



BOOK REVIEWS

Missing Pieces of the Puzzle

by Ilan Berman

KENNETH M. POLLACK, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 539 pp., \$26.95.

Give Kenneth Pollack credit. The former Clinton National Security Council staffer and long-time CIA analyst, who now heads up research on the Middle East at the influential Brookings Institution in Washington, knows a thing or two about positioning.

Pollack's first book, the best-selling *The Threatening Storm*, was released in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, and instantly made waves as the moderate Democratic case for war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Never mind that Pollack, during his tenure as Director of Persian Gulf Affairs in President Bill

Clinton's National Security Council, had played a central role in formulating the policies and official positions that resulted in the weakened sanctions regime he would later lambaste in his private capacity. He became an instant celebrity, appearing frequently on the talk show circuit and in the book review pages of leading papers and scholarly journals. Timing, as they say, is everything.

Pollack's follow-up endeavor, *The Persian Puzzle*, is similarly prescient. The Islamic Republic of Iran, now steadily marching toward an offensive nuclear capability, represents the next big foreign policy challenge for the Bush administration—and a pivotal turning point in the War on Terror. How the United States chooses to tackle Iran's strategic



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advances in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the Caucasus will go a long way toward determining the success or failure of long-term American strategy in those regions.

Pollack begins his assessment in antiquity. His sweeping, rapid-fire account of Iran's serpentine history—from the rise of the Safavids to the turbulent politics of the late 19th Century to the rise of Reza Khan—is definitive, and should be studied by students of Middle Eastern history everywhere. His detailed personal portrait of Iran's last pro-American leader, the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, is equally insightful, providing a realistic measure of a man torn between competing impulses: the desperate need to be loved by his subjects, and the need for strong, sometimes draconian, measures in order to weather the intrigue and great power politics that typified the Cold War in the Middle East.

The problem, however, is that *The Persian Puzzle* is not intended solely as a history tome. Rather, Pollack makes clear that his work is intended to also serve as a primer for formulating policy toward Iran's ayatollahs.

In some ways, it certainly succeeds. Over the past quarter-century, U.S.-Iranian relations have been nothing if not complicated, and Pollack, an accomplished Beltway player, provides an intriguing first-hand glimpse into the backroom deals, horse-trading and compromises that have so profoundly characterized U.S. policy.

But political maneuvers are not policy, and more than anything else Pollack's work underscores the sad schizophrenia of America's approach toward one of the Middle East's most important nations—a malaise that has endured despite multiple changes of administration and even the start of the Global War on Terror.

The results have been entirely predictable. As Pollack himself admits, the strategic ambitions of the Iranian regime, and its relentless pursuit of a nuclear option, have become a “problem from hell.”

Where, then, does that leave the United States? Here, Pollack does not have many good answers. His antidote for the Iranian problem is purely tactical. Ignoring the current of revolution that is now visible within the Islamic Republic, he settles for a convoluted “triple track” strategy designed to simultaneously dangle diplomatic carrots and sticks before Iran's leaders, pursue international cooperation for a new containment policy, and plan for failure.

Ultimately, however, these prescriptions are entirely unconvincing. Perhaps that is because Pollack, through his meticulous review of the ebb and flow of U.S.-Iranian relations, has so thoroughly detailed the depths of Tehran's antagonism toward America. Maybe it has to do with the fact that, having decisively shut the door on the possibility that a fundamental transformation of the regime could be in the offing, Pollack has to content himself with incremental steps built around ephemeral hopes of mollifying Iran's ayatollahs.

Whatever the reason, *The Persian Puzzle* provides a commendable assessment of the evolution of Iranian politics, and of the unhappy state of affairs between Washington and Tehran. But readers who are looking for more—for instance, a coherent plan for confronting Iran's international menace, and for promoting a peaceful, democratic Iranian future—are likely to be sorely disappointed.

