

the past to propose a new model for the aesthetics of imprisonment which operated in the medium of narrative (252).

Although Gould's argument on the poetics of incarceration in the modern period is not as well-substantiated as previous chapters, highlighting the continuity of the genre and its potential for new structural and topical transformation paves the way for further scholarly investigation. Postrevolutionary poets such as Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi, Ahmad Shamlu, Esmail Khoi, Khosrow Golsorkhi, Saeed Soltanpour, Houshang Ebtehaj, Reza Baraheni, Mohammadreza Ali-Payam, and Baktash Abtin would all provide compelling case studies of Persian prison poetry for future scholarship.

"All great works of literature either establish a genre or dissolve one," said the writer Walter Benjamin, quoted by Gould on the book's very first page, which explores the Bakhtinian notion of genre-making, establishing the three criteria of form, theme, and discourse. In writing this book, Gould has, herself, shaken up the genre of literary scholarship, issuing a "call for in-depth engagement with [poetry's] historical, cultural and political milieus, beyond what would typically be encountered in a work of contemporary literary theory" (21). This book should inspire other scholars to interrogate literature through innovative theoretical frameworks that similarly place Persian literature, across time and place, on the world stage.

doi:10.1017/irn.2023.25

## **America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present. John Ghazvinian (London: Oneworld, 2020). Pp 667, including notes and index. £35.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781786079473**

Reviewed by Professor Ali M. Ansari, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland ([aa51@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:aa51@st-andrews.ac.uk))

(Received 2 March 2023; accepted 2 March 2023)

Ghazvinian, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, has written an engaging narrative of US–Iran relations from 1720 to the present. The author usefully contextualizes the American republic's growing interest in Iran by assessing the cultural fascination with all things "Persian" in the colonial period, moving on to look at the development of trade and ultimately political relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is much in the later sections of the book that will be familiar to historians of Iran. The author seeks to reach a wider audience through accessible prose, and there is little in these sections that will be a revelation to historians. Indeed, as the text progresses the historian gives way to the policy prescription, with an epilogue which calls unequivocally for "comprehensive, unconditional, sustained, serious, good faith, high level talks" (540), a noble appeal, even if its practicality is contradicted by much of the preceding text. This is no doubt to give added relevancy to the text, but as events in 2022 have shown (including Iran's decision to side with Russia in the war against Ukraine and the protests that erupted in September of that year) it also risks dating the book. Ghazvinian is far from giving the Islamic Republic a free ride in his criticism of the state of relations between the two countries, but it is fair to say that the balance of his criticism leans toward the United States.

Any history of relations depends on how it is framed. Iranians tend to see relations framed by the coup of 1953, whereas Americans tend to start the narrative in 1979. The

original sin is therefore committed by the other in this fraught relationship, and this tends to shape the ongoing narrative, with any subsequent mistakes, errors, or mishaps being referred back to the point of origin. For each side it offers a means of absolution, and an excuse for subsequent bad behavior. It remains an excellent example of how history shapes ideas and policy, and to this end the author is right in reframing the narrative with a far deeper dive into the historical relationship.

This provides the all-important context and removes the misapprehension that the US and Iran are perennial enemies. It shows, on the contrary, as I have argued in an earlier study of the relationship, that one cannot understand or appreciate the sense of betrayal—on both sides of the divide—if one does not recognize the intimacy of the friendship that preceded it.<sup>1</sup> It helps explain why the United States was slow to break relations in the aftermath of the seizure of the embassy, and why President Reagan, despite this experience, believed there might be merit in reaching out to the revolutionary regime in what proved to be the disastrous Iran-Contra scandal. It also helps explain why regional countries, who have done so well out of Iran's pariah status, remain possessed by an irrational anxiety over an impending US–Iran rapprochement, a nervous anxiety that was clear for all with any sense of historical awareness to see during the Obama administration's negotiations about Iran's nuclear program.

Ghazvinian covers all these episodes in detail in a comprehensive study stretching to some 667 pages, divided prosaically into four sections, “Spring” through “Winter,” with the majority of the text (from page 153 onward) dealing with the period since 1951. The autumn and winter of the relationship, when things go sour, occupy our attention from page 209 onward. That the earlier period is dealt with relatively briefly is a pity and a missed opportunity, because although the rest will be familiar to readers, the history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will be new to most, and there is much interesting to be said here, not least as Ghazvinian writes of the interest shown by the American colonists in events in Iran through the 1720s, when Afghan rebels toppled the Safavid dynasty.

The interest shown was probably not quite as exceptional as Ghazvinian suggests. The dramatic collapse of the Safavid dynasty was the topic of some interest in wider Europe. But the fascination of the “Persia” of the Western imagination ran deep in American intellectual and religious thought, and it would have been interesting to interrogate this further than as an interest in biblical and classical studies. The *Cyropaedia* was a popular text among America's burgeoning intellectual class, as it was in Stuart Britain, and the figure of Cyrus, the great emancipator, resonated among the religious far more than it did in the home country. Why this was so, and indeed continues to be so (the name Cyrus remains popular in the United States in a way that it is not in Europe) would be worth exploring.

For much of the nineteenth century, Ghazvinian paints a picture of a benign United States viewed with pending admiration by an Iranian political class eager to escape the clutches of the Russian and British empires. The narrative here is both simplistic and rosy. The United States for much of this period was a curiosity, not an interest, and even if Iranians sought US assistance the US would not have been in a position to offer it. Ghazvinian suggests that the commercial treaty signed with the United States in 1856 was an attempt by Nasir al-Din Shah to secure a broader US alliance against Britain, against whom “Persia was once again at war” (31; to the best of my knowledge this was the first and to date only war fought between Britain and Iran, although technically it was fought on behalf of the East India Company). The shah may have wanted to impress Britain with his diplomatic handiwork, but it is doubtful that this commercial treaty was ever considered an alliance, and it would be a poor reflection on the shah if he thought it would deliver.

For much of this period, and certainly after the Anglo-Persian war of 1856–57, Iranian intellectuals lent firmly toward Britain, which is why the disastrous Reuter concession

<sup>1</sup> Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust* (London: Hurst, 2006), 4.

was considered in the first place. Ghazvinian omits to point out that the British government was as opposed to the concession as anyone else, anxious as they were about the Russian reaction, but his comment that the agreement had been reached “at the apex of the industrial revolution—at precisely the moment when Persia most needed to take command of its economic development” (54), seems to completely misunderstand the political economy of late Qajar Iran.

America’s encounter with Iran really began with the missionaries of the late nineteenth century, followed by a formal diplomatic presence in 1883, and of course the involvement of Americans, albeit in a private capacity, during the Constitutional Revolution: including the sacrifice of Howard Baskerville, killed in his support of the revolution, and the fateful attempt by the banker Morgan Shuster to systematize the chaotic Iranian financial administration. Even at this stage, when the Iranian government actively sought American support, the US, considering discretion to be the better part of valor, only allowed Shuster to go in a private capacity, and he became an Iranian government employee. Shuster left a scathing account of his experience, regarding the obstructive behavior of the British and the brutality of the Russians, to say nothing of the inanity of Persian politics, which he famously described as an “opera bouffe.”

The Great War proved devastating for Iran and, with Russia out of the picture, left Britain the dominant power. But the United States, along with other powers, not least Germany, were destined to play a greater role. Shuster was followed by Arthur Millspaugh, until 1927 when Millspaugh found himself falling foul of an increasingly confident Reza Shah. Ghazvinian provides some fascinating details in an otherwise familiar narrative by drawing attention to and providing pen portraits of particular individuals and incidents, not least the arrest of the Persian minister to Washington in 1935 (148), which led to a three-year hiatus in relations and the decision to move the printing of Iran’s currency from the United States to Germany.

The study is less diligent on the broader historical canvas. This is a reflection of the survey-like quality of the study and the need to maintain narrative momentum. But there are times when the abridgment loses precision—something the author attempts to compensate for with regular footnotes and explanatory endnotes, not all of which really help. The oil concession, for example, is not accurately presented. The original concession was not awarded for a “signing bonus” of £20,000 (around £2 million today; 155) but double that amount, and Knox D’Arcy spent a further £160,000 over the next seven years trying to find commercially viable deposits, coming close to bankruptcy before a chance strike at Masjed-e Soleiman. Similarly, contrary to Ghazvinian’s suggestion, the deal negotiated in 1933 set a guaranteed minimum payment irrespective of production and global markets, but no ceiling. This does not mean that the agreement was a good one for Iran, but it was a marked improvement. Britain’s real advantage with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was the ability to price oil in pounds sterling, which was overturned successfully by the US government after 1953.

Matters take an altogether more polemical tone as one reaches the crescendo of the study: winter. Here it becomes increasingly clear where the responsibility for the current impasse in relations lies, and never more so than during the controversial presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The book presents a misunderstood iconoclast simply speaking to truth to power in the only way he knows how. The Green Movement is dismissed with alarming speed, almost as if it is an inconvenience to better relations (491–93), whereas the author spends an excruciating two pages in an endnote (611–13) trying to explain away Ahmadinejad’s notorious comment about Israel ultimately being wiped from the pages of history. The semantic acrobatics on display here are so contorted that one begins to feel for the author and the pain (albeit self-inflicted) that it must induce. A much easier way to approach the controversy would have been to do what the author attempted to do for the wider relationship: to step back and contextualize it. Observing the varied military parades with missiles draped in flags, demanding Israel’s destruction,

one can only conclude that, whatever Ahmadinejad's calculated nuance, the policy of the Islamic Republic is clear.

The United States has much to answer for in its tortured relations with Iran, but the “wall of mistrust” will never come down if we do not hold the Islamic Republic to account for its many misdemeanors, from the hostage crisis to the ideological tunnel vision of its hard-line political establishment. There were attempts to confront these issues during the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami. But Ahmadinejad had no such qualms and basked in an indulgent notoriety and reckless attitude to governance, the consequences of which are being felt by Iranians to this day. The development of the security state from 2009 onward and the consolidation of power within the household of the Supreme Leader are not inconsequential issues on the prospective road to better relations, and any attempt to reconstruct US–Iran relations on a sounder footing would need to confront them. Regrettably, in this regard, this study falls short.

doi:10.1017/irn.2023.20

**Hidden Liberalism: Burdened Visions of Progress in Modern Iran. Hussein Banai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). 174 pp. Hardcover \$99.99. ISBN 9781108495592**

Reviewed by Iqan Shahidi, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland [is482@cam.ac.uk](mailto:is482@cam.ac.uk)

(Received 6 April 2023; accepted 6 April 2023)

The study of liberalism within the Iranian history of ideas is limited by a relatively small number of available sources, including Siavoshi's *Liberal Nationalism in Iran* and Mirsepassi's *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment* and *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*.<sup>1</sup> In *Hidden Liberalism: Burdened Visions of Progress in Modern Iran*, Hussein Banai tries to fill this gap. The result of his attempt is a well-written and well-organized book, embracing both the theoretical aspects underlying the subject and the relevant historical facts essential to the main theme of the book: reasons for the invisibility of liberalism in nonliberal societies, especially in Iran and in its intellectual and political discourse. Banai identifies an “acute sense of the limits to the public pursuit of liberal ideals based on practical experience” as the main issue (7). He proposes that in the case of Iran, hidden liberalism has been formed as a particular mode of thought that differs from its Western variants in its level of visibility and explicitness. The book also gives an account of some of the objections to this emerging liberal thought that appeared in Iran's intellectual sphere in the course of the twentieth century.

*Hidden Liberalism* is organized into five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1, the introduction, starts by laying out the claim that in Iran's history

<sup>1</sup> Sussan Siavoshi, *Liberal Nationalism in Iran: The Failure of a Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).