

Iran: is it that complex?

By David Berry
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'Did you hear about a man?
Used to live out in Iran
He was luxury's greatest fan
People ate out of his hand ...
Then a priest in Paris France
Made the people get up and da da dance
Sold cassettes for 60p
Said he'd set the people free
We shall see, we shall see
Shah Shah a go go'

President Ahmadinejad

These lyrics from the British band *The Stranglers*, song titled 'Shah Shah a go go' in 1979 documented the rule and eventual collapse of the British and American backed Shah of Iran and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic leader, Ayatollah Khomeini in what became known as the Iranian Revolution. There are many lessons from history involving colonial and/or imperial control, intervention or plainly put, external meddling in another country's affairs, and Iran has its own distinct story to tell.

Simon Tisdall writing in the *Guardian* (Wednesday June 17th 2009) headlined 'Tehran's fear of foreign plotters may be justified' should have inserted 'is' over 'may' because the history of Iran, previously known as Persia, with geographical differences, is a country whose cultural identity is, like many others, a creation against invasion

and a defence of institutional cultural forms created out of previous invasions. For instance, Islam is a foreign import; the process known as *Islamization* was a creation of invasion replacing the old Persian Zoroastrian religion during the 8th – 11th century, as is Buddhism, which was brutally reinforced by Mongol invaders during the 13th century. The dominance today of the Shia form of Islam was itself a consequence of violent internal struggle over religious hegemony. Sunnism (Sunni) was once the dominant religious form, and during the Safavid period (16th – 18th century) most Shia scripts were written not in Iran but in Iraq, although they were eventually moved to Iran and the Safavids were themselves a blend of Kurdish and Azeri people. Despite the conquest of Islam, Persian remains the mother tongue of modern-day Iran highlighting both cultural adoption and continuance, which is a blend of forms harvested by Iranian people.

More recent and influential interventions include British involvement in Iranian affairs, whereby the British forced Reza Shah Pahlavi from office and eventually installing his son, one Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, *the Shah* referred to in the *Stranglers* lyrics above. Both the American and British intelligence services plotted against Mohammed Mossaddeq for having the temerity to attempt to nationalise the British owned oil industry, which eventually established autocratic rule under the US and UK backed Shah of Iran. The British had discovered oil in Iran in 1908 eventually establishing the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which today has a more familiar name, BP.

To a large extent, the possibility that Iran may develop nuclear weapons should be seen partly in this historical context. Despite President Obama's less vitriolic statements recently, Iran remains suspicious of outside interference, including both secret service exploits and the future possibility of a military attack. The other reason for

developing nuclear weapons would be based on parity and balance within the region. Israel has nuclear weapons, so too does Pakistan (a US ally of sorts) and the US have a strong presence and influence in neighbouring Iraq; the country the US and other western nations sponsored and supported in its war against Iran beginning in 1980 and ending in 1988. Western forces backed Saddam Hussein, the dictator used as justification for the US-UK invasion of Iraq; Rumsfeld had shaken Hussein's hand in 1983.

Tisdall also stated that: 'Long-term instability in Iran is an alarming prospect for western countries keen to resolve disputes over the country's nuclear programme and other contentious issues.' It's worth bearing in mind that the existence of nuclear weapons in the US, UK, France, Israel, Russia etc. etc., are also of great concern, and it's also worth bearing in mind that to date only the US have actually used nuclear bombs in Japan 1945. There are of course 'other contentious issues' in Iran, so too elsewhere...where do we begin? This type of moralising, passed off as journalism, is sickening, surely the issue to resolve is removing nuclear weapons in universal terms, but if the US, UK and others are reluctant to initiate proceedings to that effect then fairness in the balance of arms seems to be the only viable option, or at least an understanding of Iranian rationale and justification for the development of a nuclear weapons.

Even if Mir Hossein Mousavi were to be elected, this would not impact upon Iran's nuclear programme. The public fight between President Ahmadinejad and Mousavi is simply a manifestation of the more private dispute between the Supreme Leader, Ali Khameni, who supports the President, and Khameni's opponent, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who supports Mousavi.

It's worth mentioning that Rafsanjani is an extremely wealthy individual (so was the Shah). The issue of wealth disparity is an issue for many Iranians who see Rafsanjani not only as corrupt but also as a part of a very powerful political and economic elite who wish to preserve their wealth and status.

On the other hand Ahmadinejad has the support of a large section of the Iranian working class. This doesn't mean that criticism of him should be abandoned, but it highlights that class is fundamental to the Iranian issue ... post-modernists, post-structuralists may wish to take note of that fact.

Iran is certainly complex and from a purely academic perspective, Iran is equally a fascinating society to comment on, but it shares one thing in common with many other countries; power is in the hands of a political class; wealth is concentrated amongst the few. Perhaps, then, other issues aside, the President could propose even more radical policies than the development of nuclear weapons ... a greater re-distribution of wealth or even place the means of production into the hands of the workers ... just a thought!

