



Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, From Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Khamenei

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William R. Polk provides an informative, readable history of a country which is moving quickly toward becoming *the* dominant power and culture of the Middle East. A former member of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, Polk describes a country and a history misunderstood by many in the West. While Iranians chafe under the yolk of their current leaders, they also have bitter memories of generations of British, Russian and American espionage, invasion, and dominance. There are important lessons to be learned from the past, and Polk teases them out of a long and rich history and shows that it is not just now, but for decades to come that an understanding of Iran will be essential to American safety and well-being.

Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, From Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Khamenei Details

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From Reader Review Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, From Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Khamenei for online ebook

Shanthanu says

A surprisingly honest and candid introduction to modern Iran and Iran-America relations, coming from a Washington insider. My only objection to this was the (in my opinion) excessive stress on trying to look at things from 'an Iranian cultural context', which gives it a sort of neo-orientalist feel, when I think most issues can be well understood on fairly universal terms. To his credit the author admits that, and makes it abundantly clear what he feels about the West's role in thwarting democracy in Iran. Obviously, no one book can sum up such a vast topic, but this is a good initial introduction to ancient and modern Iranian history.

Jeanne says

I picked up this book because I knew the author (as a statesmen) and I am embarrassingly ignorant of Persian culture and history. The book is an easy read though not a page turner. Polk does a good job of using history to build toward his thesis that Iran's culture does not point towards conquest but defense. The ancient history part is fascinating and the recent history part (the cold war "domino" effect on foreign policy, the Iran/Contra affair, the CIA's role in overthrowing Mossadegh) helped bringing these issues into context for me. The last chapter wraps everything up into a nice neat package and I thought - heck, I could have just read the last chapter! But since then, its funny how pieces of this book have popped up in other areas. The coup was mentioned in the Economist last week, the "40 days of mourning" was important in the very next novel I read. So while the book took some effort to get through, it was definitely worth it in the long run.

Chimezie Ogbuji says

Excellent, laid-back writing style, covering historical material crucial to understanding Persian gulf and Shia-Sunni geopolitical dynamics.

Julie Ershadi says

It's an OK primer on the country, better for less controversial ancient and medieval history, but lacking in current affairs: SO BIASED in its overview of the disputed 2009 presidential elections, basically asks the reader to believe that Ahmadinejad probably really was elected fair and square. Doesn't even entertain the idea that Khamenei could've benefitted from rigging the vote, implies instead that the opposition was full of sore losers.

The book is also riddled with typos and other signs of subpar editing, such as chronological confusion when discussing some of the medieval dynasties.

Still, it's a pretty good read -- not too dry -- and definitely does help you to understand Iran's political, social and economic history better.

Jenifer says

I am between a 3 and a 4. I thought it was a great introduction to the history and current affairs of Iran. The book really picked up in the second half, so be sure to keep reading. While there is a lot that is only briefly discussed, it would have been impossible to go into full detail on all of Iranian history and culture in this all book. I would view it more as a stepping stone into a full understanding of Iran and our relations with the country.

Dashaun From says

This book really opened my eyes to the rich history of Iran. Ironically since finishing the book I've met a number of people from the country. I thought Polk did a great job capturing the political and cultural melting pot of Iran. Seeing how European nations along with the United States helped shape the country into what it is today only makes me want to dive deeper into the history books. There have to be other civilizations with equal if not more intriguing histories. I highly recommend this for anyone who is interested in Asiatic history.

Mary Graves says

I picked up this book when I read the news that we might bomb Syria -- which I felt a very slippery slope into a possible World War III in the very volatile Middle East. More and more stories stated that this might be a "proxy" war with Iran and I came upon William Polk's "Understanding Iran" -- a history of Iran from the beginning human settlements to the take over of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 -- with comments on the current situation of Iran exploring the use of nuclear power amidst the Arab Spring.

My goal was to at least try to understand the history, culture and perspective of a people before going to war with them in order to understand them better.

Hence, it FASCINATED me. Not a huge book, William Polk goes through the history of Iran in a succinct fashion with an eye to trying to understand their perspective through different periods of history while taking into account the changes in their culture. I learned quite a bit -- and now understand why people in military history still talk about Tamerlane.

I had heard his name. That was one of many invasions of Iran -- and there were, indeed, MANY. This was the third of the Mongol Invasions: Tamerlane. One tribe fought back against Tamerlane and, in response, he obliterated their entire country: their culture, their entire infrastructure and built pyramids of skulls around the country. It was such a complete devastation that 100 years later, Marco Polo and an esteemed Arab historian traveled through Iran and reported the devastation was so long-lasting, that the surviving people were -- still 100 years later -- just groveling to subsist.

I feel this is a must read for everyone -- and feel we should do our best to understand each other -- at a minimum before we blow each other up.

Rebecca Graf says

Attempting to understand a culture of today cannot be limited to just this generation or even the generation before that. To fully understand any culture, the researcher has to go back to the beginning and examine the history from that moment until today. In regard to the rich culture of Iran, William R. Polk attempts to do just that in his book, *Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, From Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Ahmadinejad*.

Polk starts as far back as in history as possible for Iran. From there he discusses the cultural, ethnic, and national identity of being Iranian. It is not just a matter of descending from those that lived there for generations. It is not just claiming a home there. It is much more intricate. The book explores the history of rulers and the impact each new wave of leadership brought upon the people who lived in the region known now as Iran. The see-saw of strong ruler with that of weak ones kept the nation in turmoil and laid the foundation of much of the problems of today. The book dives further into the European influence, revolutionary veins, and the explosion of that revolutionary wave leading to a unique Iran of today with strained ties to the world around it.

The author sets out to understand the Iran of today by looking into the past starting with the original Persians. What most of the world knows about Iran is based on the struggles over the nation and the resources it possesses. Polk strove to get beyond the United States/Iran issue or the Britain/Iran issue and discover “what it means when we speak of Iran and Iranians.” He wanted to get to the heart of the people and culture.

Understanding Iran is a very comprehensive book that does not start during the Persian and Greek wars. It does not start with the end of World War I. It starts at the beginning to get a more complete picture of the subject at hand: Iran and its people. The fact that the book is so encompassing and looks beyond stereotypes makes it a valuable resource. Polk does an excellent job of taking all aspects of the Iranian world (culture, history, and political) and bringing into a logical and understandable kaleidoscope. He lays out clearly how Iran’s past is not something to be swept under the rug as it is “directly remembered by modern Iranians because it is being constantly reinforced” through its own cultural activities, its politics, and its interaction between the rest of the world.

As Polk desired to reveal more of the true Iran and everything that influenced what it has become today, the result was success. He states in an easy to read manner how Iran did not live in a bubble. The world within the boundaries and the world without had huge impacts on what one sees if they walked the streets of the Iranian cities and villages today. He clearly shows how the past is the present redefined and matured whether it is seen in a good or a bad light. There is no doubt what Iran is. Misconceptions are easily tossed aside as Polk examines the evidence in an objective and concise manner. The book could easily have been three times the size it was published at, but Polk wrote in a manner that was not lengthy yet to the point. He takes a country that “has had one of the world’s richest and most fascinating historical experiences” and gives the reader a glimpse into that past without having to spend weeks reading volumes of material.

The book is set up in a manner that can be read just to learn more and not as an academic manner. This is beneficial in encouraging the learning of the history and culture of Iran while not limiting it to those in the upper educational classrooms. It is also laid out for easy search if one is using it for academic purposes with a well laid out index and an extensive notes sections as well as bibliography. The book alone would make a valuable resource tool, but it also helps the eager learner to explore further than the book in their hands.

Missing from the book was any additional material in the form of maps, charts, or images. The book is not

designed too much for the visual learner. The layout of the chapter is not broken out in sections with headings for easy reading retention or for research. Much is absent that would help enhance the book or bring about a more in depth learning. The visual reinforcement is not present in this book.

Wendy says

I've just come back from two weeks travelling in Iran . I would highly recommend this book which is so well written, covering the complexities of a long and fascinating history and of recent events with an emphasis on American Iranian relationships . It was for me a " cant put down book " which is unusual for a non fiction . Iran is such a fascinating and important country .

Roland says

Dry in the beginning unless you like historical details, dynasties, etc. VERY interesting second half that describes Iran from WW I to 2010.

Bryce says

Polk provides a good overview of the history of Iran with particularly interesting coverage of US-Iran relations after WW II to the present. Although the first part of the book might be a little tough to wade through, the chapters covering more recent history provide an important background to understanding the current situation in Iran as well as important insights into the Middle East in general.

I find 2 flaws in the book: 1. Polk is unable to present the facts without making political jabs (thinly veiled if at all), 2. He seems to bend over backwards to try and understand things from the Iranian perspective, a noble idea, but in this case it seems to distort things a bit.

I would have preferred a more straightforward presentation of the facts minus the political jabs and the over empathizing. Nevertheless, I found this a useful read and enjoyed especially Polk's firsthand accounts of his own experiences dealing with the Iranian government (the Shah) in the 1970's.

Abbas Djavadi says

A superb historical and cultural background to understand today's Iran

Nadia says

Fantastisk bog! Virkelig god beskrivelse af Iran gennem tiden, inklusiv de horrible overgreb landet har været igennem først fra Storbritannien og senere fra USA.

Det eneste der trækker ned ved bogen, er at William Polk ikke er typen der sætter sit lys under en skæppe - jeg har ikke en stor paratviden om Iran, så det var svært at forholde sig kritisk til hans beskrivelse af USAs

diplomati under hans egen tid i administrationen. Min umiddelbare tanke er, at han har travlt ved håndvasken under dét kapitel...

Scriptor Ignotus says

A useful overview of Iran's history and some of its major themes. It is not comprehensive by any means, but it succeeds at its stated goal of covering the basic outline of Iranian history and exploring some of its implications for today. The greatest drawback of the book is the author's occasional tendency to make some nakedly political statements; perhaps most shockingly when he claims that Darius I was history's "first neoconservative." No, he wasn't. I wasn't surprised to learn that Mr. Polk was an advisor for Dennis Kucinich's 2008 presidential campaign. The bias isn't overwhelming, but one always senses a touch of the author's personal views in his narration. That being said, Polk's credentials, and the gross lack of knowledge regarding Iran on the part of most Americans (this one included) make it necessary for us to read up on Iran, and this book is a great place to start.
