

RESET

STEPHEN KINZER



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RESET



IRAN, TURKEY, AND
AMERICA'S FUTURE

STEPHEN KINZER

TIMES BOOKS

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY • NEW YORK



Times Books
Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010

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Distributed in Canada by H. B. Fenn and Company Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kinzer, Stephen.

Reset : Iran, Turkey, and America's future / Stephen Kinzer.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-9127-4

1. United States—Foreign relations—Iran. 2. Iran—Foreign relations—United States.
3. United States—Foreign relations—Turkey. 4. Turkey—Foreign relations—United States. I. Title.

E183.8.I55K56 2010

327.73055—dc22

20090506

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions and
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First Edition 2010

Maps by Jason Joven

Designed by Kelly Too

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FOR MY GRANDPARENTS

Abraham Ricardo

1882 (Amsterdam)–1945 (Bergen-Belsen)

Jeannette Margaretha (De Jongh) Ricardo

1891 (Amsterdam)–1945 (Bergen-Belsen)



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INTRODUCTION

A broken line of terrified schoolboys, laden with rifles and homemade grenades, crept through the streets of ancient Tabriz as dawn broke over the starving city. Weakened by hunger after months of siege, many of them sick, these young men nevertheless understood that they were the vanguard of Iran's struggle for democracy. Above all they were inspired by the man they followed. He was not, like other guerrilla leaders, a defiant officer, a bandit turned patriot, or the product of a long line of Persian fighters. Instead he was as unlikely a revolutionary as could possibly have emerged in this proud and ancient land: a twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher from Nebraska named Howard Baskerville.

Neither the inspiring figure of their leader nor the invigorating spring breeze blowing down from the nearby Sahand Mountains, however, was enough to persuade most of these boys and young men that this day, April 20, 1909, was their day to die. A hundred followed Baskerville as he set out at first light. By the time their column approached the city wall an hour later, fewer than a dozen remained. Nonetheless Baskerville pressed on.

Patriots in Tabriz were resisting a counterrevolution aimed at crushing Iran's new democracy and restoring the decadent Qajar monarchy. Royalist forces had surrounded the defiant city. Their siege was terrifyingly effective; hunger and disease killed people every day, and many of the living were reduced to eating grass. They could survive and continue to resist only if someone, somehow, could break through the siege line, reach a nearby village, and return with food and medicine. Baskerville volunteered to try.

"Be careful," one of his American friends begged him before he set out. "You know you are not your own."

"No," he replied. "I am Persia's."

Born in the Nebraska prairie town of North Platte and raised in South Dakota's Black Hills, the son and grandson of Presbyterian preachers, Baskerville was an improbable candidate for martyrdom. As a teenager he was pious, sober, and studious enough to win admission to Princeton University. There he studied religion, excelled in horsemanship, and became a modestly successful boxer. He also took two courses taught by Woodrow Wilson, one called "Jurisprudence" and the other "Constitutional Government." Wilson's lectures stirred the passion for democracy that shaped his short life.

After graduating in 1907, Baskerville decided to postpone his entry into Princeton's

theological seminary and work for a time as a missionary. That autumn he arrived in ~~Tabriz, a two-thousand-year-old city in northwest Iran that is the supposed birthplace~~ of the prophet Zoroaster and was built, according to legend, on the site of the Garden of Eden. There he taught history, geometry, and English to mixed classes—he insisted on accepting girls as well as boys—at the American Memorial School. He also became the school's tennis coach and riding instructor, directed a student production of *The Merchant of Venice*, and closed his first Thanksgiving sermon with a stirring verse from Sir Walter Scott:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead

Who never to himself hath said,

"This is my home, my native land!"

Baskerville's students would have found those words excruciating. For decades their prostrate homeland, heir to a great empire led by heroic kings like Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, had been misruled by a dissolute dynasty and looted by rapacious outside powers. In 1907, Britain and Russia signed a convention dividing Persia—as Iran was then known—into "spheres of influence." Britain took the southern part of the country, Russia the north. No Iranian participated in or even knew about the negotiations that produced this agreement.

Yet the early twentieth century was an age of ferment and rebellion as well as imperial power. The Boers overthrew British rule in South Africa. Russian insurgents forced Czar Nicholas II to establish a legislature. The Russo-Japanese war ended with victory for Japan, suggesting that Europeans were not fated to dominate Asians forever.

None of these shattering events went unnoticed in Iran. Anger at the docile Qajar dynasty, and at the foreign powers it served, sparked waves of protest. In 1906 these protests achieved their unimaginable goal: democratic revolution. The king, Muzaffer al-Din Shah, was forced to make concessions like those King John had made seven centuries earlier when he signed the Magna Carta. He agreed to permit the proclamation of a constitution, the holding of elections, and the establishment of a parliament. Under the new constitution, freedom of speech and press were guaranteed, monarchs were forbidden to sign treaties or borrow money without approval from Parliament, and all citizens were declared equal before the law.

Forty days after reluctantly accepting this constitution—the pain may have been too great for him—Muzaffer al-Din Shah died. His son and successor, Mohammad Ali Shah, described by one contemporary as "perhaps the most perverted, cowardly and vice-sodden monster that had disgraced the throne of Persia for many generations," loathed the new democracy. Determined to crush it, he dissolved Parliament and then, on June 3, 1908, sent Russian-led artillery units to bomb the building where it met. Scores of deputies were killed. Protests broke out across the country, but the shah ruthlessly crushed them. The only city he could not subdue was Tabriz, which, because of its location near the borders with Russia and Turkey, was the portal through which democratic ideas had been streaming into the country for years.

Howard Baskerville was in Tabriz when royalist soldiers imposed their siege at the beginning of 1909. He was instinctively drawn to the constitutional cause and spent many evenings with volunteer brigades bringing food to fighters defending the city. Slowly he came to conclude that this was not enough. News of the Anglo-Russian Convention outraged him, and he delivered withering tirades to his students aimed especially at Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, whom he scorned as a hypocrite for spouting the platitudes of democracy while supporting the slaughter of Iranians who were fighting for it. One of his closest Iranian friends, Hussein Sharifzadeh, became a leader of the Tabriz resistance, and when Sharifzadeh was assassinated, Baskerville's outrage reached new heights. In the spring of 1909 he decided to raise a volunteer force and join the defense of Iranian democracy.

"I cannot watch calmly from a classroom window as the starving people of this city fight for their rights," he told his students on his last day at school.

A few days later, Baskerville was asked to speak at a dinner honoring officers who were leading the defense of Tabriz. "I hate war," he told them, "but war can be justified in pursuit of a greater good—in this case, the protection of a city and the defense of constitutional liberty. I am ready to die for these causes!" The audience broke into applause and cries of "Long live Baskerville!" He responded by singing a chorus from his favorite song, "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

By this time, Baskerville was spending his days drilling schoolboys in the arts of war and his evenings poring over encyclopedia articles that explained how to manufacture grenades. This horrified the American consul in Tabriz, Edward Doty.

"I am compelled to remind you that as an American citizen, you have no right to interfere with the internal politics of this country," Doty told him one day in front of his young recruits. "You are here to act as a teacher, not as a revolutionary."

"I cannot remain and watch indifferently the sufferings of a people fighting for their rights," Baskerville replied. "I am an American citizen and proud of it, but I am also a human being."

On the night of April 19, 1909, Baskerville shared his last meal with Reverend Samuel Wilson, the principal of the American Memorial School, and his wife, Annie, who had been born in Iran and passionately loved its people. They drank milk, and joked about how odd it was for this to be the last drink a man would want before setting off to battle. A few hours later Baskerville met his hundred volunteers and began leading them toward the outskirts of Tabriz. Every few minutes, another handful of them lost their nerve and deserted.

Baskerville pressed on. Just after he passed through the city wall, a sniper's bullet whizzed by his head. He fired back, then paused until he felt satisfied the sniper had retreated. That was his fatal mistake. When he stood to wave his boys ahead, the sniper reappeared and fired twice. A bullet pierced his heart and killed him.

"The boys rushed to the gate to carry him in, all of us sobbing and lamenting," Annie Wilson wrote the next day in a tormented sixteen-page letter to Baskerville's parents. "We carried him to our room and laid him out on our own bed, and Mrs. Vannemen and I washed the dear body, with blood staining through his shirts and

covering his breast and back...We dressed him in his black suit, and when all the sad service was done, he looked beautiful and noble, his firm mouth set in a look of resolution and his whole face calm in repose. I printed a kiss on his forehead for his mother's sake. A white carnation is in his buttonhole, and wreaths of flowers are being made. Our children made a cross and crown of the beautiful almond blossoms now in bloom. The governor came at once, expressing great sorrow, saying, 'He has written his name in our hearts and in our history.'"

Thousands gathered silently to watch as Baskerville's coffin, covered with sixteen floral wreaths, was drawn through the streets of Tabriz to the Presbyterian church. A leader of the embattled Parliament that Baskerville had died to defend, Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, was among the eulogists.

"Young America, in the person of young Baskerville, gave this sacrifice to the young Constitution of Iran," he said solemnly.

Five days after Baskerville's death, Tabriz fell. Royalist troops and their Russian allies stormed into the city and disarmed every resistance fighter they could find. Their victory, however, was short-lived. As soon as citizens returned to health, they resumed their fight for democratic rule. So did others across Iran. Their defiance grew into a national movement, and finally Muhammad Ali Shah's counterrevolution collapsed. He abdicated on July 16, 1909, just three months after Baskerville's martyrdom. Parliament reconvened, constitutional government was reestablished, and Iran resumed its march toward democracy.

Today Howard Baskerville is an honored figure in Iran. Schools and streets have been named after him. His bust, cast in bronze, commands a salon at Constitution House in Tabriz. A plaque beneath it says, "Howard C. Baskerville—Patriot and Maker of History."

Baskerville is more than just an Iranian hero. He embodied the shared values that bind Iranians to Americans. Long before many other Middle Eastern nations had come into existence, the Constitutional Revolution brought modern ideas to Iran. These ideas have produced a nation that has more in common with the United States than almost any of its neighbors in the world's most troubled region.

Only one other country in this region shares Iran's long history of struggle for democracy: Turkey. The Iranians rebelled against and deposed their servile monarchy during the first decade of the twentieth century. So did the Turks.

The spread of egalitarian ideas among the Turks dates to the early nineteenth century. In 1839 the enlightened Ottoman Sultan Abdul Mecit proclaimed a series of reforms known as *Tanzimat*, including a list of civil rights to which all citizens were entitled, regardless of religion or group identity. The reform period culminated with the proclamation of a constitution in 1876 and the election of a parliament soon afterward. Within a year, however, the new sultan, Abdul Hamid, suspended the constitution. He closed Parliament and ruled by decree for the next three decades, suppressing dissent, directing an army of spies, and casting a paralyzing pall over society.

In Paris and other European cities, groups of Turkish radicals nurtured the democratic flame. They formed committees, published newsletters, and studied the history of past revolutions. Some of them tried to overthrow the sultan in 1896. They failed, but their radical ideas captivated many young patriots.

One of these idealists was an ambitious cadet named Mustafa Kemal. After entering the Ottoman military academy in 1902, Kemal began reading broadsides smuggled into the country from Europe. He and a handful of other cadets even started a clandestine newspaper of their own. They were quickly discovered, and escaped punishment only by the intercession of the academy's director, who was himself unhappy with the absolutist regime.

Soon after graduating, Kemal landed in trouble again; an informer named him as part of an illegal cell devoted to studying books by Voltaire and Tolstoy. He spent several weeks in military prison. Finally a sympathetic judge agreed to ascribe his crime to youthful indiscretion. He was released and posted to faraway Damascus.

Until this moment, Kemal had known only vibrant, cosmopolitan cities. He was born and grew up in the cultural cauldron of Salonika—modern-day Thessalonica, the second-largest city in Greece—surrounded by Turks but also by Greeks, Jews, and expatriates from across Europe and beyond. As a cadet he lived in Istanbul, one of the world's most dazzlingly diverse capitals. On his way to his new post he stopped for a time in Beirut, "the Paris of the Middle East," where energy and excitement crackled through the air. Damascus was a stark contrast to all of this, the somnolent heart of old Arabia. Most of its people lived as their ancestors had for a thousand years: illiterate, caught in a deadening web of orthodoxy, untouched by the outside world and largely unaware of it. Damascus repelled the twenty-four-year-old Kemal. Later he wrote that he found it "all bad."

"For the first time he came to know a city which still lived in the darkness of the Middle Ages," one biographer has written. "Damascus was a city of the dead. The narrow streets, which he paced after dark, were deserted and silent. Not a sound came from within the high shuttered walls of the houses. One night, to his surprise, he heard the sound of music floating from a café. He looked in, to find it filled with Italians, workers on the Hafez Railway, playing the mandolin, singing and dancing with their wives and girls. As an officer in uniform, he might not enter. But on an impulse he went home, changed into rough clothes, and returned to join them in their gay and uninhibited Western pleasures....Here in Damascus, Kemal felt imprisoned. He longed to break his bars, to bring life to this moribund community. The remedy, of course, lay in political action."

One day while wandering through the back streets of Damascus, Kemal stumbled into a shop that sold books in French, which he had learned to read. Among them were novels and collections of social criticism.

"What are you," he asked the shopkeeper in surprise, "a tradesman or a philosopher?"

The shopkeeper turned out to be both. A couple of nights later, he invited Kemal to his home, and Kemal brought a couple of like-minded officers. They talked for hours.

One of the officers blurted out that he was willing to “die for the revolution.” Kemal had a different idea.

“Our aim is not to die,” he said simply. “It is to carry out the revolution, to turn our ideas into reality.”

In the autumn of 1905, Kemal and a small group of comrades formed a secret society called *Vatan* (Fatherland), dedicated to overthrowing absolutism and bringing self-rule to the Turks. Over the next few months, while ostensibly traveling for military duties, he established branches of *Vatan* in the Ottoman outposts of Jaffa, Beirut, and Jerusalem. Each initiate pledged to fight for the revolutionary cause until death, then kissed a pistol to symbolize his commitment.

Soon afterward, in a rotation of officers, Kemal was transferred to his home city of Salonika. Few places on earth have such conspiratorial traditions. Saint Paul created clandestine Christian cells in Salonika nearly two thousand years ago. Since then it has welcomed all manner of plotters, dreamers, and rebels. Kemal’s revolutionary society and several others merged into a coalition called the Committee of Union and Progress, known abroad as the Young Turks. In true Salonika tradition, CUP leaders initiated new members with elaborate rituals involving blindfolds, swords, and oaths. They even designed a coat of arms, dominated by the image of a book, representing the short-lived Constitution of 1876, and a crescent bearing the motto “Fraternity, Freedom, Equality, Justice.”

The dying Ottoman Empire was ablaze with the fire of revolution. People in a dozen cities erupted in protest, sometimes over local matters like grain shortages but always with demands for a less distant, more responsive government. Anger rose over the loss of three key Ottoman territories—Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Crete—in the space of just a few weeks in the spring of 1908.

That same spring, several hundred soldiers in Salonika rebelled against Ottoman authority, looted armories, and took to the hills. Sultan Abdul Hamid ordered his local commander to crush their insurrection, but the commander was assassinated. Then the sultan sent troops from the Turkish heartland. They not only failed to defeat the rebels, but joined them in a defiant march on Istanbul.

Young Turk leaders skillfully wove these protests into a unified movement with a single demand: the sultan must reopen the Parliament he had closed thirty years before. A group of them sent the monarch an ominous ultimatum warning that if he did not agree, “blood will be shed and the dynasty will be in danger.”

Like their brethren across the border in Iran, the Turks were fed up with absolutism and intoxicated by the European ideas of liberty, self-rule, and the rights of man. Sultan Abdul Hamid had to face the reality that these ideas had infected much of his own officer corps. Rather than risk his throne, he agreed to allow elections for a new parliament. This was a shattering collapse of absolutism. Istanbul exploded with jubilation.

“The city’s Muslim holy men, Christian priests and Jewish rabbis paraded arm in arm in a joyous mood,” according to one account. “Calls from the minarets mingled with sounds of church bells, celebrating the dawn of the Young Turk millennium.”

Turkish life changed almost overnight. Newspapers stopped submitting their articles for review by the royal censor. Forbidden books appeared for sale, and the subversive ideas that sprang from their pages became political rallying cries. Long-exploited laborers staged strikes. A young feminist writer, Halide Edib, founded the Society for the Elevation of Women, and in Istanbul and other cities, Muslim women not only walked on the streets unveiled but attended political meetings and established pressure groups. The power of the sultan, revered for centuries as “the shadow of God on earth,” was crumbling.

The Turkish people had not been allowed to vote for more than a generation, and they poured out for the election of 1908. The new Parliament convened amid great pageantry. A few months later, troops loyal to the democratic regime, calling themselves the “Action Army,” suppressed a royalist counterrevolution. That further inflamed the surging reform movement.

On April 28, 1909, after a series of impassioned nationalist speeches, Parliament gave four of its members—an Armenian, a Jew, and two Muslims—a historic mission. They rode to Yıldız Palace, demanded entry to its inner sanctum, and announced that “the people” had decided the sultan must abdicate. He had no choice but to obey.

For a few hours, Sultan Abdul Hamid believed he would simply be moved to the smaller but still luxurious Çırağan Palace, which had served for years as a golden prison for unwanted royals. That night, however, military officers told him he had to leave for exile immediately. Accompanied by two of his sons and a handful of concubines, he boarded a carriage, was driven to the train station and conveyed to exile in Salonika. He had been in power for thirty-three years, during which time the Ottoman Empire lost wars, suppressed democracy, and became “the sick man of Europe.” His doddering brother replaced him, but never again would an Ottoman sultan be more than a figurehead.

The Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the overthrow of Sultan Abdul Hamid a year later set off a burst of reform unlike anything the Turks had ever known. Political parties emerged, new magazines and newspapers sprang up, the royal family’s fortune was confiscated, laws restricting business were repealed, banks opened in many towns, roads and bridges were built, the education budget was increased sixfold, and girls were encouraged to attend school. The constitution was amended to give Parliament more power. Because the Young Turks were concerned above all with salvaging the state, they were wary of democracy and did not hesitate to restrict public freedoms when they wished. Nonetheless their revolution was profound. Perhaps its greatest achievement was inspiring a generation of visionary patriots who, over the coming years, would produce a radically new order.

These tumultuous events were the product of Turkish history, and not directly related to the upheaval in neighboring Iran. Yet it is more than coincidence that both nations won their democratic revolutions at the same time. On the day Howard Baskerville was killed in Tabriz, Turkish soldiers of the “Action Army” were fighting the sultan’s power in Istanbul. Within a couple of months, almost unbelievably, the Turks and the Iranians had liberated themselves from dissolute monarchies. Their

path to freedom was suddenly and brilliantly illuminated.

A century has passed since Iran and Turkey turned toward democracy. It has been a century of unsteady progress. The Iranians and the Turks have won epochal victories but also suffered bloody defeats. From their long struggles, both peoples have developed an understanding of democracy, and a longing for it, that makes them good soul mates for Americans.

The stories of modern Turkey and Iran suggest that democracy can take root anywhere, but only over the span of generations. It cannot be called to life simply by proclaiming a constitution or holding an election. Democracy is not an event but a way of facing the world, an all-encompassing approach to life. Only long years of experience can make it real. In the Muslim Middle East, just two countries have this experience: Turkey and Iran.

Turkey has become the world's most democratic Muslim country, vivid proof that Islam and freedom can thrive side by side. It has for decades been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and closely tied to the United States. Today it is embarking on the most ambitious diplomatic project in its history, seeking to project power by resolving regional conflicts through dialogue and compromise. This style fits well with America's new, more cooperative approach to global politics.

In only one other Muslim country in the Middle East does the democratic heart beat as passionately as in Turkey. It is also the only country that might suddenly emerge to rival or even surpass Turkey's level of political freedom: Iran. The explosion of protest after Iran's disputed 2009 presidential election brought down fierce repression, but it was also thrilling confirmation that the ideals of democracy have taken deep root in that country. Beneath the heavy veneer of theocratic rule, a vibrant civil society thrives there. No generation in the world understands democracy better or wishes for it more fervently than young Iranians. Their ardor is part of a bridge of values between Iran and the United States that provides the basis for a sound future partnership.

Although these countries have been enemies for more than a quarter century, they have vital interests in common. Both want a stable Iraq, a stable Afghanistan, and a stable Pakistan. Both detest radical Sunni movements like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Both would like to limit Russian influence in the Middle East. Iran needs massive investment in its collapsing oil infrastructure; American companies are ideally placed to provide it.

Reaching an accord with Iran would not be easy, for cultural as well as political reasons. It might well require the emergence of a new regime in Tehran. But because the two countries' political cultures as well as their strategic interests overlap so fully, logic pushes them together.

A partnership that unites Turkey, Iran, and the United States makes sense for two reasons: they share strategic interests, and their people share values. This is the tantalizing "power triangle" of the twenty-first century.

The old triangle—actually two bilateral relationships, the United States with Israel and the United States with Saudi Arabia—served Washington's interests well during the cold war. It has not, however, produced a stable Middle East. On the contrary, the region is torn by violence, hatred, terror, and war. Yet for economic as well as strategic reasons, the United States must remain engaged there. Its dilemma can be simply stated: America wants to stabilize the Middle East, but its policies are having the opposite effect. What new policies could America adopt to replace those that have failed?

Here is one answer: First, build an ever-closer partnership with Turkey and, in the future, with a democratic Iran. Second, reshape relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia in ways that will serve their long-term interests and those of the United States—even if they protest.

Israel deserves special treatment from the United States, both for historical reasons and because there can be no regional peace without a secure Israel. America, though, has at times treated Israel in ways that weaken Israel's own security. The bond between the two countries has become distorted. As a result, the United States has failed to promote policies that will assure Israel's long-term stability. Instead it lurches helplessly from crisis to crisis, hostage to the hothouse clamor of Israel's domestic politics. It is right for America to stand by Israel, but not the way it does now.

The long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has, for better or worse, become the world's conflict. It permanently destabilizes the Middle East, blocks the settlement of urgent crises, and intensifies looming threats to the West. Yet it has become painfully clear that if the task of finding peace is left to the warring parties, there will be no peace. A settlement to this conflict cannot emerge from within. Neither Israeli nor Palestinian society has the cultural, political, psychological, or institutional resources to make the compromises that peace requires. The paradigm of conflict has become too deeply embedded in too many minds.

Allowing a friend to careen toward self-destruction is not friendship. That is a habit the United States needs to break as it pursues a richer and more deeply supportive relationship with Israel.

Saudi Arabia presents America with an entirely different challenge. Washington's decision to embrace this religious kingdom was among its most bizarre twentieth-century gambles.

The family that has ruled Saudi Arabia since it was created in 1932 relies on support from two vital allies: the United States and the clergy of Wahhabi Islam. To America, it offers a steady supply of oil and a rich market for defense contractors. The fundamentalist Wahhabis get something quite different: a stifling religious order at home, and backing for a global network of mosques and religious schools where generations of lost boys learn to chant the Koran and hate America. Such deeply contradictory policies had to produce an explosion. It came on September 11, 2001. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers who seized planes that day, as well as the terror leader who sent them off to kill, were Saudis.

During the cold war, Washington's partnership with Saudi Arabia seemed logical. ~~The Saudis were both militantly anti-Communist and unfathomably rich.~~ Wherever the United States wanted money to fight Marxism, from Angola to Nicaragua to Afghanistan, the Saudis paid. Their message to the United States was irresistible: We have huge amounts of money, and you can have as much of it as you want. Just don't look too closely at what is happening inside our kingdom.

The end of the cold war led inevitably to a gentle distancing between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The attacks of September 11 gave the relationship another, sharper shock. They made it difficult for Americans to continue to overlook Saudi Arabia's role in fomenting global terror.

Saudi Arabia and the United States share some approaches to global politics; both are suspicious of the outside world, both thrive on exaggerated views of their own power, and neither is known for gentle diplomacy. Almost nothing in the way of values, however, ties America to a desert kingdom where dating is illegal, women are forbidden to drive, and a royal family rules by decree. The United States and Saudi Arabia have been allies of convenience, partners in a loveless marriage. In the twenty-first century they will continue cooperating, but each will prosper by distancing itself from the other.

The ties that bind America to Israel and Saudi Arabia cannot be reshaped with the stroke of a pen. A new "power triangle"—the United States, Turkey, and Iran—cannot emerge overnight. In order to become a reliable American partner, Iran would have to change dramatically. Turkey would also have to change, although not nearly as much. So would the United States. Our world, however, advances only as a result of strategic vision. First must come a grand concept, a destination; once the destination is clear, all parties can concentrate on finding the way to reach it.

Nowhere in the world is an overarching strategy more glaringly absent or more desperately needed than in the Middle East. For years, outside powers—especially the United States—have staggered through the region's forbidding deserts, steppes, and oil fields with policies that are manifest failures. During this period, threats emerging from the Middle East have become steadily more urgent and terrifying. Remaining wedded to failed policies is not simply unwise, but deeply dangerous.

Albert Einstein famously defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over, but expecting different results. That is what the United States is doing in the Middle East. What would be the alternative? This book proposes one.

The pages that follow seek to explain the past and then propose a way to reset American policy in the world's most volatile region. First comes an account of the modern histories of Turkey and Iran, showing how long and passionately these two countries have worked toward democracy. Then comes an exploration of the two oldest relationships in the Middle East: the one binding the United States to Saudi Arabia and the one binding the United States to Israel. These lead to a logical conclusion, albeit one that may seem startling because it pushes beyond the narrow policy options that too often stifle America's global imagination. It summons the logic of history to address the future.

PART ONE

• • •

**FOR THE PEOPLE,
IN SPITE OF THE PEOPLE**

THE REAL LIFE AND SOUL OF THE SHOW

The sunburned, dust-covered gentleman who stepped out of a rough carriage in Tehran at dusk on May 12, 1911, arrived like a lawman into a terrified town. He came to help a once proud country that had fallen pitifully from past glories. Two foreign powers, Russia and Britain, had signed a “convention” dividing Iran between them. To consummate it, they needed to crush Iran’s fledgling Parliament. Members of Parliament cast desperately about for a way to resist and save their country’s democracy. They decided they had but one hope: hire an American.

The one they found, Morgan Shuster, agreed to serve for three years in a post Parliament created especially for him: Treasurer General of the Persian Empire. His assignment, with no tool other than law, was to force the Russians and the British to submit to Parliament’s will.

Turning to an American was a logical step for Iranian democrats. The United States was their inspiration: a former British colony that had thrown off its chains and advanced to glorious self-rule, just as Iran hoped to do.

“The United States at this stage looked like the partner Iran had long hoped to find in the West—anti-feudal, anti-colonialist, modern but not imperialist—a truly benevolent foreign power that would, for once, treat Iran with respect,” one historian has written. “If we think of the British and the Russians in the nineteenth century as the ugly sisters, then at this time Morgan Shuster and his United States looked like Prince Charming.”

Spheres of Influence in Iran: Anglo-Russian Convention, 1907



Though he was just thirty-four years old, Shuster had impressive experience in the esoteric art of organizing chaotic countries. He had designed a tax system for the Philippines, where he worked under governor-general William Howard Taft, and then became director of the Cuban customs service. In both posts he had won a reputation as hardworking and utterly incorruptible.

“I had never even dreamed of going to Persia before my appointment,” he later wrote, “but the eloquence of the Persian *chargé d'affaires* at Washington, Mirza Ali Kuli Khan, removed my early doubts, and I finally decided to do what I could to help a people who had certainly given evidence of an abiding faith in our institutions and business methods.”

Upon arriving in Tehran, Shuster made an instant and shocking impression, not by something he did but by something he failed to do. Foreigners normally called on diplomats from Russia and Britain—the countries that had divided Iran into “spheres of influence” four years earlier—to beg permission to begin work. Shuster ignored this custom. He let it be known that since he worked only for Parliament, he would pay fealty to no one else.

This was the beginning of his rise and fall.

Iran had made remarkable strides toward democracy in the five years since its Constitutional Revolution. There had been two elections. A royalist counterrevolution—the one in which Parliament was bombarded and Howard Baskerville killed—had been defeated. Universal male suffrage had been proclaimed. Religious minorities were guaranteed seats in Parliament. Two vigorous political parties had emerged, one favoring women’s rights and public education, the other promoting conservative religious values.

This vibrant democracy, though, was only a shadow. Parliament had no authority over most of the country. British and Russian occupiers ignored its laws. Between these commanding imperial powers and an increasingly assertive Parliament, conflict was inevitable.

A few days after Shuster arrived in Tehran, parliamentary leaders visited him at Ataba Palace, the thirty-room stone villa they had given him as an office and residence. He told them he intended to follow the same principle that had guided his work in the Philippines and Cuba: taxation is the indispensable foundation of a stable state, and therefore taxes must be collected vigorously and impartially. In Iran, though, many wealthy landowners lived under British or Russian protection and paid no taxes to the central government. They would do so only if forced.

Shuster asked Parliament to raise a twelve-thousand-man gendarmerie dedicated exclusively to enforcing tax laws. Parliament agreed, and recruitment began. The first trained units were sent to confiscate property from tax delinquents in the Russian sphere of influence. That set off a fateful crisis.

The aroused Czar Nicholas II sent thousands of troops to Russian bases in northern Iran and threatened to occupy Tehran if Parliament did not stop its meddling. Britain joined the saber-rattling, reinforcing its garrisons in the south.

Shuster did not flinch. Parliament, he later wrote, “more truly represented the best aspirations of the Persians than any other body that has ever existed in that country. It was as representative as it could be under the difficult circumstances which surround the institution of the Constitutional government. It was loyally supported by the great mass of the Persian people, and that alone was sufficient justification for its existence. The Russian and British

governments, however, were constantly instructing their Ministers at Tehran to obtain the concession or block that one, failing utterly to recognize that the days had passed in which the affairs, lives and interests of twelve millions of people were entirely in the hands of an easily intimidated and willingly bribed despot.”

The final confrontation began at midday on December 9, 1911, with an ultimatum from the Russian ambassador in Tehran. Parliament must dismiss Shuster within forty-eight hours—and also promise “not to engage in the service of Persia foreign subjects, without first obtaining the consent of the Russian and British legations.”

Many Iranians were outraged by the directness of this demand. Shuster’s insistent defense of democracy had captivated them, and he suddenly found himself the embodiment of the nation’s dreams. Patriots clamored to defend him. One of the country’s most beloved poets, Aref Qazvini, vented his passion in a *tasnif*, or popular song:

The thief is out for theft and the brigand for brigandage, my friend,

Our history will become the laughingstock of the world if we allow Shuster to go from Iran, from Iran Shuster to go.

O life of the body, O soul of the world, O real treasure, O eternal pleasure—O Shuster!

May God keep thee here... Thou art a part of us, how can we live apart from thee, O Shuster?

By agreeing to dismiss Shuster, Parliament would be accepting the rule of foreign power over Iran. Refusing would bring unknown but certainly terrible consequences. When Parliament convened on the morning of December 11, all of its members knew that Iran’s infant democracy was facing its first decisive choice. Shuster was there, and described the scene in his poignant memoir, *The Strangling of Persia*:

It was an hour before noon, and the Parliament grounds and buildings were filled with eager, excited throngs, while the galleries of the chamber were packed with Persian notables of all ranks and with the representatives of many of the foreign legations. At noon the fate of Persia as a nation was to be decided....

The proposal was read amid deep silence. At its conclusion a hush fell upon the gathering. Seventy-six deputies, old men and young, priests, lawyers, doctors, merchants and princes, sat tense in their seats.

A venerable priest of Islam arose. Time was slipping away, and at noon the question would be beyond their vote to decide. This servant of God spoke briefly and to the point: “It may be the will of Allah that our liberty and our sovereignty shall be taken away from us, but let us not sign them away with our own hands!” One gesture of his hands, and he resumed his seat.

Simple words, these, yet winged ones. Easy to utter in academic discussions; hard, bitterly hard, to say under the eye of a cruel and overpowering tyrant whose emissaries watched the speaker from the galleries and mentally marked him down for future torture, imprisonment or worse.

Other deputies followed. In dignified appeals, brief because the time was so short, they upheld their country’s honor and proclaimed their hard-earned right to live and govern themselves.

A few minutes before noon the vote was taken....And when the roll call was ended, every man, priest or layman, youth or octogenarian, had cast his own die of fate, had staked the safety of himself and his family, and hurled back into the teeth of the great Bear from the North the unanimous answer of a desperate and down-trodden people who preferred a future of unknown terror to the voluntary sacrifice of their national dignity and their recently earned right to work out their own salvation.

By its defiance, Parliament invited its own destruction. Russian troops marched on Tehran and occupied it. Their commander then ordered the submissive Ahmad Shah—actually his British-educated regent, since the shah was just fourteen years old—to dissolve Parliament and dismiss Shuster. The orders were quickly drawn up. Soon afterward, a despondent former Treasurer General of the Persian Empire stepped into an automobile to begin his long trip home.

“Our task in Persia, to which we had looked forward with both pleasure and pride, had come to a sudden and most unpleasant end,” Shuster wrote. “As I stood in a circle of gloom with American and Persian friends, about to step into the automobile, I could not help recalling the evening of my arrival at the same spot just eight months before, and there swept over me the realization that the hopes of a patient, long-suffering Muhammadan people of reclaiming their position in the world had been ruthlessly stamped out by the armies of a so-called civilized and Christian nation.”

Iran’s first experiment with democracy was over, crushed by foreign power. It left a vivid imprint on the nation’s collective psyche. During these early years of the twentieth century, Iranians discovered what democracy is. They wanted it—and might have had it if their country had not been found to be sitting atop an ocean of oil.

In photographs, William Knox D’Arcy looks like the eminent Victorian solicitor he was: portly, round-faced, and generously mustachioed, usually with a pipe in his mouth and a watch chain across his vest. In his youth he made a fortune backing gold miners in Australia, and then he did what many a man would do in such circumstances: he moved to Europe to enjoy his money. He married an actress, toured extravagantly, lived in palaces, and hired Enrico Caruso to sing at his Grosvenor Square dinner parties. By the beginning of the twentieth century, his fortune was running out.

The petroleum age was just dawning, but geologists had already guessed that the Middle East would become a rich source of oil. British leaders wanted to know whether Iran had any. D’Arcy was looking for a speculative project that could make him rich again. They were ideal partners.

To drill in Iran, D’Arcy needed permission from the decadent and sickly Mozaffer al-Din Shah, who ruled with the aid of soothsayers and financed his regime by selling concessions to foreigners. British diplomats helped him secure the necessary royal order. Under the British tutelage, he bribed everyone in the royal court from the prime minister to the servant who brought the shah his morning pipe and coffee. The concession agreement, signed in 1901, gave D’Arcy the exclusive right to seek oil in almost all of Iran’s territory, and then, if he found any oil, the exclusive right to extract, refine, and sell it. For this concession, which was to run for sixty years, he paid £20,000 in cash, then equivalent to about \$95,000; promised to pay an equal amount when he began production; and agreed to give Iran 16 percent of his future profits.

“Such was the contract that turned out to be one of the more significant documents of the twentieth century,” one scholar has written. “Its subsequent fate, the vast industrial complex to which it gave rise, the passionate hatred it evoked, the conflicts it precipitated, could not have been guessed by its signers, who, in a city remote from the centers of world power,

almost total secrecy, acted out a drama the implications of which they were only half aware.”

At four o'clock on the morning of May 26, 1908, after several years of frustration, geologists working for D'Arcy at a stony outpost called Masjid-i-Suleiman were awakened by a tremendous explosion. Oil was spurting high into the air. They had made the greatest find in the history of the young petroleum industry.

Winston Churchill, who became Great Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty soon after the spectacular strike, fully grasped its meaning. He understood that in the coming era, navies and national economies would be powered by oil, meaning that countries with oil would rule. Britain had none, nor any colony that produced it. Upon learning of the gusher at Masjid-i-Suleiman, Churchill realized that controlling Iran would be a key to the survival of British power in the new century. On the eve of World War I he arranged for the D'Arcy concession to be transformed into a corporation, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and for the British government to buy 51 percent of its shares.

“Fortune brought us a prize from fairyland beyond our wildest dreams,” Churchill later wrote. “Mastery itself was the prize of the venture.”

This proved to be no exaggeration. In World War I, as the British statesman Lord Curzon observed, the Allies “floated to victory on a wave of oil.” That made British leaders more determined than ever to control Iran. With the Russians gone—they renounced their claims on Iran after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution—the British seemed to have a free hand. In mid-1918 they sent twenty-five hundred soldiers to fan out across Iran. Once they were in place, Curzon unveiled a staggeringly one-sided “Anglo-Persian Agreement” under which Britain would turn Iran into a protectorate by taking control of its army, treasury, communication system, and transport network. The three Iranian officials who signed this agreement were induced to do so by generous bribes. They were also promised asylum in the British Empire “should necessity arise.”

Lord Curzon, a former viceroy of India who became foreign secretary in 1919, considered Iran one of “the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for dominion of the world.” Britain, he eloquently argued, must hold it at all costs:

If it be asked why we should undertake the task at all, and why Persia should not be left to herself and allowed to rot into picturesque decay, the answer is that her geographical position, the magnitude of our interests in the country, and the future safety of our Eastern Empire render it impossible for us now—just as it would have been impossible for us any time in the last fifty years—to disinherit ourselves from what happens in Persia. Moreover, now that we are about to assume the mandate for Mesopotamia, which will make us coterminous with the western frontiers of Asia, we cannot permit the existence between the frontiers of our Indian Empire and Baluchistan and those of our new protectorate, a hotbed of misrule, enemy intrigue, financial chaos and political disorder. Further, if Persia were to be alone, there is every reason to fear that she would be overrun by Bolshevik influence from the north. Lastly, we possess in the southwestern corner of Persia great assets in the shape of oil fields, which are worked for the British navy and which give us a commanding interest in that part of the world.

The Iranian people erupted in a paroxysm of outrage when the Anglo-Persian Agreement became public. Newspapers demanded that Parliament refuse to ratify it. Politicians venomously denounced it. Mullahs issued a *fatwa* declaring that any Iranian who endorsed it was an enemy of Islam. Warlords vowed to fight any regime that accepted it. Nationalists

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