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Mackey, Sandra: *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation.*

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

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Mackey, Sandra: *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*, with a New Afterword by the Author; A Plume Book (Penguin, first published 1996), 1998, paper, 442 pp.

Sandra Mackey's book, *The Iranians*, provides an excellent overview of Iran from its beginnings to 1998: the date of her new "Afterword" to her 1996 book. Part I of IV traces Persian history from its first three imperial dynasties (beginning 550 BCE and ending 631 CE), the Arab invasion and conversion of the Persians from Zoroastrianism to Islam, and the pattern that permeated both pre- and post-Islamic Iran: an interdependence of religion and state power. Part II explores the particularly patriarchal structure of Persian society: father, king, and cleric. Part III takes us to the 19th and 20th centuries with their growing discontents: the failed 19th century Baha'i revolution, failed constitutional revolution of 1906, the Pahlavi modernizing revolutions, and the anti-modernizing counter-revolution of the Ayatollah. Part IV takes us to the failed quest for justice in the Islamic Revolution.

The author's "Afterword" offers the hope that Iran's new president, Muhammad Khatami, buoyed by a new generation of disaffected youth and women, will be able to rescue the revolution from its reactionary oppressiveness to a society fit to take its place in the contemporary world community.

Twenty years have passed since the Iranian Revolution presented to the world the first popular revolution that resulted in a leap back in time. Since every extreme action has an extreme reaction, we are now witnessing the pendulum beginning to swing back as the new generation of Iranians are finding life under the clerics suffocating and without reward.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran (1977-79) had a brief honeymoon of egalitarianism in the two weeks between the fall of the Shah and the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini—but almost immediately, the jubilant revolutionaries found that they had exchanged an autocrat for a totalitarian religious dictator. Furthermore, the dictator was an avowed enemy of 20th century

culture. "He [Khomeini] told the faithful, "Some persons have come to me and said that now the revolution is over, we must preserve our economic infrastructure. But our people rose for Islam, not for economic infrastructure. What is this economic infrastructure anyway? Donkeys and camels need hay. That's economic infrastructure. But human beings need Islam."

This was a new sort of revolution indeed. Even more troubling was that the Ayatollah had dreams of exporting his product to the band of Muslim countries extending from the Atlantic coast of North Africa all the way to Indonesia. All of these have been ill-governed states, most of them formerly colonies of the west, with population explosions and growing discontent. The gap between the educated elites in these countries and the very uneducated masses was producing alienation, which the agents of the Ayatollah attempted to exploit.

With the exception of Afghanistan, whose Islamic Revolution in the hands of the Taliban fanatics embarrasses even Iran, the revolution has not spread. However, the discontent and political instability of such states as Algeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia grows and challenges those of us who would like to see these nations modernize in a healthy manner. The stumbling block to healthy modernization is fundamentalist Islam and its insistence that religion and politics must wear one hat. Iran has shown us how that scenario plays out. We are now seeing another revolution attempting to unseat the very group that appropriated the 1977-79 revolution.

Mackey takes a long look at the history of Iran and sees in it an amazing consistency of national character—a character that was as pronounced in the 6th century BCE as it is today. Persian character, she says, is based on a sometimes-warring combination of national identity (the Persian component) and religious identity (first Zoroastrian and then Shiite Islamic).

Iran's history is also characterized by periods of centralization presided over by powerful monarchs and then failure of the centralization, leaving the country in chaos and in the hands of war lords (local nobility and tribal khans). This is not unique to

Iran, of course. China has suffered from the same historic pattern, going from autocracy to anarchy until the next autocracy seizes the government. This is the price one pays for excessive centralization.

Mackey sees the cause of the breakdown in the failure of the Pahlavi monarchy to uphold both sides of the Persian duality: just rule and humane religion. She condemns the Pahlavis for attempting to undercut religion but she downplays the third pillar of Iranian character: the desire to explore and adapt the new and best currents of world culture.

The adaptive and modernizing ability of Persians is not new; it is a basic part of their historic character. The great culture of the Sassanian Dynasty (third to 7th centuries CE) was characterized by its openness to Chinese and Indian ideas, technologies, and goods, and this openness carried on into the Muslim Golden Age, in which Persian intellectuals, artists, and administrators were in the vanguard of the most dynamic international society the world has seen until today.

Persian history can be divided into two parts: the first part is the era of great imperial power beginning with Cyrus the Great, 550 BCE, and ending with the Arab Muslim conquest (7th century CE). The second half of their history is characterized by loss: loss of their ancient religion, Zoroastrianism; loss of their independence to first Arabs, then Turkic tribes, then Mongols who slaughtered half the population, then a succession of fanatical Shiite dynasties who restored Persia to national independence but ground the people and their culture into the dust.

By 1919, Persia came very close to being dismembered by Britain and Russia. At its nadir, the north was under the control of Czarist Russia and the south of the encroaching British Empire, leaving the capital, Tehran, with its inept Qajar Dynasty and reactionary Shiite establishment, in control of nothing.

Out of this chaos rose the man of the hour: Reza Khan, a colonel in the Russian-controlled north, who seized control of the country, sent the last Qajar into exile, and contemplated establishing a republic in the manner of Kamal Ataturk's Turkey. The

clergy were adamant that this not happen; a republic would be contrary to their interests. The country found itself with a new dynasty. Reza Khan took the dynastic name "Pahlavi," named for the Persian language that emerged after the Arab invasion of the 7th century CE. In so doing, he was telegraphing his intention to revive Iran's pre-Islamic persona.

Mackey does justice to Reza Shah Pahlavi and his mission to clean the Augean Stables that were the Persia of his day. I cannot imagine a more daunting task than to deal with the squalor, superstition, dirt tracks that served as roads, corrupt and ignorant clerics who presided over what passed for schooling, justice, and government bureaucracy, and total demoralization of what was once a great society. Reza Shah was not daunted. He did the impossible and before he was removed from power by events of World War II, he had set the country on a course that would enable it to join the world community.

"By the force of his will," Mackey states, "he intended to grab the Iranians by the scruff of the neck, lift them out of the lethargy dragging at society since the Middle Ages and thrust them into the twentieth century as citizens of an independent, self-reliant state." Of course the west was his model, because it was only in the west that he saw countries with standards of living that he coveted for his own. He came to see the Shiite establishment as the enemy to this vision and took steps accordingly. He did, in effect, what Napoleon, Peter the Great, and Kamal Ataturk had done in their time to create nation-states out of weak, superstitious chaos. Religion had to be defrocked.

To do this, she says, "Reza Shah, in essence, attached the might of the new Iran straight to the cloak tails of Cyrus the Great, as if thirteen hundred years of Islam and national identity shaped by Shiism never existed." Mackey is critical of this, but I don't see how he could have done it any other way.

Mackey's chapter on Reza Shah's son, Muhammad Reza Shah, the last monarch of Iran, was less satisfactory than her chapter on Reza Shah. The bulk of scholarship currently available on this complex man is, in my opinion, very one-sided. It is

easier to take pot shots from the wings than to try to walk in the shoes of a person handed the problems of Iran while only 21, with no experience and no power, and a nature ill-suited to the toughness required to rule such a country. All things considered, he did more good than bad.

On his watch, the country's industrialization, modern banking system, new universities, improvements in public health, and a gross national product that produced a middle class, all burgeoned. The programs that are the boast of the current Islamic government are only a continuation of programs begun under the Pahlavis, and many of these were initially scuttled.

The last Shah was a tragic figure, I think, rather than an evil one. I am troubled that even the positive actions he took—such as land reform and enfranchising women—serve as an opportunity for his detractors to attack his motives. If he were as ruthless as his detractors claim, why wasn't he ruthless enough to have Khomeini killed in prison? His foolishness and bad luck are incontestable. His motivations and care about his country should not be a closed book.

One can read the rest of Mackey's book with interest. She tracks the course of the revolution and shows its failure to provide the "justice" so desired by Iranians. In her Author's Afterword, she brings us up to the current chapter in this revolution—the one in which the preponderance of Iranians (under 25 and women) are beginning to chafe at their theocracy. As one Iranian professor notes, "You cannot just have a little theocracy," a quip on the comment that "you cannot be a little pregnant."

I think Mackey has produced a very readable and useful book, and I think she had an interesting viewpoint in trying to trace the eternal elements of Persian character playing themselves out on the world stage. However, I have some quarrel with her viewpoint.

Mackey, listening too uncritically to her Iranian informants, takes them at their word that they seek perfect justice, to be administered by a king as perfect as Cyrus the Great, and blessed by a perfectly just religion (Zoroastrianism and later Shia Islam).

Neither vision holds up.

Iranians had one great monarch (Cyrus the Great), but the monarchs that followed him throughout 2500 years, until Reza Shah Pahlavi, were a succession of either disasters or monsters. Monarchy is a bad system, but Iranians are still looking for a man on a white horse to rescue them from themselves.

And how “perfectly just” were Iran’s two religions? Both Zoroastrianism and Islam began as humane, egalitarian faiths, but both became monsters when allied with state power. Religion and Empire poison each other. When the breakaway Muslim sect, Shia, became Iran’s state religion in the 16th century, it was authoritarian, rife with superstition and worship of the Prophet’s bloodline, and afloat on a sea of resentment. It became the country’s judges, educators, and land owners, all of which responsibilities were administered in true feudal style, and became in the end another taxing burden on the ignorant and downtrodden. Justice was lost in the shuffle.

So, why did Iran’s revolution take the form of an Islamic march backwards? Did the Iranians really want religion back in their lives? Was it spiritual hunger, as so many analysts, including Mackey, tell us? Or was this revolution the result of lack of critical thinking?

Intellectuals fooled themselves that the revolution was theirs. However, it was directed and stage-managed by the clergy because they had the means to do so. They had a charismatic leader who told each disparate group what it wanted to hear; they had pulpits from which to denounce the Shah and give their denunciation the stamp of the divine. They had experience in putting on processions (the annual and volatile mourning and flagellating parades) and they had ready rent-a-mobs in the displaced peasants living in the city slums. In addition, they had the most potent rhetoric of envy and resentment to stir up everyone’s disappointed rising expectations. Shia is the poster child of resentment.

From the intellectual class down, no one considered what would happen to their notion of democracy when power was

vested in the hands of the clergy. Democracy requires human decision making whereas religion and religious authorities get their marching orders directly from God. How does one argue with this?

The real cause of revolutionary discontent was largely economic: an oil boom followed by a recession. Improved health conditions under the Pahlavis and expectation of a rising standard of living had also produced Iran's first population explosion in centuries. Population explosions create havoc and unmeetable rising expectations. In addition, the country's addiction to the notion of the man on the white horse who would rescue them also promotes a culture of blame pinning on the same hero when things do not go well. The Shah became the target of blame and resentment. After all, he took credit for everything good, so he was fair game for everything bad.

And the Ayatollah, the latest man on a white horse, replaced the authoritarian Shah (who would brook no political competition) with a totalitarian God-Priest (who would brook nobody's freedom: economic, mental, or personal).

The day that Iranians give up their illusions about the just king and just priest is the day that they will begin to honor the third leg of their character, the capability of exploring ideas from everywhere and adapting them to their own substantial culture. We may be seeing the beginning of this today.

Laina Farhat-Holzman