

Iranian Flag, A Brief History (English version)

Flag



After 1979, Recognized by the United Nations



Before 1979

Background

The first reference to Iranian flag can be traced back to a mythological mutiny launched by Kawah, the blacksmith, against Zohak, the notoriously tyrant ruler of the time. To spearhead the rebellion, Kaveh had no other choice but to have his own leather apron uplifted upon a lance. As a result of this upheaval, Zohak was ousted and Feridoun enthroned.

King Feridoun later ordered the auspicious leather standard to be cased in rich brocade of yellow, red and pink colors and jewels hung upon it . He also decreed the flag to be called The Royal Darafsh (flag in Old Persian), hence, Darafsh-e Kaviyan. As such, there was no figure, of any kind, on the flag. It was just a colorful combination of yellow, red and pink silk which, based on historical evidences, remained the national and military flag of Iran in the times of the Achaemenians and Sasanians.

Every king would add to the jewels attached to the darafsh. When Arab Muslims invaded Iran, the darafsh was seized in a bloody battle fought around Nahavand (a city with the same name in today's Hamadan province in the mid-western Iran) and taken, among many other war spoils including the well-known Baharestan Rug, to the headquarters of Omar-ibn-e Khatab, the second Caliph of Muslims after the demise of Muhammad. Astounded by the great number of precious stones and jewels attached to the darafsh, he ordered his soldiers to burn it after removing off the priceless staff.

For the next 200 years, with Arab occupiers of Iran imposing a religious ban on the depiction of any animated figure and prohibiting the drawing of any pictures, Iranians did not have a flag of any type. The only exceptions to this, were two Iranian rebel leaders, Abu Moslem and Babak who came to pick black and red flags, respectively, as their resistance banners. The terms, "The Black Clad", and "The Red Clad", have been employed by historians to refer to the followers of these two resistance leaders.

First animated figure on the flag in the Post-Islamic era

In the year 976, came the time when the Samanids were decidedly routed by Mahmoud Gaznavi who ordered the picture of a full moon be drawn on a solid black as background. Fifty five years later, the moon was replaced by the figure of a lion at the behest of Sultan Masoud Gaznavi, whose decision was merely a reflection of his personal habit of hunting lions. The lion figure remained an integral part of the Iranian flag for a very long period only to be removed in 1979 as a result of the Islamic Revolution.

Addition of the sun

Coins minted in the Seljuks or Khwarezmian dynasties had the figure of a full sun posted behind the lion. This trend was quickly picked on for national flags. There are two different viewpoints as to why the sun figure came to be used on the flag.

The first argues that lion, as the symbol of power, is also the sign of the second month of summer, Mordad (or Asad in the old Syriac calendar), during which the sun is at its zenith.

The second theory is based upon the fact that the ancient Iranian religion, Mithraism, would regard the sun as sacred. Iranians, therefore, chose to have the sun on their flag and coins to glorify their magnificent culture.

Safavid's Flag

Among the Safavids, who ruled Iran over 220 years, only two kings, namely King Ismail I and King Tahmasb I, did not have the lion and the sun figures on their flags. The former opted for a solid green with a full moon at the top, while the latter replaced the lion with the lamb, which represented his birthday month, Farvardin the first month of the Iranian year (Aprl. 19th – Mar. 20th) and Hamal in Syriac calendar.

In the remaining years of the Safavid rule, green was the official color of the flag with the lion and the sun emblems gold-embroidered on it. Although the lion was the inseparable part of the flag throughout the Safavid years, its posture changed many times. Often it appeared in a sitting posture, and occasionally in profile. The sun, too was sometimes attached to the lion and sometimes positioned right above and away from it.

Based on a French tourist's account of the time, thin and sharp-pointed standards with

Koranic verses and the figure of Zolfa'ghar (the name given to the two-edged sword of Imam Ali, the first imam of the 12- imam Shitte sect of Islam) were also very popular during the Safavid times.

It seems, Iranian flags, similar to Arab flags, were always of triangular shape.

Nadir Shah's choice of flag

King Nadir, the founder of Afshari dynasty and a self-styled ruler who salvaged Iran from a feudalistic state to form a unified country, made giant military advances toward India and China (on the eastern frontier), Khwarizm and Samarkand (located on the northern part of Iran), and Kirkuk and Bagdad in today's Iraq. As such, flags, especially military ones, would come to signify a lot during all these grand scale military adventures.

Nadir's royal flag was made of yellow and red silk with the traditional sun and lion figures. National flag, on the other hand, was of three colors : green, white and red and a lion's profile in a walking posture with a half-risen sun, in the radius of which was a Koranic verse meaning, "the Earth is His."

It can safely be concluded that Nadir's choice of three colors of green, white and red was a groundbreaking decision in the formation of the modern Iranian flag. Since then, these colors have been the official colors of the Iranian flag, either royal or national.

Rectangular flag of the Qajar

Agha Mohammad Khan, the founding father of the Qajar dynasty, brought about some basic changes in the shape and color combination of the Iranian flag. For the first time the shape of the flag was changed from triangular to rectangular. Out of personal vendetta with Nadir Shah, he ordered the established colors be removed, and replaced with a solid red color as the background and a white circle in the middle with the sun and the lion. What was outstandingly different here was a sword placed in the hands of the lion. Later, FathAli Shah Qajar, devised two rather different flags suitable for war and peace purposes. A totally red flag with a sitting lion and the sun on its back served as the war flag; while a green flag with basically the same figures, was used as peace flag. Surprisingly, the lion on the peace flag was raising a sword!

It was also during FathAli Shah that a white flag would be utilized for diplomatic and protocol purposes. In a painting depicting the Iranian special envoy to the Russian royal court, Abolhassan Shirazi, having audience with Czar, a white flag with the lion, sun and sword figures, is carried by the Iranian delegation. FathAli Shah is also credited with the introduction of a crown figure positioned on top of the sun.

Amir Kabir's flag

The great Iranian reformist and chancellor of the Qajar dynasty (during Nasirodin Shah's rule), Mirza Taghi Khan, known better as Amir Kabir, adopted the flag used by Nadir Shah with the exception of its triangular shape. He ordered a ten centimeter green band be patched on top of the flag and a red one at the bottom. Though the three figures

of the lion, the sun and the sword were kept, he removed the crown figure placed on the top at the behest of FathAli Shah.

The Constitutional Revolution and the Iranian flag

Members of the first and the second Iranian Parliaments, formed after Mozafarodin Shah Qajar granted the constitutionalists the rights they were seeking, decided in the Article 5 of the constitution: “the official colors of the Iranian flag are green, white, and red along with the lion and the sun signs.” No details were determined as to the order of these colors or the location of the signs.

This lack of specifications was partly due to the presence of some Muslim clergies in the Parliament, who would deem using any animated figure against the Islam. The secular MPs had to resort to some lengthy justifications to convince the fundamentalist MPs to finally ratify the clause. Green, as the favorite color of Islam, red a symbol of the blood of martyrs, and white the universal symbol of peace and the favorite color of the Zoroasterianism, the ancient religion of the pre-Islamic Iran were easily ratified.

References were also made to the importance Iranian people attach to the month of Mordad, corresponding to Asad in Syrian calendar and Imam Ali's title (“Asadullah”, the lion of God).

In 1957 (1336 H.J.), Manouchehr Ighball, the prime minister of the time, issued a directive setting standards for the flag's exact measurements.

The Iranian flag in the Post Islamic-Revolution Era

Article 18th of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, passed on in 1979 (1358 H.J.) states: “The official flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran is composed of green, white and red colors with the special emblem of Islamic Republic in the middle together with the motto”.