

Who is Reza Pahlavi: Son of the Shah of Iran, now calling for Iranians to take to the streets

In 2023, Pahlavi visited Israel and met PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Here's what to know about his family's position in Iranian history, and Pahlavi's political activism against the current regime.

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Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, speaks during a news conference, June 23, 2025 in Paris. (AP Photo/Thomas Padilla, File)

Protests that began in Iran in late December, fuelled by rising inflation and economic woes, have seen the deaths of at least 42 people as of Friday (January 9). While acknowledging the reality of economic hardships, authorities have cracked down on dissenters.

The turbulence has also provided an opportunity for Reza Pahlavi, 65, the son of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to project himself as a political player. His father was deposed in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In recent days, [**Pahlavi has given**](#) multiple interviews in the US media, writing in an opinion article for *The Washington Post* that “Protesters are chanting my name alongside calls for freedom and national unity. I do not interpret this as an invitation to claim power. I bear it as a profound responsibility.”

Addressing Iranians, he wrote in a post on X, “Your presence in the streets across Iran has kindled the flame of a national revolution. The continuation and expansion of your presence, and taking control of the streets, is today our foremost, vital priority. I call upon the people of Iran to join in with the nationwide strikes and protests.”

He has previously called for an end to the “repressive” and “tyrannical” government of the Islamic Republic. In June 2025, after the US and Israeli military attacked Iranian nuclear facilities, he told *Politico* that “the odds are very good” for the regime to be gone by the end of the year.

Origins of the Pahlavi Dynasty

Pahlavi was born in Tehran and is the eldest son of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his third wife, Farah. His grandfather, Reza Shah Pahlavi, founded the dynasty, having started as a soldier in the army of King Ahmad Shah Qajar.

He ascended the throne in 1925 after leading a coup against Ahmad Shah. Conditions were conducive for a takeover, as the once-great Persian kingdom faced threats of imperialism, with Russia and Britain seeking to divide their spheres of influence within Iran.



Reza Shah of Iran in 1941. (Wikimedia Commons)

Former *New York Times* correspondent Stephen Kinzer, who authored the book *All the Shah's Men*, detailed this history in an article for the *Smithsonian Magazine*. In 1872, a British company bought a “concession” from the Qajar dynasty, giving it exclusive rights to run industries and exploit mineral resources, among other things. Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, called this “the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history.”

The concession was later withdrawn, but it underlined the changing condition of an Iran dominated by foreign powers. It was contrasted against the stories of a glorious past, including by Pahlavi, who projected a narrative of continuing the 2,500-year-old Persian monarchy. It also helped that he enjoyed the support of British officials in his quest for power.

However, he was forced to abdicate after the Allied powers attacked Iran in 1941, ostensibly over its close ties with Germany. With the military failure, the national consensus was now in favour of Mohammed Mossadegh as the leader of a free Iran. He was the first Iranian to earn a doctorate in law from a European university (from Switzerland).

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Most controversially, for Western powers, as Prime Minister from 1951 to 1953, he championed the need to nationalise Iran's massive oil reserves. He once told the UN, “Our greatest national resource is oil. This should be the source of work and food for the population of Iran. Its exploitation should properly be our national industry, and the revenue from it should go to improve our conditions of life.”

Such proclamations did not sit well with the likes of the US government, or its media. *Time Magazine's* 1951 story, which crowned Mossadegh the Man of the Year, said, “The fact that Iranians accept Mossadegh's suicidal policy is a measure of the hatred of the West — and especially the hatred of Britain — in the Near and Middle East.”

Until nationalisation, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (known as British Petroleum today) controlled Iranian oil. The policy prompted the British to seek the United States' assistance to engineer regime change in 1953, which resulted in Mossadegh's arrest and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's assuming power.

Iran under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi

Similar to his father's regime, Pahlavi initiated some reforms for modernisation in both social and economic matters, but also had an authoritarian streak. An object of dread during this period was the SAVAK, the state's secret police, which was known to arrest and torture dissidents.

Kinzer wrote, "No independent institutions — political parties, student groups, labor unions or civic organizations — were tolerated during his quarter century in power. The only place dissidents could find shelter was in mosques, which gave the developing opposition movement a religious tinge that would later push Iran toward fundamentalist rule."

By the 1970s, however, dissatisfaction with the Shah spurred public protests, with participants ranging from the communists to the Islamists. Despite the regime's crackdowns, the continued agitation led the Shah and his family to flee Iran in 1979. In April, a referendum with 98% vote led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

But soon enough, the regime engaged in many of the same excesses — authoritarianism and limited space for dissent — with the added element of religious fundamentalism.

A Shah for modern Iran?

The Shah passed away in 1980 in Cairo, Egypt, after having moved from country to country for refuge. Much of his family has since lived in the US.

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For years now, Reza Pahlavi has attempted to lead the opposition to the Iranian regime from abroad. He recently wrote in *The Washington Post*, "My role is to bring together Iran's diverse democratic forces — monarchists and republicans, secular and religious... who want to see Iran stable and sovereign again — around the common principles of Iran's territorial integrity, the protection of individual liberties and equality of all citizens and the separation of church and state."

The 2022 protests in Iran had provided a similar opportunity for Pahlavi. However, these attempts have been hampered by the lack of a unified opposition both within and outside Iran. Then there is the formidable endurance of the regime itself, which includes well-established institutions that ensure power remains under its control.

In 2023, Pahlavi even visited Israel and met Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), which proved divisive owing to the country being seen as an adversary of Iran. Lion Sternfeld, an associate professor of history and Jewish Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, argued in an article for the Foreign Policy Research Institute that the visit may have been undertaken for an audience beyond Iran.

He wrote, “Pahlavi in a press conference said that Iran would welcome Israeli water experts to resolve the severe water issues of Iran... I would argue that this was intended to the ears in nearby Washington, D.C., to show that one of the most explosive conflicts in the Middle East, between Iran and Israel, would be resolved overnight if he returns to power, perhaps with American assistance.”

In a recent interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Pahlavi answered a question on US action in Venezuela by stating that a similar intervention was not “necessary” in Iran.

At the same time, he had words of praise for the current US administration. “Now you have a very strong prime minister in Israel who is clearly on our side. And I think President Trump, unlike his predecessor, is definitely on a different path vis-à-vis what’s happening in Iran today. And you have Marco Rubio at the State Department. I believe he’s perhaps the first secretary of state ever since the Iranian revolution who truly gets it.”

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