



# BOOK REVIEWS

## Reading Iran Right

Gary Metz

MARK BOWDEN, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Crisis, the First Battle in America's War With Militant Islam* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 704 pp.

It is increasingly clear that America's credibility as the leader of the free world hinges upon how it confronts the challenge from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Do we ignore its continuing threats of destruction made against Israel, the U.S. and Western civilization? Do we act unilaterally? Do we seek direct negotiations? Do we seek to support an internal regime change in Iran?

The problem is hardly a new one. Clear answers have been eluding successive U.S. administrations for the past twenty-eight years. And in his book *Guests of the Ayatollah*, Mark

Bowden eloquently sets the stage for the disarray that has permeated American policy toward the Islamic Republic ever since the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and 444-day crisis that followed.

Bowden's tale is a cautionary one, a case study in dealing with Islamic radicals in what he terms "the first battle in America's war with militant Islam." In 700-plus pages, he skillfully explores the mechanics of the hostage crisis through firsthand interviews with both hostages and captors. The result is an intricate picture of the thinking of the Iranian radicals who took the Embassy staff hostage, and of the astonishment of U.S. diplomats, who felt that they had been working diligently in support of the new Islamic Republic.



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But *Guests of the Ayatollah* is valuable for another reason as well. America was surprised on 9/11, just as it was by the events of the Iranian hostage crisis more than two decades earlier. Bowden's book is an attempt to ensure that we are not surprised again.

The value of history, they say, is that it can help us avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Today, a careful reading of Bowden's book would greatly help U.S. policymakers unravel what has become known as "the Persian puzzle."

The first lesson of *Guests of the Ayatollah* is the failure of Americans to comprehend the true nature of the regime in Tehran. As Bowden writes, the acting American Ambassador at the time of the takeover, Bruce Laingen, was perplexed by the assault on the Embassy. After all, Laingen believed, from a pragmatic standpoint, "Iran was clearly hurting itself more than the United States."

Laingen was not alone. American diplomats and even President Jimmy Carter apparently could not conceive that the new Islamic Republic of Iran would be both willing and able to violate international norms. What they failed to grasp was that the agenda of this new regime was not to integrate into the community of nations, but to overturn it.

The regime in Tehran came to power as a religious alternative to the liberal Western political and economic system. Its very *raison d'être*, therefore, is to replace the present order with its own. All of which illustrates why negotiations with the regime are so difficult. For, if it were to negotiate a place in (or a peace with) the West, the Islamic Republic would be betraying its very ethos. We should no more expect the Iranian regime to betray its mission than we could imagine the "materialistic" West compromis-

ing its core values in dealing with the Islamic Republic—no matter how tempting the offer.

The second lesson is that the United States desperately needs to understand the Iranian people, and to engage them in the marketplace of ideas. During much of the 20th century, modern-day Iran was manipulated by the great powers—first Britain and later the United States. Not surprisingly, conspiracy theories in Iran are not the exception, but the rule. When Iran's ayatollahs swept to power, they did so in part by taking advantage of widespread frustration among the Iranian people over this foreign interference. But the solution most Iranians were seeking after the fall of the Shah was very different from the one ultimately imposed by the regime. Many Iranians sought a greater sense of self-determination and assumed a benign role of religion in the new regime. Unfortunately, the faction that systematically took power needed an evil to explain the hardships the Iranian people were experiencing, and they found it in the United States.

None of this is to say that the Iranian population is anti-American. Quite the contrary; rampant disillusionment with the Islamic Revolution has made the majority of Iranians predisposed to American ideas and values, despite (or because of) official regime rhetoric. But the United States has failed to press this advantage. Even today, the number of non-Iranians in the U.S. government that know the Persian language remains pitifully small. As a result, our understanding of the Iranian population, its perspectives and its desires, is woefully inadequate. By extension, our attempts at outreach are at best poor and at worst damaging to our image and cause on the Iranian "street."

Such a state of affairs is simply unacceptable. Now more than ever, the U.S. desperately needs to make the case to ordinary Iranians that their regime is leading them to disaster—and that the path towards integration with the community of nations holds great opportunities and promise.

Ultimately, our battle with Iran is one of ideas. Polls indicate that the Iranian people distrust the regime and are longing for freedom. The depth of their discontent is perhaps best described by Bowden in his closing pages. “Some of the [hostage takers] have gone into exile and taken up arms against the religious rulers,” he writes; “others have been harassed, denounced, beaten or imprisoned for advocating democratic changes. In some cases they have been persecuted by their former colleagues. ‘None of us in the revolution believed Iran would have an autocratic regime again,’ said Mohsen Mirdamadi, a leader of the [hostage takers] who is today a controversial reform politician.... ‘Yet here we are.’”

It is up to the United States to seize the opportunity.



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