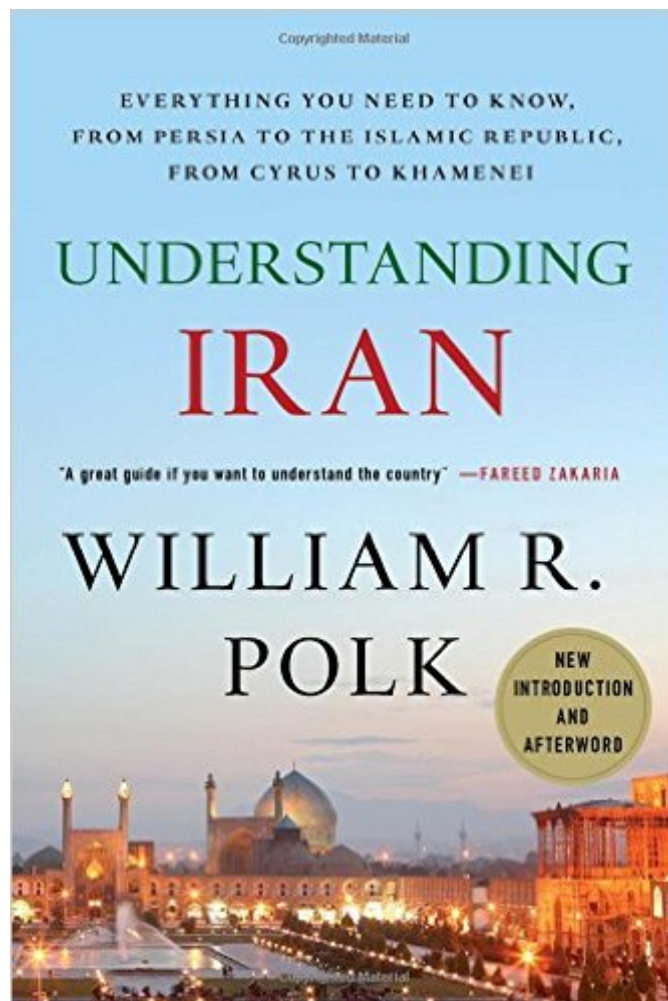


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Understanding Iran: Everything You Need To Know, From Persia To The Islamic Republic, From Cyrus To Khamenei



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

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.

Comprehensive, compact, and accurate. Prior to reading this book, I'd spent a fair amount of time mucking about on the Internet trying to get a picture of Iranian history since about 1900 and how (and why) U.S.-Iranian relations managed to descend to the abysmal depths seen today. I managed to get scattered answers to some of these questions, but Polk puts the story together in a complete and understandable package, allowing one to appreciate the fact the country is not run by a bunch of mad Mullahs, rather Iran has its own set of political dynamics as it works its way toward a more participatory democracy. Perhaps the most interesting part of the story is how the USA managed to turn itself from a country widely respected and admired by Iranians into the Great Satan after the CIA overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 and the installation of the Shah who was, as Polk develops, quite an unstable individual who wasted the country's resources to build up his military to a ridiculous level - one sufficient to single-handedly defeat the USSR. Dissent was brutally smashed by the SAVAK, economic policies benefited only a few, rebellion festered, and finally broke out in 1979. When the nuclear weapons issue raised its head in 2002 with the "discovery" of Natanz the Neocons had taken over U.S. foreign policy under Bush and any semblance of "negotiations" ceased - the U.S. demanded total surrender of Iranian rights under the NPT, not something they were about to do. Had it not been for the publication of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that said Iran had abandoned its weaponizing program in 2003, it seems it was more than possible Bush would have bombed Iran. As Bush admitted in his memoir, the NIE "tied his hands." In sum, a lot of what went on in Iran and what U.S.

I'll have to agree with New Yorker. While Mr. Polk is clearly brilliant and has a vocabulary that is beyond reproach, the organization of the book is fairly poor. It proceeds in a somewhat chronological order but tends to jump around without warning. I like to think I have a decent short-term memory. But honestly, by the end of the book it is difficult to recall with any substantial

detail the temporal order of the Shahs and the significance of their reigns. Polk kind of jumps in and out of modern Iran and ancient Iran and there is a real stream-of-consciousness feel to the book. I wouldn't say it approaches the level of say, Albert Camus, but it is a pretty jumpy narrative. I'm about a quarter of the way through Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men* and it has been a much more straightforward summary of the Shahs and their reigns as well as the origins and significance of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. However, it's difficult to say how much my impression of *All the Shah's Men* is informed by Mr. Polk's book, which I read first. That said, there is much to love about *Understanding Iran* (and really, Iran in general). There are some fascinating details relative to the many, many events and conquests that ravaged Iran throughout history. If you went into the book relatively cold on Iranian history, like me, you would likely walk away from *Understanding Iran* with a significantly more informed comprehension of Iran's perception of the West and its race to become a nuclear country. Mr. Polk posits in his conclusion (and in his afterward) that the international community tends to avoid acts and threats of hostility or "preemption" toward countries that have acquired nuclear weapons. While this notion has a real Kenneth Waltz feel to it, Mr.

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