

The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran

Hooman Majd

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Hooman Majd, a former writer for the *Rolling Stone* and movie producer, is uniquely qualified to write a book about Iran for an American audience. As he admits, “A friend once told me that that I was the only person he knew who was both 100 percent American and 100 percent Iranian. Oxymoronic as that sounds, I knew what he meant. I was raised and educated completely in the West, but am the grandson of a well-respected *Alameh* (learned) and Ayatollah; my first language is English, but I am also fluent in Farsi and am told that I speak it without an identifying accent. But more important, my Western outlook on life doesn’t interfere with my complete ease in the company of even the most radical of Iranian political or religious figures (and often theirs with me), and in my travels to Iran I have often thought there must be a toggle switch somewhere along the electrical system in my brain that is magically triggered to ‘East’ when my plane crosses into Iranian airspace (8–9).” Due to this toggle switch, Majd is able to highlight the very important role Persian culture plays

in Iranian history and politics – challenging the assumptions often made about Iranian clerics, politicians, and citizens.

This is an especially useful work for those seeking an introduction to Iran, a nation more readily associated with black chadors and burning American flags than pop singers and high fashion, but it is not an academic study – a point Majd is clear on from the first pages, where he discloses his intentions to “provide the reader a glimpse of Iran and Iranians, often secretive and suspicious of revealing themselves, that he or she may not ordinarily have the opportunity to see (16).” Still, the fact that the author is related to former President Khatami allows for unprecedented access to the inner workings of Iranian politics as well as a deep understanding of the status of Shi’a clergy in Iranian society.

For those unfamiliar with the nation’s twentieth-century history, Majd provides a good introduction – covering the overthrow of Mossadeq in 1953, the Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the politics of Khatami and Ahmadinejad, the roles of various clerical councils in the government, and the Supreme Leader’s influence, or lack of influence, in post-Khomeini Iran. As Majd maintains, “Still, despite all the political power the Supreme Leader wields, and despite his religious authority as one among a handful of senior Ayatollahs in Shi’a Islam, he is decidedly not as infallible in the eyes of the pious Shias who choose, as they are quite free to, their very own *marja-e-taqhlid*, or ‘source of emulation,’ from among those Ayatollahs (59–60).” The book’s revelations about Iranian politics are illuminating, especially for those unfamiliar with the Islamic Republic’s constitution and governmental organization, but it is Majd’s revelations about Persian society that are most illuminating. Central to Persian culture is the code of manners known as *ta’arouf*, which Majd describes as “a defining Persian characteristic that includes the practice, often infuriating, of small talk, or frustratingly and sometimes incomprehensible back-and-forth niceties uttered in any social encounter (39).”

Majd cleverly titles each chapter to reflect the story told within it. The first chapter, appropriately titled “Persian Cats,” uses the *laat* (the ubercat of the neighborhood) to introduce the *jahel*, the tough guy who runs the neighborhood and epitomizes *mardanegi*, or Persian chivalry (24). In the following and very brief chapter, “The Ayatollah Has a Cold,” Majd discusses the controversies surrounding the Supreme Leader. Despite the fact that he is not an ayatollah, he is nonetheless referred to as a “Grand Ayatollah” by the religious establishment. “If It’s Tuesday, This Must Be Qom,” describes an afternoon of opium-smoking in the holiest city in Iran—with a very religiously devout family. As in many

other chapters, “Pride in Humility” discusses the role *ta’arouf* plays in Persian society in this particular case, in political life. As Majd writes, “[Ahmadinjed’s] deceptively blunt language has always been laced with *ta’arouf*, just as much as it has been an unequivocal defense of *haq*” (110). Like Christopher de Bellaguiue’s *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran* (2005), Majd’s book does not follow a timeline of Iranian modern historical events but instead presents a collection of revealing stories. The author’s participation in the Ashura practice of *zanjeer-zani* (chain-beating, is, like much of the book, told in both an informative and witty manner, “I’m sure I grimaced when they [the chains] connected with my back and made facial expressions that must’ve convinced my family, deeply religious though they are, that I was suffering from a mental illness of some sort, for no sane Westernized Iranian, certainly not one who had lived abroad all his life, could possibly be interested in mourning the death of Imam Hossein with a bout of self-flagellation (p. 133).”

If there is a weakness to *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, it lies in the fact that the work was published before the Green Movement, thus leaving the reader wanting more. Thankfully, Majd published a second volume on Iran in late 2010 (*The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge*); this one focused almost exclusively on the 2009 election and its aftermath, a situation that is still unfolding.

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