

Review Feature - Understanding Iran: A Summary of Recent Scholarship

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, OCT 29 2014

Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah
By Roham Alvandi
Oxford University Press, 2014

Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace
By Seyed Hossein Mousavian (with Shahir Shahidsaless)
Bloomsbury, 2014

U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue
Edited by Abbas Maleki and John Tirman
Bloomsbury, 2014

Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God
by Matthew Levitt
Hurst, 2013

Roham Alvandi's *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah* does exactly what it promises in its title. The book is an excellent insight into the interactions between the three aforementioned figures in what was a pivotal period of US, Iranian, and Cold War history. Alvandi's skill is writing in such a way as to appeal to the specialist and non-specialist alike. He weaves through a deep history, placing his triumvirate of characters in context without getting bogged down in unnecessary detail, and delivers a highly readable and effective study.

The essential core of the book is in shining a new light on the extraordinary role of Iran in the Nixon doctrine. This occurred when Nixon effectively outsourced containment of the Persian Gulf to Iran due to the inability, and lack of will, to use direct US force in the region. In Alvandi's words, "Absorbed with Vietnam, the Soviet Union, China, and a re-election campaign, Nixon and Kissinger had little time to devote to the complexities of... Gulf politics. Instead they deferred to the shah's judgement on local issues." One slight criticism here would be an over-reliance on older secondary sources in such important issues as examining US-Iran arms sales – which were a major component of Nixon's Iran policy package. While Alvandi's use of archival material is generally excellent, a closer reading of recently declassified archival material would have provided a more accurate account and more accurate figures to give the reader a better sense of scope.

Alvandi also offers an account of Iran's pursuit of an independent nuclear programme – an episode that might be described as a Kissinger crusade, as he became a strong advocate in support of the Shah's nuclear plans in an increasingly hostile Washington due to general anxiety over nuclear proliferation in the 1970s. Alvandi's chapter is a worthwhile inclusion to a growing literature on this area, and it gives another excellent angle on Alvandi's triumvirate of characters – especially Kissinger. Those with a deeper interest in the Shah's nuclear plans may wish to read the chapter alongside David Patrikarakos' *Nuclear Iran*.

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Through these examples, and a third chapter that deals with Iran's rivalry with Iraq, Alvandi achieves his task of proving that by the early 1970s, Iran was not a weak client state or a pawn in the Cold War. Under the Shah, Iran became a major regional actor and an essential partner of the US in its effort to contain the Soviet Union. At times, the book feels more slanted towards an account of the Shah's agency, independence, and skill as a leader, rather than being one equally about Nixon and Kissinger. So long as readers are welcome to this, they will not be disappointed. And, it joins an excellent contemporary literature on the period both from US and Iranian vantage points.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian's *Iran and the United States: An Insiders View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* also does what it promises in its title. As a former Iranian diplomat, the author brings a perspective to this subject that is most welcome – if (obviously) subjective. Primarily, the book is an excellent historical summary. Reaching back to the 1850s, through the Shah's reign, and into the contemporary Islamic Republic – the book is kind to the newcomer and a refreshing reminder for the specialist.

Aside from the mapping of US-Iran interactions, which is done with skill and excellent use of sources and personal accounts/reflections, the book largely stands on its final chapter, 'Road Map to Peace'. Here, the author lays out his personal perspective on how the US and Iran can establish a better pattern of relations in this ever tense period beset with disagreements over Iran's nuclear programme and its revisionist regional stance. The author bases this on a diplomatic effort where both sides recognise the other's grievances and then forgive each other. What then would follow is a series of pragmatic agreements resolving the various political disagreements, such as over Israel/Palestine and a restoration of economic ties between Iran and the West.

The reader can decide for themselves how realistic/sound this proposal is. However, in a book of this nature, it feels slightly ill-advised to put a chapter like this as the capstone as, due to the fast changing nature of developments in US-Iran regional politics, the book may quickly require a second edition. It does not ruin the book, per se, but it does make it more matched to the interested everyday reader rather than the specialist or the student who is looking for something more objective and useful.

What is more matched to the student is *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue* edited by Abbas Maleki and John Tirman. See here for a full review. While it doesn't have the detailed history of Mousavian's book, or the rich historical nuance of Alvandi's book, it does offer a snappy treatment of the issues that divide the two nations from a contemporary perspective, and acts as a good first step to inspire further reading. Set over eight chapters, each with its own perspective and written by a different author, the book would make a fascinating basis for discussions in a seminar series, or for a simulation game allowing students to attempt to role play the ever-tense (and rare) diplomatic engagements between Iran and the US.

Finally, Matthew Levitt's *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* is obviously not directly about Iran, however it does contain a recurrent and informative narrative on the deep links between Hezbollah and the Iranian regime. These links are detailed in depth, often in the form of meticulous blow-by-blow reconstructions of instances where Hezbollah has surfaced in the Middle East – and as far and wide as Africa, South East Asia and South America.

Levitt's attention to detail is something that will either impress or annoy. Some readers may appreciate the forensic level of detail offered while others may tire of it and prefer a more analytical and reflective style. For these reasons, it should not be the first book you read on Hezbollah, but rather one you refer to if you are already familiar with the organisation and are seeking a book that details their history and activities from their conception to the modern day.

The narrative arc of Levitt's investigation is to build a case that Hezbollah is conducting a campaign of covert operations against the US and Israel – and to a lesser extent operating a global terror network. The author takes care to wed state support from Iran in his reconstruction, arguing that Hezbollah and Iran together comprise a dangerous alliance against the West. This is evident in the example of post-Saddam Iraq where elements of the Iranian regime and Hezbollah fought a proxy war against the US occupation, and in Hezbollah's conflicts with Israel in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories.

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For this reason, the book reads largely like a US-centric War-on-Terror-styled rallying call for concerted international attention on Hezbollah in order to limit their ability to operate. This may play well to readers in the American political community, however it sometimes lacks the nuance that might reflect the fact that unlike Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (and other such 'terror' groups) Hezbollah are also a political party with elected representatives and what might be construed as legitimate political grievances – albeit also a terrorist organisation. Despite this criticism, the book is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in Hezbollah, or Iran's links with terrorist groups.

Earlier instalments of the Understanding Iran series of book reviews are [here](#) and [here](#).

About the author:

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