13. Cultural mythology and global leadership in Iran

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INTRODUCTION

Until 1979 Iran, or Persia as it used to be known in the West, had been a monarchy for over 3000 years. The monarchical identity, presence of a central powerful government symbolized by a king and the cultural elements that accompany such traditions are an indelible part of Iranian culture and ideals of leadership. During its long history, the country has been subject to numerous invasions including those of Alexander the Great in 300 BC, and the Arab invasion of the seventh century AD, which brought Islam to Iran. As a result, Iran experienced cultural battles between its imperial and Indo-European roots and the cultures of the invaders. What some would consider the ‘true’ Iranian identity has survived through many conflicts, sometimes going underground, with adjustments and adaptations.

Iranian mythology reflected in fairy tales, folklore and literature has survived for thousands of years and continues to be taught in schools and used in popular story telling and art. The courageous, caring, humble and daring leader-hero who rises to save the nation against various supernatural, foreign or domestic evils, while showing unwavering loyalty to country, king and father, kindness to the weak and his enemies, and caring for his followers is an ever present character.

This chapter will consider the dominant cultural themes that run through Iranian mythology, shape ideals of leadership in Iran and help understand current leadership.

OVERVIEW OF LOCAL CULTURE AND MYTHOLOGY

Although Iran is at the heart of the Middle East and shares the Islamic religion with some of its neighbors, its culture is distinct. Iranians’ ethnic roots are Indo-European, part of the tribes that populated Asia and Europe in pre-historic times. Traces of evolved human civilization are found in some parts of
Iran dating back to 5000 BC, with the first Persian Empire, dating back to 500 BC, one of the largest and first world powers that stretched from modern day Libya and Egypt to parts of India and China, Turkey and central Asian countries.

Existing cross-cultural studies such as Hofstede’s (1980, 1992) and GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness, House, et al., 2004) support the cultural distinctness of Iran. For example, the GLOBE studies classify Iran in the South Asian along with India and Malaysia, rather than the Middle-Eastern cluster, which includes several Arab countries (House et al., 2004). The countries in the South Asian cluster rank higher than Middle-Eastern ones on humane orientation (fairness, altruism, generosity and caring for others), a factor that is, as we will discuss later, essential to leadership in Iranian mythology. Iran further ranks higher than Arab countries on performance orientation and power distance. Like Middle-Eastern countries, the South Asian cluster countries lean towards in-group and institutional collectivism and, on the other dimensions of future-oriented action (investing in future), assertiveness, and gender egalitarianism, South Asian countries fall in the moderate category (House et al., 2004). This tendency towards moderation, rather than extremes, appears to be in and of itself a valued cultural trait in Iran.

The leadership dimensions of GLOBE further indicate that Iran ranks high on visionary leadership, and that compared to the Middle-East cluster, South Asian countries are higher on charismatic, team-orientated, participative, humane, autonomous and self-protective leadership (House et al., 2004). Research about leadership style in modern Iran points out that, while Western concepts may have some applicability (for example, Javidan and Carl, 2004), Iranian ideal leadership is characterized by benevolent paternalism whereby the leader is a kind, warm, powerful, accessible and a stern father figure (Ayman and Chemers, 1983; Chemers, 1969). In comparison, studies of Arab leadership style point to a tendency toward egalitarian decision-making influenced strongly by the Bedouin and Islamic traditions (for example, Sarayrah, 2004; Yousef, 1998).

Iranian mythology is defined by one dominant repository of stories in verse, the Shahnameh (the Book of Kings) written by Abol-Qassem Ferdowsi\textsuperscript{1} in the tenth to eleventh centuries.\textsuperscript{2} This chapter will therefore focus on the mythology as presented in the Shahnameh and touch upon religious folklore that further shapes the Iranian psyche. While the Shahnameh is about kings, as its name indicates, it is not a simple glorification of kings. In many cases, the kings are weak and even incompetent. The Shahnameh is, however, a glorification of Iran and its leader-heroes as guardians of the nation and saviors of its people. In that regard, the Shahnameh is a complex work about leadership addressing issues concerning ideal leader characteristics, factors that lead
them to succeed or fail, and their relationships with followers (Davis, 2006). Whereas the epic has been subject to considerable analysis and study, there is strong agreement on its common themes.

OVERVIEW OF IRANIAN MYTHOLOGY

Ferdowsi was commissioned to write the epic at the end of the tenth century by the last king of the Samanid dynasty which was the first Persian-centric dynasty following the Arab invasion of Iran. The Shahnameh tells the history of Iran from the beginning of time through the Arab invasion of the seventh century through a series of poems of various lengths, the large majority of which are titled after individual heroes. The themes that run through the Shahnameh have their roots in prehistoric times and in Zoroastrian teachings dating back to approximately 1500 to 1000 BC that emphasize purity and goodness of thoughts, words, and behaviors (Brélian-Djahanshahi, 2001). However, in spite of their age, the Shahnameh’s themes continue to represent and define the culture and expectations of ideal leadership, as is evident by the literature that follows several hundred years later.

In its original language, the Shahnameh consists of 60,000 verses, which given their length, are equivalent to 100,000 verses by Western standards (Davis, in Introduction to the translation of the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi, 2004). Whereas similar to other Western epics such as the Iliad and Odyssey by its theme of heroism, conflict, and human weakness, it is approximately seven times longer. It is considered to be an unparalleled masterpiece by the Persian-Iranian (the language is called Farsi) speaking world, which includes, not only Iran, but Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and several parts of Central Asia, India and Pakistan (for example, Levinson and Christensen, 2002; Davis, 2006).

Ferdowsi’s work is somewhat unique among historical epics in that it is highly patriotic and focused on the country of Iran from its earliest emergence, rather than on a king, an individual hero, or a religious figure. While the poem was written during a time when Islam was highly dominant, references to religion are almost non-existent. A higher power is often acknowledged; Islam is not. The glory of Iran, its struggles, and survival are overriding themes. The heroes of the Shahnameh only exist in relation to their country and their ability to serve it.

The Shahnameh has significance on three separate but related dimensions. First, as a literary masterpiece, it is a symbol of the Persian language and a vehicle for its continued survival, a topic that is not the focus of this chapter, but is essential to understanding the work and its impact. As Dante played a role in shaping the Italian language, so did Ferdowsi have a formative impact on determining the Persian language. Second, it presents the mythology of the
country. Finally, it defines its key cultural themes, particularly as they relate to leadership. The influence of the Shahnameh on the Iranian culture and psyche cannot be overstated. The book connects Iranians to the early part of their long history (Forouqi, 1320). While the actual existence of many of the heroes, particularly those in the first two parts of the Shahnameh, is probably more myth than historical fact, their omnipresence in education, folklore, literature, and social life makes them as significant as real role models. Children and adults, many of whom are named after the heroes of the book, regularly refer to the epic stories, symbols and themes. A required reading in schools, the book is also the basis for popular street theatre and the subject of common story-tellers (called naqqals). Additionally, many Iranian rulers, to symbolically reinforce their unbreakable connection to the past, commissioned new editions of the epic, outdoing one another in the quality and artistry of the publication (Nahavandi and Bomati, 1998).

**Key Leadership Themes and Characteristics**

The focus of the Shahnameh is the leader-hero as guardian and savior of the nation. In many cases, these heroes have noble origins; in a few cases, they are ordinary people who outshine their kings by their integrity and courage. While the kings’ authority is always accepted and loyalty to them is undisputed, the epic notes their weakness, without detracting from royal status or power (Davis, 2006). The numerous leader-heroes of the Shahnameh are the catalyst for all actions, and the source of all successes, failures, happiness and misery. According to several well-known scholars of Iranian literature, the Shahnameh’s key themes include the importance of leadership, integrity, humility, loyalty, fairness, kindness, moderation, courage, forgiveness, seeking knowledge and advice, and patriotism (Forouqi, 1320; Khaleqi-Motlaq, 1993). Furthermore, the Shahnameh is a reminder for people not to accept failure, no matter how dire the circumstances may appear (Forouqi, 1320).

**Importance of and need for leadership**

The Shahnameh’s stories unambiguously and repeatedly emphasize the essential role leaders play. Without leadership, all falls into chaos. One of the most revealing stories is that of King Bahram Gur, who because some villagers do not show him proper respect, asks his priest to punish them (Ferdowsi, 2004: 626–9). The punishment the priest devises is equality among all people, which quickly leads to the disintegration of the social fabric of the village, scarcity and bloodshed. When the priest returns and picks a wise old man to lead the village, order and prosperity are restored. Similarly, the story of Mazdak who preaches and practices equality among people (many concepts are akin to principles of communism) and who gains considerable popularity...
but is eventually killed by order of the king, illustrates the importance of hierarchy in maintaining social order (Ferdowsi, 2004: 677–83). Followers in the Shahnameh state repeatedly that they, the country or the army cannot function without a leader.

**Integrity and honesty (dorosti; rasti)**

The most essential characteristics of a leader are integrity and honesty. He (not surprisingly they are almost all male), must remain true to his word and must at all times keep faith with his followers. Without fail, the leader-heroes of the Shahnameh demonstrate integrity. Rostam, perhaps the best-known hero of the epic and in Iran, unfailingly stays true to his word and repeatedly advises his king to keep his promises even when breaking them may be beneficial (Ferdowsi, 2004: 162). The importance of integrity is further reinforced through the bad luck and misery that befall those who lack integrity. Salm and Tur who are jealous of their younger brother Iraj and who deceive and kill him, are themselves killed by their nephew (Ferdowsi, 2004: 37–62). Integrity can therefore be considered the *sine qua non* of the ideal Iranian leader.

**Humility (ferootani)**

Leaders must not become arrogant and distant from their followers; they must remain accessible and remember that they are subject to greater powers. Arrogance and hubris inevitably lead to the fall of heroes and kings. One of the early kings in the Shahnameh, the superhuman Jamshid, is credited with establishing social classes, inventing iron tools and brick making, and instituting the festival of No-Ruz, which to this day is celebrated as the Iranian new year around the world. In spite of his accomplishments, however, he loses God’s glory (*farr*) when he becomes arrogant and imperious (Ferdowsi, 2004: 7-8).

**Loyalty (vafadari)**

Being loyal to elders, family – particularly fathers, and ruler – is essential. Even when the king is less than competent, the leader-hero is duty-bound to remain loyal to legitimate authority. The leader-hero remains in service of the nation and the king. No matter how justified, acts of disloyalty are always punished to preserve social order. Followers must obey their king to the point of knowingly taking poison when ordered to do so, as is the case in the story of Izad-Goshasp (Ferdowsi, 2004: 719–20), or entering into a battle they know is lost when asked to do so by their king (Rostam) (Ferdowsi, 2004: 151).

**Fairness and pursuit of justice (edalat; dad khahi)**

The leader-hero is responsible for righting wrongs; for pursuing justice for all and demonstrating fairness and impartiality in his decisions. The letter of
Nushin-Ravan, one of the most celebrated Sassanid kings emphasizes the need for justice that will ensure the king’s security, world prosperity, and the king’s and his followers’ happiness (Ferdowsi, 2004: 715). One of the book’s early heroes, Kaveh, the ironsmith, who although is not of noble descent, is known for his courage as the liberator of Iran from an unjust king, and his willingness to stand for those who are weak. (Ferdowsi, 2004: 18–21). He uses his simple leather apron (derafsh-e Kaviani; the flag of Kaveh) as the symbol of his pursuit of justice. The flag is still used as a metaphor for Iranian identity and the importance of taking a courageous stand.

**Kindness to all, particularly the poor and weak (mehrabani)**

The ideal leader is kind to all and champions the cause of those who are weak, and taking advantage of the powerless is frowned upon particularly for those who hold power. Every military victory ends with celebrations that distribute wealth to the poor (for example, Kavus’ return from Mazandaran, Ferdowsi, 2004: 172–3) and kings add to their glory by opening their treasury to take care of their subjects.

**Moderation (miyaneh ravi) and patience**

The leader-hero must follow the path of moderation rather than extremes. While considered a model king on all dimensions, Bahram Gur is chided for his excess (Ferdowsi, 2004: 635). In the story of Kebrui (Ferdowsi, 2004: 623–4), the head of a village is blinded by ravens while he is unconscious from drinking wine to excess, leading the king to outlaw wine. Rostam, the archetypal leader-hero, is prone to excess and pride, characteristics that cause him to put himself, his family, and his country at risk, and unknowingly kill his own son. The theme of moderation and patience is further present in king Nushin-Ravan’s letter where he exhorts his son to be patient and not to rush into decisions.

**Courage and chivalry (javanmardi)**

Courage and chivalry are central to epics of all cultures. In the Shahnameh, many of the leader-heroes are compared to lions for their courage and hunt the animal to demonstrate their bravery and skill (for example, Bahram Gur; Ferdowsi, 2004: 616–21). One of the most well-known set of stories involves the seven trials of Rostam (Ferdowsi, 2004: 152–73), where the hero’s bravery and loyalty are tested by the challenge to overcome seven impossible obstacles (*Haft khan-e Rostam* – the seven tests of Rostam), a reference to which is still commonly used in Iran to represent impossible odds and courage.

**Forgiveness (bakhshesh)**

Another leadership theme in the Shahnameh is the need for leaders to forgive
those who stray or make mistakes while the leader-hero himself is held to higher standards and cannot be forgiven for missteps. The leader-hero must show clemency whenever warranted. While there are many instances of decimating enemy armies in battle and beheading of their leaders, leader-heroes who are unkind to their fallen and repentant enemy are considered unjust.

**Seeking knowledge and wisdom (danesh amoozi; kheradmandi)**
The leader-heroes are expected to make decisions and take charge. However, they must consult wise and knowledgeable counsel before doing so. Nushin-Ravan tells his son that a king who seeks guidance from experts assures his good reputation (Ferdowsi, 2004: 715). Leaders who act on their own find themselves in dire straits. For example, Hormozd, one of the most evil kings in the epic, starts his reign by killing his father’s wise confidants (Ferdowsi, 2004: 717) and rules through deceit and without the benefit of good counsel. His tragic end, blinded by two noblemen who rise against his injustice and incompetence, points out the potential fate of those who do not take advantage of others’ wisdom.

**Patriotism (mihan doosti)**
As integrity is the **sine qua non** of Iranian mythical leaders, patriotism is their reason for being. The Iranian leader-hero is first and foremost the symbol and defender of the nation. His patriotism is unquestioned and the primary driver of his actions. Like Kaveh and Rostam, many other heroes are first and foremost patriotic, inherently tied to their native land, and emotionally connected to its culture and people. The story of Bahram Choubineh provides a telling illustration. While possessing most of the leader-hero qualities and leading men and armies to victory in the service of his king, Choubineh’s failure is that his patriotism is not absolute (Ferdowsi, 2004: 790–1).

The characteristics presented above shape the ideal of the Iranian leader who is all-powerful and decisive, while remaining humble, accessible, and caring. It is significant to note that the only female leader-hero, Gordyeh, while she does not reach the stature of the epic’s others, possesses the same qualities that define other leaders and champions (Ferdowsi, 2004: 774–91).

The themes of Persian mythology, as presented in the Shahnameh, date back to prehistoric times, but they are manifest in writings that predate the epic and in literature that follows it. One of the earliest treatise of governance and advice to rulers was written by Ardeshir Babakan, the first king of the Sassanid dynasty. The principles of the short treatise are akin to the themes represented by the heroes of the Shahnameh with a focus on rulers being honest, fair, kind, forgiving and relying on experts (Mashkoor, 1367). These themes are further reprised in later literary works indicating their prominence in Iranian leadership. Most notably, several books that provide advice to kings and rulers, such
as the ‘Siasat Namet’ (Book of Politics) written by a prominent minister Khajeh Nezamolmolk e Toosi in the eleventh century, and M. M. Saadi’s ‘Nasihat ol Molook’ (Advice for Kings, 1977) written in the thirteenth century reiterate the leadership themes found in the Shahnameh. For example, Saadi (1977) provides specific advice to rulers in much the same manner Machiavelli does in The Prince. However, the leadership themes are starkly different focusing on generosity, fairness, humility and kindness.

OVERVIEW OF IRANIAN LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

An indication of the importance and significance of the Shahnameh is the struggle of the current Islamic government with it. Because denying and downplaying the 3000 year old monarchic past has been a focus of the current government that has changed names of streets, cities, towns and even historical sites to erase references to kings and to create an Islamic rather than Iranian identity (Nahavandi, 1984), versions of the Shahnameh that were printed early during the revolution were renamed ‘Collection of Ferdowsi’s Poems’ instead of its actual name, the Book of Kings. However, the new title did not prove popular and the name of the epic has been restored. The Shahnameh is still the primary source of Iranian mythology even in the Islamic Republic, even though religion is not a central focus of the epic.

Mythology and modern research (Ayman and Chemers, 1983; Chemers, 1969) both indicate that the ideals of a fair, powerful, decisive, but caring and accessible father figure are key to Iranian leadership. An examination of the recent and current political arenas further reveals that Iranians have searched for honest and patriotic leaders consistently before and since the 1979 Iranian revolution. The last dynasty (Pahlavi; 1925–79) was brought to power by a highly patriotic, domineering father figure. Correspondingly, corruption is cited as one of the major causes of the disillusionment of the Iranian population with the same dynasty, and a cause of the revolution. While Iranians are comfortable and often appreciate even ostentatious demonstrations of wealth and glory, maybe still seen in the cultural unconscious as indicators of divine farr, they also expect their leaders to be humble and to care for those who are powerless and weak. Many expressed disappointment and resentment at losing access to their ruler (shah; the Iranian term for king), when the last king of the Pahlavi dynasty, citing security reasons, started traveling by helicopter rather than by car where he could be seen among his people and during which time they had access to him for petitions and requests. The humility and accessibility to followers are coupled with their expectations for the leader’s strength and decisiveness. The end of the Pahlavi dynasty offers yet another example.
Iranians who were demonstrating all over the country in 1978 and 1979 against the government, considered the last shah’s speech admitting that mistakes had occurred during his reign to be a sign of weakness, an admission that helped further destabilize his government and hasten his overthrow.

The current president of Iran, Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejad was elected, to a great extent, because of his reputation of integrity and honesty, and his connection to the common people, much in contrast to his powerful political rival Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. Ahmadi-Nejad was perceived as a defender of the weak, a champion of the unfortunate and an accessible leader, all qualities of an ideal Iranian leader. Although the current leadership is far from representing all the ideals of the Shahnameh on many dimensions, it is interesting to note that Ahmadi-Nejad and other current Iranian leaders’ popularity increases when they emphasize links to the imperial past, rather than association with Islamic principles. While early in the revolution, imperial history was ignored, references to the ‘glorious’ past return when leaders feel the need to unite the country.

The Shahnameh and its themes are well-established ideals of leadership in Iran. However, there is a divergence between the Islamic ideals projected by the current government and those of the Shahnameh. The Shahnameh is unequivocal about the importance of Iran, not religion. Leader-heroes must champion Iran first. The previous government of Iran, and many other past dynasties such as the Safavids, were similarly focused on patriotism and the pre-eminence of Iran. In contrast, the Islamic ideal, often presented by the current political leadership, is that of a global religion that unifies all Muslims regardless of nationality (Omat-ol-Islam; people of Islam). Khomeini, the father of the Islamic revolution, advanced analogous principles and considered nationalism a creation of the West and a crime (Nahavandi, 1984). Such views are in stark contrast with the nationalistic, and occasionally ethnocentric, message of the Shahnameh. The relationship of religion and state in Iran has posed an on-going challenge for leadership. For example, during the Safavid dynasty when Shiism was established as the national religion, partly to combat the influence of the Sunni, Ottoman Empire, rulers such as Shah Abbas, kept religious leaders at arm’s length preventing them from getting involved in political events (Nahavandi and Bomatti, 1998). Such separation has not been the case in other Muslim countries, most notably in Saudi Arabia, where religion and affairs of state are closely integrated and intertwined. The separation of ‘mosque and state’ was continued under the last Iranian dynasty, and some suggest, carried too far and another one of the causes of the 1979 revolution. Therefore, while Islam has been since the seventh century the primary religion of Iran, because of historical and ethnic differences, it has not brought Iran into the pan-Islamic fold made up of Arab nations.

The Muslim ideals and legends, however, do play a role in Iranian culture and views of leadership. In addition to the Shahnameh, one of the most cited
legends in Iran is that of the third Shiite Imam, Hussein, who was killed (martyred, according to Shiite belief) by the caliph Yazid when he was hopelessly outnumbered by Yazid’s army. Hussein’s battle was over establishing the succession after the death of prophet Mohammad, which he, as the prophet and his son-in-law’s relative, claimed must go to him. The Shiites’ claim to succession and Hussein’s legend offer another window in the strong nationalistic sentiments in Iran. By some accounts, Shiism, and the legend of Imam Hussein along with it, were a vehicle for Iranians to establish their separation from the Arab invaders and distinguish themselves from other Muslims with a distinctive identity, based on the monarchic, therefore Iranian, rather than the caliphate, therefore Arab, right of succession to the prophet. This separation from other Muslim-Arab nations continues to dominate Iranian culture and leadership.

The current theocracy in Iran is an exception to this rule with a focus on Islam rather than Iran as the center of government, although hero worship similar to the one evidenced in the Shahnameh is ever present in the glorification of the ‘martyrs’ of the war against Iraq and others who have been killed since the revolution (Economist, 2007). Nevertheless, the religious hero, for example Imam Hussein, shares in the Shahnameh’s ideals of integrity, courage, rising against injustice, and representing the weak. Since the Islamic revolution, Islam appears dominant and religious themes govern speech in Iran; such locus has two potential explanations. First, it may indicate an actual shift from a secular, Iranian-patriotic-based identity to a global, Islamic identity. Second, it may be an age-old Iranian coping behavior when faced with assaults on the culture where people change behaviors as needed while maintaining their original identity. Such practice has been evident throughout Iranian history from the time of Alexander the Great, through the Arab, Mongol and other invasions. Recent research indicates that despite the superficial changes and a dominance of Islam, the deeper cultural identity remains present and unchanged (Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003).

IRANIAN LEADERSHIP THEMES

Ideals of leadership in Iran have much in common with other cultures. The greater than life hero is not unique. However, Iranian leadership ideals present several distinct themes. First, the Iranian leader-heroes are the source of all powers. According to the mythology, they created the world and brought civilization to mankind. Without the leader, there is only chaos. Either for organizational or political purposes, the centrality of the leader in Iran must not be overlooked. Stating that the leaders, not the followers, are the drivers may not be an exaggeration based on Iranian ideals. While consultation is required and
participation appreciated, the leader still legitimately holds power. Iranian followers expect their leader to be decisive and strong-minded. Group discussions and public exchange of ideas are not necessary when the leader fulfills his/her role as a caring father figure. If the leader demonstrates the ideals of leadership including strength, kindness and humility, then followers are cared for and do not need to participate for the sake of participation.

The Iranian ideal leader is responsible for transformation, which is typical, but his/her responsibility goes beyond change to the renewal of the culture. Without the leader-hero, the nation and culture may disappear. The leader-heroes are responsible for the rebirth of Iran. They rise, like the Phoenix and fade away when crisis subsides. Another unique theme in Iranian mythology and leadership is that the change agent is often not directly tied to the existing power structure. The leader-hero has loyalty to the king, but he comes from the fringes. Kaveh is a simple blacksmith, unassociated with power. Rostam is not part of the ruling dynasty, but part of the family that serves the king. The leader-heroes are external enough to have perspective but are still insiders and have unwavering dedication to the ultimate goal, which is to safeguard and assure the survival of the nation. Being of Iranian origin is only one determinant of a leader’s insider status; however, while many of the leader-heroes have non-Iranian blood, a complete outsider cannot be the savior, no matter how brave. This theme of change coming from the fringes, but still the inside, is another key concept to consider when working with Iranians. Outsiders, or those supported by outsiders, have never been and cannot be the leader-heroes. They must come from the inside, have ties to the culture and its values – whether national or organizational – and have complete loyalty to the culture.

Along with high status and power, the ideal Iranian leader carries a heavy responsibility for justice, fairness, humility, and caring for followers. Abuse of power, even when the ends are justified, is unacceptable. The leader, like a father, is benevolent, accessible, kindhearted and compassionate. Caring for followers is a source of power rather than a sign of weakness. According to ancient Persian traditions, the leader is duty-bound to hear his subjects’ requests and petitions and honor them when possible. From an organizational point of view, the role of father puts managers in a caretaker role that is not typical in many Western organizations. Business is not simply business; it is about people and relationships. Similar cultural values are present in other countries, such as the Philippines and Mexico, and have required changes in Western management and human resource practices that make caring for the individual a central priority. As evidenced by the second example in the commentary, the powerful caretaker role is integral to leadership in Iran, not an optional peripheral behavior – see Commentary box.
COMMENTARY BOX

Iranian Business Owner-manager with Business Interests in Iran and Europe

In Iran, we have very high expectations of our leaders. I sometimes wonder if anyone can really live up to them. We want them to be kind and take care of their subordinates like a father would. If they don’t, we think they are cruel. We want them to make decisions wisely and know what the right answers are every time. If they don’t, we think they are weak. If they don’t consult with others, we think they are too autocratic; but when they consult too much, we think they are incompetent. Iranian leaders must be able to do all that at the same time.

Iranian Political Leader

Change in Iran is only accepted if it comes from the inside. The leader who brings change must prove his or her ‘Iranian-ness’, as a pre-requisite. Iranians are a very hospitable people, open to outsiders, and tolerant of those who are different, but they are also very proud of their heritage. Their leaders, especially those who want to bring change, have to come from within. The person who makes the change has to be perceived as one of them, not an outsider. The leader is the insider who has the courage to stand up, raise the Kaviani flag, and claim the mantle of leadership.

British-educated Iranian Executive-Business Owner

I have a business to run and must make money. My family depends on that and so do my employees and their families. But, I can only do that if I take care of my employees. They rely on me for much more than their paycheck. The same managers and many of the same employees have worked for me for over ten years, ever since I started my business. We have very little turnover. I have helped my employees buy homes and find suitable spouses for their sons and daughters, gone to their cousins’ funerals and to their children’s weddings, given them days off when their grandfather was sick, and made sure that I know what
is going on with their life. That is part of being a leader. In exchange, I know they will do anything for me. It is more like a family than a business, but there is no doubt who is in charge. There is a clear line between us that they will not cross.

As in any cross-cultural situation, knowing and understanding the other culture is indispensable. When working with Iranians, whether they are still in Iran or part of the diaspora who migrated abroad after the 1979 revolution, recognizing their culture and rich history is essential to building effective relationships. Iranians’ patriotism and love of their country and of its culture are deep-rooted values that must be acknowledged and appreciated to establish successful connections with them. Likewise, familiarity with the ethnic and cultural differences between Iran and its neighbors is another step in successful interaction. Primarily focusing on the task and results alone, a well-accepted and common practice in Western business, is not a wise option. The Iranian leader’s focus on followers is an entrenched obligation and leaders from any other culture who lead Iranians must understand that responsibility.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The strength and survival of the leadership themes present in Iranian mythology are startling. The themes can be traced to Zoroastrian teachings, glorified in the Shahnameh, the source of Persian mythology, reiterated in Iranian-Islamic traditions, and recounted by many other writers up to the modern day. The image of the ideal Iranian leader as a charismatic change agent fits, to some extent, ideals of leadership in the West and those that are currently proposed by much of leadership theory. Leaders are charismatic change agents, spiritual and authentic. Their power is unquestioned. However, the power also carries the considerable and unwavering responsibility to care for followers and champion their cause, to listen to their concerns, and to put their well-being ahead of the leader’s.

Understanding Iranian mythology can provide considerable insight into modern Iranian leadership. Findings of research about the culture and leadership of Iran are evident in the leadership themes found in the Shahnameh. Because of the ingrained and ancient nature of these themes and their existence in cultural values, understanding of modern Iran is much informed by consideration of its mythology. The goals of the country and its leadership have remained the same for at least 3000 years: Glory of the nation, a recognized place in history, and cultural and national independence.
dominated the world in antiquity. Throughout their history, Iranians have attempted to regain that place of prominence they believe is rightfully theirs. Respect for the national identity, recognition of the role of the leader as the change agent who must be from the inside, and as the person who is responsible not only for accomplishing the goals – business-related, economic, social, or political, but also for being the defender of the weak are all essential to understand Iranian leadership.

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NOTES

1. Phonetic spellings of Iranian names are used; in most cases, many alternative spellings have been used.
2. Several excellent translations of the book both in prose and verse are available in English, including one by Dick Davis used in this chapter.
3. When Iranian publications are cited, the original dates are used. They are based on the modern Iranian solar calendar which started at the Islamic era; equivalent Western dates are provided in the reference section.
4. The dynasty ruled Iran from 224 AD to the Arab invasion of the seventh century.
5. Saadi is best known for his works the *Golestan* (*The Rose Garden*) and the *Boostan* (*The Orchard*). One of his poems about the common nature of all humans graces the entrance of the Hall of the Nations at the United Nations.
6. The disagreement over succession after the prophet is one of the fundamental differences between Shiites and Sunnis.
7. For example, the assassination of the caliph, Omar of the Umayyad dynasty by an Iranian slave is still celebrated in remote Iranian villages 1400 years after it occurred (djashn-e Omar koshi; the celebration of the killing of Omar). During the previous dynasty, protests by Arab nations over celebration of this assassination led to its ban in major cities.
8. A much-cited story of an anonymous general of the army of Nadir Shah, the Iranian conqueror of India in the eighteenth century, recounts that he pointed out that the Iranians failed many times in their attempts to invade India. The general responded to Nadir Shah’s inquiry regarding the reasons for failure by stating that they were all there, but that the King was not.
9. The Phoenix is called the *simorq* in Iran. The last ‘poet laureate’ (malek ol shoara; king of poets) of Iran, M. T. Bahar has labeled Iran the country of the Simorq for its ability to repeatedly rise from ashes.
REFERENCES


