Over the past few years, there have been numerous journalistic attempts to review the history of Iranian-American relations. The Last Great Revolution (Robin Wright) and Persian Mirrors (Elaine Sciolino) are just two examples. Another class of works would be those relying on previously unpublished sources or academic research methods, such as All the Shah’s Men (Stephen Kinzer) and Modern Iran (Nikki Keddie). I have always found books written by journalists to be easily accessible, but not as useful as the latter for research purposes.

This book by Kenneth Pollack (author of The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq, 2002) shows how to do both. The Persian Puzzle is well-documented and an enjoyable read. Pollack, who currently serves as director of research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, has documented what is arguably one of the most difficult subjects to understand. He then provides a vision of what future Iranian-American relations could become. He is neither naïve nor vague. Pollack offers a how-to for American policy makers, who “no longer [have] the luxury of considering a purely passive approach to Tehran” (p. 375).

Since his purpose is to bring the reader into the present with a push towards a new future, Pollack spends little time discussing ancient Persia or pre-Reza Shah Iran. However, his summary of “Reza the Great” is quick and decisive. He describes the advances, particularly in modernization, for Iran under Reza but is quite candid in his assessment of the anti-democratic and “heavy price” (p. 35) that the people paid. It is clear that Pollack is determined to present a balanced view of Reza Shah, and in many ways this is a touchstone for the entire book. He is quick to point out the errors of judgment on the part of the Americans, especially presidents Eisenhower and Nixon. Still, he has plenty to say about Mohammad Mosaddeq, too:

For most foreigners, the collective memory of the Iranians for Mohammad Mosaddeq might seem contrary and ironic. He is remembered as the man who challenged despotism, even though he established an autocracy . . . (pp. 67-68).

Again, it is this same, well-documented, balanced approach that allows him to scrutinize the period before the 1979 revolution with remarkable accuracy. The juxtaposition of Mohammad Reza Shah both as part of the “twin pillars” (p. 104) approach to America’s Persian Gulf policy and as an adversary having constant squabbles with its “unconditional ally” over the sale of arms, the role of the U.S. military in the region and the price of oil casts the Iranian-American relationship in a different, more vivid light. Iran and the United States were allies out of necessity and not out of any common understanding of religion, culture or politics. With only the SAVAK (secret police) to enforce this alliance, the situation was ripe for revolution. And its impetus could only come from nationalists and religious leaders.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was poised in France to return to his native land through a “cassette revolution” that had paved the way for a modern revolution. The irony is that such modern techniques were used to instill a seventh-century theocracy. One of the best analytical points from Pollack comes after Mohammad Khatami was elected in 1997.

Iran’s isolation, their eight-year war with Iraq and limited contact with the West was taking a toll on the economy. Pollack states that the regime had “frequently put its ideas about Islamic orthodoxy ahead of economic efficiency” (p. 304), and the result was destroying Iran’s productivity and export capacity.

In Pollack’s mind, there is a desire on the part of Iran now to work with the United States and reach a consensus on regional security issues, including international terrorism (p. 379). However, economic ties, oil exports and even humanitarian issues are really second-tier compared to what Pollack sees as the most important reason to begin a process now with Iran: “their pursuit of nuclear weapons” (p. 381). Iran becomes an even more dangerous regional state if it develops such weapons. Still, he stops short of suggesting an invasion of Iran (p. 386) unless there are extraordinary circumstances. What he does suggest is a more multilateral approach with China, Russia and Pakistan at the table (p. 411). The stakes are just too high to rely upon a still-reeling United Nations, or a complicit European Union. Additionally, the United States does not seem able to cope with a nuclear Iran. Solving this “Persian puzzle” may be the “ultimate test of America’s leadership in the new era” (p. 424).

Pollack has provided a blueprint for improving Iranian-American relations. The only puzzle would be why an administration would not follow his advice.
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