Iranian Headwear in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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The evolution of fashion in Iranian headwear during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is, in its various forms, distinctive and different from headwear examples elsewhere and reflects the political philosophies of Iran’s leaders over time and their attempts to control society. Iranian headwear was frequently subject to government legislation: sometimes a sumptuary law defined the size, color, texture, and shape of what was worn. For those who resisted such decrees, the wearing of headwear became a challenge and a matter of personal compromise. This article is based on observations of evolving styles, as well as research from original documents and oral interviews with urban residents from various Iranian ethnic groups. It excludes headwear among the religious minority and ethnic groups living in villages, because the vast variety of these styles await future research.

Meanings attached to Iranian headwear are complex. Iran is a country of great cultural diversity, and headwear serves as the crown of apparel for most class levels, respected by both males and females in different religious groups, diverse social communities, and various ethnic tribes in the country. This item of dress, for both genders, represents a complex self-perception and perception of the world around, because it may identify a person’s beliefs, cultural uniqueness, social stature, occupational status, place of habitation, social restrictions, and sensitivity to fashion and display. The perception and the impression of headwear in Iranian folklore have become a metaphor in literature, and are sometimes incorporated in common expressions. “Throwing a hat up to the sky,” or “to toss up one’s cap,” are expressions of happiness and success. “His hat is worth his head” is similar to the American expression for a wealthy person, “He is a fat cat.” “Putting a hat on someone’s head” means cheating; “His hat does not have wool” means he has no power or influence.

**TYPES OF IRANIAN HEADWEAR**

Iranian headwear went through enormous changes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. During this time, distinction between men and women became especially important, and headwear became that item of attire that strongly characterized the wearer’s social status, religious beliefs, occupation, interest in novelty, and traditional versus nontraditional custom. Varieties of styles exist for both genders, though more a role designation for men than for women, because the social appearance of women was limited at the beginning of the twentieth century, controlled by religious forces and government decrees. Nevertheless, women appeared in a variety of styles, depending on private activity or public festivities and gatherings.

In general, the clothing of various peoples around the world is an outward manifestation of the progress, or even the decline, of the values and attitudes of any specific phase of history of a particular society. Social forces, political influences, geographic demands, the economy, the arts, education, and stylistic awareness inspire and otherwise affect this movement. Between 1905 and 1911, Iran underwent a constitutional revolution, a change in regimes, community and environmental changes, and growth and decline in the power of religious and political beliefs, followed by World War I. World War II further swayed fashion. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution occurred, which remains the dominant power force in the early twenty-first century. Thus Iranian headwear for men and women can be examined in three different phases of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as follows:

- 1905–1925: The Iranian Constitutional Revolution to the end of the Qajar dynasty.
- 1979 onward: The decline of the Pahlavi dynasty and the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**MEN’S HEADWEAR 1905–1925**

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Iran witnessed a great movement toward democracy in political and social life, aimed at ousting the monarchy. A few of the last Qajar
kings had opened political and cultural relationships with European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century. This connection, mostly with England and later Russia, created a mutual cultural exchange of ideas in many aspects of Iranian life, including Western influences on how Iranians dressed. Intellectuals were inspired by modern notions of national identity, and these ideas became the foundation of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, the first political movement of its kind in Iran; and also of the first such movement in other Islamic countries in the Middle East. The new political and social awareness shook the foundations of the Qajar monarchy, and at the same time revolutionized clothing fashions among upper-class Iranian men and women, especially in regard to Iranian headwear. The following eight types of men’s headwear represent political, social, and religious status during the Constitutional Revolution and the end of Qajar era in Iran (1900–1925).

**TAJ-E-KIANI OR DAYHIM-E KIANI, THE CROWN OF KINGS**

Taj or dayhim means “crown” or “diadem.” The taj-e-kiani is the king’s most celebrated official headwear, worn only by the king on ceremonial occasions, as in a coronation. During the long history of Iranian civilization, the taj (crown) has been the only sign of kingship. It comes in different shapes with different decorations, depending on which king from which particular dynasty is wearing it. Historically, there are two kinds of crowns: one is a closed crown that covers the head; the second is an open crown that looks like a tiara, which is called nim-taj (half-crown) and is a version of the crown used by queens or princesses. The Iranian closed crown is usually made of three distinct parts: an inside cap, a cylinder-like side panel, and in the front the royal aigrette or jegheh.

The most famous royal crown in the 1905–1925 period was originally made for the coronation of FathAliShah Qajar (1798–1834). It was altered and used for the coronation of the other Qajar kings, and finally for the coronation of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar in 1906, the second to last king of the Qajar dynasty. He ruled Iran from 1906 to 1909. The records of Iran’s Central Bank Treasury, where this crown is kept, indicate that it is 12 in. (30 cm) tall and weighs slightly over 7 lb. (3 kg). According to the records documented by Gowhar-e Iranby Mohammad Tavakkoli Bazzaz, there are 1,800 seed pearls measuring 7 to 9 mm, 300 emeralds (the biggest one is 80 carats), and 1,500 rubies (laal or yagbout). Many pieces of diamond make up the design. The complete crown is composed of three parts: cap, side panel, and aigrette.

The red silk velvet cap is made of four segments that form into a dome-like shape; the four gore seams are covered with jewel trim. On the apex of the crown there is a 120-carat ruby. The jeweled cylindrical side panel is set with a huge number of diamonds, and also pearls, rubies, and emeralds. It is shaped with eight points on top, which most likely represent the eight corner points of the Muslim star—two squares overlap equally in perpendicular position, creating eight corners in upright points, all trimmed with precious stones. The jegheh, the royal aigrette, is covered with precious diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. The sun-shaped medallion aigrette has a burst of jeweled rays emerging from the top and symbolizes the royal status of the king.

**TAJ-KOLAH, THE ROYAL HAT**

The taj-kolah or royal hat has a long history in Iranian headwear. It is one of the highly respected clothing accessories that define supremacy, used by the Qajar kings as part of court attire. Each king had his own style of crown-hat, usually adorned with a royal aigrette (jegheh) that might be installed in front or at the side, often on top of a small plume of feathers. Since the aigrette (or hat brooch) gave dignity and authority to its wearer, it inspired hat styles worn by noblemen, or military and governmental officers, in order to define the wearer’s rank and status.

**KOLAH-E-QAJARI, THE QAJAR HAT**

The kolah-e-Qajari, a black, brimless, tall hat, was a popular men’s hat at the beginning of the twentieth century and was based on the Qajar royal hat. The original style was 18 in. (46 cm) tall, comparable in height with the European stovepipe hat. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was gradually modified
This royal aigrette, the turquoise jegheh, was made for Nasser-ed-din Shah Qajar (1831–1896). It is made in the form of a sun in turquoises, with a lion and sun on either side to portray kingly power.
Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of National Jewels, the Central Bank Treasury of Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, Iran, 2006.

The name of the kolah-e ashtarkhani, the Cossack or astrakhan hat, is taken from the region of Astrakhan, which is situated north of the Caspian Sea, in the early twenty-first century a part of Kazakhstan. This semi-military, brimless men’s hat became known during the domination of the Soviet Russians in Iran after World War I, when it was designated with the Russian emblem of the hammer and sickle. It is still worn by Iranian men (without the Russian emblem) in northern Iran.

After World War I, the British and the Russians greatly influenced the Iranian government; a substantial number of Russians served in the Iranian Cossack Brigade. Iranians who worked under the Cossacks’ military regiments were required to wear the kolah-e ashtarkhani. Gradually, they accepted it as an Iranian headpiece, although old-fashioned Iranians did not approve. During this time, Western clothing was introduced to middle-class Iranians by foreign military or commercial personnel, or by royal visits to European countries. The original style of the hat was a short cylindrical shape, 5–6 in. (12–15 cm) tall and circular on top, made of curly black lamb’s wool. When used by Russian officers or their agents, it usually had a flap in front, slightly taller or the same height, standing straight up and attached to the front of the hat. On the front of this flap was a gold or silver military medallion, the Russian hammer and sickle symbol. Because this hat was originally made with karakul (the curly coat of a young Karakul or Persian lamb), Iranians accepted it for everyday use in cold weather. Later it became an inspiration in the design of different styles of hats, bearing no Russian influence on their height, shape, or color.

**AMMAMEH, THE TURBAN**

The ammameh (or dastar; Arabic ʿemʿmah) or turban had two functions. It was used in a secular form as a traditional Iranian headpiece; and it marked clerical status and served a religious purpose. In the early twentieth century, the draped and unsewn headpiece gradually declined as the foremost urban secular Iranian headwear, but continued to be used by certain Iranian ethnic tribes (Kurds, Afghans, and Balochi); it was also worn by some Iranian guild and union members, such as school-teachers and some traditional doctors. The Persian word dastar refers to the Muslim Shia’s clerical headwear. The word ammameh derives from a Middle Eastern language. In olden times in Persia, the turban was called a dulbend; the Turkish word was dulbent or tulbent. The shape, color, texture, and the meaning of this particular type of Iranian headwear have changed over the centuries.

The turban was traditionally used by men to distinguish themselves from women and prior to the twentieth century, a turban was engraved on men’s gravestones to indicate the gender of the deceased. In the early twentieth century, the turban continued to be worn only by Muslim men, both religious leaders and ordinary Muslims. It consisted of two parts: a skullcap called the aragbin and a single, separate, long piece of fabric wrapped around the cap. Over time, the secular turban was gradually replaced by the Qajar hat as a mark of class, worn by aristocrats and nobles who traveled to Europe for education or pleasure. However, the turban remained as a formal headpiece used by men of the Muslim priesthood, to mark the wearer as a spiritual authority among common citizens, and many men still wore a turban simply to convey that they were believers in Islam. Turbans were also worn for protection or could be used as a container in which to keep small items. For important leaders, a large turban showed dignity and worldly status, reflecting the style and taste of the wearer.
Shia Muslim religious institutes and Shia authorities honor new clerics by crowning them with the official religious headwear of a turban on the day of graduation, which is called ammameh gozaroon or taj gozaroon. It represents religious supremacy as a taj (a crown), is a symbol of piety and devoutness, and is also a sign of having completed clerical school after five years of study. The turban is custom-made for each graduate, and carried on an attractive platter to the crowning ceremony, which is usually performed by a well-known ayatollah. The professional turban maker has to consider the appropriate size, texture, color, and the chosen style for the individual cleric. A Muslim Shia of high prominence would be recognized by the size of his turban, which reflects his education, reverence, and juridical status: the larger the turban, the more respect it carries. The wrapping and the draping of the fabric required to construct a handsome turban require special knowledge and expertise. However, many clerics learn how to wrap their own turban. It is usually made of soft muslin or very lightweight broadcloth. The length and the width of the fabric depend on the desired size when wrapped—a length of 18–30 ft. (5–9 m), and a width (from selvage to selvage) of 30–36 in. (76–91 cm).

The color of a Shia cleric’s turban is important, conveying eminence. Solid black denotes a sayyid mullah, whose genealogy goes back to Mohammed the prophet and his cousin Ali ibn-e Abu Talib. A white turban indicates a cleric who is not a descendent of Mohammed. Both these turbans are bestowed through a ceremonial ritual, and they complete the wearer’s ecclesiastical ensemble. A green turban identifies a sayyid who did not participate in a seminary; usually such men live near Shia shrines. There are other turbans of different colors and textures, which mostly represent the non-clerical ethnic groups in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, wore a black turban that characterized him as the descendent of the Prophet Mohammed and was the most prominent figure in the Shia Muslim religion in the twentieth century.

**KOLAH-E DERVISH, THE Dervish Hat**

The kolah-e dervish (or taj-e dervish, sikke, Sufi taj, kolah-e tark) is a brimless, rounded felt hat made of lamb’s or camel’s wool, and is 6–10 in. (15–25 cm) tall. In Iran, the hat is further embellished by embroidered blackwork of religious writing. It was worn by members of Sufi religious groups, also known as dervishes. “Dervish” is a Persian word. The dervish hat was worn as a part of ritual clothing in the Sama, the lively Sufi mystical ceremony to worship Allah. Sufism is a faith based on Islamic theology and rules, and its practice is associated with mystical symbolism in the clothing of members. The dervish’s attire included a white, ankle-length, circular “dancing” robe called a tannir, whose white color signified divine purity, love, and peace, and symbolized a shroud; a hefhy, black, wide, coarse wool coifan, a khirqah, which suggested humility, represented the earth, and symbolized the grave; and a hat, a kolah-e dervish, which symbolized a headstone.

Sufi Muslims follow a thirteenth-century Persian theologian, mystic, and poet named Molana Jalaloddin Mohammad Balkhi, who wrote under the name of Molavi Rumi. He believed that listening to heavenly songs and music activated the soul by divine flight or spiritual movement. The kolah-e dervish represented an honor for Sufi members. Sufism, like other religious beliefs, is divided into different theories and practices and in the early twenty-first century exists not only in Iran but also in places such as India, Afghanistan, Bukhara in Uzbekistan, and Konya in Turkey.

**KOLAH-E MOQAVAIE, THE CARDBOARD CAP**

During the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar (1909–1925), the last king of Qajar, the cap known as the kolah-e mozavaie appeared as a men’s fashion. The lightweight cap was styled for novelty rather than authenticity and favored mostly by the rich young dandies, who usually wore it tilted to one side, their hair showing on the other side. It was a short, cylindrical cap, 4–5 in. (10–12 cm) tall, and the top circle was indented about 1 in. (2.5 cm) deep into the cap, like the edge of a plate. It was most likely inspired by the European porkpie hat, one of the favorite hats of the late nineteenth century in Europe, except that the kolah-e mozavai was brimless. The structure of this cap was interfaced with a cardboard base, which was covered with mahbou, black wool felt. Later, the kolah-e mozavai became a taller hat without the indentation on top, like a fez without the tassel. Thus, as it became more elegant in shape and quality, it was favored by older men and worn by merchants, government officers, and even by the nobility. It became an inspiration for the kolah-e Pahlavi, the Pahlavi hat, with the addition of a visor.

**ARAQCHIN, THE SKULLCAP**

In Iran, the covering of the head was a traditional practice, and therefore headwear was an essential part of a man’s ensemble. The araqchin or araghchin, the skullcap, was one of the most popular items of headwear. This small, brimless, fitted cap, in a cylindrical or dome shape, was made of different materials—mostly

*Kolah-e dervish or dervish’s hat, Iranian style. Photograph by Dr. Mary H. Farahnakian.*
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Revolution, many women fought to maintain their social rights. Economically, Upper-class Iranian women in particular were fascinated by European fashion. After the Iranian Constitutional law, brothers and brothers' sons, sisters' sons, and her uncles, but not her husband, sons of her husband, father and father-in-law, brothers and brothers' sons, sisters' sons, and her uncles, but not her uncles' sons. The hijab must cover the entire body, from head to toe, under a large semicircular cloth called the chador, or cloak, except it draped over the head to complete the hijab for women. There are few records of who first designed and made this veil. The chador kamari was worn when out in public or on special occasions. It was made of the fine black silk crepe de chine or black silk crepe.

Cotton, silk, and sometimes wool—and in different shapes and patterns. Each had a significant connotation: for example, in a prayer cap, the top circular piece was made of four equal gores seamed together, symbolizing the Muslim first four caliphs. The cap was considered to offer spiritual protection, or physical protection from the elements; it represented the status of the wearer through the quality of its texture, color, and style; it identified and communicated the wearer's faith and commitment; and it also showed the fashion and the aesthetic taste of the wearer. It was worn both day and night as a prayer cap, sleeping cap, and leisure cap, or under other hats or the turban. If used as a lining for other hats, it was smaller, simple, and made of cotton or linen.

WOMEN’S HEADWEAR 1905–1925

Iran is a Shia Muslim country and according to Muslim shariah, a woman over nine years of age must wear the hijab. In public or even at home, she must wear her hijab in the presence of all men except her husband, sons of her husband, father and father-in-law, brothers and brothers' sons, sisters' sons, and her uncles, but not her uncles' sons. The hijab must cover the entire body, from head to toe, under a large semicircular cloth called the chador, or veil. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Iran continued its relationship with European countries—politically, socially, and economically. Upper-class Iranian women in particular were fascinated by European fashion. After the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, many women fought to maintain their social rights.

Five pieces of women’s headwear will be discussed in the context of political, social, and religious influences on a woman's life and status during the Constitutional Revolution and the end of the Qajar era in Iran (1905–1925).

CHADOR

A chador—a combined head and body covering—was semicircular, with a diameter that was twice the height of the wearer. Women wore it in public and at home, whenever the hijab was required. The chador had no closure or fastener; it was held shut by the hands in front of the face or under the chin, or by wrapping or tying the ends around the body. There were two types of chador (which was often called a veil): formal and informal. A formal veil was usually black heavy silk crepe, and considered to be outdoor attire. The informal veil was lighter in weight and color and worn for the hijab inside the home, and also when praying five times a day at home. To attend the mosque, a woman usually wore a formal chador in the street and then changed at the mosque into an informal prayer chador. This was usually fabricated of lightweight cotton, linen, or silk, and either printed or solid white. Textile quality showed the wealth and the status of the wearer. Exactly when the chador originated is not precisely known; however, historians believe that Mesopotamia was the first culture to use the veil for protection, as well as to show status and fashion. The wearing of the chador has been subject to political decree in Iran in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

CHADOR KAMARI, THE SKIRTED OR WAIST VEIL

The chador kamari was a tailor-made garment designed for the formal hijab, which covered the whole of a woman's body and was tied to the waist with a waistband attached to a half-skirt in front. It was also called the chador-e Qajar, because it first appeared in women's fashion at the end of the Qajar dynasty. This skirted veil resembled a man's aba or cloak, except it draped over the head to complete the hijab for women. There are few records of who first designed and made this veil. The chador kamari was worn when out in public or on special occasions. It was made of the fine black silk crepe de chine or black silk crepe.

The following description is of a surviving example of a chador kamari from the early twentieth century. This veil has a separate piece that attaches in the front of the veil, like a skirt front, with a waistband. Extended tails at each side allow it to be wrapped around the waist twice and tied firmly in front, while the back of the veil drapes over the head. The skirt part is made to compensate for the weight of the fabric and to balance the veil on the head. The chador kamari reaches to the floor. It consists of 7 yards (6 m) of black silk crepe, 38 in. (96 cm) wide. Black silk or satin ribbon, 6 ft. 6 in. (167 cm) long, is used as the waistband and sewn to the skirt. The skirt front on this particular sample flares from the waist to the hemline. It is 12 in. (30 cm) wide at the top and 36 in. (91 cm) wide at the hemline. The skirt features one pleat at either side, where the skirt attaches to the veil. A black lace ribbon, 13 x 3 in. (33 x 7 cm), is inserted into the skirt panel horizontally as decoration. If the wearer had a colored underskirt, the color would have been seen through the lace.

The chador kamari went out of fashion in the mid-twentieth century. Yet during the Pahlavi era of 1925–1979, political decree
women who wanted to identify themselves as pro-Revolution. In twenty-first-century Iran, the maqnaeh frequently distinguishes followers of the classic Islamic shariah. Women are encouraged to wear this headpiece as an icon of the Iranian Revolution, and it has been adopted by many younger women, particularly college students. It continues to be idealized as national headwear, worn by young schoolchildren as well as by older generations.

**Charqad, the square head scarf**

In Farsi, *charqad* means "four-length," thus denoting a square head scarf. According to shariah, women need to hide the hijab from unrelated male visitors at all times. The charqad was promoted as a new headwear in the Qajar dynasty of the mid-nineteenth century and continued to be worn into the early twentieth century. During this period, women appeared in public more often than before, but they had to be appropriately covered in private and in public. The charqad was suitable for wearing in private because of its simplicity; it could also be worn unseen under a veil in public.

The charqad was fabricated from soft, white cotton voile for city women (white or colored cloth for villagers and rural women), cut as a 40 in. (101 cm) square. It was folded into a triangular shape, worn on the head and pinned under the chin. Depending on one's status, the small brooch or pin could be metal, or gold studded with a gem. Ladies of high fashion often starched and blocked the top of the charqad to fit their head size and decorated it with jewels if they had the means; this was abandoned the hijab, and so the chador kamari became popular among women who wanted to keep their hijab. First, because it was tied to the waist it was not too easy to remove; and second, it could easily be disguised as a skirt and a cloak draped on the shoulders instead of a veil on the head.

**Maqnaeh, the hooded scarf**

*Maqnaeh* comes from the Arabic word *maqnaah*, meaning a head cover. Iranian Muslim women cherished this head covering as a way to continue to observe shariah law. The custom-made hooded scarf covered the head, neck, and shoulders and sometimes reached to the waist; the face remained exposed. Sometimes it was tightly held in the back of the head, secured by a strap. A prayer maqnaeh was usually made of white cotton and worn under the chador.

This type of headwear continued to be worn by women for prayer during the Pahlavi dynasty of 1925–1979. However, the role of the maqnaeh changed during a demonstration against the Pahlavi regime before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when the wearing of it became a strong political statement made by...
called charqad-e abari. Frequently, women wore a large, black, silk handkerchief over the top of this charqad-e abari and tied the ends behind the head, thus creating something similar to a hat, worn over the scarf. This black handkerchief scarf was called a kalaqi. The charqad went out of urban fashion in the mid-twentieth century; however, it is still worn by elderly and rural women in different villages and areas in Iran.

ROBANDEH, THE FACE COVER

The robandeh, a cloth draped over the head and covering the face, was tied at the back of the head with a fastener made of gold or silver, or a precious jewel stone, depending on the wearer's wealth. The robandeh has been around since the beginning of Persian history, but from time to time served different purposes. In the early twentieth century, it was one of the important pieces in a woman's complete hijab: the chador, the chaqbour (cloth boots and crotchless bloomer, sewn as one piece), and the robandeh. It is sometimes confused with the niquab (a black face cover made of horsehair), burqa (a blue, black, or white tent-like veil to cover the woman's whole body), picheh (a new fashion in the early twentieth century—a facial hijab accessory, which was made in a black, visor-like shape as partial face shade cover). All these face coverings differ from each other in style and purpose.

The robandeh was made of white linen, cotton, or silk. Its size was according to personal choice, measuring 24–28 in. (61–71 cm) wide, and of a length that usually reached below the waist. Fabrication, construction, and decoration reflected the wealth and status of the wearer. The details, that is, the hand embroidery and the sokhcheh-deozy, or lacy drawn thread work, shielded the eyes but permitted the wearer to see through the cloth. The robandeh, along with the other hijab pieces, was abandoned by women after governmental clothing reforms in Iran from 1928 to 1941.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S HEADWEAR 1925–1979

Reza Shah Pahlavi overthrew the Qajar dynasty and ruled from December 1925 to September 1941. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, succeeded as monarch and ruled until April 1979, when the Pahlavi dynasty was deposed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Pahlavi period witnessed political, social, and economic changes in Persia. This social reform caused a revolution in all aspects of life, including clothing, and especially in headwear fashion, which was met with resistance from Muslim clerics. Their opposition to clothing reform was because the changes did not conform to traditional Muslim clothing. There was a decree against the hijab (a Muslim rule for female modesty), and a rule requiring uniform dress for men: these shocked the whole society. One woman reported that she fainted on the street when her veil was pulled off and ripped into pieces by the Ghazagh military guard. She felt as though she were naked in front of strangers. Author S. Shariat Panahi has explained the requirements approved by the parliament regarding uniform dress for all men.

- All male citizens who were not in military uniform had to wear the same clothing based on European style, including the kolah-e pahlavi.
- Eight groups within Iranian society were excluded from this law: religious clerics who were active in preaching; people who taught in the seminaries in villages; Sunni Muslim clergy; liturgists, the imams of the mosques; seminary students recommended by Muslim clerics as preachers; the talabeh, cleric students who had passed their exams and were ready to teach; Muslim theology preachers; Iranian clerics of other faiths.
- Violators of this law were penalized monetarily, or jailed for up to seven days. The money collected from penalties was spent on the poor.
- These sumptuary laws were enforced from March 1929.

The compulsory dress code was based on European styles and included a man's shirt, a vest, trousers, a jacket, and most importantly a hat called the kolah-e Pahlavi. The law mandated that the kolah-e Pahlavi replaced all other hats that Iranian man wore in the cities. Iranian male villagers could wear the kolah-e namadi, a wool felt cap, or a headwrap turban; however, if they needed to go to the city, they had to wear the mandatory clothing. The military guards were ordered to remove any incorrect piece of clothing from the body of individuals and destroy it. This law caused huge social tension and resistance among military guards and the people. Nevertheless, the change was adopted, and the new look for city clothing, including Iranian headwear, was established as a modern style in the twentieth century.

After Reza Shah, his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, modified the clothing decrees by giving freedom of clothing choice, including headwear, to Iranian citizens. Men generally chose to wear the new look as standard clothing, while women and some of the older generation chose to return to their traditional outfits.

Kolah-e Pahlavi, the Pahlavi mandatory cap, decreed by Reza Shah Pahlavi for all Iranian men in 1935. Courtesy of Akbar Radpour’s photograph album.
MEN’S AND WOMEN’S HEADWEAR 1979 ONWARD

This phase of history marks another fundamental change in headwear and the hijab as well as in all other aspects of Iranian lives. The Iranian Revolution or Islamic Revolution of 1979 was led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The strategy of his new government was to focus on Islamic law in politics, economics, and social life, under the rule of the standard Islamic shariah. The shariah is based on the teachings of the Qur’an and the sunna that are accepted by Muslims globally. Since the beginning of Islam, leaders of Islamic countries have followed the decree of shariah, but with some differences. In Iran, after the 1979 Revolution, the government mandated classical shariah regardless of differences in Iranian religious minorities and ethnic groups throughout the country.

In the early twenty-first century, shariah justifies the decree for hijab, as well as dress codes for men and women when they appear in public. As in twenty-first-century Western culture, since the late 1960s, hats and other headwear have largely disappeared from the wardrobe of urban Iranian men. The Islamic dress code allows a man—on some occasions, such as in sports—just to cover his private body parts; however, women still must be completely covered from head to toe even while participating in sports. Thus when people around the world see Iranian women competing in international sports arenas, covered by their hijab, they are astounded; but this is the women’s choice: to compete as Iranian athletes, they must obey the laws of their country. Within Iran women are jailed if they defy the wearing of the hijab. However, some subtly try to protest by other means, such as by wearing heavy cosmetics, exposing a small amount of hair over their forehead, or letting it show at the back.

In summary, Iranian women face challenges and discrimination not only in their own country but also when visiting other Islamic countries and/or the Western world. Over the past 115 years, Iranian headwear has served more of a purpose than merely providing a head covering: it has become an icon representing official Iranian governmental policies.

References and Further Reading


Mary H. Farahnakian

Photograph by Dr. Mary H. Farahnakian.

Maqnaeh, the hooded scarf. This headwear became an icon of the Islamic revival of the Iranian Revolution, and it has continued to be worn as women’s national headwear—from young schoolchildren to the older generations.