

America and Iran: The Great Post-Persia Hangover

We never meant things to get out of hand the way they did in Iran. Let's agree about that to begin with, let's agree that the CIA's role in [replacing a democratically elected but left-leaning leader](#) in the 1950s with a dictator, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was understandable in the context of Persia's vast oil fields, and the widespread belief at the time that we were on the strategic defensive against an ascendent and nuclear Soviet Union. Let's agree that yes, there were excesses, as there often are, even in our society today. There was CIA-condoned torture – a lot of it – so much so that if you were to ask an Iranian immigrant from that time about the Shah, he or she would likely tell you that life under the Shah was about as bad as it later became under the Clerics – but Persia was right next to the Soviet Union, and this was an existential fight. Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet, especially when the free world is on the line.

Iran was supposed to be a lock, for us, like it had been for the British. And the thing about America is that it's better than Britain – in many ways, it's just Britain 2.0. More freedom. Better PR. Hotter chicks, with better teeth. That's the promise of America – bigger, beefier, less nonsense, and we can tell the difference between a bad guy and a good guy. Above all, the implicit bargain between America and its overseas pals is simple: you love us, we've got your back.

The type of revolution that occurred in Persia, coming when it did, after Vietnam, was unthinkable. A safely pro-US country turned its back on us, and started calling us "The Great Satan." Worse than couching its rhetoric in a language we shared, the language of religion, they didn't even ally with the Soviet Union. A defection along rational lines from our system to that of the Soviet Union would have stung, but was

also easy to rationalize – we'd just allowed ourselves to get beat by the Vietnamese, because of weak and liberal politicians. In other words, had Persia gone Red like everyone else, well, that's because we were beating ourselves. We were too weak. That was the national narrative at the time. And when you're losing due to some decision you made, when you're losing due to omission, it's almost like you didn't lose at all, right? It's not like fighting fair, *mano e mano*, and getting slapped down by someone stronger.



But Persia went for something new, and pre-enlightenment. They went in the opposite direction of the Soviet Union. They rejected Western systems entirely, and embraced a pre-colonial, theology-based organization instead. It's pointless to debate the merits of their system – anyone who'd claim Iran ended up better off as a theocratic despotism is either an extremist, an ideologue, or a buffoon. They slapped our hand away, *and* that of the Soviet Union. They said, essentially, that they hated us so much, they were willing to invent their own model, to hell with our science, to hell with a better life, to hell with all of it. If they were going to torture their own citizens, they were going to do it their own way, by god, and they did. The smack from that hand-slap has resonated, awfully, throughout our foreign policy ever since.

The greatest sin you can make against the United States of America is to hate us. Is to reject our love. Iran compounded that sin doubly – by threatening Israel, which is still a part of their official rhetoric, and by the aforementioned bad timing of their revolution occurring on the heels of our defeat in Vietnam.

It doesn't take a genius to draw parallels with the current situation in Iraq and Syria. In ISIS (or ISIL, or IS, or Daesh) we see a similar impulse: a group of people who have discounted and rejected American assistance, save in a way

that is supremely irritating (taking the plundered ammunition, vehicles, and weapons of our fallen proxies). To a certain constituent group with which we've become acquainted these last two decades, that we never suspected existed before, ISIS and Iran represent a clean break with the West, a positivist assertion of a moment in history when ethnic and religious social groups could exist outside a post-enlightenment, post-rational framework, and the colonialism and exploitation that went along with it. To ISIS and Iran, there's no fundamental difference between America and the Soviet Union.

I'm against intervening militarily in Iraq and Syria, and have written why at length elsewhere. Regardless of whether you think I'm full of s*** or not – many feel that way – one has to acknowledge that America's behavior in the Middle East has been desultory, reactionary, and short-sighted, which is why, in part, we keep encountering groups that profess to hate us. Once we begin to acknowledge that we were partly (although again, understandably) responsible for creating the conditions where a thing like Iran or ISIS could exist in the first place, we will have taken the first necessary step toward avoiding the mistakes that we will, left to our own devices and current foreign policy, create again in ten or twenty years, and then again after that. The lesson of Iran shouldn't be that we must be at loggerheads with an entire people – but that time heals all wounds, and it's okay for a group to not love us without America going ballistic in response.