

---

# Sandstorm

*Mark Bowden*

**Guests of the Ayatollah:  
The First Battle in America's War  
with Militant Islam**

*Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006,  
680 pages.*

*Reviewed by Noah Pollak*

Few Americans recognize the name Massoumeh Ebtekar, formerly the vice president of Iran and until 2005 head of the Ministry of the Environment, and a 2006 recipient of the United Nations' Champions of the Earth award for her environmentalist advocacy in Iran. But there are several dozen Americans who will never be able to forget her. In 1979 they nicknamed her "Screaming Mary" for her bombastic, paranoid, and sadistic style of interrogation in her role as translator and spokeswoman for the Islamic radicals who stormed the American embassy in Tehran and imprisoned its staff in brutal conditions for fifteen months.

During the hostage crisis, Ebtekar displayed an unquenchable thirst for abusing, threatening, and humiliating her captives; today, she is celebrated by the United Nations, and like more than a half-dozen of the hostage-takers—including, almost indisputably, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—she holds a prominent position in the Iranian government. A few of her fellow hostage-takers have in recent years become circumspect about their actions, but those who ascended in Iran's government view the incident as a defining victory, a moment when Allah vindicated the revolutionaries and humiliated the American infidels. The publication of *Guests of the Ayatollah*, Mark Bowden's meticulously reconstructed examination of the crisis, comes at a moment when the West once again is confronted by the sinister cast it first met during the hostage crisis—and is facing, quite clearly, an unchanged Islamist ideology.

It had been almost a year since the expulsion of the shah when enraged

---

students took over the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Just days earlier, the Carter administration had handed the simmering revolutionaries a new grievance by granting the shah entry into the United States for medical treatment. The personnel at the embassy had become desensitized to the kind of raucous anti-American protest that regularly filled the nearby streets, and the demonstrations on the morning of the seizure seemed only slightly more menacing than usual. Such revolutionary theater had become a standard feature of Tehran at the time, described by Bowden as a city “in the grip of Islamist fervor, a kind of mass hysteria.” Iran’s leftist nationalists and Islamic radicals, along with a dozen smaller groups, had briefly allied in order to overthrow the pro-Western shah, who had been installed in a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953 and came to be detested by an array of Iranian factions. He was viewed as an American stooge who had plundered Iran and brutalized its citizens for a quarter-century in order to enrich his Western friends.

With the shah expelled, the revolutionary groups first turned against those they considered collaborators with his regime, and then they turned against each other in a tumultuous death struggle for internal control of Iran. “For a student of politics,” Bowden

writes, “being in Tehran just then was like being a geologist camped on the rim of an active volcano.” People were summarily executed, shot in the streets or off rooftops, or hanged from telephone poles. Many of the revolutionaries saw in the Carter administration’s promise of a moral foreign policy the prospect of an American shift away from support for the shah, but Carter had dashed those hopes with an extravagant toast to the dictator at a nationally televised state dinner in Tehran. “It had been a mere formality for the president, a perfunctory salute to a longtime American ally,” says Bowden, “but the words carried tremendous significance in Iran. To the percolating revolutionists, America had once again chosen sides against the people. It marked Carter as a hypocrite and an enemy.”

The students who stormed the embassy originally intended simply to occupy the compound for a few days and to use it as a platform from which to denounce the American infidels and draw international attention to their grievances. When the throngs of protesters started streaming over the compound walls and into the embassy buildings, the embassy staff assumed roughly the same intent, and believed that the Iranian provisional government would quickly chase them off. But after the quick capture of the embassy and its occupants,

---

the hostage drama rapidly became a captive of its own success, and of its utility to the revolutionaries. The embassy compound, the Islamists were certain, was a CIA stronghold, a “den of spies,” full of American devils who were plotting every day to thwart the nascent Islamic revolution and to install another American puppet who would exploit Iran, torture its people, and prevent the realization of the first Islamic utopia in the world—just like the CIA did in 1953. Having accomplished the magnificent and unthinkable feat of capturing the embassy, it became impossible simply to set free the henchmen of the Great Satan. (It must be mentioned that the actual CIA presence in Iran at this time was *three officers*, none of whom were involved in anti-revolution activity.)

By any traditional foreign-policy calculus, storming the embassy and holding its staff hostage was a foolish and impulsive act that served to diminish Iran’s position in the region at a time when the country could not afford to be seen as weak. The Soviet bear was on the northern border (a fact that was fundamental to America’s support for, and arming of, the shah) and a bellicose Saddam Hussein was mobilizing on its western border. Diplomatic and economic isolation invited catastrophe, but the radicals were not thinking internationally. They were focused on the internal

politics of the revolution and the creation of an Islamic utopia, and for them the hostage crisis was a sensational and irreplaceable victory in their struggle for power in Iran. “We rubbed dirt in the nose of the world’s greatest superpower,” one of them proclaimed. Their success was proof that Allah was on their side.

For Ayatollah Khomeini and the imams who were the high priests of the revolution, the eager young radicals and their street demonstrations perfectly served the goal of establishing an Islamic republic. The pious, lathered mobs and factional violence deterred anyone from pointing out that severing all ties with America and its supply of military parts for Iran’s army was dangerous. And in the young fundamentalists—who called their group “Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line”—the revolutionary leaders had perfectly obedient soldiers. The American captives were astonished by the students’ display of “appalling ignorance combined with absolute conviction.” Articulating the impression of the hostages, Bowden writes that most of the students “were shockingly ill-informed and uneducated.... They were confused kids living in a bizarre society that for reasons of religion or tradition closed off most of the usual avenues

---

of growth and self-improvement. It produced young people who were restless and ignorant, ripe for a demagogue, and in Khomeini they had found their man.”

In scenes the Americans found baffling, they were ordered to remove their jewelry and watches because their captors believed such items contained secret homing devices and radios. One guard warned a hostage against sending messages with her eyes, and Screaming Mary denounced the Iraqis for “dropping fancy table napkins over the city contaminated with a virus that would cause cancer.” The Americans thought the young Iranians were living in a parallel universe, a sinister bizarro-world in which American conspiracies controlled events both inside and outside Iran. The revolutionaries very straightforwardly believed “that the United States government was controlled by a rich Jewish cabal that acted, in Iran, in Vietnam, in the Middle East, strictly out of corrupt self-interest and often for the sheer pleasure of torturing and killing Muslims.... America was responsible for plagues, famine, war, and even natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, which were manipulated by its evil scientists. Whatever examples of American contributions to the world—the Salk vaccine, the Peace Corps, billions in disaster assistance, etc.—were dismissed

as ploys or sinister plots to further subjugate the planet.” In a sense, the radicals really were living in a parallel universe; they were devoted to the explanatory power of their paranoid worldview with a zealotry most of the American captives had never encountered in their lives—and it scared the daylights out of them.

With the embassy compound turned into a prison, among the hostage-takers the American captives lived in a suspended animation of terror and brutality. They were interrogated repeatedly, left in solitary confinement for months on end, beaten at the slightest provocation, denied basic medical care, subjected to mock executions, and the daily protests in the streets outside the embassy formed a backdrop of perpetual intimidation. In the daily anarchy of revolutionary Tehran, what if the embassy were seized by a rival faction and the hostages were dragged into the streets and beaten to death by the intoxicated mob, or simply shot in their cells? In the minds of the hostages, such scenarios dangled overhead like a noose.

During the hostages’ ordeal, life outside the embassy compound walls became increasingly unhinged. Friday prayers in Tehran, which had become mandatory for all public officials during the revolution and were attended by tens of thousands, had

---

been turned into an afternoon-long Orwellian Two Minutes' Hate, a prolonged, vigorous denunciation of the United States, Israel, and everything detested by the Islamist revolutionaries. There has probably been no other time during which the thesaurus of anti-Americanisms has been so robustly enlarged: America is the Great Satan, full of "world-devouring ghouls," who "skinned alive the meek ones" and "stripped nations of their resources." At the end of the day's carnival of hatred—the tirades were delivered under a massive, scowling portrait of Khomeini—the ayatollah, in one instance, called on everyone in Tehran to take to the rooftops and scream "*Allahu akbar!*" for fifteen straight minutes.

Halfway around the world, the hostage crisis incensed Americans and proved an intractable problem for the Carter administration, which from the outset insisted on dealing with it diplomatically, partially for fear of provoking the execution of the hostages, and partially, one suspects, because of Carter's natural earnestness in dealing with hardened fanatics and killers. Bowden humiliatingly recounts the administration's desperation as it grasped at one quixotic diplomatic straw after another, only to find that negotiation was impossible with the various charlatans who stepped forward claiming to

represent Iran's tempestuous provisional government. It should have been obvious rather quickly that there was nobody with whom to negotiate, but the administration did not give a rescue attempt—the ill-fated Eagle Claw, the Delta Force's first mission—the go-ahead until the crisis was already six months old.

This remarkably well-done book represents a new pinnacle in Bowden's career as the finest narrative journalist working today. All the skills on display in his previous books, such as *Black Hawk Down* (1999) and *Killing Pablo* (2001), are showcased in this one, but Bowden has created a substantially more sweeping and sophisticated work than his earlier projects. In a story that shifts repeatedly between Tehran, Washington, Fort Bragg, and hostage prison cells, and which includes dozens of characters, he is meticulous and detail-oriented without dwelling on the irrelevant or boring, and thorough in his exploration of people and events without sacrificing the pace of the story. Bowden is a virtuoso storyteller.

Bowden does not intend his account of the hostage drama to be read as a political tract or cautionary tale, but it is impossible not to take note of certain lessons. One is particularly pertinent today, when foreign policy

---

is so vigorously debated amidst the Bush administration's hands-on approach to the Middle East over the last five years. For eight successive American administrations, Iran under the shah exemplified the realist model, the triumph of concern for regional stability and the promotion of American interests over other considerations. The shah was installed in 1953 because in the cold-war calculus of the day, America needed a staunch ally in Iran to act as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism. It didn't help that Muhammad Mossadeq, the Iranian prime minister elected in 1951, had immediately nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, at the time one of the biggest corporations in the world. (*Time* promptly named him its Man of the Year.) Under Mossadeq, the thinking went, Iran was drifting toward socialism, economic stagnation, and Soviet cooption—an unacceptable situation—and in the shah, the West, and most importantly America, would keep the Soviets out of the Middle East and cut off from Iranian oil.

But the shah's rule became increasingly arrogant, strict, and violent. As Bowden recounts, "Oil wealth fed urban enclaves of educated, Westernized, well-connected citizens, loyal to the regime, but the disparity between this small affluent class and the majority of Iranians was vast and growing.

By the twentieth year of his reign, the shah was deeply unpopular, reviled by Iran's educated class as a tyrant and American puppet and by the multitudes of poor and uneducated for his efforts to dismantle their religious traditions." Despite this trajectory, American support never waned; Iran was stable, it seemed, and its regime friendly.

Realism, however, proved blinding. Confident that the red menace to the north was contained through the strong arm of the shah, Americans thought little and knew less about the cauldron of revolutionary fervor seething below the surface. Indeed, one of the key problems with realism that the Iranian revolution illustrates is the not-so-insignificant matter of information-gathering. Trained to think only in cold-war terms, the CIA and State Department were caught off-guard by the sudden appearance in the streets of millions of Iranians loyal to an austere, exiled ayatollah. "The turbaned classes were overlooked because they were considered vestiges, representatives of a fading ancient world," Bowden notes. "But away from the affluent, Westernized neighborhoods where American diplomats and visiting military officers lived and visited, the mullahs had been building a national network of mosques, which waited patiently for the moment Islam would rise up and

---

smite the infidels and their puppet king.” In other words, the American diplomatic and intelligence communities had tunnel vision, an ailment that in retrospect seems entirely predictable given the immense chasm separating the Iranian regime from the people who suffered under it. By relying on a hated autocrat, the U.S. became just as isolated as the shah was himself from the true state of affairs inside Iran.

And then there is the problem of stability, which after all is realism’s lodestar. In a recent article, Jeffrey Goldberg of the *New Yorker* recounts a tense encounter in 2002 between Condoleezza Rice and Brent Scowcroft, in which they argued about the Iraq war. As Scowcroft told Goldberg, “she comes back to this thing that we’ve tolerated an autocratic Middle East for fifty years and so on and so forth,” he said. Then a barely perceptible note of satisfaction entered his voice, and he said, “But we’ve had fifty years of peace.”

Critics of realism, upon reading those words, hit the ceiling. They noted that the Middle East, with all of its ruthlessly stable dictatorships, has been home to dozens of wars in the last half-century. “Realism of the Scowcroft sort,” retorted Christopher Hitchens, “presided over the Iran-Iraq war with its horrific casualties and watched indifferently as genocide was

enacted in northern Iraq. It allowed despots free rein from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, and then goggled when this gave birth to the Taliban and al-Qaida. If this was ‘fifty years of peace,’ then it really was time to give war a chance.”

In Scowcroft’s doctrinaire assertion of a half-century of peace, by *we* he is referring to United States soil, not the nations or citizens of the Middle East. That region—one of the biggest realist playgrounds—has been an abject stability failure, and there is arguably no better example of that fact than Iran under the shah and the ensuing revolution. American support of a hated dictatorship fomented an Islamist backlash that ultimately toppled the regime, and the diplomatic and economic isolation resulting from the embassy takeover—and notably, Iran’s inability to import military hardware to maintain its partially Western army—weakened the country sufficiently to invite an Iraqi invasion in 1980.

The resulting Iran-Iraq war lasted for eight years and involved, among other horrors, the slaughter of wave after wave of child suicide conscripts sent, holding hands, marching across minefields. By the end, it claimed close to a million lives, making it the bloodiest conflict since World War II. To fight that war, Saddam Hussein indebted himself to Kuwait for

---

14 billion dollars, and his desire to avoid having to repay that debt was an important reason underlying his invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

The continued history of war and bloodshed in the region since then occupies the headlines on a daily basis, now culminating in a grand nuclear crisis. So very much of it, Bowden teaches us, is the product not of swaggering American idealism that seeks to refashion the world in its own

image, but rather of precisely the kind of amoral, pragmatic realism that critics of American foreign policy love to claim for themselves. If the post-1979 Middle East is an example of the stability that realists seek to encourage, one shudders to think what instability would look like.

---

*Noah Pollak is an Assistant Editor of AZURE.*

---