

AMERICA AND IRAN



A HISTORY
1720 TO THE PRESENT



JOHN GHAZVINIAN

America and Iran

ALSO BY JOHN GHAZVINIAN

Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil

America and Iran

A HISTORY,
1720 TO THE PRESENT



JOHN GHAZVINIAN



To my parents, of course,
who lived too much of this history

When the lingering sorrow of separation lifts, The
nightingale will tear back into the rose garden Its throat
filled with song

این تطاول که کشید از غم حجران بلبل
تا سراپرده گل نعره زنان خواهد شد

—HAFEZ, FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PERSIAN POET

The Iranian revolution is a fact of history, but between
American and Iranian basic national interests there need be
no permanent conflict.

—RONALD REAGAN,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, NOVEMBER 1986

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Introduction

For a historian—for any storyteller, really—the challenge is always where to begin.

Does the story begin on the day the star-crossed lovers meet? Does it begin, as it does in the immortal poetry of Omar Khayyam, on the secluded riverbank, with a jug of wine and a loaf of bread, and that moment of blossoming, freshly emergent romance? For those telling the story of Iran and America, alas, it does not. This is a story that always seems to begin at the very *end*, at the moment when swords are drawn and voices are raised—when tempers are flaring and the lovers have gone their separate ways.

In the United States, so often, the story begins in 1979, with those famous grainy television pictures—the bearded revolutionaries climbing the wall of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and taking sixty-six Americans hostage, leading them blindfolded and bewildered into the street for all the world to see. It begins with a radical, hateful, anti-American revolution, and all the menacing symbolism and fanatical Middle Eastern blood-thirst that image conjures up. The very moment that America and Iran broke off ties—the moment that ended more than a century of warm and friendly relations—has become Day One, Chapter One, Verse One. The Book of Genesis.

It is an odd way to write history, this—beginning at the end. But this is the way the story is told in the United States. A catalog of Iran’s sins—ranging from “support for terrorism” to “pursuit of nuclear weapons”—generally follows in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with the accusation that all these activities stem ultimately from the radicalism of the Islamic Republic that was created forty years ago, and the ideology of hatred and hostility it has cultivated ever since. The Iran hostage crisis of 1979 has become a kind of original sin—the moment the serpent slipped into the Garden of Eden and brought an end to the comfortable illusion of American global invincibility. The unforgivable has become the unforgiven. And nothing has been the same since.

In Iran, meanwhile, the story usually begins in 1953, with an original sin of a

different kind. It begins with Mohammad Mosaddeq—a name largely forgotten by Americans, but a national hero to many Iranians. It begins with that hot afternoon in August 1953, when the CIA engineered a coup against Mosaddeq, the elected—and wildly popular—prime minister of Iran. It begins with the thugs and newspaper editors who were hired by the CIA to create trouble on the streets and give the army the cover it needed to remove the prime minister. Mosaddeq—a great admirer of democracy and human rights—had represented the hope of a generation. It was a generation that had adored America—a generation raised on years of John Wayne movies and big, stylish Chevrolets—but that quickly grew to hate it. Another ending, treated as a beginning.

This is the way the story is told in Iran. After the 1953 coup, Iran's young king—the shah*—returned from a brief exile and spent the next twenty-five years increasing his dictatorial grip on the country, bolstered by billions of dollars in weapons and training from the United States. His feared secret police jailed and tortured thousands, the royal family pilfered spectacular sums from the Iranian treasury, corrupt courtiers engaged in a lavish and opulent lifestyle, as one American president after another toasted the shah for his “steadfast” friendship. And then—only *then*—in 1979, did the hated and hollow regime finally collapse, brought down by millions of revolutionaries streaming through the streets, a handful of them so angry that they seized the U.S. embassy and took its employees hostage.

So it has remained, for forty years. History—like almost everything else—has become a casualty in the long-running war of words between Iran and the United States. For more than forty years, those who like to look for someone to blame, or something to defend, have stood in their respective corners, trading accusations about the relative criminality of the CIA coup and the embassy hostage crisis, taking very little interest in the idea that there might be a richer, more sophisticated way to look at the history that has transpired between these two nations. For more than forty years, 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. And for more than forty years, endings, ruptures, and angry disagreements—rather than beginnings, attractions, and initial infatuations—have become the starting point for every conversation about Iran and America.

We are all much poorer for it.



The history of U.S.-Iranian relations did not begin in 1979, and it did not begin

in 1953. It began hundreds of years ago—when the United States was still a handful of British colonies and Iran was still known to the outside world as the Persian Empire.* And it began with something much more interesting than hostile acts and mutual accusations about “original sins.”

When we choose to take this long-term approach to history, we discover something surprising. For hundreds of years, it turns out, well before their governments had any serious high-level interaction, the peoples of Iran and America looked at each other with a remarkable degree of fascination, admiration, warmth, and benevolence. In the 1720s colonial American newspapers wrote at length, and with great sympathy, about the political affairs of the Persian Empire. In the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams studied Persian history as they looked for inspiration and guidance on how to run their new nation. From the 1850s to the 1920s, Persian newspapers constantly urged their readers to learn from America’s example and develop their country into a progressive, prosperous constitutional republic. In 1919 there were reports of *pro-American* riots on the streets of Tehran.

This is where the story of Iran and America really begins. And this is what has been missing most acutely from all our discussions of the subject. Well before governments in Tehran and Washington began to step on each other’s toes in our own lifetimes—well before the “Great Satan” and “Axis of Evil” speeches, well before Mosaddeq and the hostage crisis and Ayatollah Khomeini—relations between these two countries were animated by a spirit of common respect and mutual understanding.

It is this spirit—far more than any supposed original sins—that should mark the beginning of their interaction in the pages of history. And it is out of a desire to bring this history to light that this book has been written.



For the past forty years, Iran and the United States—once the closest of allies—have had almost no relationship at all. There have been no meetings between heads of state, no exchange of diplomats, no official channels for the two governments to express their concerns and views to each other. There have been no embassies, no trade missions, virtually no tourists, no student exchange programs, no military coordination or communication. Only very recently has there even been any contact between officials of the two countries.

This has created a gulf of understanding of epic proportions. Today decision-makers in neither country know, with any real depth or conviction, what their counterparts are thinking. Today an enormous chasm exists between Iran and the

United States—the kind of chasm that, even in the darkest days of the Cold War, never existed between the United States and the Soviet Union.

To the uninitiated observer, the most obvious risk from this prolonged estrangement appears to be that of all-out war. But this is not the most pressing reason to study the history of U.S.-Iranian relations today. Certainly, tensions between the two countries do periodically flare up, to the point that a military confrontation appears imminent. But it would be a mistake to let these be the only moments that capture our attention. Understanding Iran—and the history of U.S. relations with Iran—is important not just because Iran is “the next country we might be bombing.” Iran is not just another crisis. It is not just another bushfire in the seemingly endless series of conflagrations and catastrophes that have engulfed the Middle East in recent years.

Iran is a nation of 80 million people. It is the second-largest country in the Middle East, both by population and by area. And it is an immeasurably important part of the region’s politics. For centuries, Iran has been at the crossroads of civilizations—a meeting place of cultures along the ancient Silk Road, and the key power along both the north-south axis between Russia and the Persian Gulf and the east-west axis between Asia and the Middle East. It is one of the world’s most important petroleum producers—sitting atop the world’s second-largest reserves of conventional crude oil and its single-largest reserves of natural gas. Iran controls maritime access to the Strait of Hormuz, 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—a population that, however it might sometimes appear, is far more modern, outward-looking, and comfortable with Western cultural norms than many of its neighbors. 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.

Iran is also, of course, the world’s only Shia nation. Although it is not the only nation with a Shia majority (neighboring Iraq is 60 percent Shia, and several other countries have sizable Shia minorities), Iran is the undisputed *political leader* of the Shia Muslim world. Its population is more than 90 percent Shia, and if you look at a map of the region broken down by religious allegiances, Iran emerges very clearly as the center of gravity of Shiism. Iran is to Shia Islam roughly what the Vatican is to the Catholic Church, or what Moscow once was for the Communist bloc. For the United States to close itself off to a country that exercises immense political leadership over one of the two major sects of Islam makes little sense under the current circumstances.

Finally, it is worth remembering that Iran is one of the world’s oldest,

proudest, and most enduring civilizations. Unlike other countries in the region, Iran was not created by British or French colonial elites drawing lines in the sand or handing over power to native political elites. Rather, Iran has had three thousand years of (mostly) continuous nationhood, interrupted only by a period of foreign domination in the Middle Ages. Along with China, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia, Iran is one of the very few nation-states that can legitimately claim to have existed more or less continuously since antiquity. It is also one of only seven or eight nations that were never colonized by European powers.* Culturally, historically, and politically, Iran has an extraordinarily strong sense of its identity and its regional significance. It is an unavoidable presence in any discussion of the Middle East.

For all these reasons, Iran merits close attention. And for all these reasons, none of us can afford to be overly complacent about the antagonism that exists between Iran and the United States today. Though it may not be obvious on a day-to-day basis, the poisonous atmosphere that has accumulated over the years between these countries has caused tremendous damage—to the United States, to Iran, to the Middle East, and to the world as a whole. It has become, in the words of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, a kind of “lingering sorrow of separation.”

It should now be blisteringly clear that America’s foreign policy in the Middle East is stuck—and that it is stuck in ways that could benefit enormously from an improved relationship with Iran. In Afghanistan, Iran’s eastern neighbor, U.S. troops have struggled for nearly two decades trying to defeat Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other Sunni radical groups—unable to capitalize on Iran’s deep, long-standing ties with local tribal forces (or its hatred of the Taliban, which dates back to the 1990s). In Iraq, Iran’s western neighbor, America has expended prodigious amounts of money and manpower since 2003 but has not been able to capitalize on Iran’s great influence with the Shia population there (or its same basic desire to see stability and order prevail). In Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—where America’s most important ally, Israel, feels surrounded by enemies—Iran has built up a formidable array of alliances and could play a decisive role in either advancing or undermining any potential peace agreements. Even in unexpected places, like Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt, Iran has relationships with local actors that could be leveraged in a very different direction if circumstances ever allowed for it.

In short, there is not a single problem the United States is dealing with in the Middle East that cannot be traced, in one way or another, to its dysfunctional relationship with Iran. And there is not a single problem that would not, to some degree, benefit from an improvement in that relationship. For forty years,

America's attempts to advance its interests in the Middle East have suffered immeasurably because of this relationship of bile and hostility that exists with the Islamic Republic. Yet that same relationship, paradoxically, could prove to be the key that unlocks so much—if only it were allowed to turn in the opposite direction.



When I set out, in 2007, to tell the story of Iran and America, I felt it was important that each country have a chance to be heard—properly, on its own terms, without the filter of a political agenda. I felt it was important not to apportion blame, or to look for culprits and victims, or to take sides. What was missing from most discussions, I thought, was a fair, dispassionate record of the many events that have led up to the present-day impasse. I wanted this to be the first book that was written neither “from Tehran” nor “from Washington” but rather was unencumbered by the reflexive assumptions and ideological baggage that so frequently characterize writings on this subject.

Part of this, for me, meant doing something many Americans writing on this subject never do, which was to actually *go* to Iran. I was born in that country, in 1974, but left at the age of one, and had never been back. In a way, this meant that Iran was as alien to me as it is to most Americans. But it also meant I had the ability to travel there without much difficulty—a privilege that I felt it was important to make use of.

By traveling around the country—talking to Iranians from all walks of life but also, crucially, scouring through archives not easily accessible to Western scholars—I hoped to create a richer, more sophisticated version of this story. And I hoped to take the information I found in Iranian archives and place it alongside similar evidence from the United States—allowing each country's sources to speak for themselves. I knew this was not the first book ever written on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, and that it would not be the last. I did, however, want it to be the first that used both American *and* Iranian archives. For ten years, from 2007 to 2017, I engaged in what I believe is the most exhaustive and wide-ranging study ever undertaken on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations.* And the result, I hope, is the first really comprehensive attempt to understand how these two countries have ended up in the confrontational position they are in today.

But my aim has not been just to be comprehensive for its own sake—or to laboriously hash out every tedious detail of U.S.-Iranian relations. My aim has been to make the case for a more enlightened principle: that history can be a

force for peace. If this book accomplishes only one thing, it should be to help readers in both Iran and the United States, and indeed those in neighboring nations, understand that there is nothing inherently grotesque or untrustworthy about the “enemy” on the other side. If one thing should quickly become obvious, it is that both countries have occasionally made decisions that seem beastly and reprehensible to the other, but that they have done so as a result of peculiar historical circumstances, conditions, and considerations—not because they are inexplicably evil.

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. And what I hope every reasonable reader will conclude from this narrative is that the time is long overdue for a mending of fences. Though there are people in both countries—and indeed in other countries—who believe their interests are best served by perpetual antagonism between Iran and America, I believe most people reading these words will not share this cynical perspective. 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 differences. 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.

* *Shah* is the Persian word for “king.”

* Iranians have always called their country “Iran,” but for centuries Europeans (and later, Americans) erroneously referred to it as “Persia”—a reflection of the facts that the Persians were historically the most dominant of Iran’s many ethnic groups, and that it was the Persians who had created the first Iranian empire, in the days of Cyrus and Alexander. This confusion is understandable, but it is somewhat akin to referring to France as “Gaul” or to Italians as “Romans.” In 1935, Iran formally declared its desire to be known as Iran, not Persia. In order to avoid confusion and awkwardness when quoting from contemporary Western sources, or discussing institutions with names like the “Anglo-Persian Oil Company” or the “Persia Mission” of the American Presbyterian Church, I have mostly chosen to use *Persia* and *Persians* when discussing events before 1935, and *Iran* and *Iranians* for events after 1935.

* Though these things can be debated endlessly, by my estimation, Japan, China, Thailand, Korea, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Mongolia are the only other major nations that can justifiably claim never to have been colonies, protectorates, or mandates of European powers at any point in their modern history.

* For more details, please see the Acknowledgments.

PART I

Spring

East of Eden



Once upon a time in Iran, there was a city that gave men butterflies. Centuries before the ayatollah, before the shah—before even Muhammad and Jesus Christ shook up their respective corners of the Middle East—the emperors of Persia had built one of the most magnificent capital cities the world had ever known. It was called Persepolis—literally, the “city of Persians.” And such was its reputation that even the mightiest of princes, as they saw it coming slowly into view after days and weeks of trekking across the desert, could feel themselves reduced to nervous wrecks.

Once a year, in ancient times—on the first day of spring—rulers of the twenty-eight great kingdoms that Persia had conquered were expected to journey to Persepolis to pay tribute to their lord and master, the “King of Kings.” And they never failed to carry out this duty. From the Mediterranean city of Sardis would come the obscenely wealthy kings of Lydia, carrying all the riches of Croesus to lay at the feet of the shah. From Memphis and Alexandria came Egyptian nobles, their Nubian slaves in tow. From the hills of Bactria, the “emperor of a thousand cities” brought his camels laden with gold. Timidly they would all climb the enormous staircase to the Apadana Palace and walk through the fabled Gate of All Nations, hoping what they had brought would prove worthy of their overlord, the Persian emperor. Hoping he would have mercy this year and not reduce their meager satrapies to weeping hillocks of rubble.

At its height in the fifth century B.C., the Persian Empire ruled over 60 million of the world’s 100 million people—making Persepolis, for all intents and purposes, the capital city of all humanity. And anyone who laid eyes on this fabled city could not fail to come away in awe of its power and opulence. Great stone columns, capped by winged bulls, soared into the sky at the entrance to

every ceremonial building. Palaces and throne rooms, overflowing with jewels and sumptuous furnishings, shimmered in the midday sun. Tombs of ancient emperors, chiseled into the surrounding cliffs, loomed dramatically over the landscape below. It was the kind of place one had to see to believe—a city designed to strike reverence into the hearts of visitors and remind them of their own insignificance before the mightiest empire the world had ever known.

Like so many other imperial projects, the famous “city of Persians” long ago went the way of all souls. Burned and pillaged by Alexander the Great and his army of conquering Greeks in 330 B.C. (legend has it they required three thousand camels to cart away all its gold and jewels), its columns still reach proudly into the cloudless blue sky, in one of the most remote and unpopulated corners of Iran. Today, though, it is not Sogdian princes but busloads of tourists—Japanese, Germans, occasionally even Americans—who are driven across the vast, hot, and flat Morqab Plain to pay their tribute. As they approach the ruins of Persepolis, they marvel, just as the Elamites and the Babylonians once did, at a city that seems to rise out of nowhere—the final punctuation mark at the end of a merciless expanse of dust.

And as modern visitors scramble among ancient tombs and statues, snapping pictures and admiring what is left of the palaces of Darius and Xerxes, they often notice, just off to the side, a rusting metal grandstand—rows of empty spectator seating rising like bleachers at a high school football field. These are the ruins of a much more recent emperor.



In October 1971 the Shah of Iran—Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, King of Kings, Light of the Aryans, Imperial Majesty and Commander-in-Chief of four hundred thousand fearsome (if somewhat modernized) Persian warriors—chose Persepolis as the backdrop for one of the most audacious, expensive, and self-indulgent spectacles of the modern era: celebrations marking the 2,500-year anniversary of the Iranian monarchy. Attempting to replicate the rituals of Persian emperors from centuries past, he summoned the world’s most powerful leaders before the Apadana Palace and asked them to marvel at the greatness of his “empire.” **Only this time Iran** was picking up the tab. Ten kings, twenty-one princes and princesses, nine sheikhs, two sultans, a grand duke, a cardinal, sixteen presidents, three prime ministers, and four vice presidents were flown into Shiraz and transported—some by helicopter and some in red Mercedes limousines—across the desert to Persepolis, where four full days of feasting awaited them. Princess Grace of Monaco, King Hussein of Jordan, President

Nikolai Podgorny of the USSR, Vice President Spiro Agnew of the United States—all mingled among balls and banquets, parades and performances, and a light and sound show described by observers as the “[world’s greatest fireworks display](#).” At least six hundred journalists were also flown in, together with their satellite trucks and cameras, so that no corner of the globe would be deprived of its chance to witness the historic occasion.

The shah did not cut corners. The legendary French hotelier Max Blouet was persuaded to come out of retirement to coordinate the event. Catering was provided by Maxim’s of Paris, which closed its doors two weeks early to prepare for the feast. Thirty cooks, 150 waiters, twenty-two tons of provisions—including such precious cargo as freshly picked raspberries—were all flown in from Paris on a fleet of jumbo jets. [Five thousand bottles of wine](#) and champagne were sent to Iran a month early, to give them time to settle and adjust to the climate. At the gala banquet, the menu, Maxim’s finest, included quail eggs stuffed with caviar, crayfish mousse, and rack of lamb with truffles—all washed down with a 1945 Château Lafitte Rothschild. The main course, “[imperial peacock](#),” was roasted and stuffed with foie gras and served “surrounded by its court” of jellied quail. Ninety-two of the regal birds were arranged along the banquet table, their tail feathers fully spread, to symbolize the magnificence of the Peacock Throne (the traditional seat of Iranian monarchs since 1739). The five-and-a-half-hour feast went down in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the longest and most lavish in modern history.

And this wasn’t the half of it. To ensure the comfort of the shah’s guests, they were housed in what were modestly described as “tents”—luxury air-conditioned apartments covered in blue and gold cloth, designed by Jansen of Paris (famous for its renovations of Buckingham Palace and the White House). [Each “tent” boasted](#) two bedrooms, two marble bathrooms, servants’ quarters, a kitchenette, and three telephone lines. The main banquet tent, meanwhile, was stuffed with Louis XV furniture, crystal chandeliers, and a 235-foot mahogany dining table. [Special tents with casino](#) and gaming tables were set up, along with sixteen hair salons staffed by beauticians from Elizabeth Arden and other leading Paris houses—all flown in to help guests look their best for each night’s festivities.

No one ever found out how much all this feasting and festoonery ended up costing Iran. The shah’s defenders suggested impossibly low figures around \$4 million and claimed most of it came from “private business contributions,” while his detractors threw around equally outlandish figures in the hundreds of millions (close to \$2 billion in today’s money). But whatever the exact figure, it did not look good. As French waiters poured liters of claret into the goblets of

kings, in the eastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan, severe food shortages were driving villagers to the brink of famine. Even in Fars Province, where Persepolis was located, there had been reports of malnutrition, and the shah found himself facing awkward questions from the international press corps. At a Tehran news conference, a Swedish journalist asked him pointedly if he knew how much all the festivities were going to cost. “Do you know how much a kilo of meat and a kilo of bread cost?” the shah replied, just as pointedly. The journalist shook his head. “So why are you asking me?” the shah sniffed.

American journalists were a little gentler with the shah. In the United States, where the appetite for imperial pomp and pageantry was limitless, the Persepolis celebrations were met with squeals of delight. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “there isn’t likely to be [a celebration] to match it for another 25 centuries.” The normally sedate *New York Times* marveled that “some of the emeralds in [Empress Farah’s] crown were the size of golf balls. Her diamonds were only slightly smaller.” The entire event was broadcast via satellite, and hosted by a young Barbara Walters on NBC, to an estimated audience of 10 million Americans. Orson Welles narrated the official documentary, *Flames of Persia*. And the U.S. *chargé d’affaires* in Tehran congratulated the event’s organizer, telling him it was “the best exercise in public relations” he had ever seen.



“The most expensive party in history”: Persepolis, 1971. Festivities marking the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of the Persian monarchy were estimated to cost in the tens of millions of dollars.



In the banquet tent at Persepolis, seated left to right: Prince Rainier of Monaco, Prince Philip of Great Britain, Crown Prince Carl Gustaf of Sweden, and Vice President Spiro Agnew of the United States.

The shah lapped it all up. Proudful, insecure, plagued by demons few around him fully understood, and constantly concerned with demonstrating the prestige of his ancient throne, the fifty-two-year-old monarch was never more at home than when he was basking in the praise of his American friends. And at Persepolis in 1971, he was in his element. Surveying the grounds majestically, like a schoolmaster peering through his spectacles with his famously stern and piercing eyes, puffed up with pride like the peacocks on the banquet tables as he welcomed one king after another to his desert encampment, the shah glowed with satisfaction. This was his roost. He ruled it—with a degree of absolute, unquestioned power that few of his predecessors had ever managed to summon. And he was happy to let the world know it.



Ten years later he was dead. And so was the 2,500-year-old empire that he had gone to such lengths to celebrate. Gone was the Peacock Throne. Gone was the King of Kings. Gone were the armies of fawning courtiers lined up dutifully in their gold-threaded uniforms. In the place of the shah was a man of God—an “ayatollah” in a black turban and a gray barbed-wire beard, whose eyebrows seemed permanently knitted in anger and whose open palm seemed permanently spread out over oceans of seething crowds, their fists rising and falling in unison as they rhythmically chanted *Death to America! Death to America!* In place of the imperial nation of Iran, the modern incarnation of the Persian Empire of

centuries past, there was now something calling itself the “Islamic Republic”—severe, austere, a vast landscape of rage, painted only in shades of black, and mercilessly unforgiving of anything it deemed to be “Western arrogance.” In place of a cooing Barbara Walters, American television carried wall-to-wall programming about fifty-two hostages and their hellish ordeal at the hands of sweating Iranian revolutionaries.

Those ten fateful years—from 1971 to 1981—were perhaps the most decisive, transformative, and unforgettable decade in the history of America’s long and tortured relationship with Iran. For ten years, give or take, American military equipment had landed like snowflakes on the lap of a grateful shah. Chinook helicopters, F-14 Tomcats, Patton tanks, Sidewinder missiles—nothing was off-limits if the shah desired it. In Washington in 1972, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger gave him carte blanche, instructing the Pentagon that decisions about Iranian arms sales “should be left primarily to the government of Iran.” And over the next few years, Iran quickly became the world’s largest single purchaser of U.S. weapons, accounting for more than one-third of Washington’s international arms sales. By 1978, Iran was spending \$10 billion a year on U.S. arms (around \$50 billion in today’s money) and had amassed the most powerful military in the Middle East. If ever there was occasion for some lamentatious Roman poet to sing of “arms and the man,” this was it.

But it was not just arms. By 1978 some fifty thousand Americans were living in Iran. “Technical advisers,” military contractors, schoolteachers, oil executives, development “experts,” tour guides, archaeologists, hippies waylaid on the trail from Goa to Zanzibar—all of them, in one way or another, buying into the idea that Iran was a progressive, dynamic nation of the future that was benefiting handsomely from the hand of American friendship. And for the U.S. government, this was just about the best piece of news coming out of the Middle East. In Washington, the shah was seen as a much-needed alternative to the radical, troublesome, evil Arabs—less Muslim somehow, less threatening, more benign. The Arab world in the 1970s, seen from Washington, was a hopeless, never-ending psychodrama of airplane hijackings, bomb plots, socialist revolutions, interminable wars with Israel. Just to the east, though, lay a more peaceful kingdom—a “natural ally” whose romantic Persian past, secular institutions, Western-educated elites, stable politics, and anti-Communist ruler made it a more reliable partner for the United States. This was the most durable, dependable, reassuring alliance America enjoyed in the Middle East. And it had felt like it would never end. As late as December 1977—just one week before the revolution broke out—President Jimmy Carter stood at a banquet in Tehran, raised his glass to the shah, and, repeating a phrase used by countless American

officials since the 1950s, toasted Iran as an “island of stability in one of the more troubled regions of the world.”

The equation worked just as powerfully in the other direction. For despite the ugly spectacle of Vietnam in the 1960s, most Iranians still viewed America as a basically virtuous nation, in stark contrast to the European powers that had been divvying up the Middle East for decades. When the shah had come to power in 1941, Iran was still feeling the effects of nearly two centuries as a pawn in the imperial ambitions of Britain, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, France. Thus, whenever Iranians thought of “the West,” their minds turned instinctively to the image of greedy, self-interested Europeans. But when they looked just a little *further* west, they saw a more benevolent power—a nation born out of opposition to empire and colonialism, infused with noble idealism, with a foreign policy that seemed largely selfless and respectful of the concerns of weaker nations. Though this image of America had begun to fray by the 1970s, it still held sway with bourgeois elites in Iran and especially with the shah himself. Just as Americans looked past the radicalism of the Arab world and found a “nicer Middle East” on its periphery—one with a friendlier face and a reliable ally at its helm—Iranians looked past Europe and found a “nicer West”—one that seemed to live and breathe its liberal ideals and was ready to extend the hand of genuine partnership.

This idea—that both Iran and the United States could reach beyond the countries that frustrated them and find a “natural ally”—had a long pedigree, one that has not always been fully appreciated by historians. Decade after decade, dating back at least to the 1850s, successive Iranian governments had looked to the United States as a potential “third force” that could counteract the pressures from Britain and Russia. Decade after decade, Americans had looked to Iran as a mystical, benevolent, faraway Persian kingdom that seemed more appealing than the radical, hostile Arab world. This belief in an “alternative” force, lying just over the horizon, proved powerful and durable in both the American psyche and the Iranian—and arguably really fully disappeared only after 1979. When examined in its full historical dimensions, it goes a long way toward explaining how these two countries became such friends in the first place—and why it might not be so hard for them to see each other this way again. This fundamental attraction, this narrative of two countries on opposite sides of the world that were able to look beyond their own immediate trouble spots and find common ground—this is the core of our story.



So the obvious first questions are: How exactly did all this come about? And when? At what point in history, exactly, did the peoples of these two countries begin to see each other as “natural allies”? And for what reasons? These questions are almost never asked by historians—who typically seem more concerned with explaining how everything went *wrong* for Iran and America than with understanding how so many things initially went *right*. And the answers, perhaps, will come as a surprise, even to those who believe they know the story of Iran and America well.

The very first newspapers published in North America, it turns out, were absolutely enchanted by Iran. In the 1720s, at a time when “the United States” had yet to come into existence, and Britain’s North American colonies were largely a land of yeoman farmers, tobacco plantations, and quiet settler villagers, newspapers in Boston and Philadelphia reported regularly on events in the Persian Empire—with a breathless, even hysterical energy. Week in and week out, publications like the *Boston News-Letter*, the *Boston Gazette*, and Philadelphia’s *American Weekly Mercury* fell over one another to feed (and stoke) the public appetite for information about Persia. At one point, the *Mercury* was regularly devoting 25 to 30 percent of its column-inches to Persian affairs. In July 1724 the newspaper even led with a regretful note: “[We have at present](#) no News concerning” the situation, “neither do we hear anything from Persia.” In the American colonies in the 1720s, the mere absence of news from Iran was a front-page story.

Though this might seem odd or surprising, the reason was fairly straightforward. In the summer of 1722, in the lawless Pashtun tribal regions of Kandahar, a revolt had broken out against the authority of the shah. The Afghan rebel Mahmud Hotaki, angered by Persian attempts to force his people to convert from Sunni to Shia Islam, had led an attack on Persian garrisons, then swept across the eastern provinces of the empire and laid siege to the capital, Isfahan, for six months. The brutal siege had starved eighty thousand people to death and brought chaos to the Persian Empire. So it was merely the big news story of the day when Americans first started publishing newspapers. What was perhaps most extraordinary about the American press coverage though (at least from a twenty-first-century perspective) was how overtly one-sided it all was—or, rather, which side it took. The American media in the 1720s were uniformly, passionately, and unapologetically pro-Iranian.

As news trickled in from Persia during these years, colonial American newspapers went into overdrive, openly cheering for the Persian king to defeat “the usurper” Mahmud. In October 1723 the *Boston Gazette* reported with horror that “[the Usurper](#) . . . having possess’d himself of all the Riches of Persia, [now]

puts all to Fire and Sword to establish his ill got Power.” In July 1724 the *Boston News-Letter* was even more puffed up with outrage. Mahmud, it claimed, “**was not satisfied** with the barbarous Death & cruel Murder of [the shah], nor with the inhuman Cruelties committed upon all his affectionate Adherents, but has farther extended his Tyranny.” It hoped someone would soon “extirpate the flagitious Tyrant, and cut his Adherents off the Face of the Earth.”

Why would news of civil war in imperial Persia have aroused such passions in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania in 1722? And why would Americans have been so quick to take the side of the Persians? The answer, in part, has to do with the peculiar understanding that North Americans had of Middle East politics in this period. Because Mahmud had rebelled explicitly in the name of Sunni Islam against his Shia overlords, Americans believed he must have received encouragement, and even diplomatic recognition, from the hated Ottoman Empire. To colonial Americans, this could mean only one thing: the rebellion was part of a larger proxy war between Sunni Ottoman Turks and their Shia Persian rivals—the region’s two great superpowers. It was another sign of the creeping expansionism of Ottoman Turkey, an evil empire that they had been told was a danger to Christendom—and to their very way of life.

In article after article, American newspapers blasted what they believed was a pattern of collusion between the Ottomans and the Afghan rebels.* In May 1723 the *Boston News-Letter* reported angrily that the Ottoman sultan had sent “**all kinds of Provisions & Ammunition**” to support the uprising. **In February 1724** the same newspaper told readers the whole rebellion had taken place “by the Instigation of the Ottoman Porte, which maintains an underhand Correspondence with” Mahmud. And in May 1724, when Isfahan finally fell, the *New England Courant* claimed “**the Turks very much** rejoiced at” hearing the news.

In the early eighteenth century, most white residents of North America still considered themselves loyal British subjects—as well as active participants in the broader world of European Christendom. And there was a history there. In 1683 the Ottoman Empire had laid siege to Vienna. One hundred and fifty years before that, the Ottomans had taken Hungary and the Balkans, and they now seemed to be threatening all of Christian Europe with their mighty armies. Worst of all, since the year 634, there had generally been some form of Turkish or Arab rule in Jerusalem, provoking Europeans to go on Crusades against the “infidel” Turks and their “occupation” of the Holy Land. Given this long history of confrontation between Christian Europe and its eastern periphery, Americans naturally felt hostile toward anything Turkish or Arab. It was also easy to romanticize and idealize Persia simply because it was an avowed enemy of the

Ottoman Empire. For decades, in fact, European monarchs had explored the possibility of a Persian-European alliance against the Turks. It was the oldest political principle in the book: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Politics, though, was only part of the story; there was also the complex matter of religion. For generations of New England Puritans, especially, raised on years of Sunday school and Bible study, Persia was forever the land of the Three Magi*—the “wise men from the East” who had come to Bethlehem bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the baby Jesus. Persia was also the land of Cyrus the Great, the famous king who, in Ezra 1:1, is praised for liberating the Jews from the Babylonian captivity. By contrast, the Ottoman Empire was heir to the ancient kingdom of Babylon†—the hated empire whose name the Book of Revelation equates with every imaginable kind of evil. Even more important, because virtually every place described in the Bible was now under the control of the hated Ottomans, pious Christians felt the Turks had “defiled” all their holy sites—and their writings vividly reflected this. But just to the east of the sultan’s dominions lay Persia—a fairytale land, home to hardly a single location of biblical significance. By what must have seemed an extraordinary coincidence, the Persian Empire began just to the east of where Christians believed the Garden of Eden had been—just past the last of the major sites of biblical interest.

This kind of biblical interpretation of the Middle East, with all its skewed comparisons of Ottomans and Persians, both reflected and reinforced the political prejudices of the day. Books published in Britain at this time, widely consumed in colonial America, were full of lopsided sympathy for Persia in its rivalry with the Ottomans. British writers generally described Persians as a noble, courageous, civilized race, while they condemned Turks as tyrannical, savage, incurably evil infidels. Travel books, scholarly accounts, religious manuals, and newspapers always referred to the “inhuman Turke” or the “terrible Turke”—while the Persians rarely received anything but praise.* Almost on cue, whenever British travelers crossed from the Ottoman Empire into the shah’s dominions, their tone brightened. Instead of condemnation and hatred, they expressed admiration and awe. The “*Turkes be not* comparable to the *Persian* for magnanimity and nobleness of mind,” wrote one traveler. Another contrasted “*the treachery, the covetousnesse, the wrath, the cruelties, the impietie, the wickednesse of these triumphing Turkes*” with the “*peace & tranquillitie*” of the Persian villages. As for the shah, he was “*verie absolute both in perfection of his bodies, and his minde,*” and a Christian-Persian alliance could easily defeat the Turks. Most impressive of all to British travelers was the

legendary city of Isfahan—the grand new capital of the Persian Empire, with its broad, double-laned boulevards, reflecting pools, and magnificent palaces and mosques, all covered in turquoise. Home to six hundred thousand people at its height, Isfahan rivaled London for the distinction of the world’s largest city in the seventeenth century. But London couldn’t hope to compete with its beauty. **European visitors were regularly** rendered speechless when they arrived, struggling to describe what they saw.

Thus, when the Afghan revolt broke out in 1722, Americans were transfixed. After decades of hearing about the glories of the shahs—the heirs of Cyrus the Great and the wise Magi—Americans had developed an affinity both for Persia and for the Persian monarch. And they were incensed to find that he was now under assault from east and west by a crude axis of evil formed between the Turkish sultan and the Afghan rebels. For the first time in history, and without fully understanding the conflict, Americans were becoming absorbed into a complicated world of Sunnis and Shias, Pashtuns and Persians. And they had no hesitation about taking sides.

Newspapers made heroic, if somewhat crude, attempts to help Americans understand the difference between Shia and Sunni Islam, and how this sectarian split had contributed to the conflict. Because the Persians were Shia—a minority sect viewed by most Muslims as heretical—some in America optimistically assumed that perhaps Persians were a little *less* Muslim or even not Muslim at all. (The conflict was sometimes described as a holy war between “Muslims and Persians.”) One newspaper explained that Sunnis were followers of Muhammad and therefore were true Muslims, while the Shia were only “**followers of Hali**” or Ali. Another claimed the Persians worshipped Ali “**as equal to Mahomet himself**”—suggesting that this made them altogether different from the evil Muslims of the Ottoman Empire. It was a spectacular misreading of the difference between Sunni and Shia, but a revealing insight into just how badly some Christians wanted to believe in the existence of a lesser of two evils in the Middle East.

As the 1720s progressed, some colonial Americans displayed a budding “**Persophilia**”—a romantic idealization of Persian culture and Persian themes. **Newspapers began carrying** advertisements for Persian rugs. **In 1724, *The Persian Cromwell***, a disparaging book about the life of Mahmud Hotaki, quickly made its way into libraries in the America colonies. **In 1729, Benjamin Franklin** praised the ancient Persians for the value they placed on education and virtue and suggested Americans follow the example. **Perhaps most tellingly**, the writings of Cotton Mather—one of the most influential religious leaders in colonial America—were rich with pro-Persian sentiment. **Though his writings**

were virulently anti-Islamic, he often went out of his way to point out examples of virtuous behavior by Persians—even suggesting that such stories should shame his fellow Christians into behaving more piously.

By 1727, a full five years after the Afghan rebellion, American interest in Persia showed no signs of abating. That year the *Weekly Mercury* ran a special nine-part series—a first for an American newspaper—explaining the background and chronology of recent events. In grueling, grisly detail, the *Mercury* reported on the extraordinary siege of Isfahan, depicting the Persians as victims of Sunni Afghan aggression. It described starving citizens examining human carcasses in the hope of finding bits of flesh to chew on, and mothers driven to feasting on their newborns. The shah himself was reduced to eating the flesh of his horses, it was written, just before he succumbed to the Afghans and ran weeping through the streets dressed in black. American readers learned that when the evil Mahmud was finally crowned, his victory parade required vast quantities of perfume to cover the stench of rotting corpses. “So many carcasses were thrown into the river,” reported the *Mercury*, that for a full year afterward “no Body could without Horror think of eating any Fish.”

Never before had an American newspaper offered its readers this kind of sensationalistic, in-depth coverage of an international event, and the format proved a runaway success. Just twenty years earlier American newspapers had barely existed. The few that had appeared regularly were dry, dusty affairs, reprinting tired stories about European diplomacy culled from the London papers. Now, though, thanks to the Persian conflict, colonial newspapers began to find their voice.

And that was not all. For the first time in history, Americans were demonstrating that very basic instinct that would become so vividly apparent by the 1970s—their willingness to believe that if they just reached over and beyond the infidel empire of the Middle East, they would find an idyllic civilization waiting in the periphery. A civilization that was somehow a little less Muslim, a little less Arab, a little less evil. For the first time, Americans had looked over at Persia and convinced themselves they were looking at a land ruled by a wise and enlightened shah whose interests overlapped considerably with their own.

There would be so much more where that came from.



For the remainder of the eighteenth century, Americans continued to display signs of this budding Persophilia, though not always with the same level of energy and visibility as in the 1720s. In 1761, “rich Persia carpets” were being

advertised in Boston, and in 1774 a “very large Persian carpet” was auctioned in New York. In 1765, Harvard began offering its first lessons in the Persian language. And after the turmoil of the American Revolution subsided, leaders of the new republic proved no less interested in learning about Persia than they had been in earlier decades. If anything, the elites seemed to have a *greater* appetite for information—an appetite fueled perhaps by the realization that an independent United States could no longer rely on Britain to keep it informed about world affairs. In the 1790s and early 1800s, the influential Salem preacher William Bentley taught himself Persian and collected dozens of volumes of Persian literature—several of which he carefully annotated—including narratives of travels in Persia, discourses on Persian science and astronomy, Zoroastrian religious texts, and three Persian dictionaries.

The most obvious association Americans had with the name *Persia*, though, was still its ancient history. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ordinary Americans had an easy intimacy with the glories of the ancient Persian Empire—a form of cultural literacy that has entirely vanished in recent generations. Cyrus the Great was a household name, widely celebrated as the magnanimous ruler who had freed the Jews from Babylon (an act for which Protestants, full of millennial fixations, were eternally grateful). The names Xerxes and Darius tripped comfortably off the tongues of small children, in a way that would be hard to imagine today. Americans with even the most basic schooling had an awareness of the legendary empire of ancient Persia. Almost every schoolchild during these years learned the ABCs by memorizing the rhyming couplets of *The New England Primer*—meaning that five-year-olds across America associated the letter *X* not with xylophones but with the rhyme “*Xerxes the Great* did die, and so must you and I.” *Abbott’s Histories*, a series of biographical sketches of great leaders—and a staple of American education for generations*—consisted of twenty-two biographies, of which only four were devoted to non-Western leaders. One was Genghis Khan. The other three were Xerxes, Cyrus, and Darius.



“Xerxes the Great did die, and so must you and I”: Generations of American schoolchildren, from the 1690s until well past 1800, associated the letter X not with xylophones but with the name of an ancient Persian emperor. (Two million copies of *The New England Primer*, a textbook for teaching children to read and spell, are believed to have been sold during this time.)

This appreciation for ancient Persia was particularly pronounced among America’s Founding Fathers. Like other Enlightenment thinkers of the time, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison—indeed, almost every person whose face appears on American currency today—were all intimately familiar with ancient Persian history. And they were particularly impressed by the legendary emperors Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, whose exemplary leadership abilities they saw as a potential model for the new republic. They drew much of their information from the *Cyropaedia*, a biography of Cyrus written by the ancient Greeks around 370 B.C., which describes Cyrus as a wise, just, and benevolent despot who relied on humanity and decency rather than brutality to secure the loyalty of his subjects. It is easy to see why this model would have appealed to early American leaders. The *Cyropaedia* was like a kinder, gentler version of Machiavelli—a prescription for leadership that emphasized the consent of citizens rather than the raw power of tyranny. Jefferson liked the book enough to own two copies, and evidence

suggests he read them with enough care that he was able to point out inconsistencies between them. John Adams owned several, too, and wrote notes to himself in the margins. In 1783 his son, John Quincy Adams, was even advised by his mother to emulate Cyrus and avoid the temptations of excessive power.

As the nineteenth century wore on and the United States began to think of itself as a rapidly expanding continental empire, references to ancient Persia became commonplace in American culture. In 1854, during a Senate debate about the so-called “Nebraska question,” Sen. Edward Everett argued that the Midwest would one day play a decisive role in American history, suggesting that “these infant territories . . . stand where Persia, Media[†] and Assyria [once] stood in the continent of Asia, destined to hold the balance of power—to be the centers of influence to the East and to the West.” Everett had taught Persian at Harvard forty years earlier, so perhaps the comparison came naturally to him. But he was not alone. Several American towns during this period changed their names to Media or Persia or even Cyrus. In 1834, Sylvanus Cobb, a prominent Universalist preacher from Maine, saw nothing strange in naming his twin sons Darius and Cyrus.* And in 1858, David Dorr, a freed slave famous for his global travels, declared that American liberty was such an inspiration to the world that “the American people are to be the Medes and Persians of the nineteenth century.”

It would be a huge exaggeration to say that Americans somehow “modeled” their new republic on Persian ideals. But if one browses through catalogs of early American libraries, it is striking to consistently see Persian tales and biographies of Cyrus side by side with the Christian prayer books and Greco-Roman histories one might expect to find. As they settled down to the hard work of building a new republic, this first generation of Americans—citizens of an independent United States—was prepared to cast its net far and wide in search of lessons and examples. And that even, occasionally, meant looking to Iran.



The Persians, meanwhile, had a similar fascination with and idealization of the United States—but it came about much later, and for much more practical, urgent reasons. For most of the eighteenth century, Persia was consumed by domestic political turmoil, and for most of the nineteenth century, with fending off the machinations and exploitative practices of the European powers. For Persia, these were difficult years. And the United States was not initially of great interest.

The legendary empire of the Persians never fully recovered from the Afghan raids of the 1720s. In the half-century that followed, the country was steadily reduced to chaos, anarchy, and seemingly endless tribal warfare. Not until 1794 was the pain of these years finally brought to an end by a new ruling dynasty, the Qajars—who would remain in power until 1925. The first two Qajar shahs quickly reconquered Georgia, which had intermittently slipped in and out of Persian control over the previous 250 years, and they solidified Persian sovereignty over the volatile eastern provinces around Khorasan and Afghanistan. And to cement their rule, they built a new imperial capital at the foothills of the Alborz Mountains—in a small village by the name of Tehran.

In their early days, the Qajars brought a measure of desperately needed political stability after nearly a century of turmoil. The second Qajar ruler, Fath Ali Shah, governed Persia from 1797 to 1834—a thirty-seven-year period notable for no major internal conflicts, steady growth in economic prosperity, and the return of prestige to the imperial court. Under Fath Ali Shah, a culture of grandeur and elaborate court ceremony—missing for nearly a century—reasserted itself in Persia. The new king presided over a renaissance in Persian arts and painting and endowed numerous new titles, thrones, and palaces, famously bedecking them with jewels larger than anyone had ever seen. And for the first time in history, Persia began to have serious, sustained political relations with the Western powers. In the years from 1801 to 1809, important treaties were signed with Britain, France, and Russia, and one of Napoleon’s generals was invited to Persia to help modernize the army. Relations with the newly established United States, however, were not immediately on the agenda.

America, as far as anyone in Persia was concerned, was *terra incognita*—a savage continent full of wild, half-naked cannibals. Despite the turmoil of the eighteenth century, Persia still saw itself as one of the world’s great empires, a proud and ancient civilization ruled by the Shahen Shah, the King of Kings, who sat on the famous Peacock Throne—studded with enough diamonds to buy North America several times over. In fact, for Persians, there was no such place as America, much less the United States. The name they used on the rare occasions when they discussed American affairs was *yengi donya*—a Turkish phrase meaning “new world.” In the imagination of Persians, *yengi donya* held a kind of mystical, almost fairytale allure—like a place that existed only in stories. In 1807, when the South Carolina gentleman Joel Roberts Poinsett* briefly crossed the border from Russia into Persia, he found the local tribal chief “**knew something of** France and England and more of Russia. . . . But of America, of the nation beyond the great waters he had merely heard and believed in its existence with the [scanty] faith with which he listened to an Arabian or Persian

tale.”

This is not to say that educated Persians were totally unaware of America. Visiting British diplomats frequently reported that America was “a subject upon which all Persians are very curious and inquisitive.” In the early 1800s, Persian-language books chronicled American history from the arrival of Columbus in Hispaniola to the War of Independence. Persian readers were even given a flavor of slavery and race relations in the United States, as one book explained how in America “people born with fair hair” were treated with respect while “darker people” were not. In 1809 the shah himself took an interest in America, asking the visiting British diplomat Harford Jones to tell him more about this “new world” he kept hearing about. “What sort of a place is it?” Fath Ali Shah asked Jones. “How do you get at it? Is it underground?”

Possibly the shah was being playful, or possibly he was ignorant. Either way, stories like this reflect the kind of atmosphere in which the subject of America was treated at the Qajar court in its early days. In the early 1800s, by and large, Persia thought it stood on top of the world and had little interest in a distant land of tobacco farms and small wooden churches.

It was only when living, breathing Americans began arriving in Persia in the 1830s—populating the mountain villages of the country’s northwestern frontier—that this outlook would slowly change.

* The reality, not surprisingly, was more complicated. Initially, the Ottomans seemed to maintain neutrality or even tacitly support the Persian monarchy. But as the conflict dragged on, and the Russians began taking advantage of the situation to make territorial gains at the expense of Persia, the Ottomans felt compelled to get involved. This latter stage of the conflict, roughly 1723 and early 1724, coincided with Mahmud’s consolidation of power over Persia. The Ottomans’ main priority was to deter Russia from advancing into Persia, and the best way to do so was to recognize Mahmud and offer him assistance against Russia (while also possibly strengthening the Sublime Porte’s own position in Persia). If anything, the later stages of the conflict were more like a proxy war between Russia and Turkey, contested on the field of a weak Persian state. Still, Americans clearly felt alarmed by the possibility of Ottoman expansion, as around this time the newspaper coverage began to take a more urgent tone.

* *Magus* (pl. *magi*), comes from the Old Persian word for “Zoroastrian.” Our word *magic* derives from the same root.

† The fact that the Turks were not actually Babylonian was beside the point; what mattered was that one race of infidels had inherited the kingdom of Babylon from another.

* Shakespeare’s plays are replete with references to the “barbarous” Turk but describe the Safavid (Persian) emperor as “the great Sophy” and allude to his legendary wealth and power with an awestruck tone.

* Abraham Lincoln once admitted he was “indebted” to Abbott’s biographies “for all the historical knowledge I have.” The series eventually became known as *Makers of History* and is still popular in the

home-schooling movement.

† Media, like Persia, was one of the ancient kingdoms of Iran. (The Persians defeated and eventually absorbed the Medes.)

* The third son, Sylvanus Jr., obviously felt left out, as he went on to write a novel called *The King and Cobbler: A Romance of Ancient Persia*.

* Poinsett (the man who would later give his name to the poinsettia plant) was the first U.S. citizen recorded as setting foot on Persian soil. However, it is impossible to say with any certainty who the *very* first Americans and Persians to interact were. To some extent, it depends on how one defines Americans. From 1687 to 1692, for example, Boston-born Elihu Yale (benefactor of the college that today bears his name) served as governor of the Madras Colony in India—where he was heavily exposed to the Persianate culture of the Mughal court, conducted business in Persian, and received a special envoy sent by the shah of Persia. But these were, for the most part, the experiences of British colonial officials—men who had deep, genuine roots in New England but who also belonged to a global elite for whom interest in Persia was a natural extension of colonial administration.

Tashrifat



Almost certainly the first Americans and Persians to interact in person were rum traders. In the first half of 1830 alone, some 12 million gallons of “Boston Particular” (rum laced with whiskey) sailed across the Black Sea and into Persia. (“*Scarcely an American* vessel,” the U.S. legation in Constantinople reported, “arrives at Smyrna from the United States that does not bring from 50 to 100 casks, much of which finds its way into Persia and the neighboring countries.”) However, this insalubrious trade left few records and probably fewer enduring bonds. In the end, it was less New England rum than New England religion that produced the first sustained, meaningful, documented U.S.-Persian relationship.

Decade after decade, from the 1830s to the 1930s, American Presbyterian missionaries came to Persia to build schools and hospitals and churches. They spent years learning their way around unfamiliar customs. They became fluent in Persian and other local languages, translating the Bible and bringing literacy into far-flung villages. Many Americans spent their whole lives in Persia. Generations were born, generations were married, and generations were buried on Persian soil. *Some had no idea* what the United States even looked like. They were sent to Persia by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM)—the main oversight body for American missionaries overseas. And their presence there amounted to the first exercise of American “soft power” in the Middle East.

Though we might assume, from our present-day vantage point, that these American missionaries were seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity, in fact, they were focused on a very different quarry. In northwestern Persia, in the mountains of the Caucasus, lived thousands of Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans who for centuries had recognized Jesus Christ as their lord and savior

—the Christians of the Middle East. For American Presbyterians, this was a much more exciting opportunity than the conversion of mere heathens. Here they had a chance to convert Persians who were already Christians to what they believed was a *better* form of Christianity.

Persia’s native Christian population was (and remains) one of the most ancient Christian communities on earth. The Armenians were many in number and well organized, and they had historically proven to be hostile to missionaries. The Chaldeans were almost too small of a community to merit attention. But the community of thirty thousand Assyrians seemed promising as candidates for proselytizing. Their presence in Persia dated to the fifth century, when the followers of Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, had been excommunicated after a dispute about the nature of Christ and given refuge by the Persian king. Over the past fourteen hundred years, they had lived in poverty and isolation, cut off from Western Christendom and presided over by clergy with little access to European Christian teachings. **Forgotten both by mainstream Christianity and by their Persian hosts**, the Assyrians had gradually crafted their own version of Christianity—one based largely on rituals passed down through generations of their tight-knit community.

To the American missionaries, this made them perfect candidates for “re-education.” Although Persia’s Assyrians were a unique and fragile Christian sect, Americans of the 1820s saw in them a twisted and degenerate form of Christianity in desperate need of reform—and this gave them a great sense of excitement about the work that lay ahead. In one of its first reports on the subject, the ABCFM proclaimed breathlessly that in Persia, as throughout the Middle East, **“the whole mingled population** is in a state of deplorable ignorance and degradation, destitute of the means of divine knowledge.” Like their neighbors across the region, the people of Persia were “bewildered with vain imaginations and strong delusions” and were practically begging for a bit of spiritual enlightenment from America.

And so it began. In 1829 the ABCFM selected two upstanding young men—twenty-nine-year-old Yale graduate Eli Smith and twenty-seven-year-old Harrison Dwight from upstate New York—to undertake an exploratory mission into Armenia, Georgia, and Persia and report on the possibilities. And in November 1830, after a lengthy ocean crossing from Boston to Malta, nine days across the Mediterranean to Smyrna, a week on Tartar post-horses, a stay in Constantinople to obtain travel documents, and a two-hundred-mile journey across Anatolia by oxcart, the pair finally arrived—dressed in flowing Turkish robes, with turbans wrapped around their heads—in the mountains of northwestern Persia. Freezing temperatures followed by a hot, dry wind and

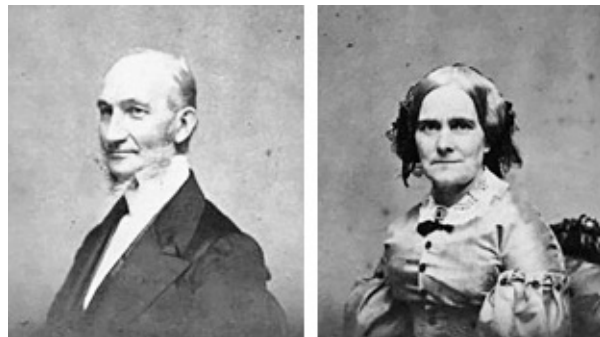
swarms of mosquitoes sent both men into repeated bouts of fever. But their enthusiasm for the Lord's work was not diminished. After several weeks recovering and exploring the area around the city of Urmia—where the Assyrian community was concentrated—Smith and Dwight relayed their findings back to Boston, giddy with excitement.

The Assyrians, they said, were a noble but ignorant people—carrying on Christian rituals they barely understood and practically begging for American salvation. They had kept an ancient manuscript of the New Testament in a locked box for centuries, but no one could read it. They had no complete Bibles in their possession, and their priests seemed excited about the idea of having fresh texts to study. The two young Americans spent only a few days in Urmia but came away sure of their conclusions. “In all my journeys I have seen no people as willing to accept the gospel as the Assyrians of Persia,” Smith wrote back to Boston. “This field is white and ready for the harvest.”

Mission accomplished, the pair returned to Boston in 1831. And two years later, on their recommendation, the ABCFM sent two more Americans—Justin Perkins, a twenty-nine-year-old tutor from Amherst College in Massachusetts, and his heavily pregnant young bride, Charlotte—to establish a permanent mission in Urmia. The following year the Perkinses were joined by another young couple, the physician Asahel Grant and his wife Judith. And in November 1835, the two couples set up a primary school in Urmia and began translating the New Testament into Syriac. The school opened its doors in January 1836, offering seven pupils the chance to learn the Syriac alphabet and memorize the Lord's Prayer. Two years later Judith Grant opened a girls' school nearby.

In 1837 a few more missionaries arrived, and over the next several years, Americans set up a thriving community of earnest young Presbyterians, all eager to “run their hoes through the fields of the Lord,” “sow the seeds of holy salvation,” and generally indulge their fascination with agricultural metaphors. In 1840 they recruited the Illinois printer Edwin Breath to drag a high-volume, custom-built printing press across the mountains into Urmia, and began cranking out schoolbooks and religious tracts—sometimes at the astonishing rate of a half-million pages a year. As European Jesuits were also doing work in the area, the competition for souls quickly became fierce. One of the first publications the Americans handed out was called *Twenty-two Plain Reasons for not Being a Roman Catholic*. Other pamphlets dealt with everything from food hygiene to home economics. In 1852 came a full Syriac translation of the Bible that Perkins had worked on for seventeen years (the version still used by Assyrian Protestants). By the time Breath's press succumbed to old age in 1892, the missionaries could boast they had printed some 30 million pages of American

know-how for the benighted residents of northwestern Persia.



The first Americans: Presbyterian missionaries Justin and Charlotte Perkins arrived in Persia in 1833, with Charlotte heavily pregnant. They established a boys' school in Urmia and produced the first Syriac translation of the New Testament, still widely used by Assyrian Protestants. Their arrival ushered in a century of American missionary activity in Persia.

Though American missionaries in Persia did achieve a number of conversions among the local Christian population, their most enduring successes were in more prosaic areas, such as the establishment of schools and clinics. In 1843 the energetic Fidelia Fiske took control of the girls' school that Judith Grant had founded five years earlier and steadily increased attendance to forty pupils. The boys' school started by Perkins, meanwhile, moved to a site outside Urmia and by 1879 had been reestablished as Urmia College, offering medical, theological, and "preparatory" schooling. By 1895, 117 American schools, with over 2,400 pupils, were operating in Persia. And medical work thrived just as much. Dr. Grant was renowned for his operations on cataracts—literally removing the fog of blindness from the eyes of heathens. Several later doctors also achieved legendary status. The most successful was Joseph Cochran, whose name became synonymous with medical work in Persia. In 1878, together with his wife Katherine, Cochran acquired a fifteen-hectare garden in Urmia and built a modern hospital with capacity for one hundred patients, along with a small college for training physicians—the first Western-style medical school in Persia. Cochran quickly became a local hero for his medical work, and when he died in 1905, ten thousand mourners were said to have poured onto the streets of Urmia for his funeral.

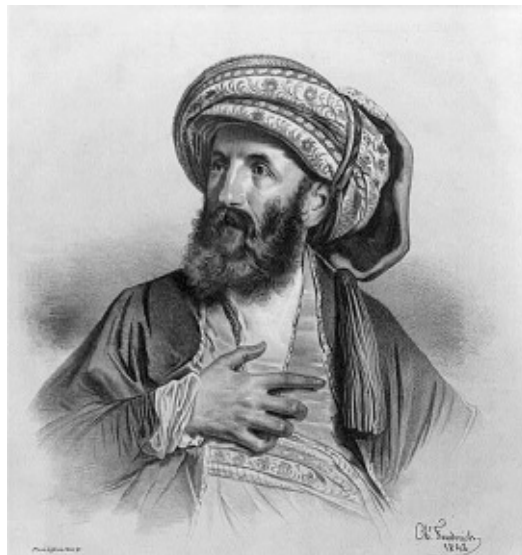
All this missionary activity did not come cheaply, and the ABCFM relied heavily on churchgoer donations. And this, in turn, meant that the Board plowed considerable time and resources into domestic outreach efforts, holding informational presentations after Sunday-morning church services, educating Americans about Persian history, geography, languages, culture, politics, and religion, and recruiting young Americans to consider careers as missionaries.

Without ever intending to, the Board was becoming an early version of *National Geographic*. In 1841 the ABCFM even sponsored a visit to the United States by Mar Yohannan, the Assyrian bishop of Urmia. Probably the first Persian whom ordinary Americans had ever seen in the flesh, Yohannan arrived in New York to a rapturous crowd and was immediately packed off on a year-long speaking tour across the United States. Thousands of curious spectators turned out to see the Persian cleric with his exotic robes, long beard, and sumptuous silk turban.

The American missionaries genuinely believed they were on the verge of converting thousands of Persians to Presbyterian Christianity. In that respect, they failed spectacularly. Despite one hundred years of proselytizing and a certain amount of natural population growth, today no more than a few hundred Protestant Christians live in Iran. In another important respect, however, the American missionaries succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. For a full century, their work transcended the schools and clinics they built, and the language textbooks they wrote: it dominated and defined the relationship between the United States and Persia. In countless subtle ways, American missionaries acted as informal intermediaries between American policy makers in Washington, American diplomats in Tehran, and Persian officialdom. Generation after generation—until well into the 1950s—many a high-level American official assigned by the State Department to deal with Iranian affairs was himself a former missionary or the child of missionaries or was in some other way deeply influenced by the work of Protestant missionaries. For decades, American diplomats in Tehran, if they did not already have a strong understanding of the country (and they often didn't), were forced to rely on the experience and expertise of resident American missionaries. And for generations, much of Iran's own political elite—cabinet ministers, technocrats, even prime ministers—was drawn from the ranks of men who had been educated in American mission schools. Even as late as the 1970s, meetings between Iranian and American officials often resembled informal reunions of alumni of the American Presbyterian mission schools established more than a century earlier.



First American Protestant church established in Iran (1853). A small congregation of Protestants—descendants of people converted by American missionaries—continues to worship here.



Mar Yohannan, Bishop of Urmia: The first Iranian known to have visited the United States. In 1841, Mar Yohannan arrived to a rapturous crowd in New York and then went on a year-long publicity tour sponsored by the Presbyterian Church. Enjoying his newfound celebrity, he often walked into country taverns to lecture the bewildered patrons in his broken English on the evils of drink.



What was perhaps most remarkable about the American missionaries' century-long enterprise was that for the first fifty years, they operated in Persia almost entirely by themselves. Until 1883 the United States sent no official diplomatic

legation to Tehran—no embassy or ambassador to represent their interests or provide them with legal protection if they needed it. On the rare occasion Americans in Persia ran into trouble, they relied quietly on British diplomats for help. Even from 1838 to 1841, when Britain and Persia broke off ties during a dispute over Afghanistan, it was the shah—not the U.S. government—who quickly stepped in to protect the American missionaries, issuing a royal *farman* (decree) in support of their work and demanding they come to no harm.

The U.S. government during this period was wedded to a policy of strict—almost extreme—isolationism. Following Thomas Jefferson’s warning against “entangling alliances” in distant lands, successive U.S. administrations in the nineteenth century refused even to engage with countries as far away as Persia, believing no essential U.S. interests to be at stake. This policy of strict isolationism would remain in place until the early 1940s. As a result, most historians who have studied the U.S.-Iranian relationship (using only U.S. sources) have begun their narratives around 1940, on the casual assumption that U.S.-Iranian relations barely existed before the United States became interested. This reflects a limited, skewed, and one-sided approach to history.

Though Washington maintained a posture of aloof neutrality toward Persia before 1940, Tehran’s attitude could not have been more different. The Persian government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw cultivating an official relationship with the United States as a critical foreign-policy priority, almost a matter of life and death. In fact, some of the very first disagreements between Washington and Tehran came about because Persia wanted the United States to become *more* involved in its affairs, and the United States refused—a fact that might come as a surprise to twenty-first-century observers of U.S.-Iranian relations. This critical part of the story is precisely the aspect most consistently missed by historians who approach this subject only from the perspective of U.S. sources, U.S. priorities, and U.S. foreign policy.



In 1849 the Persian government turned to the United States for a simple reason: it was sick of dealing with Europe. In the early nineteenth century, Britain, Russia, and France had all jockeyed for position in Persia, each attempting to use the shah’s territory as a defensive bulwark against the other two powers’ Asian ambitions. In Europe, they called it the “Great Game”—a fierce struggle for supremacy in Central Asia, fought mainly between Britain and Russia, each of which hoped to block the other from gaining access to strategic assets. Russia’s goal was to gain access to warm-water ports in the Persian Gulf; Britain’s was to

create an unbroken chain of influence from the Mediterranean to its colony in India. At various points, Britain and Russia both took advantage of Persia's military weakness to launch invasions and to force the shah to make political and economic concessions that were increasingly crippling—forging treaties, then reneging on them with bewildering speed when circumstances changed. [Though this behavior made sense](#) in the context of European power politics, from the Persian vantage point, it was rascally and duplicitous behavior.

The tone for these years was set by the infamous Treaty of Turkmenchai of 1828, a crucial turning point in modern Iranian history. After the Russian army inflicted a particularly crushing defeat on the Persians at Turkmenchai, the concluding treaty forced Persia to pay Russia an indemnity of 20 million rubles—an unheard-of sum in its day. Even more remarkable, the treaty gave Russia the right to sell goods virtually tax-free in Persia, and it afforded Russian subjects legal immunity for crimes they committed on Persian soil. The Russians thus deftly used their military victory to establish a permanent sphere of influence over their southern neighbor. They called these heavy-handed measures, which went far beyond the typical provisions of a peace treaty, “extraterritorial privileges.” The Persians called them “capitulations.” But whatever they were called, their effects were devastating, cruel, and immediate. The Persian economy went into a tailspin as cheap Russian products flooded the market. [Ancient handicrafts](#), like textiles and woven silk, were decimated. The 20-million-ruble indemnity bankrupted the Persian treasury, forcing Tehran to sign up for crippling loans from Russian banks—loans that ushered in a cycle of indebtedness, bankruptcy, and dependency.

But the most devastating impact of the treaty was the precedent it established. In 1841, after Britain defeated Persia in a three-year war over Afghanistan, it demanded (and got) peace terms identical to those the Russians got at Turkmenchai. Once Britain and Russia were enjoying such privileges, other European powers asked for similar perks, in exchange for loans or other emoluments—money Persia desperately needed to pay off its debts. A vicious cycle thus took effect: extraterritorial privileges given to one country bankrupted the Persian treasury, forcing it to give privileges to another country to pay off its loans. [From 1855 to 1900](#), no fewer than fifteen Western nations invoked the precedent of Turkmenchai as they negotiated treaties with Persia. The empire's carcass was slowly being picked clean.

For Persia, the Treaty of Turkmenchai was far more than a peace agreement—it was a humiliation of epic proportions. For the first time since Alexander the Great marched out of Persepolis with his three thousand camels laden with gold, Western powers had gained the right to plunder the Persian treasury and to

dictate from distant capitals the country's internal affairs. But unlike the imperialist projects under way in other parts of the world, this was not a straightforward conquest or colonization. Rather, it was something subtler and ultimately more toxic—a form of indirect political interference. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia would more or less run Persia from behind the scenes, using bribes, economic leverage, and political intrigue to stage-manage the decisions of the Persian government. It left Persians with a lingering feeling of resentment and suspicion toward the European powers.

It was in this atmosphere that the United States first began to look attractive. In the 1830s and '40s, the Persians noticed that a few dozen people from the “new world” had turned up in the mountains around Urmia with nothing more than a printing press and some medical supplies and begun building schools and clinics. These missionaries (*mobalaqin-e mas-habi*, the Persians called them, or “spiritual messengers”) looked like Europeans, spoke like Europeans, and dressed like Europeans, but their attitudes and their behavior toward Persia could not have been less European. They appeared, bizarrely, to have no connection with their government and no interest in making demands on the Persian government. Their own government hadn't even bothered to send an ambassador to Tehran or to initiate negotiations for a treaty. For whatever inexplicable reason, these Americans appeared to have come to Persia just to help.

For a while the Persian government was too busy fighting wars with Russia and Britain to pay much attention to the United States. But then in 1848, a young and energetic new shah named Naser al-Din came to power, determined to save the bankrupt Persian treasury from the crippling capitulations. The seventeen-year-old shah appointed as his prime minister the highly promising and capable young modernizer Amir Kabir, who immediately saw the potential of a U.S. friendship. After years of losing battles against Britain and Russia, Amir Kabir felt keenly Persia's military and technological inferiority and was convinced his country could learn a lot from the West. But it must no longer learn such lessons, he felt, from the losing end of a gun barrel. The United States had declared its independence from Britain, fought a war for it, and won. Surely, he reasoned, this was a country that would instinctively understand Persia's desire for a little respect from Europe. A friendship with America, perhaps, could bring the advantages and know-how of Western civilization without the duplicity, greed, and self-interest that usually accompanied it.

Like dozens of Persian politicians who would follow in his footsteps, Amir Kabir was deeply impressed by the accomplishments of the West but was adamant that Western technological and political advances should be

incorporated into Persia without putting the country in a servile position. More important, he was the first to recognize that to balance the pressures from Russia and Britain, Persia would need a “third force” of some sort to use as leverage against them. The United States, as a rising power, was an ideal candidate.



In the 1840s, as luck would have it, American disputes with Britain over the Oregon Territory had created a flare-up of anti-British feeling in the United States, leaving many in Washington on the lookout for opportunities to encroach on the interests of their former colonial power. So in 1849, Amir Kabir instructed a Persian envoy heading for Constantinople to approach the American minister there and initiate a dialogue. The meeting took place in an atmosphere of such secrecy that virtually nothing is known about it. But the following year a similar effort was made—this time between the Persian minister in Constantinople, Davud Khan, and his American counterpart, George Perkins Marsh. Again, the first priority for both men was to make sure the British didn’t find out.

For a year and a half, Davud and Marsh met in total secrecy with the knowledge and support of their respective governments. And in October 1851, in Constantinople, they signed the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation between Persia and the United States. It was a remarkably fair and respectful document compared with other treaties being foisted on Tehran in this period, and it was guaranteed to put a knot in the tail of the British lion. Among its provisions was a clause allowing the United States to set up a consulate in Bushehr, an important southern trading port where the British had all but declared squatter’s rights. Marsh felt he had achieved an impressive victory.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Senate didn’t see it that way. When news of the treaty reached Washington, senators complained that Marsh had failed to secure a clause giving American citizens the same privileges and immunities that other Western nations enjoyed in Persia, and they refused to ratify it. Marsh went back to Davud, who promised to see what he could do, but before Marsh heard back, the situation in Tehran changed dramatically. Amir Kabir was murdered by his enemies and replaced with a prime minister seen as more loyal to British interests. The window for negotiations with the United States closed firmly, and the treaty expired before it could be ratified. Marsh was convinced that a British hand was lurking in the background.

In 1854 the two countries tried again—this time in an atmosphere of secrecy bordering on paranoia. On the U.S. end, Marsh had been replaced as minister by

Carroll Spence, a tough-minded diplomat with a long history of anti-British sentiment, for whom a U.S.-Persian treaty was both a patriotic duty and a chance to deliver a black eye to London. Unfortunately, however, positions had hardened since the previous attempt. Both sides had developed such an obsession with Britain that they came to the table with demands that seemed utterly outrageous to the other. Persian relations with Britain had taken a nosedive over Afghanistan, and the shah was now fixated on obtaining an American security umbrella in the Gulf. His list of demands was audacious: the purchase of American warships, manned by American officers, and full U.S. naval protection of Persian merchant shipping, complete with the Stars and Stripes flying from every Persian commercial vessel in the Gulf. For the Americans, always wary of “entangling alliances,” these demands were unacceptable.

The United States had its own set of requirements that the Persians found equally objectionable. Spence had been instructed to demand a clause guaranteeing U.S. citizens the same “extraterritorial privileges” that the Russians had extracted at Turkmenchai. For the Persians, this tiresomely familiar request came as a tremendous disappointment. The whole point of pursuing an alliance with the United States, they felt, was that it would *not* be like all those other Western nations. [American negotiators insisted](#) they simply wanted to be treated on an equal footing with Europe. But the Persians dug in their heels, telling their American counterparts that the humiliating conditions they had agreed to with other nations had been the result of military defeats or emergency loan agreements. Giving Americans the same privileges would create an even more damaging precedent than Turkmenchai: it would mean, in effect, that any nation with diplomatic ties with Persia would be *automatically* entitled to extraterritorial privileges.

[It took nearly two years](#)—and a twist of fate—for the deadlock to break. [At the end of 1856](#), Persia was once again at war with Britain, and the shah now desperately wanted an American alliance he could wave in front of British eyeballs. With little further discussion, he agreed to give the Americans all the privileges they had asked for—including immunity from Persian law for U.S. citizens, and exemptions from Persian taxes for U.S. businesses. The treaty was quickly concluded and signed on December 13, then was ratified by both countries in early 1857. The shah never got the American security guarantees he had hoped for, but there was no going back—the United States and Persia had become friends.



The opening words of the treaty told Americans everything they would ever need to know about Persia. “[The President of the United States](#),” it began:

and His Majesty as exalted as the Planet Saturn; the Sovereign to whom the Sun serves as a standard; whose splendour and magnificence are equal to that of the Skies; the Sublime Sovereign, the Monarch whose armies are as numerous as the Stars; whose greatness calls to mind that of Jeinshid; whose magnificence equals that of Darius; the Heir of the Crown and Throne of the Kayanians; the Sublime Emperor of all Persia .

..

And so on and so on. The Persians were great sticklers for ceremony, it turned out, and now that the treaty was ratified, they expected an exchange of gifts to mark the important occasion. At Spence’s insistence, the United States spent \$10,000 (close to \$1 million in today’s money) on diamond-studded snuffboxes and weapons for the shah. [The State Department protested](#) bitterly, as it was not in the habit of spending such outrageous sums, but Spence put his foot down, knowing that these gifts paled in comparison with what Persia had received from Napoleon and others. [Spence’s brother Charles](#) was dispatched to Tehran to deliver the gifts in person—a gesture the shah appreciated so much that he decorated the young man with the Order of the Lion and Sun, the country’s highest honor.

These demonstrations of protocol seemed a trivial and tedious distraction to the United States, which liked to think of itself as a humble, pragmatic power, removed from the blandishments of the old world. But to Persians, courtesy, respect, and ceremony were as fundamental to political relations as any practical matter of policy. They even had a word for it, one virtually impossible to translate into any Western tongue. Ritual, respect, protocol, form, ceremony, courtesy—the Persians called it all *tashrifat*, and you ignored it at your peril. This was a lesson the United States would learn again and again in its dealings with Iran—often the hard way.



With a treaty in place, the next challenge was to translate it into an exchange of living, breathing diplomats. Initially, there was every reason to believe the matter would be straightforward. The U.S. president, James Buchanan, gave firm support to the idea of establishing a permanent legation in Tehran and sending over an ambassador (or “resident minister,” as ambassadors were then known),* and he urged Congress to approve the necessary funds. “[The Shah has](#)

manifested an earnest disposition to cultivate friendly relations with our country,” Buchanan argued in his first State of the Union message in December 1857. From the Persian side, meanwhile, the prime minister, Mirza Agha Khan Nuri, tried to nudge things along by writing a personal letter to Carroll Spence—who was back in Washington and had become Persia’s biggest cheerleader in America.

Spence, who was now on something of an anti-British crusade, advocated forcefully for a Tehran embassy as a way to weaken British influence in Asia. Persia’s long border with British India, he wrote to the State Department, as well as the “national feeling of hatred” its people had for Britain, had the potential to make the country a “most serviceable ally” for the United States. Setting up a legation in Tehran could “at some future date . . . [help] us in annoying a nation [Britain], which has never ceased to interfere with our foreign policy.” The U.S. House of Representatives, however, was not convinced by this naked Brit-baiting. In January 1859, citing budgetary constraints, it rejected the request for funding.

In Tehran, where the finer points of American politics were not always appreciated, this decision was utterly mystifying. Why, the Persians wondered, had the United States spent all this effort to negotiate a treaty, only to turn around and refuse to fund a legation? Why spend \$10,000 on snuff-boxes, then balk at \$5,000 for a minister’s salary? Once again the occidental mind was proving an irrational and mercurial thing. But the Persians were also left feeling that the dignity of the shah had been insulted. For them, the whole point of concluding a treaty with the United States had been to send a message to Britain and Russia; the unexpected snub from Congress had left them looking foolish. At the very least, they now suggested, the United States should offer some symbolic gesture to make clear that it was serious about its Persian friendship. Anything less would be a breach of *tashrifat*.

As it happened, the navy frigate USS *Minnesota* was on its way to China at the time. It was ordered to make a stop in the Gulf and fire off a few ceremonial cannons in honor of U.S.-Persian friendship. The Persians appreciated the gesture, but from the American side there was no further talk about establishing a legation. The round of volleys that the good ship *Minnesota* fired into the empty starlit sky turned out to be the last official interaction between the United States and Persia for more than twenty years.



In 1861, just two years after Congress rejected funding for a Tehran legation, the

United States slid into a catastrophic civil war. Six hundred thousand Americans lost their lives in the conflict, at the end of which the U.S. government was left with the challenge of reintegrating several southern states, with devastated economies, into the national union. In the midst of this long and painful process, in 1873, the United States, along with most of the industrialized world, fell into economic depression. Given these circumstances, foreign affairs slipped down the list of priorities in Washington. Setting up a U.S. legation in Persia seemed almost obscenely frivolous.

But the more distant the Americans became, the more interested Persians seemed to be in all things American. [In 1873 and 1878](#), during his state visits to Europe, Naser al-Din Shah observed with admiration the wealthy Americans congregating on London's Regent Street and the bales of American cotton being unloaded at Liverpool docks. In the 1870s, Persian newspapers ran frequent stories about American prowess and ingenuity, inviting readers to marvel at how quickly the United States had advanced in the few short decades since it had gained independence. [In New York](#), readers were told, awesome hotels were being built—one with room for seven hundred guests. [A San Francisco man](#) had reached the North Pole, and a train had run from Jersey City to Trenton—a distance of fifty miles—in just fifty-nine minutes. America was praised for its culture of integrity, hard work, and sobriety. [And Persian editorialists](#) were particularly impressed by the temperance movement, marveling that people whose religion did not forbid drink were taking a firmer stand against drunkenness than Muslims did. [Most controversially](#), the official government newspaper, *Iran*, edited by the wily Itimad os-Saltaneh, suggested obliquely that the key to America's rapid advancement had been its free press and the atmosphere of open debate in Congress. Never before had such an obvious challenge to the shah's authority appeared in print in Tehran.

By the 1870s, Persians had grown utterly disgusted with the endless capitulations and commercial privileges that European powers were demanding of them, and they were hoping a more meaningful relationship might soon be possible with the United States—a rising power they saw as pleasingly anti-imperialist in its ideology. Persian reformists frequently noted the contrast between America—a nation born out of revolutionary opposition to tyranny and colonialism—and the Great Powers of Europe. The United States, to their great admiration, minded its own business and seemed to respect the sovereignty and dignity of powerless nations. The Europeans did nothing of the kind. Indeed, in 1872, as Persia's desperation for cash grew, the British aristocrat Baron Julius de Reuter swooped in and acquired, for the mere sum of \$200,000, control over Persia's future mineral exploration rights, factories, road-building projects,

irrigation, and agriculture—along with the rights to build a railway from the Caspian Sea to the Gulf coast. The Reuter concession was unparalleled: for the first time in history, a sovereign state had surrendered, during peacetime, the right to develop its own infrastructure to a foreign private citizen. Worse, it had been agreed to at the apex of the Industrial Revolution—at precisely the moment when Persia most needed to take command of its economic development in order to have a prayer of competing with the West.



Naser al-Din Shah (1848–96): The first Persian monarch to travel to the West, Naser al-Din admired the United States and presided over the tentative early years of relations between the two countries.

In the late 1870s, when the United States finally began to emerge from its long trauma of Civil War and Reconstruction, a booming economy and the demands of new millionaires pushed American traders into ever more exotic corners of the world. Persian carpets were all the rage in the drawing rooms of New York and Philadelphia. Persian dates and nuts increasingly found appreciative consumers. In Tehran, meanwhile, the *dernier cri* was to be seen smoking Virginia tobacco and wearing clothes made of Mississippi cotton. In just the few short years since the Civil War, U.S.-Persian trade had quietly reached into the tens of millions—still small in comparison with other countries but far too large to be ignored.

From many corners now, the message being sent to Washington was the same: it was time to open a legation in Tehran. In 1879 the USS *Ticonderoga* called in the Gulf, where its captain, Commodore Robert Shufeldt, informed the secretary of the navy that the trading possibilities with Persia were excellent. [A U.S. legation](#), he said, was long overdue. The American minister in Vienna, John Kasson, urged the secretary of state to make the establishment of a Tehran legation a top priority. Persia was not just an eager market for American cotton, he noted. [Lately, American petroleum](#) was also making its way into the country.

What finally tipped the balance in favor of a U.S. legation in Tehran, though, was not commercial considerations but an immediate concern about the safety of American missionaries. In October 1880 a major Kurdish rebellion broke out in northwestern Persia, where Americans were heavily concentrated. In Washington, concern for the fate of Americans trapped in Urmia grew quickly. Rep. Rufus R. Dawes (R-Ohio)—a devout Presbyterian whose sister and brother-in-law happened to live in Urmia—appealed to Secretary of State William Evarts to take action to protect Americans from becoming “[the victims of Mohammedan](#) fury.” Months dragged on without a response. In March 1882, Dawes tried to tack an amendment onto a House appropriations bill, extending the accreditation of the U.S. minister in Constantinople to include Persia (thus giving the United States an official channel to the Persian government). Dawes made his case passionately and in explicitly Christian terms. “[Persia is one of the oldest](#), and was, at one time, the most powerful nationality on earth,” he argued. But it “has become effete, superannuated, and insignificant . . . because of the blighting influence of Mohammedanism. The young and vigorous Christian civilization of America has stretched out an arm to lift that nation from its moral degradation.”

Supporters of the appropriations bill angrily interrupted Dawes—they were in a rush to pass it and were in no mood to entertain frivolous amendments proposed by men full of Bible talk. But Dawes did not give up. A month later, along with a few sympathetic colleagues, he pushed another resolution, this time authorizing the secretary of state to set up a legation in Tehran and appropriating funds for the purpose. When the bill reached the House floor, Dawes was once again met with jeers and mockery. But this time he looked his adversary, Rep. William S. Holman (R-IN), in the eye and said quietly, “[Remember that](#) my sister is there in peril, and let this go for me.” Holman went quiet and took his seat.

“By such slender threads hang important things,” Dawes later recalled. And indeed they did. Holman yielded the floor to Dawes’s friend, fellow Presbyterian and former Pennsylvania governor Andrew Curtin, a legendary orator, who rose

to his feet and delivered a powerful, emotional appeal for the establishment of a U.S. embassy in Tehran. Persia's was the "oldest government in the world," he began, "and a country now growing to great consequence commercially." It was a strategic makeweight between Britain and Russia, and the shah seemed eager to build a relationship with the United States. "Persia can probably never again rule the world as under Cyrus," Curtin argued. "But the wheel of history will soon bring round the day when its commercial and religious influences will again reach over a hundred millions of people."

The old man's eloquence did the trick. The bill squeaked through under a suspension of the rules before Congress adjourned for the summer. On August 7, 1882, President Chester Arthur signed HR 6743 into law, and the following year America's first official envoy to Persia was on his way to Tehran.

* Traditionally, the terms *embassy* and *ambassador* were reserved for diplomatic exchanges conducted among the great royal heads of state in Europe. The United States thus referred to its ambassadors as "resident ministers" and its embassies as "legations"—technically lower in rank. After World War II, the idea that some nations' sovereignty was more prestigious than others' fell out of favor, and *ambassador* and *embassy* became the standard usage throughout the world.

The Amateurs



At first blush, Samuel Greene Wheeler Benjamin seemed like just the right man to serve as America’s first-ever ambassador to Tehran. Born in Greece to missionary parents and deeply familiar with Eastern cultures, he was energetic and outgoing, spoke several languages, and loved to travel. Described as a “**cosmopolitan adventurer** who became sickly only when he stayed in one place too long,” Benjamin had dabbled in everything from painting to amateur sailing to freelance journalism but never settled on anything in particular. He was every inch the gentleman-dilettante the State Department favored in those days when it hired diplomats.

But alas, Benjamin’s bombastic personality was something of an acquired taste. Short, loud, and opinionated—sometimes irascibly single-minded—he was inclined to swell up with indignation over a minor matter of punctilio. What he lacked in height (and tact), he tried to make up for by standing as straight as a plank and blustering from behind what one biographer called an “**imposing mustache.**” At times he was his own worst enemy.

On paper, Benjamin was eminently qualified for the job. But opening a new legation in a land as far away and unfamiliar as Persia would take a lot more than an impressive CV. The court of the Peacock Throne in 1883 was a place where centuries of tradition, wealth, and imperial grandeur intersected with the strategic interests and cloak-and-dagger intrigues of Europe’s greatest powers. For an American to step into this atmosphere and survive, much less succeed, would require bottomless reserves of patience, a natural aptitude for subtlety, and—perhaps most important—enough money to project an aura of personal dignity. On all three measures, Benjamin fell far short.