


Iran's Quiet Revolution: The Downfall of the Pahlavi State

Ali Mirsepassi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Pp. 242. \$99.99 hardcover, \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 9781108725323

Reviewed by Gregory Brew , Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA (gregory.brew@yale.edu)

The Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 is often characterized by scholars as a sudden and violent break, the moment when Iran's political development took an abrupt turn in a new and revolutionary direction, away from the Westernized modernism of the Pahlavi era toward Khomeini's brand of political Islamism and *vilāyat-i faqīh*, or "Guardianship of the Jurist," the system of government adopted by Iran in the wake of the revolution. In *Iran's Quiet Revolution: The Downfall of the Pahlavi State*, Ali Mirsepassi argues that this break was not quite as sudden as we might believe, and that the apparent *raison d'être* of the shah's regime was thoroughly, and, in many cases, deliberately, undermined by Pahlavi elites who embraced forms and discourses of *gharbzadegi*, or "Westoxification," and antimodernism in the years prior to the Islamic Revolution.

Mirsepassi illustrates how a "cultural and discursive shift in Iranian political culture" occurred over the course of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 4). This "Quiet Revolution" was grounded in Heideggerian anxieties surrounding Iran's encounter with modernity. It drew from distinct currents of Iranian social and political thought, as well as the general antimodernism spreading through Western intellectual circles. Versions of *gharbzadegi* were adopted by Pahlavi elites, and even the shah himself, to delegitimize liberalism and undermine the regime's opponents on the Left and among moderates.

Although some of the elites Mirsepassi examines seem to have held sincere doubts regarding modernity's viability, he generally characterizes their efforts in cynical terms, as attempts "to foster national hegemony for one's own cause and destroy opposing nation-making ventures" (p. 4). Embracing mysticism and a vision of national identity grounded in pastoral mythology was, as Mirsepassi sees it, an expression of insecurity and a massive gamble by a regime that lacked a fundamental source of legitimacy. This gamble ended in failure and the "violent annihilation" of both the Pahlavi state and its governing elite (p. 5).

Mirsepassi structures his book as a series of thematic chapters, often organized around a specific primary source that speaks to a distinct feature of Iran's Quiet Revolution. Chapter 2, for example, examines *Bonyad Monthly*, a journal published in 1977–78 with support from Ashraf Pahlavi, the shah's sister, that was outwardly antimodern and engaged with *gharbzadegi*. Chapter 3 turns the focus to Ehsan Naraghi, a high-living member of the Pahlavi elite with ties to Queen Farah, whose published work flirted with antimodernism.

The chief inspiration for the rise of antimodernism in the late Pahlavi period was the work of Ahmad Fardid, an early Pahlavi era intellectual and the subject of a separate monograph by Mirsepassi.¹ It was Fardid who first formulated *gharbzadegi*, characterizing it as a cultural, and even spiritual, phenomenon. This contrasted with Jamal Al-e Ahmad's more famous formulation from the 1960s, which was directed in political terms at the shah's state-building project. When expressed by Pahlavi elites, Westoxification referred to an attack on Iran's national soul. The antidote to such contamination was a revival of Iran's ancient past, the resuscitation of Iranian nationhood tied to Iran's imagined pastoral antiquity. Mirsepassi illustrates an irony: elites educated in the West and tied explicitly to the Pahlavi regime's programs of land reform, industrialization, and urbanization opined for an agrarian Iran that never existed in the first place.

¹ Ali Mirsepassi, *Iran's Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmed Fardid's Legacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).


Although dense and rigorously analytical, Mirsepassi's narrative includes interesting character studies, such as the enigmatic Fardid and the blustery Naraghi. As we learn, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi contributed to the flirtation with *gharbzadegi* through his public statements and *Toward the Great Civilization*, an ideological text published just before the revolution. Mirsepassi characterizes Iran's last shah as a mystic late in his life, who lived in a "fantasy reality" (pp. 11, 152).² Rather than a means to modernize Iran, the Pahlavi experiment was an attempt to create harmony between the imperatives of the 20th century and the spiritual need to retain the essence of Iranian nationhood.

Through the interpretive lens of the Quiet Revolution, Mirsepassi buttresses arguments for the inevitability of the Pahlavi state's collapse, although not, it should be noted, of the subsequent rise of an outwardly Islamic and cleric-led government. The shah's elite was actively undermining itself through its flirtation with *gharbzadegi*, but such contradictions had been at the heart of the Pahlavi regime from the very beginning, as the shah performed nationalism even as he accepted support, armaments, and thousands of military and technical advisers from the United States. The key insight of Mirsepassi's book is that the regime's adoption of *gharbzadegi*, which might have made sense in combination with political reforms and a distancing from the Cold War, instead was taken as a measure to delay such reform. Antimodernism was meant to provide a means for the Pahlavi state's survival. Instead, it hastened its demise.

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The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

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Reviewed by Maryam Alemzadeh , School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK (maryam.alemzadeh@area.ox.ac.uk)

The history of the Iran-Iraq War is an unfinished project, Annie Tracy Samuel tells us, because it is present in the constantly developing identity of Iran's military elite, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* is a book about the significance of writing the past in the service of the present. It delves deep into tens of thousands of pages of untapped material, namely, the IRGC's publications in Farsi, to present an alternative reading of the longest war of the twentieth century and one of its main agents, Iran's IRGC. It is a valuable monograph not only for students of the contemporary Middle East, Iran, and the IRGC, but for anyone with an interest in historiography, narrative construction, and military history, at large.

The IRGC has become the most powerful and most controversial organization in Iran's postrevolutionary history. It was formed shortly after the 1979 revolution with the mission of protecting the revolutionary creed. The IRGC immediately became the hub for leaders and volunteers with the utmost dedication to Ayatollah Khomeini and his Shi'i-Islamist vision. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, a cadre of Revolutionary Guards and volunteers lived up to the prevalent image of dedicated soldiers of Islam by presenting as selfless troops who

² Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Toward the Great Civilization: A Dream Revisited* (London: Satrap Publishing, 1994).