

The Iranian Culture

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Note: *The information presented in this section of the Maine Diversity Manual may be general. Although Muslim is the main religion of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it does not mean that every Iranian or every Muslim believes or practices these beliefs or customs.*

I. Description of Culture

A. Demographics

- Capital: Tehran
- As of July 1997, the total population was 67,540,002
- From a September 2003 census study, there were only 228 Iranian residents living in Maine.

B. Brief History

- The Persian Empire, from 559-334 B.C., was said to be the greatest legacy: “demonstrated for the first time how diverse peoples can culturally flourish and economically prosper under one central government.”
- Mohammed moves from Mecca to Medina in 622 marking the birth of Islamic civilization and the start of all Islamic calendars as well.
- In 1979, after 2500 years of being ruled by a democratic government, the Revolution occurs. Iran adopts a theocratic government and becomes the Islamic Republic of Iran.

C. Foods

- Main diet is rice and bread.
- Strict Muslims only eat “halal” meat, which is meat prepared according to Islamic law. Pork products are not eaten and a few seafoods are not allowed.
- Water is usually drunk with every meal.
- Consummation of alcoholic beverages is illegal due to religious beliefs.
- Gracious hospitality is part of the character of the Iranian people, and a characteristic as old as history itself.
- When eating in a private home or in a mosque (religious institution), the best food is saved to be served to the guests.

D. Dress

- According to Islamic and social beliefs:
 - Men are advised not to wear short sleeve shirts and short pants are firmly prohibited.
 - Women are to cover themselves except their face, hands and toes at all times.
- In their homes, people wear what they please.
- In the U.S. some Iranians adopt a combination of traditional and Western dress.

E. Language/Communication

- Official language of government and courts is Persian and it is the native tongue of over half the population.
- Because it is an Indo-European language it is an easier language for English speaking people to learn compared to other languages of the Middle East.
- Persian is written from right to left in the Arabic script.
- Very conservative Muslims may avoid shaking hands or kissing unrelated individuals from the opposite sex.
- It is well accepted for individuals of the same sex to kiss on both cheeks, hold, embrace and hug each other whether they are related or not.
- Dressing up formally and appropriately is also regarded as a sign of respect and people may get offended if their guests arrive in casual outfits and sneakers.
- People are anticipated to behave politely at parties, being loud is considered inappropriate unless people know each other very well.
- People stand up when new guests arrive except with the elderly who will remain seated. Sometimes women will only stand up when other females arrive.

F. Holidays

- Iran uses the Persian calendar with twelve months which differ from Western cultures.
- Festival of No Ruz is Persian celebration of New Year's, or the Spring equinox (around March 21st on western calendars.) It is the most cherished and most celebrated holiday.
 - The preparation for No Ruz starts well before the actual date and the event itself lasts 13 days.
 - It is customary for all to take a bath and cleanse themselves thoroughly before No Ruz. This is supposed to be a purification rite but modern times have lost the meaning.
 - On the last Tuesday of the year, before No Ruz, Iranians carry out spring cleaning and set up bonfires for the night. This symbolizes the welcoming for the return of the departed souls.
- Ramadan is celebrated using the lunar calendar. It is a month of fasting from sunrise to sunset to observe Allah and the book of Q'ran.
 - The practice of fasting includes abstaining from all food, drink, tobacco, chewing gum, and sexual relations. One also refrains from arguing, fighting, lying, speaking ill of others, and restrains the tongue and temper.

- Children (who have not reached puberty), pregnant or nursing women, women in menstruation or the 40 days following childbirth, very old elderly, sick people, those who are traveling and the insane are exempt from the Ramadan fasting.
- Eid-e-Fetr is the three day festival that marks the end of Ramadan to celebrate the success of the fasting.

G. Religion

- According to the US Library of Congress, at least 90 percent of Iranians are Shia Muslims. Approximately 8 percent are Sunni Muslims. There are smaller numbers of Baha'is, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.
- Strict Muslims pray five times a day, starting at sunrise and ending at sunset.
 - They must be facing towards Mecca, their foreheads must be touching the ground and they must wash their face, hands and feet before prayer. It is considered uncleanly if they do not wash before prayer.

II. Family, Relationships, and Roles

- In Iran, kinship is a primary source of security and financial support for low-income families.
- Family is the most important social institution and children are the focal point. The relationship between parents and children are sometimes stronger than then relationship between husband and wife.
- Traditionally, men are the wage earners, whereas women stay at home and rear the children. Since the turn of the Revolution more women are breaking the “traditional” gender roles and working outside of the home.
- Daycares are not wholly trusted. A nanny is more preferable if the family can afford it.
- Many Iranians still participate in arranged marriages. Parental approval of future spouses is considered very important.
- Although it is not widespread in Iran, polygyny (the marriage of up to four wives at once) is still legal.

III. Concept of Work/Play/Time

- The work week in Iran is Saturday through Thursday. However, many government offices and private companies are closed on Thursdays.
- Friday is a public holiday for all establishments to attend the mosque for religious purposes. Offices are generally open to the public in the morning hours only.

IV. Health and Wellness

- Iranians value cleanliness of the body as well as the soul. Frankincense and incense are burned in homes to provide a good smell as well as to kill insects and bacteria.
- Iranians do not bathe or wash dirty objects in flowing water, and urinating or spitting into water is considered a sin.
- According to Iranian custom and culture, 'mantreh' (cure through discourse) was the word that destroyed all evil, filthiness, bad thoughts and all ugliness.
- Abortion is not permitted unless there are very strong medical reasons.
- Tubal ligation and vasectomy are not desirable in the Islam religion. Other contraceptions are allowed if there are medical reasons to avoid pregnancy.

VI. Barriers to Health Care

- Women may have a preference to work with female interpreters and health care providers.
- Men may also prefer to work with male health care providers.
- It is considered uncaring to tell a patient that he/she is dying.
 - Telling the patient's family first is acceptable.
- During Ramadan, some patients may only take medications at night.
- Due to religious practices, Iranians are prohibited to eat certain meats and any alcoholic products.
- Treatment is usually not considered complete without medication.

VI. Suggestions for Health Care Providers

- Health care providers must be aware of all social customs of Iran and the strict customs of the Islamic religion.
 - It may be wise to ask clients if they practice and/or strictly follow the Islamic rules.
- They must also be aware of the specific customs concerning birth and death.
 - For instance, after childbirth, the placenta should be offered to the parents for burial.
 - A strict Muslim may prefer to face Mecca when dying.
 - Some families may prefer to take a body home or to the mosque for preparation for burial.

- Sick people may want privacy during the day during prayer times. They may also want help facing Mecca during prayer and washing the face, hands and feet before prayer.
- During Ramadan, fasting may also extend to the non-use of medications, including injections, during the daylight time.
- In hospitals, women may prefer to remain fully clothed and may only want to be seen by female professionals.
- Men may also want to be covered from waist to knee and may also want to be seen only by male staff.
- Men and women may want water in order to wash before and after meals and for toilet hygiene.
- It is normal for a person to notify all family members when one is sick. The sick person is usually happy to have many visitors.
- Patients may not want to discuss political issues.
- Healthcare providers may want to discuss bad news with the family of the patient, rather than directly telling the patient.
- For strict Muslims:
 - It is important not to touch patients with your left hand. The left hand is used for toilet hygiene.
 - Muslims do not like to have their heads touched for cultural rather than religious reasons.
- Because of the language barrier, an interpreter will be needed for Persian speaking Iranians. It is discouraged to have an interpreter of the opposite sex or other family members for fear of embarrassment.
- Friday is a public holiday, therefore scheduling appointments on that day may pose a problem.
- Health care is serious, therefore, giving a careful explanation of a diagnosis is very important.
- Women recently arriving from Iran may have little health awareness, therefore may have never had, or understand the importance of a Pap smear or a mammogram. They may be reluctant to do so because undressing in front of a health care provider even if it is a woman is often difficult for them.

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