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Erlich, Reese. *The Iran Agenda Today: The Real Story Inside Iran and What's Wrong with U.S. Policy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

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To present the recent history of Iran to cohorts of young students is always a challenge. It is to contest stereotypes and fragmented information stockpiled for over forty years in the West, which has created a schizophrenic profile of a country polarized between the Orientalized ideal of a touristic destination—the imagery of which, even more than that of Iraq, stems directly from Scheherazade’s tales—and the notion of a brutal landscape of political dictatorship and religious fanaticism. Western media rarely challenge this imagery, and finding scholarly resources on the subject that are easily accessible in terms of language and description is just as hard for scholars trying to move students beyond prejudices as it is for students attempting to build their critical thinking and understanding of the region. The work of Reese Erllich is a helpful contribution in this respect.

Erllich is an American investigative journalist and foreign correspondent whose articles have appeared in well-known newspapers and magazines, such as *Vanity Fair*, *Vice News*, and *The Nation*. His career spans over forty years, and his fame is also linked to his previous books, *Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You* (co-authored with Norman Solomon in 2003); *Dateline Havana: The Real Story of US Policy and the Future of Cuba* (2009); and more recently, *Inside Syria: the Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (2014). In his works, Erllich distinguishes himself as a critical and independent voice that challenges many of the most common assumptions that have long underpinned American public opinion and US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. His recent *The Iran Agenda Today* continues and expands the arguments he originally presented in his acclaimed *The Iran Agenda: The Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Middle East Crisis* (2007).

The Iran Agenda Today addresses primarily an American public, starting from a simple assumption expressed by William O. Beeman in his foreword to the volume: “For a non-Iranian, ... the ability to understand [the] rich and complicated Iranian social and political fabric requires sophisticated knowledge. Unfortunately, that knowledge is utterly lacking the United States today” (p. xi). This point can be extended to other Western countries, such as Italy or the UK, where the information concerning Iran is often scarce and limited in scope.

After the 1979 revolution in Iran,¹ the relationship between the West and Iran was cast into the contested space in which it currently lies, in large part due to the manipulation of US public opinion. While the key topic of the book is the international relationship between Iran and the US, Erllich offers a political reconstruction of the history of Iran over the past sixty years. In plain prose, the author challenges the Western stereotypical understanding, pointing out the paradoxes that mark everyday life in Iran. He shows the many ways in which public opinion in Iran is, formally and informally, expressed in the country and how it helps to build a form of democratic life in which both consensus and discontent toward the national political system can be expressed. The tale of Hollywood actor Sean Penn’s 2005 visit to Iran with Erllich² (pp. 1-14) and Penn’s subsequent publication of his travel experiences in Iran in the *San Francisco Chronicle* is just the first example of how the author uses the narration of everyday experiences in Iran to problematize existing stereotypes and introduce the reader to a more nuanced vision of present Iran.

While public debate in the West often centers around the Iranian nuclear arms race, particularly linked to a fear of Iran developing a nuclear weapon, Erllich reconstructs the history of nuclear development in Iran and highlights the transformation of Western attitude regarding Iranian nuclear development after the 1979 revolution (pp. 15-50). He points out the continuity between the current Iranian agenda and the nuclear program launched in the 1970s by the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with the full support of the United States and

other Western countries, such as Germany and France. Given the continuity of Iran's aims, says Erlich, it must be the stance of the US that has changed. The author interrogates the real reasons behind US hostility to the present program and, more generally, to the country. Erlich looks at geopolitics and the attempts of the US to seize hegemonic control over the region and its oil reservoirs—attempts that are resisted by the Iranian republic. He asserts that the cause of the hostility underpinning the debate concerning the nuclear program is “about finding an issue that will get...the American public very, very worried...” (pp. 44-45). To achieve this, he says, and to successfully “assert US hegemony in the Middle East, Washington must have a truly evil enemy to combat. Mad mullahs with nukes fit the bill” (pp. 44-45).

While Erlich pays particular attention to describing the direct interests of the US in the region—attention that does not spare the examination of the US use of covert operations, hacking attacks, and international pressure against Iran, as explained in the fourth and fifth chapters (pp. 51-87)—the book also offers a critical contribution to the deciphering of the structure of the Iranian national political scene. In particular, Erlich looks at the interaction between bazaar merchants, bonyads (charitable organizations, funded by the government, which play a central economic role in the national economy), and religious and political leaders as well as the role played by the so call “Deep State”—the interconnection between the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the judiciary, and intelligence services in preserving the regime through intimidation and arresting (p. 88-107).

Erlich's analysis deconstructs the Western understanding of Iranian politics as a stereotypical authoritarian regime ruled by a clique of religious leaders. Discussing also issues such as corruption, civil right infringement, and ethnic and religious minority discrimination, the book highlights the spaces and practices that illustrate the ongoing democratic development that characterizes modern Iran. In particular, focusing on the development of protest movements (pp. 108-139), Erlich testifies to the vitality of the current political debate in Iran and urges the reader to move away from any simple understanding of these initiatives that would classify Iranian public demand for civil rights or gender equality or any denouncement of governmental corruption as an open expression of a pro-American sensitivity or, worse, a request for American military intervention in the region. Rather, says Erlich, protest movements, in particular the Green revolution of 2009, can be read as a fundamental attempt of a nation to define its own independent path towards a more just political system which stems from a deep national pride.

Considering the complexity of Iran and the vexing interest the West has in the region, the book closes with an open invitation to the reader not to accept blindly the message offered by US media. The author advises the reader to approach US news segments and stories with a critical eye, to scrutinize sources, to look carefully at the so-called experts, to get to know the by-lines, and to read foreign press and alternative media (pp.193-194). This suggestion, which works well beyond the case of Iran, can be directed to all our students who want not only to better understand the country in which they live but also to be better equipped to be constructive protagonists in the world in which they live.

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Notes

¹ It was during the 1979 revolution that Ayatollah Khomeini became the country's "Supreme Leader" and declared Iran an Islamic Republic. In the preceding decades, the US had contributed to the setting of the stage for the revolution, as it had backed the return to power of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in a 1953 coup. The coup led to public dissatisfaction with the Shah and set the stage for the unrest that culminated in the 1979 revolution.

² In 2005, Penn , accompanying Erlich, visited Iran on a journalist visa. He subsequently published an account of his travel experiences in the country in the San Francisco chronicle, presenting readers with a first-hand account of life in Iran, one that often contradicted the stereotypical American notion of the country.