



A History of Modern Iran

By Ervand Abrahamian

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More than a century has passed since one of the first democratically elected National Assemblies in the Middle East was established in Iran as a result of its Constitutional Revolution in 1906, presenting an occasion to revisit contemporary history of the country. The Constitutional Revolution was a defining moment in the history of Iran as the concepts of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity overshadowed the orthodox notion of autocratic monarchy and subsequently metamorphosed into the 1979 Revolution. In 1907, just a few years after the establishment of the National Assembly, the constitutionalists experienced a major setback with the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention that divided Iran into respective zones of influence. The Convention is still regarded by many Iranians as betrayal to their struggle for freedom, justice and independence.

Just few decades after the Anglo-Russian Convention, Iran was invaded by the Anglo-Soviet Forces in 1941 and a decade later in 1953, British and American intelligence services orchestrated a coup to remove Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq. The 1953 coup d'état left a profound and long-lasting legacy on Iran's contemporary history and tarnished the image of the US. As a result, many Iranians began to view America as a part of the Imperial guild, aiming to expand hegemony at the expense of the integrity of 'third world' nations. The book began by beautifully convincing the reader that the foreign interventions throughout Iran's modern history continue to haunt Iranians in to the present day.

Ervand Abrahamian is best known for his classic study of the contemporary history of Iran, with his time as a distinguished Professor of History, teaching at various reputable institutions including Princeton and New York Universities. Nonetheless, in authoring a book that encompasses a century and coalesces a range of resources into a single combinative narrative, Abrahamian tangibly shifts away from narrating single trials to authoring a captivating scenic history. The book successfully aims to take the reader through a century-old journey of how Iran arrived to the present day. In doing so, Abrahamian sequentially and analytically focuses on correlations between

state and society during the Qajar and the Pahlavi eras. More importantly, the book amalgamates into its chronological account standpoints that provide the reader with a panoramic vision of the roots of the Iranian Revolutions of 1906 and 1979. The book specifically underlines the public resistance and the psychology of the public domain against gradual penetration of the country by the West. For instance, in analysing the cause of the 1979 revolution, the author rightly rejects speculations that the revolution could have been prevented. Abrahamian argues that:

'The revolution erupted not because of this or that last minute political mistake. It erupted like a volcano because of the overwhelming pressure that had built up over the last decades deep in the bowels of Iranian society' (p. 159)

Abrahamian admirably contextualises the events from the 1953 coup to the 1979 revolution. As noted, published in 2018, the book is a revised version of its first edition published in 2008. The second edition, however, does not specifically offer a new narrative or disclose unknown archive documents. Despite the fact that the book's title reflects 'A History of Modern Iran', it meticulously covers the period between late nineteenth century until the first decade after the 1979 revolution and only briefly covers the period after 1989 or known as the post Khomeini's era. Abrahamian's ecumenical outlook of Iran's socio-political position in the twenty-first century seems murky. He concludes his book by observing that Iran emerges in the contemporary age as a major regional power and argues that the country in many ways is no longer part of the 'Third World'. The conclusion highlights the importance of Iran's national identity in understanding the state's psyche. While the reader obtains deep historical knowledge from the book, they are left unaware of the broader conceptual and theoretical analysis of the subject matter. In spite of this, in recent years a growing number of scholars have surgically and theoretically engaged with the topic of identity politics. For instance, the book of "Psycho-Nationalism" written by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam extensively theorises the psychology of the concept of national identity in the history of Modern Iran.

That being said, undoubtedly Abrahamian is a legend in his own time and has significantly contributed to Iranian studies over five decades. The book's greatest achievement is that it helps the reader to straightforwardly navigate historical events since late nineteenth century that have shaped today's Iran. Overall, the book 'A History of Modern Iran' is scrupulously authored for a wider audience beyond academic domains and unquestionably is a distinguished reference for those looking for a beautifully written narrative of contemporary history of Iran.