



Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic

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A major new and definitive work by the author of *Iran: Empire of the Mind* Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Tehran in February 1979 was a key moment in post-War international politics. A large, well-populated and wealthy state suddenly committed itself to a quite new path: a revolution based on the supremacy of Islam and contempt for both superpowers. For over 30 years the Islamic Republic has resisted widespread condemnation, sanctions, and sustained attacks by Iraq in an eight-year war. Many policy-makers today share a weary wish that Iran would somehow just disappear as a problem. But with Iran's continuing commitment to a nuclear programme and its reputation as a trouble-maker in Afghanistan, Lebanon and elsewhere, this is unlikely any time soon. The slow demise of the 2009 'Green Revolution' shows that Revolutionary Iran's institutions are still formidable. About the author: Michael Axworthy's *Iran: Empire of the Mind* established him as one of the world's principal experts on this extraordinary country and in his new book, *Revolutionary Iran*, he has written the definitive history of this subject, one which takes full account of Iran's unique history and makes sense of events often misunderstood by outsiders. Reviews: 'Balances scholarly precision with narrative flair ... Axworthy does the best job so far of describing the Iran-Iraq war ... He revisits, and convincingly reinterprets, defining moments of the Islamic republic ... [with] scholarly rigour and first-class analysis. Anyone interested in this most complex of revolutions would do well to read [this book]' *Economist* 'An impressive exploration of Iran's development since 1979 into an unpredictable pseudo-democracy ... [a] calm and literate portrait of the Islamic Republic' *Guardian* 'If you were to read only one book on present-day Iran you could not do better than this ... Axworthy revokes the sound and fury of the revolution itself' *Ervand Abrahamian, Times Higher Education* 'Packed with gobbets of information and policy advice on how to deal with Iran' *Telegraph* '[A] meticulously fair and scholarly work ... passages from Iranian authors little known in the west as well as references to both popular and arthouse cinema bring depth [and] richness ... moving and vivid ... a very fine work that deserves to be read by anyone interested in the Middle East' *Jason Burke, Observer* 'Axworthy is a true Iranophile, learned in history and literature ancient and modern ... [A] subtle, lucid, and well-proportioned history ... his method casts theocracy in a refreshingly cold light, and embosses the Islamic Republic's well-established subordination of faith to power' *Spectator*

Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic Details

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From Reader Review Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic for online ebook

Mauberley says

Incisive look at Iranian history since 1979 informed by the author's deep respect and fascination with Persian culture. Highly recommended to anyone who seeks a better understanding of what is happening in that country.

Hakan says

A balanced, comprehensive and useful account of the recent history of Iran.

Ambar says

Michael axworthy's Revolutionary Iran is a condensed narration of the period between the constitutional revolution of 1906 until the islamic revolution of 1979, followed by a more detailed analysis of the islamic regime and it's functioning that tries to hold the seemingly centrifugal principles of Islam and democracy together and has so far, with some considerable hiccups, and a great degree of turbulence, held.

The narrative isn't partisan in terms of an ideology outlook, but is an account that would lean towards sympathy for the Iranian regime for western readers, though an attempt can be seen to remain ostensibly fair, and heaps of criticism are laid at Iran's door. Axworthy's account of the shah's regime displays both, admiration and scorn, and he generally maintains a very positive outlook towards the citizenry. His focus though, is on the revolutionary regime, a story that is, according to Axworthy, best explained not through ideologies, but the interpersonal relationships of the important personalities of the revolution, and Khomeini's personal charisma and vision for the velayat-e-fiqh, alongside his wish to moderate power between leftists and conservatives and maintain stability. The eight year Iran Iraq war is another central event in the book, discussed in strategic, military and political terms. The conclusion focuses, predictably, on the nuclear question. By the time the book went into the presses, Ruhani had not yet been elected president. Although there is an added epilogue that acknowledges this, it is perhaps time for a second edition, in view of the groundbreaking breakthrough with the Obama administration over uranium enrichment.

Luke says

This is a good book. Ultimately, the view that underlies Axworthy's writing is that there is a fundamental tension between Islam and democracy and the past thirty years of Iranian governance has seen the political establishment from one end to the other and back. For those of us living in the West, it makes sense that Islam and democracy (or really any religion and democracy) should produce tension, as these ideas seem fundamentally contradictory. However, Ayatollah Khomeini's view of government was that the state does not gain legitimacy from "the people," but from God. Already, this sounds even more autocratic than I've alluded to, but a key aspect here is that, in Khomeini's view, the will of God could be seen in the acts of "the

people" as a group. Therefore, if a majority of the people supported a policy or direction, it must have been the will of God.

However, this tension became more strained after the death of Khomeini in 1989, and even more after the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. The death of Khomeini represented a sea of change, as nobody post-revolutionary Iran (or really, revolutionary Iran) stood as high as he did. Nobody else could command respect the same grace and authority as Khomeini. Indeed, it is highly unusual that Ali Khamenei became the Supreme Leader in the first place. Initially, Hussein-Ali Montazeri looked as though he would take power, and it was only a result of his reformist attitudes that Khomeini replaced him with Khamenei as his desired successor. Although Khamenei was weak from the outset, he gradually gained power at the expense of other clerics and elected officials, until 2009 when repressive measures against the Green Revolution caused him to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people (more on this in a bit).

Khatami's election as president of the Islamic Republic was also a radical change in the Iranian government, as his government looked to thaw relations with the West. It was not mere rhetoric when Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations" (directly challenging Samuel Huntington's popular but ridiculous claim that the end of the Cold War represents a shift in global conflict, especially between the "West" and the "Islamic world," completely ignoring that these two categories are far too broad to be used in this context).

With the reforms of Khatami's government, Khamenei and the ulama (if they were following Khomeini's views) should have recognized that *reform* was the will of God, as it commanded the support of the majority of the people. Even though Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 (in an election of questionable veracity), the election of 2009 further represented a wave of support for reform over conservatism (or "principlism" as it became known under Ahmadinejad), and potentially, as a result, God's own support.

The book itself ends in 2012, which is a shame (no disrespect to the author here, this is always a problem when reading books about the present) because the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and the Saudi-Iranian Cold War that emerged after the Arab Spring raises even more questions about the relationship between Islam, democracy, and nationalism as well.

In spite of recent difficulties, Axworthy refused to name Iran as "totalitarian." Admittedly, the Iranian state is nowhere near fully democratic, but Axworthy argues that even the principlists in the ulama have faith in democracy, and *want* to think of themselves as democrats, which is why there is so much tension between democracy and Islam in the present (if there wasn't, Islamic theocracy could potentially run roughshod over democratic elements). Axworthy finds that the Sepah (or the Revolutionary Guards as they're known in the West) is much more a threat to Iranian democracy than principlism or the ulama. Over the past thirty years, the Sepah has gradually gained power at the expense of other branches of government, allowing the state to look more like a military dictatorship that relies on Islamic norms than an "Islamic republic" or an "Islamic theocracy." Indeed, the military establishment (including the secret police) have a great deal in common with the Shah's dictatorship that the Iranian Revolution sought to overthrow in the first place.

Overall, this is a well-written, easy to read, nuanced, and thoughtful book about the Islamic Republic of Iran. Highly recommend.

Sumit says

A thoroughly researched book, I have read Iran before, I have read middle east before and I have read

History before, what stands out about this book, it bring best of all those books and even more in terms of insights. I did last 250 pages in a binge reading session and I usually don't do that but for this one I made an exception. Now enough of good things, What I disliked about this book was at time it changed topic so abruptly that I was forced to go back and to check what exactly is happening.

It is one of those books, where multiple timelines go on in parallel and when author jumps from one to another, without proper handholding, reader sometime get left on earlier one and hence loses his/her focus. But that was not a deal breaker, Over all style was good so a big recommendation for some one needs good bit of info about Iran, and its influence on Middle east and world politics.

Victoria says

I thoroughly enjoyed Axworthy's other book on Iran - Empire of the Mind - which charted historical intellectual movements from the Iranian plateau. This is a fantastic and comprehensive history of modern Iran charting its history from the Constitutional era until the nuclear deal, which shows a great deal of sympathy towards the subject matter and debunks common foreign policy myths. Essential reading as relations between Iran and the West warm and normalise.

ka?yap says

A very well written and comprehensive history of 20th century Iran. The author uses diverse sources including personal and literary accounts to paint a vivid narrative of especially the 1979 revolution, the events that led to it, and its aftermath.

calum steele says

One of the best books on the subject around

Definitely worth a read, a clear and concise over view of the Iranian issue with the back ground to support the authors position. Probably one of its key benefits is that this work is done without the heinous bias for or against Iran that most other books take and doesn't contain the shrill condemnation that others take. All in all a superb book!

Rune Clausen says

This book is absolutely amazing from beginning to end. It captivated me right away, and that feeling never let off throughout the entire read. It might be the first time that I've actually been happy about a book being very densely written, with a lot of text on each page - since all of it is wonderful to read through.

Iran is an immensely interesting, enigmatic country like no other in the world, and the most recent history of Iran is full of drama, power-struggles, fights for freedom, repression, war, struggle and everything else that makes for an interesting story.

While the population of Iran still struggles and suffers under their regime, the book does also clearly paint a more nuanced picture of Iran, and its people, than what we usually see in the western media. Both sides of the story is presented, and there is no inherent pre-disposition against the Iranian side. Actually on the contrary, I learned about some of the more shady dealings of the US and the west in general towards Iran, and our failures to take the opportunities of reconciliation that presented itself several times.

Iran is an important player, not just in the region, but in the world as a whole, and it was a pleasure to gain more insight into this fascination country.

Miguel says

The relationship of the West with Iran has been one plagued by blunders, resulting from the lack of understanding of a country rife with contrasts. "Revolution Iran" succeeds in coming across the complexities of one of the major actors of the middle east and changing the way you see it.

It takes you on a fascinating tour throughout the country's modern history, with a focus on the 1979 revolution, which toppled down the monarchy and replaced it with a theocratic republic. It examines in great detail the events and the characters that took part in it, and the conditions that led to the revolution. The prose is crisp and compelling, without sacrificing rigour. In addition to the description of the facts at a macro level, it also includes personal accounts by those who experienced the events.

Michael Gilbride says

Axworthy has written a scholarly history of twentieth-century Iran, doing justice to a country with a complex history. So much detail is on offer that I occasionally had to digest certain sections and chapters multiple times. For anyone interested in political structures and systems of governance, Iran is an intriguing case study. Persia, latterly Iran, has had, and continues to have, a convoluted and complicated relationship with democracy. As to what degree the Islamist revolution in 1979 was democratic or theocratic, Axworthy neatly channelled the old proverb "the voice of the people is the voice of God" to sum up the matter. After Khomeini had installed himself as the Supreme Leader, he implemented a system whereby only the Supreme Leader could decide who was eligible to get elected to the Iranian parliament, the Majles. There were debates between Khomeini and his fellow revolutionaries, who took over in 1979, about what they would rename Iran as. Before it became the Islamic Republic Of Iran, the two other options were the Democratic Islamic Republic Of Iran and the People's Democratic Republic Of Iran. There was no doubt that they believed they were instituting a democracy. The revolution was legitimate too as 98% of the 15,000,000 people who voted gave direct authorisation for the country to be an Islamic theocracy. Doubtless it is my Western bias at play, but I remain baffled at countries voting themselves into theocratic and autocratic systems of governance. I wonder what the percentage would be were an open vote be permitted in 2017 Iran. The first constitution in Iran in 1906 was dominated by Shia Islam whilst also having a democratic element in the form of the elected parliament. The Shah also had a degree of control. There were theocratic, democratic and autocratic elements at play from the outset. Dissenting voices were present, if not always heard, during this time. Ayatollah Taleghani, who vigorously opposed the Shah, said "may God forbid autocracy under the name of religion". It is noteworthy that Iranian theologians understood the danger

of autocracy. In 1911 the Majles was beginning to gain traction and influence in society and people such as William Schuster were attempting to direct Iran down a Western style democratic path. This effort to democratise Iran was met with resistance from the autocratic and theocratic wings that were themselves vying for power. Concurrently, Russia viewed this new move as a threat to a country close to their border. This was a time when the British were busy snaffling Iran's supply of oil for themselves. Whilst the constitution was technically in effect at this point, Iran was in reality run by scores of local regional leaders and this internal division permitted foreign influence to take hold. By 1915, there was constant war in Persia. The Russians, British, Kurdish, Jangali, Ottomans and Germans were all active in the region at various different points in time. When the communist Tudeh movement sprang up in the 1940s, the Russians moved in to Northern Iran to support them which sparked a war with the Allies. The Shah eventually managed to maintain enough control so that Iran could remain a sovereign country. The Majles became the solitary vent for those Iranian citizens who tried to clutch to the idea that they could determine their own future. Meanwhile, the Shah began to exert a stronger grip on power too. Reza Shah governed from 1926 until 1941 and oversaw a huge amount of development in Iran. He changed the name from Persia to Iran in 1935 and was primarily a militarist, overseeing the doubling of the Iranian army. School attendances in Iran increased from 50,000 in 1922 to 450,000 in 1938. The Hijab was banned and the country was largely secular. This irritated the Ulemas who had updated the religious Shia texts for each generation and believed that society was changing too quickly. In 1941, Reza Shah refused to expel the German forces who were extremely influential in Iran at the time. This resulted in the Allies invading Iran. They replaced Reza Shah with his son Mohammed Shah who ruled until the revolution in 1979. The British wanted to maintain control over the Iranian oil supply and used Reza Shah as their puppet to keep the black gold flowing from Iran to the United Kingdom. The 1949 assassination attempt on the Shah had quashed any remaining hopes that Iran would become a more open society as he began to repress the Iranian people to an increasingly higher degree until the revolution. From 1963 until 1976, Iran underwent a huge economic boom, with an average growth rate of 8% per year. The GDP increased from \$200 in 1963 to \$2000 in 1976. Essentially the Shah bought the Iranian people whilst he tightened the noose of social repression. The population exploded from 19,000,000 in 1956 to 33,000,000 in 1976 and car production rose from 7,000 a year to 109,000. Coal production saw a similar jump from 285,000 tonnes per year to 900,000 tonnes per year. This economic spurt meant that the Shah could significantly improve life for ordinary Iranians and won him many followers. Inevitably, power corrupted him. He became paranoid that the English would try to have him executed. His regime was endemically corrupt. Iran wanted change. His personal military, the SAVAK, reduced the number of books in circulation from 4,000 to 1,000. He locked up 4,000 people in jail, many of whom without trial. Amnesty International's 1979 report identified that at least 900 of these people were tortured. The beginning of the end for the Shah came in January 1978 when an article was published alleging that the main opposition leader Khomeini was gay. This created shockwaves and people began huge protests across the country. The Jaleq square massacre, in 1978, resulted in innocent protestors being killed which sparked further outrage and culminated in mass protests of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people. The situation became uncontrollable as members of the SAVAK were thrown from the rooftops of buildings for trying to keep a lid on things. Khomeini returned from isolation in Paris to institute the revolution. There have been 49 democratically elected Prime Ministers of Iran since 1906 yet there remain serious doubts over just how democratically legitimate any of them actually were. Until the 1979 revolution, the Prime Minister was very much subservient to the Shah. Different Prime Ministers had tried to wrestle varying degrees of power from the Shah. Iranian Prime Ministers constantly sought to consolidate democratic power in Iran. Perhaps the best example of this was Mohammad Mosaddegh who governed from 1951 until 1953. He fought British imperialism and nationalised the Iranian oil companies, cutting off all diplomatic ties with the British in 1952 and sparking a trade boycott with Britain. He also tried to limit the power of the Shah by removing his name from military barracks which stymied his constitutional capacity to govern. Mosaddegh fought the autocratic and theocratic forces in Iran and, concurrently, British imperialism. He was a reformer who pushed Iran in a democratic direction. Churchill desperately wanted him overthrown so the British could retain their

stranglehold on Iranian oil. Roosevelt was worried that Mosaddegh's socialist urges were pointing Iran in a more communist direction during the cold war. Both countries combined to overthrow him which gave control back to the Shah. However, it is important to dispel the myth in the West that a democracy was overthrown. It was not. The Shah still retained the most control and the theocrats also retained a modicum of influence. That being said, it was a disgraceful act to overthrow him. The British had no right to Iranian oil. The incident was a turning point in Iranian history and it ensured that Iran became increasingly authoritarian. From 1953 until the revolution virtually all Iranian Prime Ministers were in the pocket of the Shah. He realised how much power Mosaddegh had accrued and what a danger he had become to his position and duly hired subservient characters from then onwards to ensure a repeat would not happen. Post revolution, the Prime Minister had to kowtow to the Supreme Leader. Therefore, it is not accurate to say that Iran has ever really had a genuinely democratically elected Prime Minister. The Shah used to effectively handpick which Prime Minister he wanted and this same allegation is now being levelled at the Supreme Leader as he decides who can run for office. Certainly the 2005 election where Ahmadinejad beat Rafsanjani was riddled with inaccuracies and reports of corruption. Four years later and fresh allegations that vote rigging took place surfaced as the regional percentages were suspiciously in line with the national average. As the powers of the Shah and the Majles were colliding and scrapping for supremacy, Shia Islam also vied for power. Khomeini was the leader of the religious opposition throughout this time and he pushed for Shia Islam to be the main force in ruling Iran. He fought bitterly against the Shah in the run up to the revolution and led many protests against him. Once he took power, theocracy replaced autocracy, in the main, and democracy was marginalised. However, all three forces were, and still are, present. The role of the Supreme Leader can be seen as both autocratic and theocratic. The Islamist regime cracked down on what free press and civil society there was once they were in power. 580 Iranian citizens were killed in the first year after the revolution for sexual and dissenting offences. The post-Tudeh leftist organisation, the MKO, fought with Khomeini for influence in society and the administration killed between 2,000 and 7,000 of the MKO in an attempt to wipe them out in a shocking example of how any wayward voices were crushed with power. Fast forward to 1988 and the regime massacred approximately 5,000 MKO and Tudeh leftists in their attempt to further kill off these movements. It was the largest clampdown on opposition parties in modern Iranian political history. Axworthy has an interesting theory about the opaque border between the two countries as not being as big a contributory factor to the Iran-Iraq war as some other historians thought that it was. Axworthy thinks that it was mainly started due to Saddam Hussein being an opportunist and trying to take advantage of the volatile new Islamist regime after the revolution. The Iraqi tyrant had also resented the Iranian backing of the Kurds in Northern Iraq and sought revenge for this. Initially the Iranian regime blamed the 45,000 Iraqi ground troops in Iran as a US conspiracy and tried to downplay the situation. This gave Iraq the initial advantage. Luckily for Iran, the Iraqi air force was inept and unable to exploit their surprise attack. Even more fortuitously, the Shah had invested heavily in modernising the Iranian air force. Despite the regime's initial misgivings about the intentions of these pilots, once they employed their superiority in the skies, it enabled the Iranians to deal several decisive blows to the invading Iraqis. The war also cemented relations between Iran and many other countries. Syria began obtaining its oil from Iran, not Iraq, in 1982. The Iranians never forgot this show of loyalty and are repaying it now by propping up then ruler Hafez's son Bashar Assad. Iran also despised how the Americans supported Iraq economically and militarily during the war. This soldered the previous ill feeling between the two countries and ratcheted up tensions previously only seen during the hostage crisis. Although primarily a history book, there are some fascinating insights into the political influence that Iranian literary and cultural forces exerted. An excellent example of this was Forough Farrokhzad's poetry about feminism in Iran in the 1960s and how it reflected the increased Westernisation and potential move in a more progressive direction at the time. Moreover, Ahmad Salu's poem that wrote about "this dead end" highlighted the growing repression in Iran at the time. During the first year of the 1979 revolution, after Khomeini has consolidated power, the annual literary festival that was scheduled for October and November was cancelled which underscored the repression that the theocratic government was to unleash on Iranian citizens. In February 1980, 38 writers, scholars and

journalists wrote to Khomeini to tell him that this new form of repression from the regime was becoming worse than that of the deposed Shah. Nine years later Khomeini put a bounty on Salman Rushdie's head for publishing the Satanic Verses. Ironically, they had previously given Rushdie an award for one of his books. One of the benefits of Shia Islam is that it has the potential to be flexible. The fact that the Ulemas update old religious texts for new generations proves that it can be somewhat adaptable and flexible in an ever evolving world and will permit a degree of reform. This is something that the West needs to be open to working with. Mohammad Khatami, who served as President from 1997 until 2005, opened 740 newspapers and journals and his rhetoric about liberalising Iran was welcome. Likewise, Mohsen Kadivar's wide reaching vision of believing that human rights and democracy are compatible with historical Islam, if not Koranic Islam, was also promising. These remain signs of a path to a potentially more secular future. Granted, Kadivar was cheated out of the 2009 election yet, the point surely remains, that Iran retains a potential to have a future in which liberal values and Islam can live peacefully side by side. We live in hope that it is a matter of time before the Nobel peace winning Shirin Ebadi and her ilk begin to win more sway in Iran. Alternatively, one can view the 2000 Majles elections as proof that the regime hardliners interpreted a move to democracy as an implicit threat to the theocratic Iranian state. They were afraid that the country would become secular and ensured that reformers would not take power. Iran's future is as complex as its past. Axworthy has written an erudite and essential history which will benefit anyone wanting to get up to speed. ? ? ? ? ?

P.H.G. Haslam says

Although I got this primarily to write an undergraduate essay on the 1979 revolution, I decided to push to the end anyway. I'm very glad I did! Reading about the movements of F-14 Tomcats in the Iran-Iraq War sections wasn't exactly enthralling, but once I got to the 1990s it really picked up. I was unaware of Khatami's shock victory in the elections of 1997, and just how tantalisingly close Iran came to reform (before the Trump-esque absurdity of Ahmadinejad). And talking of Trump, I have to address the *Epilogue...* being published in 2014, it's full of wonderful optimism for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This has now of course been greatly threatened by Trump — such are the vicissitudes of US/Iran relations, as this book shows. Axworthy is very keen to point out that animosities that sometimes seem eternal are relatively recent, and cites this as hope for a better future. This book has put me in a position which will allow me to better understand Iranian politics as it evolves.

Vikas Datta says

A key guide to this most-misunderstood country, covering its history and politics right from the Shah's time, through the 1979 revolution, and well after the aftermath of the disputed 2009 elections. The conclusions are spot on and one hopes the West seeks the correct way out rather than the discredited way of pressure, sanctions and threats seeking a regime change - haven't the lessons of their tries in both of Iran's neighbours been enough?

Jonathan says

An overly academic analysis on the history of Iran from the beginning of the 20th century up to 2014. Michael Axworthy follows the major political and clerical figures as they increased in power leading up to

the 1979 revolution and continued to be in power in the years that followed. Although there are a lot of details, names, and dates the book reads more like an academic text book than material for a general audience.

Youssef says

This book was written in 2013, before the ramping up of sanctions against Iran; the spread of the civil war in Syria; the rise of new terror groups in the Middle East; and the further breakdown of nations caught in the middle due to the actions of larger powers in the region (e.g. Saudi Arabia and the GCC, Russia, the US, the EU, etc.). Thus, reading Mr Axworthy's extensive, but not complete, account of the Iranian Revolution from 1979 up to the current day does seem careful and not ready to make any concrete predictions for the future.

It was, and is impossible, to know what will happen in the future, and many Americans (and Westerners) would do themselves a favour in reading this book, IF ONLY AS A STARTING POINT. Axworthy admits right at the get-go in the introduction that his book is by no means an exhaustive account or narrative — as a British historian on Iran, he readily shows his hand in his outsider perspective. It is something to keep in mind while reading, as well as the fact that there are many many many more perspectives to keep in mind.

That said, this is a hell of a read, and filled in gaps in my own knowledge I had no clue were missing. Of course I thought I had some idea of the events prior to, during, and immediately after the revolution. Axworthy points out that this revolution, like others before it, heralded massive change in Iranian society and international relations. And it did, by any account.

However, what this narrative of the 1979 revolution also shows is that it, like other revolutions, can fall prey to the individual and collective ambitions of the actors in the middle of it all, and the power of small moves that lead to a monumental shift in what people had hoped, or thought, would happen.
