

Heroes to Hostages

It is easy to forget, given the oppositional dynamic between Iran and the United States of the last fifty years, that these two countries once shared productive partnership. Tracing US–Iran relations over two turbulent centuries, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet considers when and how this relationship went awry. With careful attention to social and cultural as well as diplomatic developments, Kashani-Sabet shows that the rift did not originate in flashpoints of crisis, like the 1953 coup or the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but was instead long in the making. Drawing from a wealth of English and Persian-language sources, many of which were previously unavailable or unacknowledged, this book considers the relationship from the vantage point of Iranian society and the experiences of an evolving Iran that strived to accommodate American and great power politics. Following these two nations through wars, decolonization, and revolution, Kashani-Sabet presents an invaluable history of a diplomatic rivalry that informs geopolitics to this day.

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Heroes to Hostages

America and Iran, 1800–1988

FIROOZEH KASHANI-SABET
University of Pennsylvania



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*For Dr. Akbar Mehraban Sami'i and Ms. Sally (Jarvis)
Mehraban Sami'i*

*and for future generations –
of Iranians, Americans, and Iranian-Americans with hope*

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Preface

The city of Tehran came to a standstill on a foreboding February afternoon. Martial law confined residents to their homes as the calm before the storm eerily set in. When nighttime approached, gunshots echoed in affluent neighborhoods, as outraged mobs overran thoroughfares once named for American presidents. Chaos marked the violent protests as it became apparent that February 11, 1979 would be no ordinary day. The shah – a maligned monarch who had secured his throne with America’s blessing – had already abandoned his homeland in anticipation of the changes to come. He was not alone. For months, American nationals, along with Iran’s elite, had trickled out of the country, recognizing that large swaths of the population no longer welcomed them. Iran’s Islamic revolution, with its strident anti-American spirit, had turned the United States and the shah into scapegoats on the world stage.

Then, the unimaginable happened: the hostage crisis. With this hostile act the Islamic Republic of Iran forced an indelible rift in US–Iranian relations. In the capital, the regime consolidated its hold, and executions of “infidels” and Pahlavi diehards made daily headlines. The shocking and unjust killings of the dapper former prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, and the women’s right activist and education minister, Dr. Farrokhrou Parsa, portended a sinister swing in local politics. Women quickly perceived that mandatory veiling would take hold in their postmodern lives.

Watching these historic events from the vantage point of an American international school on Zhaleh Avenue, a street that was a hub of revolutionary activity, I struggled to understand the seemingly sudden transformation of a country I had known as an open and secular society into an Islamic theocracy. Originally begun by American missionaries, my school eventually closed its doors as its faculty and students dispersed across the globe. Despite the closure of such institutions that had once enjoyed the patronage of Iran’s elite, America left its imprint on Iran, although sometimes in unwelcome ways.

No one denies the tectonic cracks that the revolution opened in Iran's intellectual landscape, but the world comes no closer to understanding the paradox of the Islamic Republic some four decades later. As Winston Churchill said about the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."¹ Its *raison d'être* has driven the momentum for reform, but its legacy remains a matter of passionate debate and heated political exchange. In the United States, many conversations about Iran adhere to a script that often dehumanizes Iranians and skews the discussion in ways that make goodwill gestures seem impossible. Under the Islamic Republic, anti-American rhetoric polarizes citizens and distorts the long-standing contributions of the United States to Iran and the international system.

Although some observers are not keen to look back before the days of the shah to explain the relationship between America and Iran, such short-term historical thinking prevents understanding of Iran's connections to the United States. Until 1979, the two countries had enjoyed a fairly prosperous, though inherently problematic, client-state relationship.² This book argues that America's early engagements in Iran remain significant because they adumbrated a less combative and more collaborative partnership that not only benefited the two countries, but also the broader Middle East. However, these early encounters also sowed the seeds of dissent. Eager to assert its relevance and independence, Iran found itself powerless and marginalized in a new Arab-dominated Middle East virtually controlled by Britain after the First World War. America's initial adoption of British notions of Islam, Iran, and the Middle East made it difficult to forge a distinct relationship that fully respected Iranian sovereignty. Britain invariably passed on its imperial mindset to the United States.

What has since transpired thus did not just have to do with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 – as is often simplistically argued – but also with the shift in regional power dynamics and alliances. To understand this contemporary cultural and political landscape requires going back to the moment when this relationship formed. If Iran changed as a result

¹ I first used this analogy to describe the Islamic Republic in a talk delivered at Columbia University as part of a conference on the Iranian Revolution, entitled: "Iran After The Election," December 5, 2009.

² Mark Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

of regional and international politics, so too did America, as did Iran's neighboring states. While 9/11 briefly unified the United States around a terrible tragedy and turned it into an omnipresent military force in the Middle East, the event also marked Iran's renewed and aggressive marginalization by the United States as the Bush administration wrapped Iran into the so-called "axis of evil," not the countries inhabited by the perpetrators of the 9/11 atrocities (nationals from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates).

This book does not purport to explain every rift in the history of US–Iranian relations or to provide an encyclopedic account of this centuries-long relationship in a complicated Middle East. Based on the historical record, it argues that America's long-term departure from Iran has not benefited either country or the region, broadly conceived. This association, when it worked, was not based on a client–state relationship in every context, but rather on a recognition of mutual national interests and a diplomatic partnership that accommodated both sides.

The monumental international effort that went into the creation of the short-lived Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 was perhaps the best example of a newfound reciprocal political understanding reached between the United States and Iran since 1979. Its failure simply points to the dogged belief that the Islamic Republic can be subdued, reined in, and forcibly overturned from outside – an argument that has over the last four decades only entrenched the Islamists, rather than the reformers, secularists, or monarchists, in power. Its failure also points to the complex international and regional forces that demand unequivocal Persian subservience to one great power – a position that rankles the core of Iranians on both ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, Iranians justifiably clamor for change and sacrifice their lives for freedom, cultural openness, and economic prosperity. The regime cannot survive by killing and imprisoning its citizens, suppressing its women, girls, and youth, placing its minority communities under duress, spewing a rhetoric of hate, and crushing dissent. Conversely, foreign agitators cannot bargain on this opposition to eradicate Iran, in the name of toppling the Islamic Republic, by funding separatist movements and other nefarious activities.

No easy way exists to reconcile America's imperialist ambitions and Iran's regional vision. Oil, frontier security, and diplomatic interests make it difficult at times to align US policies and Iranian interests. For

better or worse, American culture pervades Iranian society, and Iran intrudes upon American consciousness in cultural and diplomatic circles. In Los Angeles, lovingly dubbed “Tehrangeles” by Persian exiles, the Iranian-American community has imprinted on local culture, from the popularity of its restaurants to the widely held celebration of Nowruz on the first day of spring. In Iran, the youth avidly follow American pop music, movies, and TV shows. This cultural connection was not lost on the intellectual and diplomatic pioneers of more than a century ago. As beloved Persian poet Hafez of Shiraz counseled in these timeless verses:

Let us make our glasses kiss;
Let us quench the sorrow-cinders.
To-day let us drink together;
Now and then will never agree.³

How appropriate that an eminent American writer – and an admirer of Hafez – rendered these words into English. Although neither Hafez nor Ralph Waldo Emerson ever intended these verses to shed light on US–Iranian relations, it is a sad truth that no amount of finesse will make the American and Persian versions of the “now and then” agree. Only a mutual desire to “quench the sorrow-cinders” might bring the two over to the same side of history to enjoy a “drink together.”

³ Cited in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Introduction by Chester Noyes Greenough, Vol. V (New York: Hears’s International Library Co. Publishers, 1914), p. 188. Other editions appear to differ slightly in translation and rendition of these verses. I presented elements of this narrative at a teach-in on the 1953 coup held at Columbia University on August 19, 2009.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book came into existence immediately after 9/11. As an assistant professor at the time, I felt the weight of the moment. When I faced my students two days after that tragic event, I, like the rest of the world, was still raw and in shock about what had taken place. I prepared myself as best I could, fully recognizing the inadequacy of any explanation I could provide to make sense of the disaster. My sadness was compounded as a New Yorker who had never seen our indomitable city suffer such devastation and pain – until coronavirus. 9/11, however, presented a different type of danger and disruption. The enemy appeared familiar, if evasive. For weeks, New Yorkers glimpsed the thick plume of smoke that smothered downtown Manhattan. Friends, neighbors, and strangers mourned as “the city that never sleeps” – a metropolis known for welcoming people of every ilk – paused for days but came together in grief and, eventually, in renewal.

I thank my former department chair, the late Jonathan Steinberg, for convincing me of the inherent value of writing this study as someone who had lived in Pahlavi Iran; had witnessed the revolution, the birth of the Islamic Republic, and the start of the Iran–Iraq War; and had settled years later in the United States. Jonathan nudged me into proposing the idea for this book, which Walter Lippincott of Princeton University Press embraced. My research evolved over the years and took me into a small but vibrant community of American diplomatic historians working on Iran. At the same time, global events intruded upon my consciousness as I wrote, reconceived, and revised my manuscript, which brought me to the doorstep of a different publishing house. During this long journey I accrued many debts, which I am delighted to repay, however inadequately, at this time.

First, I would like to thank Professor Ali Mirsepassi and Professor Arshin Adib-Moghadam for their steadfast support of this project. They offered invaluable advice in the final stages of revision and production,

and my manuscript has benefited enormously from their deep knowledge of Iranian history and international politics. The excellent editorial team at Cambridge University Press led by Maria Marsh, Rachel Imrie, Emily Sharp, and Atifa Jiwa prior to her move, have ensured that this book enters production in a timely and professional manner after many unforeseen and unusual delays, no doubt exacerbated by the pandemic. I would also like to thank the copy editors, Santhamurthy Ramamoorthy and Fiona Tatham, for their meticulous work.

I have had the privilege of presenting my research at different venues, including Columbia University, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, Yale University, the Community College of Philadelphia, and, via Zoom, the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. I remain profoundly grateful to my many colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania for their years of friendship and intellectual engagement. I would especially like to thank the following Penn-affiliated scholars: Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano; Eiichiro Azuma; Cheikh Babou; Rita Barnard; Warren Breckman; Kathleen Brown; Marie Brown; Lee V. Cassanelli; Alex Chase-Levenson; Paul M. Cobb; Frederick Dickinson; Ann Farnsworth-Alvear; Siyen Fei; Al Filreis; Claire Finkelstein; Amy Gadsden; Nili Gold; Harun Küçük; Renata Holod; Peter Holquist; Lynn Hollen Lees; Ann Matter; Benjamin Nathans; Laura Perna; Thomas Ricks; Sophie Rosenfeld; David Ruderman; Tom Safley; Fatemeh Shams; Heather J. Sharkey; Beth Simmons; Mbarek Sryfi; Alon Tam; Margo Todd; Eve M. Troutt Powell; Arthur Waldron; Seçil Yılmaz; and Jonathan Zimmerman. My colleague, Walter McDougall, graciously agreed to read my manuscript at the final stages, for which I remain grateful. I would also like to thank my office colleagues in the history department for their friendship and assistance over the years: Octavia Carr; Yvonne Fabella; Angela Faranda; Joan Plonski; and Chris Sabella.

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never read this manuscript, Professor Kennedy's rigorous approach to diplomatic history has informed my appraisal of international politics. He taught me a great deal about imperialism – a knowledge that shapes my critical understanding of Britain's role in Iran and the Persian Gulf.

The most rewarding aspect of being a Penn faculty member remains the privilege of working with supremely capable and interesting students. This book has been two decades in the making, and I would like to acknowledge my graduate students who have engaged me in countless conversations over the years and have patiently listened to my reflections on life in academe and on the politics of the Middle East. This list begins with my first doctoral student, Ram B. Regavim, who was brave enough to take me on as his advisor over a decade ago. Since then, I have been fortunate to work with other immensely talented scholars, including (in chronological order) Noor Zaidi; Kelsey Rice; Jim Ryan; Ciruce Movahedi-Lankarani; Bill Figueroa; Nick Foretek; and Sarah Eskandari. I would also like to draw attention to the privilege of working with other Penn graduate students on whose committees I served for periods of time, notably Beeta Baghoolizadeh, Lacy Feigh, Dahlia El-Zein, Armaghan Fakhraeirad, and Griffin Creech.

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I have had with Dr. Steele on Iran's relations with Africa. Although we have worked independently of one another, we have encountered some of the same sources and discussed others. His important interventions and insights will appear as a groundbreaking book, tentatively titled: *Iran and Africa: The Cold War, International Relations, and Cultural Connections in the Late Pahlavi Period* (forthcoming with Cambridge University Press). Penn librarians Nick Okrent and Heather Hughes provided indispensable support as I approached them with challenging requests on a regular basis. At Princeton University, I thank Kimberly E. Leaman for her tireless efforts in helping me to procure scans of valuable historical works. Finally, I would like to recognize the help of a Penn graduate student, Weston Bland, in preparing the bibliography and of a recent Penn Ph.D., Matthew Sharp, for helping me to check my English-language footnotes and citations. Please forgive any inadvertent oversight of individuals who should have been included here. I accept full responsibility for any errors that may have unintentionally entered the manuscript.

As I pen these long-awaited acknowledgments, the world reels from the impact of a deadly pandemic that has ravaged countless lives and still threatens many others. My family, too, faced the scare of COVID-19, as my husband, Alireza Javaheri, was in quarantine with the familiar symptoms of fevers, dry cough, and chills, during the early confusing days of the pandemic. My mother, too, having lacked the benefit of vaccines, contracted COVID-19 in Iran. Thankfully, she recovered despite enduring lingering symptoms of the disease. I, too, contracted a case of COVID but remain grateful for my recovery.

As the pandemic ravaged New York City, the epicenter of the outbreak in March 2020, my elderly uncle and aunt generously opened their home to us in south Jersey to help minimize the spread of coronavirus in our immediate family. We were enormously grateful for this humane gesture as my eldest daughter, Neda, suffers from both physical and cognitive disabilities. Keeping her, and all our children, safe was our absolute priority during the pandemic. During that time, my sons, Alexander and Kouros, muddled through a tough year of online schooling and curtailed athletic opportunities, transforming living room furniture into makeshift gym equipment, to stay fit and busy. My daughter, Ariana, weathered the challenges of the college admissions process with characteristic aplomb despite the ways in which the pandemic changed the rules of the game.

Acknowledgments

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My children’s stories of growing up in New York City in the post 9/11 era, which witnessed a surge of Islamophobia and “Iranodium,” have yet to be told.⁴ Like most experiences of prejudice theirs, too, entailed marginalization, lost opportunities, belittlement, and hurt. During the years of the Muslim Ban in particular, enacted during the Trump presidency, expressions of hate directed against individuals of Iranian heritage swelled. The bigotry to which they were subjected at some of their previous schools have sadly become a part of our family narrative and this country’s checkered history of immigration. It will be up to them to chronicle the unsavory experiences of prejudice that they have faced as Iranian-Americans.

I thank my entire family for understanding that, in addition to my personal commitments to them, I must persist in my research endeavors. I dedicate this book to my uncle, Dr. Akbar Mehraban Sami’i, and his wife of over fifty years, Ms. Sally (Jarvis) Mehraban Sami’i, who gave me refuge when I needed it, especially during times when we did not have a place to call home, after leaving Iran.

Sally and Akbar met each other in the United States. They later returned to Iran and worked in the fields of education and medicine for over a decade, before permanently relocating to America. My uncle first came to America as an undergraduate student at Lafayette College, through a family connection with Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan. My uncle’s mother (my grandmother), Maryam Rahmat Sami’i, had attended the girl’s mission school in Tehran and often fondly reminisced about its famed principal, Ms. Jane Doolittle, and about another renowned missionary to Iran, Cuyler Young, who had been stationed in Rasht. My grandmother became partial to American education and hoped to see her children continue their education in the United States (which they did). My uncle then attended medical school at Temple University and completed his residency in surgery. He and his wife went to Iran and traveled to Shiraz, where my uncle could satisfy the requirements for his military service as he practiced medicine.

Raised in the United States, my aunt taught English at the Iran America Society and at the Princess Ashraf Pahlavi preschool, while her husband worked at the Namazi Hospital of Shiraz (Pahlavi) University. After his stint ended in Shiraz, my uncle returned to Tehran,

⁴ See my forthcoming essay, “Iranodium: The Origins, History, and Politics of Anti-Iranianism.”

and from 1972 to 1980 he served first as Acting Chief, and later Chief, of Surgery at Reza Pahlavi Hospital in Tajrish, Tehran. After 1979, the Reza Pahlavi Hospital was renamed Shohada Hospital, and it was there that my uncle operated successfully on an Iranian politician named Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was shot just months after the revolution.

Before the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war, Dr. Sami‘i emigrated to the United States and eventually began working at the James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona, Pennsylvania, as chief of surgery. In 1988, he became a US citizen and joined the US army reserves. He went on active duty in 1990 for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, arriving first in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. From there, he went to al-Khobar Towers and was subsequently stationed at Hafr al-Batin. After retirement, he and his wife enjoyed a quiet retreat in New Jersey. Although I am saddened that Aunt Sally passed away before this book entered production, I hope it will be a testament to her meaningful contributions in bridging the United States and Iran.

The lives and careers of my uncle and aunt reveal the deep networks that connected generations of Americans and Iranians. In his youth, my uncle recalls participating in protests supporting Dr. Mosaddeq, but the outcome of that unfortunate episode did not forever embitter him against America. Years later, he still deeply values the education he received in the United States. It was through my aunt and uncle that we came to celebrate Christmas in Tehran every year and learned to make turkey and stuffing. Although we also marked Persian holidays and Islamic rituals, we made room for new traditions, thanks to my uncles, aunts, and cousins, who embraced different religious persuasions (Zoroastrian, Protestant, and Catholic). Our family story is not unique, but these accounts rarely appear in historical narratives of America and Iran. Akbar and Sally belong to a group of individuals and adventurers, who through their personal choices, literally wedded the cultures of America and Iran. As a teenager, my uncle left the comforts of his home in Rasht, Guilan, to reside in a spartan dormitory in rural Pennsylvania, where he struggled to speak English. His wife, a native of Philadelphia, had never traveled outside the United States before moving with him to Iran. She was familiar with the diverse make-up of Philly, but the class conflicts of Persian society were new to her. These seemingly risky and unorthodox life decisions became possible, and even attractive to them, because the societies of Iran

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and America had opened themselves up to adventurers for over a century. At their best, America and Iran received visitors who irrevocably enriched and transformed their societies.

As I write, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran seem inexorably set on their collision course, unable to see eye to eye on a lifeless nuclear deal and the regime's oppression of Iranian women and girls. Growing ranks of poor chafe under the strictures of debilitating international sanctions that have deprived them of vital medical supplies and simultaneously suffer from the mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis. For months, Americans faced shortages of ventilators, face masks, personal protective equipment, and a devastating death toll. Today, they confront the economic hardships of a post-pandemic world. Even an apocalyptic global event has failed to bring peace between America and Iran. If sobering contemporary crises refuse to convince those in positions of power to relinquish their rhetoric and policies of division and hate, perhaps rereading the past, and remembering our collective interest in freedom, gender equality, and tolerance, will.

A Note on Transliteration

I have used a Persian transliteration system to render Persian words into English. The names of Iranian figures with Muslim names are transliterated according to their Persian pronunciations. In some cases, I use a doubled “s” to render phonetically common Persianized Arabic names such as Nasser or Hossain. When possible, I use an Arabic transliteration system for Arab figures (ex.: Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal; Saddam Husayn; Sayyid Qutb) and for common Islamic terms such as “ulama.” I do not use diacritical marks to distinguish between the Persian long and short vowels. Apostrophes are used to denote the *hamza* (‘) or *‘ayn* (‘). However, when a word or name begins with an *‘ayn* (ex: ulama; Ashura; Ali), the apostrophe has been eliminated.