

# The Iran Agenda

The Real Story of U.S. Policy and  
the Middle East Crisis

Reese Erlich  
Foreword by Robert Scheer



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*"The Iran Agenda* is vital reading for anyone concerned about U.S. foreign policy."

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gripping and insightful book should be required reading for all Americans.”

—**Peter Coyote**, actor and author of *Sleeping Where I Fall*

# THE IRAN

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## A G E N D A

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The Real Story of U.S. Policy  
and the Middle East Crisis

REESE ERLICH

Foreword by Robert Scheer

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This book is dedicated to the people  
of Iran and the United States,  
both of whom want peace.

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# Foreword

Robert Scheer

Historical mischief has stark consequences, not at all mitigated when world leaders, including Americans, claim the best of intentions. Steeped in the mythology of innocence since our own revolt against British imperial rule, the United States has consistently presented its own imperial drive as an effort to extend rather than suppress the freedoms of the peoples conquered.

The pattern has repeated itself many times since the Second World War, but it has never been clearer than in the persistent but disastrous effort of the United States to direct the politics of oil-rich Iran. Never admitting to an overriding interest in controlling that nation's and the region's precious resource, U.S. leaders have always insisted that they care only to expand the universe of peace and freedom. That charade now stands exposed since the U.S. invasion of Iraq. But despite that debacle, the longer-standing goal of dominating Iran remains all the more compelling to the United States.

In this perceptive analysis, Reese Erlich writes in the spirit of Graham Greene, whose classic *The Quiet American* captured the naive but nonetheless murderous impact of U.S. intervention in the "third world" of the Cold War era. Like Greene, Erlich blends



an on-the-scene familiarity with everyday life in the target country with a piercing critique of the purportedly high motives of the foreign invader.

The United States has interfered with Iran for more than fifty years, and the consequences of that sorry history will continue to haunt us well into the future. Our capricious disregard for the nationalist and religious complexity of Iran began with the 1953 overthrow of its last democratically selected leader, the secular populist Mohammad Mossadegh. His crime was to begin the nationalization of foreign oil companies. He assaulted our sacred faith in the divine right of corporate plunder that trumped all other concerns, including the will of the Iranian people to control their own resources, and hence their own destiny.

After a well-documented coup paid for and engineered by the CIA, the United States replaced Mossadegh with the self-proclaimed Shah of Shahs, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who based his legitimacy on a highly questionable royal lineage. Despite U.S. and Israeli support, the shah's regime eventually collapsed under the weight of its own corruption and selfish opulence, which wasted oil revenues on an array of unnecessary purchases, including U.S. military hardware. The shah was replaced by religious fanatics who claimed the mantle of incorruptibility. Because the shah had governed in the name of modernization, it is no wonder that the ayatollahs' appeal to the glories of a fundamentalist world found a following among those whom the shah had ignored.

It is also no wonder that the theocrats who ascended to power should prove hostile to Israel and the United States. But of course, given the general acceptance of American virtue in foreign policy, the 1979 taking of hostages by the Iranian revolutionaries was interpreted as a totally unprovoked attack. American politicians and media figures have accepted this interpretation uncritically. Although the Iranian leadership has undergone many changes since then—from militant to somewhat reason-

able and back again—most Americans have never wavered from the view that Iranian leaders are nothing but treacherous.

Call it the cartooning of Iran, in which the motives and actions of Iran's various (and sometimes competing) leaders are never plumbed for profound explanations but rather dismissed as the pure caprice of the malevolent. Hence, we see the all-too-easy classification of Iran as part of the "axis of evil" by the incoming Bush Administration. That designation is now an embarrassment, given that Bush's invasion of Iraq has left the Iraqi disciples of the Iranian ayatollahs very much in power in Baghdad.

Erlich provides an invaluable insight into the contradictions that drive U.S. policy toward Iran and threaten to take us into yet another disastrous war in a region that has ample reason to question U.S. motives. He questions the demonization of Iran's leadership without underestimating the theocracy's record of suppressing the people it rules. Having witnessed modern ideological wars, he brings a nuanced and—dare one say it?—objective view of the contending forces attempting to define modern Iran. The book is particularly useful in dissecting the trite, politically motivated threat assessments of Iran's nuclear program and its alleged support of international terrorism. In both instances, there are painful reminders of the phony case made to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Erlich's analysis opens up possibilities for change other than those that rely on the military option, which has proved so disastrous in neighboring Iraq. Indeed, Erlich questions the value of a belligerent U.S. stance when its primary impact is to enhance the popularity of hardliners and undermine those working for genuine reform in Iran. For that reason, this is a hopeful book, as well as a well-written work on a difficult subject, for it suggests the truly revolutionary prospect that the Iranian people might be trusted with the difficult task of engineering their future. After a half century of heavy-handed U.S. interference, they can hardly do a worse job on their own.

But Iran is not some banana republic to be toyed with as a matter of whim; it is rather the historic seat of a major civilization whose legacy, both politically and religiously expansionist, cannot be ignored. A U.S. foreign policy based on ignorance of Iran's rich history and preoccupied only with U.S. interests has wrought horrible consequences. Those consequences—unintended as they sometimes were, and authored by politicians oblivious to the complexity of the world upon which they intruded—now dominate the key drama of international politics. The value of this excellent treatise is that it exhibits rare humility in attempting to grasp why modern-day Iranians have proved so difficult for the U.S. government to deal with. While critical of the clerical tyranny that has controlled Iranian politics since the anti-shah revolution, Erlich avoids the path of crude demonization that has characterized most popular writing on this subject. Instead, he skillfully melds personal observations with a scholar's insight into the historical record that informs today's passions—passions that we ignore at our peril.

## In Tehran with Sean Penn

All our senses were assaulted simultaneously as we walked slowly down the inclined road into the Tehran bazaar. We smelled the fragrance of savory kebabs, heard the cacophony of merchants hawking their wares, and saw the yellow saffron rice and deep purple eggplant. It was June 2005.

The crowds jostled Sean Penn, Norman Solomon, and me as we worked our way deep into the narrow byways of the bazaar. Sean was there on assignment for the *San Francisco Chronicle*; Norman was writing for his media analysis column; and I was reporting as a freelancer for the *Dallas Morning News* and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio. I had visited the bazaar during my previous trip in 2000 and figured this was a good way for Sean and Norman to get acquainted with ordinary people.

Middle East bazaars were the first shopping malls. Tehran's main bazaar consists of a vast underground network of stalls, shops, and stores. You can buy anything from ridiculously expensive hand-knotted Persian silk carpets to ladies' under-

wear. Both are clearly displayed for passersby. There are no fixed prices. Bargaining is a proud tradition in Iran. If you pay the first price asked, you are clearly not from around these parts.

As we walked past the many shoppers, our translator and guide, Maryam Majd, suddenly became aware that this would be no ordinary visit to the bazaar. "Everyone is whispering Sean's name," she said a bit apprehensively. Although I don't speak Farsi, I could hear the mumbled recitation "Sean Penn" and see the startled looks on people's faces. We had arrived in Tehran two days before, without any prior announcement. So most people were very surprised to see the world-famous actor, with his wavy hair and piercing eyes, just ambling by.

In meetings at Sean's house north of San Francisco before our departure, we all agreed that the purpose of the trip was to learn the views of Iranians toward the United States and their own government. Sean was visiting as a writer, not an actor or celebrity. He did not want to become the focus of the story and refused to give any media interviews.

"Do you think they know me over there?" he asked me during one preparation session. "Oh yes," I responded. But none of us had any idea *how* well known Sean was in Tehran—nor the buzz his trip would have, even years later.

We were walking in the bazaar, looking at the incredible array of clothing, household goods, food, and antiques. We stopped at a stall where Moshtabor was selling small home appliances such as irons and blenders. He asked that we use only his first name.<sup>1</sup> We asked him about the U.S. assertion that Iran's quest for nuclear power disguises a plan to build nuclear weapons. Moshtabor said Iran is not building nuclear weapons. He defended Iran's desire to have nuclear power.

"Every country needs to have access, and it's our right," he told us.

Moshtabor told us that compared to the 1980s, cultural restrictions are much more relaxed in Iran. The government usually looks the other way if people choose to drink alcohol in their own homes or see their girlfriends without male relatives present. The government won't allow most western films to be shown in theaters or on television, but the films are readily available on pirated DVDs. In fact, major Hollywood films often reach Tehran before being released in the United States. Moshtabor told us that many Iranian young people are obsessed with Hollywood movie stars.

At that point Sean, who had been interviewing someone else, walked over to join us. "That guy looks just like Sean Penn," Moshtabor told us with a big grin. Suddenly he realized that he was talking to the real Sean Penn. "I'm going to see *The Interpreter*," he blurted out. "I know you were married to Madonna."

Great. We've come halfway round the globe to meet ordinary Iranians and discuss matters of grave international concern. And Iranians want to talk to us about Madonna.

That encapsulates the contradictions in today's Iran. Ten thousand people chant "Death to America" at Friday prayers. But afterwards, those same people invite us home for lunch. In part, that reflects traditional Iranian hospitality toward strangers. But it's also a genuine friendliness and fascination with things American. Many Iranians studied in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. I've met Iranians who speak with a Bostonian or even a valley girl accent.

But many Iranians strongly criticized U.S. government policy. Yes, they are bombarded with clerical propaganda de-

nouncing the United States and Israel. But they also haven't forgotten the U.S. support for the shah's dictatorship<sup>2</sup> or the American navy ship that shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing all 290 people on board.<sup>3</sup> They may love Sean Penn, but they would take up arms against George Bush.

### Why We Hate *Them*

Since the 1979 revolution overthrew the U.S.-backed shah, successive Democratic and Republican administrations have vilified Iran. They have argued that Iran poses a threat to U.S. national security, with the reason varying by the year: It spreads Islamic revolution; it supports terrorists; it plans to develop a nuclear bomb; it kills American soldiers in Iraq. That hostility has remained, even when some of the U.S. justifications have disappeared. For example, the United States rarely mentions Iran's trying to spread its Islamic revolution anymore, because Iran largely stopped doing so in the 1980s. The United States just shifts the goalposts and comes up with new ways to score the game.

U.S. policy is controlled by a relatively small ruling elite of corporate executives, military leaders, government bureaucrats, and politicians. That elite is supposed to be subject to democratic control. In practice, however, the American people have little influence over its decisions.

The U.S. ruling elite always wants to confuse national security with corporate/military interests. The people of the United States face no immediate threat from Iran. Iran cannot and would not launch a military attack on U.S. territory. While it supports groups that have used terrorist tactics in Israel and other parts of the Middle East, it is no supporter of

Al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations that pose a real threat to the United States.<sup>4</sup> If the current government of Iran disappeared tomorrow, Americans would be no more or less secure.

But Iran does threaten the interests of the political, military, and corporate elite who run the United States.

### The Great Game in the Internet Era

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Britain competed with Russia, the Ottoman Turks, and other imperialist powers to control the oil wealth of the Middle East. Oil was vital to power navy ships and home-front industry. The British had no oil of their own, so they had to control colonies and neo-colonies that did. The imperialist powers called this scramble for natural resources the Great Game. For them it was a game; for the people of the region, it was deadly.

Today the players have changed, but the Great Game continues. Charles Freeman, Jr., was U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (1989–92) and Under Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1993–94). He welcomed me into his office at the Middle East Policy Council in Washington DC. He was jovial and outspoken as he explained U.S. national interests in Iran.

“There is a hierarchy of American interests at stake, which begin with secure access to energy supplies,” he told me.<sup>5</sup> U.S. oil companies never come pounding on his door demanding that the United States overthrow the Iranian regime or invade Iraq, he explained. They don’t have to. U.S. politicians and military men understand that the country must have secure sources of oil. And the oil companies automatically benefit.



Freeman said the United States wants Middle Eastern governments “that are not hostile, countries that are willing to work with American companies to provide energy. It means governments that are sufficiently competent to maintain stability rather than engage in acts that disrupt the flow of energy.”

Iran sits on approximately 10 percent of the world’s proven oil supplies and has the second-largest amount of natural gas.<sup>6</sup> Iran also sits between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, two critical oil regions. The world’s oil tankers slip down Iran’s coast at the Strait of Hormuz, which narrows to thirty-one miles at one point. Control of that strait means control of the whole region. No wonder the British, Russians, Germans, and Americans have all sought to dominate Iran.

Freeman also noted that because the United States buys so much oil from the region, it needs to sell products to keep a favorable balance of trade. “This is a significant market for our products and services. We have to sell things to the people who sell oil in order to buy oil. Dollars that we give them have to be recycled.”

Freeman said U.S. generals and admirals worry about the Strait of Hormuz as well. “The United States is a global power. We have forces both in Europe and Asia. From a military point of view, this is a vital choke point. It’s vital that it stay open.”

Paul Pillar was the CIA’s national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia (2000–05). He is now professor at Georgetown University’s Security Studies Program. He told me, “Everyone is quite conscious, not least of all U.S. military planners, about the capability of the Iranians to cause—if they had the motive to do so—a lot of mischief in regard to

closing the strait or necessitating considerable military measures on the opposite side to keep it open, that is to say, on the part of the United States.”<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. ruling elite not only wants to dominate the region but works to prevent any other country from doing so. Since its inception in 1979, the clerical government in Iran has wagged its collective turban at U.S. oil companies and military brass. Robert Hunter, U.S. ambassador to NATO from 1993 to 1998, said the U.S. “goal with Iran is not even regime change, but regime change as a means to eliminating Iran as a competitor for power and influence.”<sup>8</sup>

Please note, dear reader, than none of these “national interests” have much to do with you and me. Sure, we need petroleum to drive cars and natural gas to power electricity plants. But the United States can buy those energy resources on international markets, as do other countries. In order to maintain a steady supply of oil, Sweden doesn’t unilaterally impose sanctions, prop up dictatorships, or overthrow governments. Apparently, God has given that mandate to the United States of America. In reality, U.S. strategic interests benefit corporations whose profits depend on domination of the region.

Aha! some neoconservatives are mumbling to themselves right now. If you oppose U.S. policy, you must be a supporter of the Iranian mullahs. Actually, no. Iran is ruled by a reactionary, dictatorial clique that oppresses its own people. However, that doesn’t make Iran a threat to Americans. As we will see in later chapters, those Iranians fighting hardest to get rid of Iran’s government are also strong opponents of U.S. policy.

The U.S. ruling elite can’t very well tell the American people that we may go to war with Iran to improve the long-term

profits for Exxon Mobil and Halliburton. So the United States creates threats, or exaggerates those that do exist.<sup>9</sup> And that's one of the reasons we visited Iran.

### Visiting the Ghost of Khomeini

Sean, Norman, and I visited one of the most highly guarded locations in Tehran, a place where ordinary Iranians never go. It's the compound where Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini once ruled, and today it is home to some of the country's top officials.

In the early years of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini spoke to throngs of followers while seated on the second-story balcony of his home. That's where we visited. They've preserved Khomeini's living quarters since his death, as a kind of museum that Iranians can't visit.

"This is the famous balcony," said Mohammed Hashemi, a grizzled old man and former Khomeini bodyguard. "This is where he first called the USA the Great Satan. This is where everything started. This is the place," he said with a hearty chuckle.<sup>10</sup>

We were there to interview Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the late ayatollah, who now heads the influential Khomeini Foundation. Hassan Khomeini welcomed us into a meeting room in his grandfather's house. He sported a ginger-colored beard, wore long white clerical robes, and wrapped his head in the black turban indicating he was a descendant of the prophet Mohammed. Some of us sat on chairs. Others rested, Iranian style, on thick carpets and cushions.

We asked for his response to U.S. charges that Iran is a major sponsor of terrorism. "What is the yardstick that de-

fines Iran as a terrorist-supporting nation yet dismisses such a claim against Israel?" he said.<sup>11</sup>

Bush uses the issue as an excuse, he said. If Iran met all U.S. demands, Bush would come up with new ones. "I don't know about his intentions" about a military attack, he told us. "It will be clear in the future. I don't believe the USA has enough power to attack Iran. American public opinion, as well as what America is facing in Iraq, as well as world situation, won't allow the Americans to do that."

Khomeini conceded that U.S.-Iran relations have been bad for a long time, but he blamed President George W. Bush for making things worse. After all, it was Bush who referred to Iran as part of the "axis of evil."

"The first thing is to recognize the Iranian government as an independent government," Khomeini told us. "The U.S. public should force its government to change its opinion in this regard."

### **A Wrestler, the Foreign Ministry, and a Cup of Coffee**

Two days later we covered a women's rights demonstration in front of the University of Tehran. Plainclothes police and fundamentalist paramilitaries known as Basijis blocked hundreds of people from attending the demonstration and strong-armed the press. Sean got shoved around by a cop. Dozens of Iranians were clubbed by the police. The government even turned off cell phone service in that part of Tehran to block communication among demonstrators.

We got back to the hotel that night tired and angry. By this time, Sean's visit was making headlines all over Iran. So the hotel assigned a three-hundred-pound former wrestler to es-

cort Sean while inside the hotel and shoo people away while we were in the lobby. The wrestler had secured a table for Hamid-Reza Asefi, then Iran's deputy foreign minister, who had decided to stop by for an unannounced chat with us.

Boy, did he pick the wrong night.

I pulled out my microphone, hooked up the cables to the recorder, and let fly. Why did the police attack peaceful demonstrators demanding equal rights for women? I asked. "If [the demonstrators] had permission, they should be protected," he answered rather lamely.<sup>12</sup> He knew that it's impossible to get official permission for demonstrations critical of the government. So demonstrators are always subject to attack and arrest.

Sean followed up by asking Asefi if it's government policy for police to beat up reporters. Asefi claimed that the government works transparently with journalists. "I don't know why they [beat people]. They were wrong." In fairness to Asefi, he was part of reformist President Mohammad Khatami's government. A parallel intelligence service within the judiciary, Revolutionary Guard, and Basijis operated independently of any governmental control and sometimes even jailed Khatami supporters.

But neither was Asefi willing to criticize those forces within the government who trampled on people's basic rights. He reminded us that Iran was far more democratic than Saudi Arabia or other Middle East dictatorships supported by the United States. True, but also irrelevant. Iran says it is an Islamic democracy but hardly lives up to the claim. Asefi's responses encapsulated the problem with Iran's political reformists. They wanted to liberalize Iran, allow greater individual freedoms within the context of an Islamic republic, but

they wouldn't take effective action against those who broke the law and undercut the positive reforms.

But the people of Iran aren't relying on politicians to make change. Slowly, and sometimes in small ways, Iranians are rebelling against the tight strictures that once bound them to a reactionary version of Islam.

### The Creeping Dress Codes

From the time of the revolution until the early 1990s, the government required women to wear a manteau or the all-encompassing chador. The chador is a full-length cloth cut into a semicircle and wrapped around the body and head. It is the traditional Iranian hijab, or "cover" for women. Translated literally, *chador* means "tent." A manteau looks just like a cloth raincoat and comes in various lengths.

According to Islamic teachings, women should be modest and cover themselves while in public. But the type of covering varies widely depending on the country and culture. Saudi Arabian and Afghan women cover themselves head to toe, without even their eyes visible. Some Muslim women in Lebanon wear stylish suits and matching head scarves with the scarves pushed well back, revealing a lot of hair.

Iranian clerics, all men, mandated a very conservative interpretation of the dress code in the early years of the revolution. Unmarried couples couldn't even attend a party together. Film director Jafar Panahi skewered this type of government repression in his excellent 2003 film *Crimson Gold*. In one scene a delivery man on a motorbike brings a pizza to an upscale apartment building in Tehran. He discovers men arresting unmarried couples leaving a party.

*Male Policeman:* Come out here.

*Man with Woman:* What's going on? But we're married. Let me explain.

*Policeman:* Yeah, right. Who goes out with his wife?

But rebellion from below gradually forced the government to loosen its policies. By the time of President Khatami's election in 1997, authorities had all but given up trying to enforce those moral codes inside people's homes. Even ultraconservative President Ahmadinejad hasn't been able to roll back most of the reforms from the 90s.

One day I visited an upscale shopping mall in north Tehran. Wealthy Iranians wandered through stores stocked with imported cosmetics, Italian designer clothes, and hi-tech sound systems. In a cell phone store, I met fifteen-year-old Michelle and her mom shopping for a new cell phone. Michelle had the unfortunate habit of losing her cell phone, and they were bargaining for an inexpensive replacement.

Michelle's mom was wearing a head scarf and manteau. Michelle was wearing a head scarf, sandals, jeans, and a green manteau about the length of a long shirt. "When we bought the manteau, it was up to here," said mom, pointing to her daughter's mid calf. "But we shortened it." In the United States, teens like to wear short skirts, and the shortening urge is apparently international. "It's more stylish," said Michelle with a big grin.

Then I asked about a more controversial topic. Does Michelle ever go to parties? The resulting dialogue was revealing.

*Michelle:* Yes, of course.

*Mom:* But only girls.

*Michelle:* No! Not these days.

*Mom:* Maybe brothers of a couple of girls.

*Michelle:* No, Mom! We go to parties. There are boys. We hang out. [giggling] Mommy!<sup>13</sup>

When the boys and girls get a little older, the parties get a lot wilder. At several north Tehran parties I attended, people not only drank alcohol but smoked hashish and even snorted coke. I was more worried about a police raid than they were. (I could see the next day's headline: "American spy found consorting with drug-crazed teens and unaccompanied women.")

By far the most popular illegal activity behind closed doors is watching satellite TV. The government has tried to stop news and entertainment from the outside world. And it has failed.

### Satellite TV—Now You See It, Now You Don't

The satellite TV revolution hit the Middle East in the 1990s. For the first time, people of the region could see timely news and entertainment shows banned on state-run TV. People were fascinated with everything from English-language news on BBC or CNN to videos of scantily clad belly dancers undulating on screen.

The Iranian government first tried to prohibit satellite dishes in 1995, and it has waged a largely unsuccessful effort to enforce the ban ever since. Satellite dish prices have dropped. In 2006, friends in Iran told me you could buy a satellite dish and descrambler for \$100. Most stations are pirated, so viewers don't pay monthly fees. The dishes are affordable to middle-income and even some working-class Iranians.

I sat down one evening and counted over 500 channels available on the Hotbird satellite, including foreign news