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# Review Essay

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## Contextualizing Iran

CHARLES M. BROWN

**Ward, Steven R.** *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009.

**Limbert, John W.** *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History.* Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009.

**Gold, Dore.** *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West.* Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2009.

**Pollack, Kenneth M., et al.** *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009.

**Wehrey, Frederic, et al.** *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East.* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009.

Last fall, while attending one of my favorite academic conferences, I was having dinner with an old classmate who, knowing that I went into government service after graduation, asked, “Do you government folks really learn that much from us academics?” While I cannot speak for every government employee, I would say to my friend that, “Yes, there is a great deal we learn from you academics.” His question has stayed with me; how much is to be learned from academics regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran, possibly one of the most opaque, vexing, and frustrating agenda items for the US government? Truth is, there is a great deal to learn. Iran is the topic of maybe a dozen or so good books annually, along with dozens of articles in various academic, military, and policy journals. The volumes under review here represent a range of styles and are intended for varying purposes and audiences. They are by no means the best of their genre, but most exhibit exceptional quality, expand the body of knowledge on Iran, and more importantly to us “government types,” offer fresh ideas that inform our thinking.

These five books represent three distinct, but at times overlapping categories, of today’s informed writing on the Islamic Republic of Iran. We have books that aim to contextualize or refine existing contexts for contemporary Iran. Steven Ward, John Limbert, and Frederic Wehrey’s, et al. works would seem to fit this schema rather easily. Some of the books try to define viable

US policy options. Certainly, the work by Wehrey and his fellow authors naturally fits here too, especially given that this volume was contracted to them by the US Air Force for precisely that purpose. Pollack, et al. does this too, thinking through nine distinct policy options for a new US administration. Limbert offers a fourteen-point list for how US officials who may find themselves sitting at the table with Iranian interlocutors should approach the issues. Dore Gold's book, very much in a category by itself, given its alarmist nature, states that the failure of US diplomatic policy toward Iran necessitates a much more aggressive policy—regime change—as the only option worth considering, especially in light of the discoveries related to the scope of Iran's nuclear development. Gold's book also, by itself, is representative of a third category: using the "Iran issue" as a polemic for restating the case against Iran, while presenting policy options short of military action, and reminding us of Israel's sense of threat. Gold may stand alone in this particular selection of books, but he is far from alone in a sub-genre that envisions a palpable, imminent threat from Iran while dismissing the notion of subsequent diplomatic strategies with Iran as nothing less than Neville Chamberlain-style appeasement.

### ***The Long History of Iranian Arms***

Steven Ward's book *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* begins our review. Ward, a senior intelligence analyst at the CIA and a former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, has written publicly on Iranian military doctrine, and is particularly well-placed to offer a perspective on Iran's military history. This book is easily the most original covered in this review, given the fact that it is the first military history of Iran written in English for a nonspecialist audience. Ward's approach could be criticized for relying too much on secondary sources to create his historical narrative; there are a few primary sources in Farsi consulted for this work. This particular book fills a long-neglected gap in the literature of this critical topic. Since the 2010 election debacle heightened awareness of many Americans regarding the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iranian political life, readers may wish to supplement Ward's book which was published just three months before the elections. In the context of the post election unrest and the oft-heard analysis "inside the beltway" that the June elections represented the IRGC decisively taking over many areas of state administration that previously were the prerogative of the Islamic Republic's clerical leaders. One may wish to supplement Ward's volume with a pair of RAND studies, *The Rise of the Pasdaran* and *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, that help contextualize the IRGC in military, economic, and political contexts.

*Immortal* is not without its shortcomings: the treatment of the Iran-Iraq War, which seems to be in need of a broader introduction and context to help the reader see the larger picture of that era-defining conflict. The abrupt end of the narrative between the chapter on the Iran-Iraq War and the concluding chapter makes it clear that there was probably a lack of source material. Ward's book is primarily a survey of the Iranian military art from roughly 500 BCE to 1988 CE. There is no thorough treatment of the 1990s or the periods during and after Operations Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. But this is a minor criticism. Ward deserves great credit for producing an eminently readable survey of the past 2,500 years of Iranian military history, and given the volume of sources synthesized, this was no easy task. The book does an admirable job filling a gaping hole in the literature on modern Iran, and will be useful for foreign policy practitioners and academics alike.

### ***The Ghosts Are in the Room***

John Limbert, a former hostage of the Islamic Republic during the 1979-81 crisis, presents four case studies of Iran at the negotiating table over a period of six decades in his *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History*. Ambassador Limbert (who has a 45-year connection with Iran and is one of the few US government employees fluent in Farsi) most recently served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran. He is certainly one of the most experienced and intimately acquainted with Iran and its policies and personalities of all US officials. He is quite possibly the only US official to have a conversation with Iran's Supreme Leader. *Negotiating with Iran* is a highly-nuanced account written especially for Americans who might have an opportunity to sit toe-to-toe with the Iranians. This monograph is also a first-of-its-kind in that almost all historical accounts of the cases presented are seldom written with an eye toward how the United States could negotiate with the Islamic Republic. The case studies include two examples from before the Islamic Revolution and two following, making this book one about negotiating with Iran, not necessarily about negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The cases are the Azerbaijan Crisis (1945-47); the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry under Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951-53); just after the Islamic Revolution, the US Embassy Hostage Crisis (1979-81); and the efforts to free Western hostages in Lebanon during the mid- and late-1980s. Each study includes a lengthy and detailed reexamination of the facts of the case, with an emphasis on how Iranian leaders of the time negotiated with interlocutors to advance various agendas, and what this history should tell us. Throughout the book, the author applies Roger Fisher and William Ury's negotiation methodologies to each of the

cases. Fisher, a master negotiator who attempted to find common ground with Ayatollah Muhammad Husayni Beheshti in a failed attempt to end the crisis and free Limbert and his 65 fellow hostages, developed the concept of “Best Alternatives to Negotiated Agreement” (BATNA) in his seminal work, co-authored with William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Limbert examines the various BATNAs of the cases—the best solution, or least bad one, the Iranians could get without negotiating a solution to the issue at hand—and how these might have influenced a settlement of some sort.

The strength of Limbert’s approach is the combination of intimate knowledge of each case and the Iranian historical and political contexts in combination with the application of Fisher and Ury’s methodology. Understanding the complex decision trees that Iranian leaders have internalized during the events gives clarity to why they took the seemingly incomprehensible actions they did—such as keeping US hostages for 444 days, well past the point where the hostages offered any kind of political leverage, and where they became major liabilities for the regime. Limbert espouses fourteen lessons “history has taught us” regarding how Iranians negotiate and the limits reasonably expected from Iranian interlocutors. Among the most important of these points is that the “past matters: be aware of Iran’s historical greatness, its recent weakness, and its grievances from decades or centuries before.” Good advice, and thankfully Limbert prevents overeager would-be negotiators from going overboard into Iranophilia by reminding us that “American negotiators need not be scholars of Iran . . . They should, however, at least be aware of the past that has gone into forming the views and approaches of the Iranian side.”

Limbert’s most important point is that for Iranians the past is much more alive than it is for Americans. The “Ghosts of History” are indeed in the room, but forward-looking Americans often fail to see them, while for Iranians, the ghosts are not only acknowledged but often take center stage. One of the biggest mistakes that could be made for any serious analyst or negotiator with Iran is to write off the past as “ancient history” and move on to today’s issues. For Iranians, issues of yesterday and today merge, especially when Iranians believe America may be responsible for those issues. Equally damaging for Iran’s interlocutors is any attempt to game the Iranian political system in an effort to gain an advantage over one of its factions or to dictate Iran’s own self-interest to Iranians. The former is ever-changing and the latter is transparently paternalistic. Understanding the past 300 or so years—when Iran fell from its status as a superpower to a developing power—and how this history affects Iranian political culture will certainly assist policy-makers, planners, diplomats, and analysts. A combination of

grandeur and grievance plays in Iran's political culture as Iranians remember what they were and grieve for what they can no longer be.

### ***Misrepresenting Iran***

Dore Gold's *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West* is in many ways the inverse of Limbert's work. Gold's main agenda is to ensure that Tehran is presented in the worst light possible. Given this task, Gold's book adds little to the literature on Iran and does not contribute to a greater understanding of Iranian decision-making. The author presents numerous under-supported claims as fact, and attempts to ensure the reader knows how the Iran-focused portion of the academic community was not only wrong about Iran, but these academics are to admit their "mistakes" and are not worth listening to. He is particularly scornful of James Bill and the late Richard Cottam for giving upbeat assessments of the Khomeini regime, which when translated through Gold's mindset, is tantamount to being supportive of Khomeini. This is a gross oversimplification given the fact that nowhere in the writings of Bill or Cottam can one discern a hint of support for Khomeini. Both of these authors are widely cited by students and experts alike, and for good reason, since their works are standard-setting. In fact, Bill and Cottam are cited or included in the bibliographies of three of the books in this review essay. Gold's focus on studies made over a generation ago during the infancy of the Islamic Republic overlooks ideas detailed in a number of books on Iran published since that time. It is not necessary, nor helpful, to establish in writing where an author stands politically vis-a-vis the contemporary Iranian regime. Gold, the former Ambassador to the United Nations from the State of Israel and foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu, also makes certain that the Palestinians, especially Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization and Iran, are linked. Although this may be true enough, it sounds a lot like a score-settling exercise in the context Gold creates. Gold's book, then, is less an analysis of Iranian politics than it is a polemic on why regime change is the essential policy option.

Among some of the more jarring factual errors Gold presents includes the notion that the 1979-81 Hostage Crisis was "in collusion with" the highest levels of the regime, when in fact the embassy takeover was conceived and executed without advance knowledge by Iranian leadership. Likewise, his claim sourced to unspecified "experts" that the detonation of the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983 as "the largest non-nuclear explosion that had ever been detonated on the face of the earth" is almost certainly hyperbole. Additionally, Gold's claim that Sunni Muslims had not used suicide bombings until Hamas started doing so in 1994 is similarly erroneous. There are a number of such errors that collectively undermine the

book's credibility. The argumentation suffers from occasional internal inconsistency, such as declarations that the Islamic Republic is not deterrable, but then listing occurrences when it was in fact, deterred. The author's portrayal of Tehran as a monolithic bloc with little distinction between the agendas of its various personalities, despite overwhelming evidence of a high degree of factionalization within the regime, simultaneously obscures the nature of the regime while understating the difficulty of the challenge faced by the West, the United States in particular, in coming to terms with the future of Iranian policy. Gold is correct in pointing out the repressive and retrograde tendencies of this regime. Although it would appear those tendencies are obvious, it seems that the task at hand, if we do not choose the military option, is to find those opportunities within a larger political framework of international actors and possibly within the factions of Tehran's regime, that can bring an end to the twin issues of nuclear proliferation and Iranian state support for various terrorist or militia activities.

### ***Iran's Regional Resurgence***

*Dangerous But Not Omnipotent* is the RAND Corporation's short analysis of Iran's increasingly hegemonic role in the Middle East and how it is perceived in the Arab states. It is arguably the least controversial of the books considered in this review essay. In examining Iran's regional role, this analysis trods little new ground. It does examine Iranian support for various regional entities ranging from Lebanese Hizballah to Iraq's Mahdi Army, much of which have been the bread and butter of the think tank community for several years. The real value in this version of the story is the fact it is succinctly in a single volume. Even of greater importance is having Iran's external activities portrayed in relation to its strategic culture, coupled with the understanding that deriving specific intent from Iranian actions is ambiguous even at the best of times. "What seems like a drive for hegemony may in fact be a form of deterrence or the manifestation of an ambition for increased stature and 'indispensability' in the midst of isolation and encirclement." One of the primary reasons it is so difficult to assess the regime is the factionalization within the regime. As stated earlier, Gold refuses to deal with this facet of the Islamic Republic; Pollack states unequivocally that "The Iranian political system is one of the most complex, Byzantine, fragmented, and opaque on earth." The RAND study, led by author Frederic Wehrey, a former Air Force officer, offers more specificity by defining the various camps within the Iranian regime and giving a detailed analysis of how this factionalization affects the US-Iran relationship. Wehrey and his fellow authors rationalize how this factionalization affected "benchmark" events in the Islamic Republic's relations with the West including the religious edict

calling for the murder of British author Salman Rushdie and the on-going confrontation over Iran's nuclear program.

*Dangerous But Not Omnipotent* also provides a much-needed analysis of the fact that Iran has always had a close relationship with Lebanese Hizballah, but there are limits to the degree which Iran actually can control the organization. This book reaffirms themes in a growing body of research that groups like Hizballah, and probably some of the Iraqi Shia militias as well, can and do act independently of Iran, and that notions of Iran pulling strings of "proxies" with the intention of using them to achieve regional hegemony is likely an oversimplification of the dynamics between Iran and these groups. While it is quite unlikely that we will see any kind of complete break between Iran and these groups, the following statement is noteworthy: "The image of Hizballah as a client of Iran . . . is becoming obsolete." It is unfortunate that the RAND study is the only book of those under review to explore this theme.

On Iraqi groups, Wehrey and his co-authors are equally insightful, dedicating an entire section on "Iranian Support of Iraqi Groups Does Not Equal Control." It is worth noting, however, that a discussion on the complexity involved between Iran and Iraqi groups—especially Iran's closest strategic partner, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq—could have been strengthened by including the fact that Ba'th regime's purges and deportations of a quarter-million Iraqi Shia of Iranian descent resulted in complex interaction inside the Islamic regime, to say nothing of Iranian society. In fact, some personalities from the large Iraqi constituency exiled to Iran have become senior officials in Iran: the Najaf-born Ali Larijani, the Speaker of the Majles (Parliament) and likely candidate in the next presidential election; his younger brother Ayatollah Sadiq Larijani, head of the Iranian Judiciary; and Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi, a founding member of the group that became the Supreme Council. This constituency, and its members inside the Iranian regime, guarantees that contrary to the overly-simplistic belief of some officials and pundits, Iraq and Iran are unable to be extricated from one another. Highlighting more of this complex relationship would serve the goal of contextualizing the new relationship Iran and Iraq are developing. This is extremely important as Iraq starts its recovery from decades of dictatorship, Iran's quarter-million Iraqi refugees from that period continue to be absorbed into Iranian society, and the Iranian regime prepares for the real possibility of having a non-Persian president.

Another plus for the RAND study was it is the only book of those reviewed in this essay to make concerted use of the Open Source Center's (OSC) many holdings on Iran. Ward used a smattering of OSC reports in the latter chapters of *Immortal*, but *Dangerous* has made far greater use of these sources.



### ***What Next?***

*Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* offers analysis of several policy options related to Iran. The nearly-ubiquitous Kenneth Pollack is lead author of a highly-useful analysis of nine distinct policies that could be implemented in dealing with Iran. The value of this volume, co-written by well-known think tank community personalities such as—Daniel Byman, Martin Indyk, Suzanne Maloney, Michael O’Hanlon, and Bruce Riedel—is that each option is presented in the same format, without editorial comments related to which option the authors prefer. Policy goals, windows of opportunity, political requirements, and a pro/con analysis are applied to all nine options, giving those charged with planning for contingencies a head start. While the events of the past year appear to have put various diplomatic experiments with Iran in a state of suspended animation, running through these options is a worthwhile exercise as America continues to watch for opportunities.

The policy options examined are based on two diplomatic strategies: persuasion and engagement; three military options: invasion, airstrikes, or permitting Israeli airstrikes; three regime change choices: offering support to a popular uprising in the “velvet revolution” sense, a similar strategy offered to one of Iran’s minority or opposition groups, and support of a military coup; the last option Pollack’s working group considered resembles more of the same: containment. Whichever strategy, or combination of strategies, the administration chooses, it acts against the ticking clock of Iran’s developing nuclear program. Citing the last National Intelligence Estimate of Iran’s nuclear capacity, Pollack reminds us that the next five years are “the more likely time frame” for the Islamic Republic to produce sufficient fissile material for a single warhead. Thus, time is of the essence in implementing any strategy designed to steer Iran away from this objective. Complicating any of these options, especially for the nonmilitary ones, is last June’s contested election. Any of these strategies will require significantly more cooperation between the United States and its international partners, and almost certainly will require a substantial investment in time that we may not have if we want to ensure a nonnuclear Iran. Any such strategy will almost certainly involve unilateral US actions aimed at strengthening United Nations resolutions against Iran, and adjusting bilateral relations between our allies and Iran. This last strategy against Iran’s development of nuclear technology is probably beyond direct US involvement, and reflects how any effort against the Islamic Republic will ripple through an increasing swath of American foreign relations.

The authors of *Which Path* are the first to point out that the nine policies they examine represent “nine bad options” none of which are optimal and

all of which have a low likelihood of success. The options presented are also not mutually exclusive. They represent fundamentals that can be combined to give the United States maximum leverage against the likely scenarios of Iran stalling for time, its flat-out rejection of the very premises of negotiations with the international community, and its continued efforts to enshrine as policy encompassing a course of action that satisfies US concerns based on entrenched anti-Americanism as a core element of the regime's policy-making process. Thus, a future US policy toward Iran will need to combine some of these diplomatic and military options. It will also require the United States to be more flexible and patient than we have been if we are going to give these approaches time to work.

### ***Conclusion***

This review essay should allow us greater insight into the answer I gave my friend at the conference. A few of these books are standouts that ought to be on every serious analyst or commentator's shelf. Not every volume adds greatly to the collective wisdom on the subject, but even those that do not are revealing in that they show us where the political debates rest in key constituencies. In addition to the substantive points that are brought to the foreground in a number of these books, we also gained a clear sense of the importance of what history means to Iran. This is certainly one of the key issues Americans need to come to terms with when thinking about what direction our Iran policy follows in these uncertain times. The reader will also gain a clearer sense of just how confused the US response has been to the Iranian challenge, how critical future policy decisions will be, and the fact that the Iran issue is not going to resolve itself anytime soon.

**The Reviewer:** Charles M. Brown earned his M.A. in Middle East Studies and History at the Middle East Center, University of Utah. He serves as a CIA intelligence analyst focusing on Iraq.