

Middle East

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Worlds Apart: A Documentary History of US–Iranian Relations, 1978–2018

Malcolm Byrne and Kian Byrne. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. £22.99/\$29.99. 283 pp.

The documentary record assembled in this book is an important addition to our understanding of how US–Iran relations have evolved over the past four decades. Too often, assumptions are made regarding this important relationship without the necessary archival foundation. The US government must bear its share of blame as it has been too slow in releasing documents. Its declassification rules are too cumbersome and its bureaucracy too sluggish. *Worlds Apart* reflects the paucity of available records, as most of the original documents it presents pertain to the early periods. For the most recent presidencies, it relies on public declarations that are already easily accessible. This is not a criticism of the authors but of the United States' archival administration.

One of the persistent claims made by scholars of Iran is that America missed various opportunities to normalise relations with a willing Iran. Even a casual reading of the documentary record reveals that the story is not so much one of near misses but rather of a fundamental divergence of perspectives between two governments with differing views on the Middle East. The fact is that every US president since the Islamic Revolution hoped to lessen the tensions with Iran and even find some pragmatic accommodation with the Islamic Republic. These gestures were routinely rebuffed by the theocratic state. The lingering influence of the revolution and Iran's poisonous factional politics militated against mending ties with the 'Great Satan'. Iran was never the foremost priority of any US administration, but its mishandling did damage to both the Carter and Reagan presidencies.

Paradoxically, historical evidence does not always adjust our impressions of the past. Jimmy Carter is seen by many as the president who 'lost Iran'. Yet, as this volume reveals, Carter may have had the toughest stance against the Islamic Republic. As with all his successors, he tried to mend fences with the new revolutionary regime, but once the hostage crisis took place, he quickly switched tracks. Recent documentary disclosures reveal that Carter even issued a 'presidential finding' in December 1979 calling for regime change in Iran. This important piece of evidence is not included in this volume, but there are enough documents marshalled here to disabuse us of some inaccurate views on Carter.

One of the persistent misjudgements of successive US administrations is to see in Iran's bewildering array of factions an opportunity to strengthen the forces of moderation. Americans have believed that by adjusting their policy tools they can somehow alter the internal balance of power in Iran. The Islamic Republic has remained impervious to such entreaties, inviting some Americans to try even harder. It was such an impulse that led the Reagan administration into the disastrous Iran–Contra affair.

By injecting primary sources into the Iran debate, *Worlds Apart* allows us to see things as they are, as opposed to how we wish them to be.