



Thoughts from Linda:

*America and Iran  
A History 1720 to the Present*

John Ghazvinian  
2021

“It is a novel system,” noted the first Iranian diplomat assigned to America in 1888.

Hossein Qoli Khan Nuri, an experienced and accomplished internationalist at the time, was most generous in his praise of the United States of America. In diplomatic correspondence to Iran, he declared that this young America had “the greatest government in the world...a far cry from Berlin or Istanbul or London or Paris or Vienna.” Nuri wrote, “America as a nation was a hard-working, ambitious, efficient nation, and an impressive culture of integrity and accountability marked its political system.” This time was during the Presidency of Grover Cleveland and reflected the infatuation that Iran had with America early in their relationship.

Coming from a centuries-old absolute monarchy, he was somewhat incredulous at the rigors of representative democracy. He wrote with some disbelief that “an election was coming up in the United States, and it was unclear whether Cleveland would even still be President...his fate was entirely in the hands of the American people!”

This passage provides an example of the type of numerous details revealed in the complex story of the changing relationship between these two countries, as the title indicates--America and Iran--putting them in a historical context from 1720 to the present. The author intended to provide a broader historical landscape, placing today's intense struggle between the two nations in perspective.

It was not always like it is today. The book clarifies where, how, and when things went wrong. It illustrates very clearly why these two countries that once had such heartfelt admiration for each other became such committed enemies. He tells us why it didn't have to turn out this way.

The author, John Ghazvinian, holds dual citizenship, having been born in Iran and reared in London and Los Angeles. Because of this unique heritage, he was allowed to conduct archival research in both countries, examining original documents and correspondence that provided the content for this most interesting book, which was named by the *New York Times* as one of the “100 Notable Books of 2021.” He holds an undergraduate degree from Brown University and a doctorate in history from Oxford University. He was the recipient of a Public Scholars’ fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2016-2017 and a grant from the Carnegie Corporation’s special initiative on Islam in 2009-2010. Today he is the Executive Director of the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

In his introduction, Ghazvinian notes that today in America, the ‘Iranian story’ tends to begin in 1979 with the seizing of the American Embassy and the taking of 52 hostages who were held for 444 days in prison before their release. The story focuses on the Iranian Revolution of that year and the subsequent rise of fundamentalist Islamist leadership in the form of Ruhollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of the Islamist Republic, and his successors of today.

Americans often think of Iranians as terrorists and rogue state actors headed toward nuclear power. They see the unprecedented shows of dissent following the death of Masha Amini, the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman detained by the morality police in Iran for allegedly not wearing her hijab correctly, and wonder at what a strange place this must be.

As he notes, in Iran, the ‘American story’ is told quite differently, beginning in 1953. In August of that year, the CIA engineered a coup against a national hero, Mohammad Mosaddeq (a name primarily forgotten by Americans), replacing him with the Shah. In many ways, Ghazvinian contends, this was the ‘day the music died’ in Iran as so many people trusted Mosaddeq and respected him. He was, in fact, a great admirer of democracy and human rights and represented the hope of an entire generation of Iranians.

Over the next 25 years, Mohammed Reza Shah increased his dictatorial grip on the country, bolstered by billions of dollars in weapons and training from the United States. Spending statistics are astounding. For example, Iranian spending for military assistance from the US increased from \$113 million in 1971 to \$4.4 billion in just two years. From 1972 to 1977, Iran spent roughly \$16 billion buying weapons from America, with most of the money being spent on aircraft. In a stunning chapter,

Ghazvinian relays that in 1974, the Shah spent \$1.5 billion on 80 F-14 jets, single-handedly saving Long Island's Grumman Aircraft Corporation from bankruptcy. By the mid-70s, more than one-third of America's international arms sales went to Iran, which had become the world's largest purchaser of US weapons.

Under the Shah, the royal family offered a glaring example of excess and corruption. His feared secret police jailed and tortured thousands. During most of this time, American Presidents celebrated him and his family and offered protection on a global scale. By 1979 the end had come, and the hatred erupted to overthrow the hollow regime as it finally collapsed, brought down by millions of frustrated and disappointed citizens ushering in the revolutionaries.

These two stories continue to frame our images and perspectives of each other. And this poses a grave danger to all of us. For the past 40 years, these two countries, once the closest of allies, have had almost no relationship. There have been no meetings between heads of state, no exchange of diplomats, and no official channels for the two governments to express their concerns and views to each other. There are no trade embassies, no trade missions, virtually no tourists, no student exchange programs, and no military coordination or communication. Only recently has there been any contact between officials of the two countries.

As our author notes, "...for 40 years, history—like almost everything else—has become a casualty in the long-running war of words between Iran and the United States... history has been treated as a competitive sport—just another arena of contestation in the seemingly endless array of disagreements and accusations that have been hurled back and forth between Iran and the United States."

As he says, "we are all much poorer for it."

The book is presented in four major eras, with 26 specific chapters. Each chapter is readable as a single-point story, but this book is best read from cover to cover as it builds on the previous context through history.

You will learn about the early infatuation that Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams had for the Persian Empire and their interest in guidance from Persian history as they formed the new government in America. You'll experience the excess of the Shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, King of Kings, Light of the Aryans, Imperial Majesty, and Commander-in-Chief of four hundred thousand fearsome Persian warriors) in numerous

examples. None tell the story of his excess as does the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy held in Persepolis in 1971. It included a banquet that the *Guinness Book of Records* notes was the longest and most lavish feast in modern history, including 25,000 guests who were flown in and housed in specialized tents and structures, 5,000 bottles of champagne, 30 French chefs flown to Iran from Europe, along with ten kings, 21 princes and princesses, nine sheiks, two sultans, a grand duke, a cardinal, 16 presidents, and three prime ministers in attendance.

The book takes you through American Presidents ending with the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement announced on May 8, 2018, by then-President, Donald Trump. It focuses on internal workings in the White House through the administrations of Bush and Obama. It gives a nuanced understanding of the overtures early in the Obama administration, including the impact of his speech in Cairo, which received so much global attention. There is an amazing accounting of the CIA-organized coup in 1953, including the inner workings of President Eisenhower and CIA operatives such as one of Teddy Roosevelt's sons, Kermit Roosevelt, who assumed the name: James Lochridge upon arriving in Tehran.

There is much here. It is a thorough book and highly educational. As Ghazvinian notes, Iran is important, and we should all know more. This country is one of the oldest and proudest civilizations. And an essential element of Iran's history is that it is one of the few countries that was never colonized.

The current gulf of understanding between our two countries is quite dangerous. He notes, "Iran is a country of 80 million people and is the second largest country in the Middle East, both by population and area. For centuries, Iran has been at the crossroads of civilizations. It is one of the world's most important petroleum producers, sitting atop the world's second-largest reserves of conventional crude oil and the single-largest reserves of natural gas. It controls maritime access to the Strait of Hormuz, the gateway to one-fifth of the world's oil supply. And Iran has one of the most dynamic, educated, and cosmopolitan populations in the Middle East. To be estranged from a nation like this at any point in history, much less at a time when the Middle East presents such enormous challenges—would be senseless and self-defeating."

I particularly like his hopeful vision of the impact of this work: "Informing my narrative throughout this book has been a conviction—unspoken for the most part and perhaps even naïve at times—that the current state of antagonism between Iran and America is wholly unnecessary. What I hope emerges from these pages is a portrait of two

countries with far more in common than they ever will have to drive them apart and far more in common than either cares to admit. The security and prosperity of the United States, the security and prosperity of Iran, the cause of world peace, and even—if I may be so bold—the nobler instincts of humanity will be better served in a world where America and Iran learn to set aside their difference. And it is my earnest hope that this book, by telling the story of how it all came to be, might play some small role in hastening that possibility.”

This is a very important book, and I highly recommend it.