



PHILATELY I. THE POSTAGE STAMPS OF IRAN

Both a utensil to indicate a paid postage fee on mail matters and a medium of official self-representation, stamps have been used in Iran since the 19th century. Pers. *tambr* “stamp” is from French *timbre*.

The early stamps (1868-1906). The introduction of postage stamps took place in connection with the establishment of a modern postal system initiated by [Mirzā Taqi Khan Amir Kabir](#) and continued by [Amin-al-Dawla](#). In order to facilitate postal traffic at fixed postage fees, it was decided that Persia should follow the example of her neighbors (Russia in 1854, India in 1858, Turkey in 1862) in introducing postage stamps. For that reason, an official delegation was sent to France in 1865 to conduct inquiries on the design and printing process of stamps, and it took three more years until the first Iranian stamps were issued (see [Plate I](#)). These stamps (generally called the *bāqeri* issue) were printed in Persia, using a design which is usually credited to Albert Barre, the chief engraver of the imperial mint in Paris (Abdolifard, 1996, pp. 42-44; Sadri, 2007, pp. 7-8). In their design, the stamps, which were supposed to demonstrate the state’s financial sovereignty, followed the pattern of the first French stamps, whose design had copied that of coins, and showed the royal coat of arms (Lion and Sun) within a circle, a symbol also used on permits and uniforms of post officials. Like coins, stamps were not only a legal payment method, but also symbols of the state’s sovereignty. This sovereign function was corroborated with contemporary accounts, in which they were not named



stamps, but of *mohr-e dawlati o nešān* “official seal and coat of arms” (Kiā, p. 166). The first postage stamps printed in Paris were issued in Tehran in 1868, although there is no evidence for postal use before 1870. In general, these first stamps were not on free sale, but glued on letters by clerks at the post offices before sending. (Abdolifard, 1996, pp. 45-49). Moreover, they were only valid within Iran, while for international transport stamps of the transit countries were needed.

With the intent to adjust Iran’s bureaucracy administration to Western standards, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah asked the Austrian government during his visit to Vienna for the deployment of experts to reorganize the Persian postal system. Following his request, in 1875 an Austrian official, Gustav Riederer, was appointed director of the Iranian post. During his three year activity in Iran (1875-77), Riederer not only turned the Iranian post into an efficient institution, but also procured Persia to become a member of the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which also implied that Persian stamps would be regarded as valid postage stamps all over the world (Abdolifard, 1996, pp. 128-30; Kiā, pp. 124-26). Under Riederer’s direction, initially stamps with a revised design of the *bāqeri*-issue (with an inserted value indication in Latin numerals) were issued. In 1876 Riederer ordered the printing of new stamps in Austria, which were, in contrast to the earlier issues, much harder to forge and moreover displayed a new design (Plate II). In accordance with Nāṣer-al-Din Shah’s policy of augmenting the authority of the crown through public representation, the state was represented by the ruler’s portrait in addition to the Lion and Sun symbol (see [Flags i](#)). Stamp sets that were printed in Austria or France during the following years showed Lion and Sun or just a faced sun on the lower (*šāhi*-) denominations and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah’s portrait on the higher (*qerān*- or *tumān*-) denominations (Plate III). Thus a pattern of design was created that was to be adopted for later stamps, which in general were ordered from the Netherlands from 1894 onwards. Apart from those stamps there was also a great number of provisional and locally edited stamps, for which either artlessly designed provisional issues were printed or stamps of the official series were overprinted. The unauthorized self-designed stamps of the Belgian postmaster at Mašhad, Victor Castaigne, which he had issued in order to overcome a shortage of regular stamps (Plate IV) constitute a curiosity (Sadri, 2007, pp. 79-84).

Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath (1906-21). During the reign of Moṣaffār-al-Din Shah and Moḥammad ‘Ali Shah the design of Iranian stamps



followed the artistic pattern set by the earlier stamps of the Nāṣer-al-Din Shah period. While Moẓaffār-al-Din Shah was content to appear like his predecessor in modest attire, with a heron's crest as the only symbol of kingdom, Moḥammad 'Ali Shah demonstrated his claim for absolute power by having himself portrayed with the Kayāni crown on the highest denomination of that set (Plate V). The **Constitutional Revolution** did not immediately lead to a fundamental change concerning the design and the symbolism of stamps. After the shah's deposition, a new series was issued in October 1909, which bore Lion and Sun as the only symbol of statehood. It was only two years later that that a new series with the young king's portrait was issued. A first sign of the fundamentally transformed political identity in the wake of the Constitutional Revolution could be found in two stamp series that were prepared for the official coronation of Aḥmad Shah in 1915. The iconography of these stamp sets digressed from the tradition of the monarch being the representative of the state and portrayed the ruler as supreme head of the nation. The first series (now called the *seri-e salāṭin-e vābina*) placed Aḥmad Shah in a line of ancestry leading back to Nāder Shah, while on the *qerān*- and *tumān*-denominations the nation was represented by palace buildings, the mausoleum in Mašhad, and views of the parliament in Tehran (Faraḥbaḳš, 2008, pp. 81-82; Sadri, 2007, pp. 160-61). As this set could not be delivered at the outbreak of World War I, a provisional set was issued displaying the Kayāni crown on the Shahi- and the ruins of Persepolis on the Kran- and Toman-denominations (Plate VI), thus presenting the Qajar rule as the preserver of Persia's political and cultural tradition.

The extent to which stamps were a symbolic representation of the monarchy became also evident in the stamps that were edited by local revolutionary movements during the Constitutional Revolution and the turmoil of the wartime and postwar years. Two series of stamps, with the respective inscription *Post-e mellat-e Lār* and *Post-e mellat-e Eslām*, were issued in 1909 by the Mellat-e Eslām in Lār. The Constitutionals in Tabriz also had printed a set of stamps depicting the tricolor flag, which were, however, never found a postal use. The stocks of these stamps were seized and surcharged by the Azādīstān movement under Shaikh Moḥammad Kīābāni (q.v.) in 1919. In 1921, the Jangali movement in Gilān also issued stamps of its own, showing Kāva the blacksmith holding a red flag as a reference to the mythical hero character the *Šah-nāma* (Plate VII). The Jangali stamps also bore the inscription *Jomhuri-e sōsiālisti-e šurawie Irān* (Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran; Faraḥbaḳš, 2008, pp. 85-86; Sadri, 2007, pp. 90, 164-76), demonstrating the strong influence of the



Russian revolution on their movement.

Reza Shah period (1921-41). Following the coup d'état of Reza Khan and Sayyed Ziā'-al-Din Ṭabāṭabā'i the newly appointed director general of the Iranian post, Mošir Mo'azzam, ordered stamps of the 1915 coronation set to be issued with the surcharge "12 Jomāda II 1339/12 February 1921", which were printed and issued by A. Kordestāni Mošāver-al-Saltāna, a high-ranking post official (Sadri, 2007, pp. 140-41). Because Mošir Mo'azzam had been displaced from his post by his Belgian predecessor Camille Molitor, during the following years Reza Khan's seizure of power did not have a direct impact on the emission and design of stamps. A new set of stamps picturing Aḥmad Shah was issued as late as in 1924. After Reza Shah's coronation in 1925, however, the shah's portrait on these stamps was overprinted and provisional stamps with the inscription *Salṭanat-e Pahlavi 1305*/"Règne de Pahlavi 1926" were issued ([Plate VIII](#)). The iconography of stamps during the Reza Shah period was to a high degree dominated by the shah's portrait, who not only appeared as a king representing the state, but also functioned as the personification of the incipient modernization and centralization of Persia by wearing the so-called Pahlavi hat ([Plate IX](#)). While on the one hand borrowing elements of late Qajar iconographies, such as Persepolis depictions, the stamps were on the other hand trendsetting developments in depicting the country as a modern state. The most innovative contribution was a set of commemorative stamps whose issue had been ordered by the cabinet in 1934 in celebration of the tenth anniversary of Reza Shah's coronation (see [Plate X](#)), whose denominations did depict the achievements of the past decade, such as the concrete factory near Rey, the railway bridge of Ahvāz, a warship, and the Tehran airfield (Yazdāni, 1999, pp. 65-66; Siebertz, 2005, pp. 51-56). A series that depicted new industrial and administrative buildings as icons of modern Iran was issued only after the Allied invasion and Reza Shah's deposition (Yazdāni, 1999, pp. 75-76). From the 1930s the stamps of Iran began to distinguish between definitive stamp sets printed in great numbers and being sold for a longer period, and commemorative stamps and sets issued on particular occasions. During that period stamps were either printed at the Majles press in Tehran or, in some cases in the Netherlands. Another set of stamps in celebration of the crown prince's wedding with Princess Fawziya had been ordered in Switzerland (Faraḥbakš, 2008, pp. 95-104, VHB, pp. 622-51).

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-79). Despite the unruliness during the first dozen years of his rule, the stamps reflect the ongoing internal and external



conflicts only marginally. While commemorative sets were issued to celebrate Iran's contribution to World War II, the abatement of the Soviet-backed government in Azarbaijan (which had also issued surcharged stamps), and the second anniversary of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, other stamps were dedicated to the Shah's marriage with Torāyya Esfandiāri or the millenary of a Fārābi. A much stronger politicization of stamp motives, however, took place after the coup d'état of 1953, when the monarchy was faced with the challenge of legitimizing itself towards its own population as well as to the Western public. Therefore, the motives of stamps in the fifties and sixties stressed the respectability and legitimacy of the Pahlavi regime by issuing stamps on the occasion of the visits of foreign heads of states or in appraisal of the constitution and the coup as a nationalist uprising (see [Plate XI](#); Siebertz, pp. 66-70). The other fundament of power was, as under Reza Shah Phalavi, the modernization of Iran in the appearance of newly built railway connections, bridges and barrage dams, culminating in lavish sets in celebration of the various development programs of the White Revolution. The invocation of Pahlavi rule to ancient Persian kingship and its alleged popularity was also furthermore pursued in the design of definitive sets with illustrations that combined Achaemenid architecture and the shah's portrait.

The Pahlavi regime's recognition of stamps as an important propaganda instrument was evident from the instance that copies of the series remembering Iran's war efforts were distributed among the members of the United Nations' General Assembly (Siebertz, p. 65). To coordinate such efforts, the Council for the Improvement of Stamps (Šurā-ye ta'āli-e tambr) was founded in 1964, whose representatives were chosen from the ministry of culture, ministry of information, and the Imperial Printing Press (Ṭabāṭaba'i, p. 35). From the late 1960s onwards, the desire for self-portrayal led to an explosion of the number of stamps issued and of the subjects covered. Apart from celebrating the Pahlavi monarchy, represented by the members of the imperial family, the Iranian post was anxious to demonstrate the country's affiliation to the modern world with annual commemorative stamps on United Nations Day or subjects like human rights and the campaign against illiteracy, as well as stressing the national cultural heritage as the other part of national identity ([Plate XII](#)). Especially in the last decade of Pahlavi rule, Iran had followed an international trend and "joined the anything to commemorate club" (Lewis, p. 95), issuing commemorative stamps on broad subjects, from meteorology congresses to the opening of Tehran's Hilton hotel. Another characteristic feature was the random combination of Achaemenid symbols



with modern institutions, e.g. on stamps on Red Cross day or the founding anniversary of Rotary International (Plate XIII; Siebertz, pp. 82-83). This trend was accompanied by a change in the design of stamps, which switched from the unadorned motives in warm pastel shades characteristic of earlier issues to fuzzy illustrations in gaudy colors.

The growing crisis of the system was at least visible in issues of the last years before revolution, when the *šāhanšāhi* calendar, introduced on stamps in 1976, was again replaced by the traditional solar calendar in 1978 (see CALENDARS), and on the last definitive set of stamps issued before the Islamic Revolution, which showed historical monuments of the pre-Islamic as well as of the Islamic period instead of the picturing icons of technical progress (Siebertz, p. 87).

Islamic Republic (1979-). Immediately after the Islamic revolution, all previously issued stamps were overprinted (Plate XIV). Due to the unclear political situation in the first months after the revolution, stamps in commemoration of champions of liberal nationalism, such as Moḥammad Moṣaddeq, or revolutionary Islam (e.g. ‘Ali Šari‘ati) were issued along with stamps that propagated the mainstream political line led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Siebertz, pp. 103).

After the final defeat of the groups opposing clerical rule, the stamps became a distinct instrument of the new clerical elite, with the issue of stamps rising from one million before the revolution to three million afterwards. To coordinate the propagandistic employment, the stamp council was reconvened in a new composition in 1986, consisting of representatives of the postal administration, the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Islamic Guidance and from the Islamic Propagation Organization (Dabirkāna, pp. 1-7). In addition, an illustrated bulletin with information on the issue and the meaning of their respective message were published for every stamp (Wezārat-e post o telegrāf o telefon, Edāra-ye koll-e post-e kešvar, *Entešār-e tambr-e yādbud*, Tehran, 1981-85).

Subjects of Iranian stamps at that time were limited to a small number of topics. Apart from stamps dedicated to the Islamic cultural heritage or foremost religious holidays, they celebrated the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and events that were seen as leading to it, the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, and in remembrance of martyrs of the war and the revolution, clerical as well as secular (Plate XV).



Apart from demonstrating the state's self-conception towards its own citizens and the world abroad, stamps were also a proof of the system's ideological sense of mission, and played a significant role in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, by agitating the public of Islamic countries through stressing Iran's pan-Islamic agenda, presenting the Islamic Republic as a champion of suppressed Muslims. This becomes evident especially in the numerous stamps issued in support of Palestinian and Afghan resistance movements (Plate XVI). At the same time, the Republic tried to sharpen its profile as a champion of Islam with stamps that were intended as deliberate provocation of adversary governments. Among those stamps were commemorative issues for the assassin of Egyptian president Sadat, the Iranian victims of the riots of Mecca in 1987 (which were presented as a massacre premeditatedly perpetrated by the Saudi authorities) and a stamp on World Health Day, depicting a starving African in contrast to a well-fed European child (Badry and Niehoff, p. 22; Siebertz, p. 141).

A characteristic feature of stamp illustrations during that period was their often simplistic, but at some point also very complex iconography, that blended Shi'i symbolism (especially that of 'Āšurā' celebrations) with elements of Western leftist and populist iconography. A fine example was the first set of stamps issued three weeks after the proclamation of the Islamic Republic (Plate XVII). The illustration of these stamps, with their depictions of protesting crowds, clenched fists, bleeding corpses and the suggestive use of colors like red and green, was further developed during the following years, when the graphic design of Iranian stamps bore all the typical features of the iconography of the Islamic Republic. Apart from Islamicate ornaments, the illustrations were characterized by the glossy coloring that had characterized the stamps of the Pahlavi era, combined with a limited number of catchy, familiar symbols (either with a positive connotation, like red tulips, white pigeons and green banners, or negative ones, like the Stars and Stripes or the star of David; Plate XVIII).

After the armistice and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the themes and illustrations of postage stamps lost much of their aggressiveness (aside from the case of a commemorative stamp on the occasion of World Child Day in 1991 (Plate XIX), whose motive combined the star of David with a broken glass, which made such a direct allusion to a pogrom that it caused severe criticism from Jewish organizations as well as from philatelic associations; Ṭabāṭabā'i, pp. 58-72). Issues in praise of regional and international cooperation or on



social issues became more dominant during that time. The sets and commemorative issues in memory of the war, as well as the posthumous celebration of Khomeini (who, as others, was barred from appearing on stamps during his lifetime) did not serve any fomenting purposes, but were rather functioning as an ideological self-assertion of the system, while the illustrations of stamps on political subjects became more conventional (Plate XX). On the other hand Iranian stamps betrayed a tendency towards trivialization and were dedicated to apolitical and unspecific subjects. Aside from that, due to technical innovations such as email and metered mail, stamps have gradually lost their practical function, but retained their importance as a medium of official self-representation. During the last few years stamps were therefore more and more used on selected occasions (e.g., to corroborate Iran's claim on the Persian Gulf), while the number of issued stamps as well as their triage has dropped sharply.

Watermarks and inscriptions. Since different sorts of paper were used for the printing of stamps in the early period, no watermarks can be found on the printing sheets during the first decades, with the exception of the coronation series of 1915, which bore a stylized lion. From 1955 onwards, watermarked paper was permanently used. At first there was a drawing of Lion and Sun under a Pahlavi crown on watermarked paper, and from 1957 onwards the phrase *Dawlat-e šāhānsāhi-e Irān* was used, to which first the Pahlavi crown and afterwards the Lion and Sun were added in 1963 and 1965 (Faraḥbakš, 2008, p. 8). Still existing stocks of this paper were used up after the Islamic Revolution, until the new watermark *Jomhuri-e eslāmi-e Irān* came into use in 1981 (Badry and Niehoff, p. 11).

The first stamps did only carry an indication of value in Arabic figures, to which, under Riederer's direction, indications in Latin figures were added. Inscriptions holding the country's name appeared for the first time in 1881 with a bilingual inscription of *Post-e mamāmlék-e maḥrusa-ye Irān* resp. "Postes Persanes," which remained in use well into the early years of Reza Shah's rule (although from 1902 some sets bore the denomination *Post-e dawlat-e 'elliya-ye Irān*).

From 1935 to the end of the Pahlavi dynasty the Persian inscription used on stamps was *Post-e Irān*, while the denomination in French was changed into "Postes Irlandaises"; after a period of omission (1938-46), it was changed simply into "Iran" (1949-79). After the Revolution the Persian denomination was transformed into *Post-e Jomhuri-e eslāmi-e Irān*, while the denomination



in Latin letters was modified several times: “The Islamic Republic of Iran” or “Republique Islamique de l’Iran” on the first issues, “R. I. Iran” (1979-84), “I. R. Iran” (1984-86; 1991), “Islamic Republic of Iran” (1986-91), and “Islamic Rep. of Iran” (1991-2004). In 2004 the inscriptions were set as *J. I. Irān* viz. “I. R. Iran.”

Collection of Persian stamps. Due to the copious emission of stamps especially during the rule of the last Pahlavi Shah and under the Islamic Republic, most Iranian stamps are traded at very moderate prices.

The stamps of the Qajar era constitute a special case as the genuine stamp emissions are outnumbered by a great number of reprints and forgeries. For that reason, the early stamps of Iran form one of the most challenging collecting fields in philately. Therefore, genuine items of surcharged stamps or provisional issues, but also complete genuine definitive sets of Qajar stamps may attain considerable high prices. Among the rarest, and highest valued stamps from that period rate the 1902 Mašhad stamps issued by Victor Castaigne and stamps surcharged by British authorities during the 1915 occupation of Bušehr (Faraḥbakš, 2008, pp. 74-75; Sadri, 2007, pp. 170-71). Among the stamps issued during the Reza Shah period, stamps with the surcharged denomination “Iran” are highly valued due to the low run. Completely unused definitive sets from the time of Reza Shah and the early years of his son’s rule are likewise quite rare and attain correlate prices. Two of the greatest rarities are two sets of erroneously emitted and quickly withdrawn stamps sets from 1952 and 1968 (Faraḥbakš, 2008, p. 253).

Since the stamps of Iran are not a very familiar field for stamp collectors, it is quite difficult to find sumptuous collections, apart from those assembled by committed specialists in Iran as well as in Britain, Germany, and the United States. These private collections are in general not accessible for a general public. In Iran, important public collections are in possession of the Postal and Malek museums in Tehran, while in the Western world the Tapling collection at the British Library in London presents the most important public collection of 19th century Persian stamps.

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