

Bad history between us

Kenneth M. Pollack. "The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America." Random House: 540 pp. \$26.95

By Marvin Zonis

Marvin Zonis is a professor at the Graduate School of Business at the University of Chicago and the author of "The Political Elite of Iran" as well as "Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah" and co-author of "The Kimchi Matters: Global Risk and Local Politics in a Crisis Driven World" (Agate)

March 20, 2005

If you're looking for one book to read about Iran with both a history and a prescription — a history from the beginning of ancient Iran and a prescription for what U.S. policy toward Iran should be — "The Persian Puzzle" is it. Kenneth M. Pollack comes to the subject with impressive credentials and knowledge — seven years at the CIA as a Persian Gulf analyst, two stints on President Clinton's National Security Council as director for Persian Gulf affairs, and now director of research at the Saban Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the Brookings Institution. His 2002 book, "The Threatening Storm," made the case that the U.S. could no longer contain Iraq and should invade. What Pollack gets profoundly right here is the "ferocious hatred," as he calls it, that Iran's ruling clerics and the U.S.' ruling circles feel toward each other.

The Iranians, Pollack suggests, carry the deep emotional burden of years of feeling intensely humiliated by the U.S.: the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953; the unrelenting U.S. support for the shah and his demeaning of the Iranian people; the extraordinarily significant assistance we provided Iraq in its war with Iran that ultimately forced the Iranians to accept a cease-fire; our refusal to meaningfully censure the Iraqi use of chemical weapons in that war causing some 50,000 Iranian casualties; the undeclared war in the Persian Gulf we carried on against Iran toward the end of the war; our refusal to prevent Saddam Hussein from slaughtering Iraqi Kurds and, more important, Iraqi Shiites after their uprising following his defeat in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. (As Pollack suggests, the U.S. adopted that policy out of fear that absent Hussein, Iraq would disappear into chaos or disintegrate and no state would be left to balance Iran.)

But Iran's grievances hardly end there. Iran received no benefits from cooperating with the U.S. in both of its Gulf wars against Hussein and in its war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the U.S. captured the principal armed opposition group to the clerics but refused to turn over its leaders, even in exchange for senior Al Qaeda leaders in Iran, as Iran had promised.

Of course, the U.S. has suffered its own humiliations at the hands of the Iranian clerics. They overthrew the shah. They seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and kept U.S. citizens imprisoned there for 444 days. They were behind the bombings of the Marine barracks in Beirut and, perhaps, the bombing of the U.S. Embassy there as well, although Pollack doesn't mention this latter outrage. Almost 300 Americans were killed in the two attacks. In 1996, the Iranians were behind the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, in which 19 Americans were killed.

Now they are found to have an ambitious nuclear development program, which they successfully hid from the International Atomic Energy Agency until 2003, and have been giving only fitful cooperation since

then.

What follows humiliation, psychoanalysts tell us, is rage. And both Iran and the United States remain enraged at each other. What is needed — my prescription, if you like — is serious work that will help the policymakers and people of each country work through their rage. But the necessary psychological work is not happening on either side. "Ever since November 4, 1979," Pollack writes, "no American leader has wanted to open himself or herself up to the charge of 'coddling' the Iranians. It is not a winning strategy in post-hostage crisis America."

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami, Iran's newly elected president and reformist cleric, declared, "We are in favor of relations with all countries and nations which respect our independence, dignity and interests." That was fine with the Iranian people who sought an opening to the U.S. as a counterpoise to the clerics. Khatami threatened the hard-liners who checked his reformist impulses. Given that the politicians in both countries who try to do the emotional work have to pay an enormous price, there is an obvious role for others to help Iran and the United States work themselves out of their counterproductive emotional states.

Pollack demonstrates an impressive sense of empathy with the clerics, rare among policy analysts. He appreciates their position. He understands their rage. But he fails to translate that empathy into proposals to help the Iranians do the difficult and painful emotional work that will be necessary before Iran can deal, in any useful way, with the Great Satan. Instead, his prescriptions focus on two "clocks" in Iran — the regime-change "clock" and the nuclear "clock." Pollack looks forward to regime change in Iran, assuming, unwisely, that regime change will see the hard-liners replaced by the reformers and, therefore, a regime with which the U.S. can do business. While he looks forward to that day, he correctly concludes that the U.S. can do little to speed its coming. Worse for the U.S., by the time it does happen, Iran may well have crossed the nuclear threshold.

The main foreign policy goal of the U.S., he suggests, must be to prevent that happening. A nuclear Iran would stimulate nuclear proliferation among its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, which would feel especially threatened. Iran would also believe that nuclear capability was a powerful deterrent to a U.S. attack and would feel free to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy.

Pollack examines the policy options available to the U.S. to prevent Iran's "going nuclear." (It is important to note that there has been no direct evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. But the pattern of clandestine behavior suggests that only the most ardent fans of the Islamic clerics could believe its nuclear program was solely meant to generate power. Imagine you were the Iranian supreme leader contemplating that your country is surrounded on its east in Afghanistan, on its west in Iraq and in its south in the Persian Gulf by hostile U.S. forces. In addition, there is a nuclear-armed Israel. Wouldn't you want nuclear weapons?)

Pollack artfully shows the weaknesses of the policy options. Neither invading Iran, nor a covert or overt policy of fostering regime change, nor unilateral U.S. concessions, nor an aerial bombing campaign, nor offering Iran a "grand bargain" (the U.S. would end sanctions and unfreeze Iranian assets and Iran would stop supporting terrorism and thwarting Middle East peace) will serve to deter Iran's nuclear ambitions. Instead he offers what he calls a "Triple Track," which he suggests is America's "least bad option." Track 1 is to hold open the possibility of a grand bargain while simultaneously pursuing Track 2, a "true carrot-and-stick approach," and Track 3, preparing for a new containment regime if Tracks 1 and 2 fail.

Here begin the problems. The Iranians appear to have proposed a grand bargain of their own in May 2003, after the U.S. had expeditiously disposed of Hussein and President Bush had made his now famous speech on the deck of the aircraft carrier Lincoln in front of the "Mission Accomplished" sign. Perhaps the Iranians were fearful that they would be next. They sent the Swiss ambassador in Iran to Washington to propose a deal. The U.S. dismissed the overture. John R. Bolton, the leading hawk in the State Department (and President Bush's pick for U.N. ambassador) left no doubt as to the administration's position, suggesting the U.S. was not interested in any grand bargain. This abrupt rejection further humiliated the Iranians, as it was undoubtedly meant to do by the Bush neocons in their moment of grandiosity. Given that the U.S. is embroiled in Iraq, it is unlikely the Iranians would now be

ready for a grand bargain.

The "true" carrot-and-stick approach is equally problematic because the U.N. Security Council will not vote for sanctions against Iran, which is allowed the peaceful development of nuclear technology under international treaty, under any foreseeable circumstances. Both Russia and China have made it clear to the United States that they will not accept such sanctions. If the U.S. steps up its unilateral sanctions, Iran will just buy what it wants elsewhere. The problem with trying to sanction trade with Iran, in any case, is that Iran is now exporting nearly 3.5 million barrels of oil per day, earning lots of dollars. If Iran cannot spend those dollars, it need not export its oil. With oil demand and supply in such precarious balance, Iran's withdrawal of any of its exports would drive oil prices to ruinous heights.

Unfortunately, all that is left of Pollack's policy proposals is living with a nuclear Iran. He speculates that all would not be lost. "Our history with Iran," he says, "suggests that this regime probably can be deterred" from actually using its weapons or merely using the fact that it has weapons to influence U.S. policy. "Probably" is faint assurance. But it is likely to be the most the U.S. can hope for.

What Pollack has demonstrated all too convincingly is that dealing with Iran is very much of a puzzle. (Since Iran as long ago as the 1930s insisted it be referred to as Iran, I wonder who chose to humiliate the Iranians even further by titling the book "The Persian Puzzle.") Even the "least bad option," as Pollack shows, is not very much better than just plain "bad."

Pollack either is a blindly dedicated U.S. patriot, rather than a clear-sighted analyst, or believes, sensibly, that his policy career in Washington is not over. So he is very careful not to find fault with successive American government policies under either the Democrats or Republicans, blaming only the Iranians for the disastrous relations between the two states. "[T]he U.S. government," he suggests, "has been ready for the Grand Bargain for at least fifteen, if not twenty, years." The Clinton administration was pursuing an opening to Iran (and Pollack was clearly involved in that policy) but, perhaps, not a grand bargain. But there is little evidence that either Bush I or Bush II was interested.

The U.S. has now outsourced its Iran policy to the "EU3" — Britain, France and Germany. After his recent European trip, President Bush offered a carrot to Iran, proposing to facilitate Iran's joining the World Trade Organization and to sell Iran spare parts for its civilian airliners if it abandons any effort to enrich uranium. Those incentives are so trivial that Iran has already refused. What's left then for the U.S.? A sure U.N. veto of any U.S. efforts to institute sanctions against Iran. That will leave the U.S. at a dead end. Will it undertake a military strike against another country with no international authorization? More unsuccessful efforts at regime change in Iran? What the U.S. needs to do is engage the clerics in negotiations with substantial incentives to test their willingness to reach accommodation — Pollack's least bad option. Failing that, the U.S. has not been dealing seriously with this grave threat to national security.

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