



New York: Penguin Press,
2012

638 pages

\$36.00

The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran

By David Crist

W. Andrew Terrill, Ph.D. is a research professor at the US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA and the author of *Global Security Watch Jordan* (Praeger, 2010)

David Crist's *The Twilight War* is a methodical and comprehensive description and analysis of the US-Iranian relationship from the 1979 Iranian revolution until the first three years of the Obama administration. As such, it is an important contribution to the effort to understand the US-Iranian relationship which comes at a time when serious commentators throughout the world routinely speak of the possibility of war between the two nations. Crist is particularly qualified to write this study as a US government historian who wrote his doctoral dissertation on this subject and continued his research on this subject for a number of additional years. He is also an officer in the US Marine Corps Reserve with extensive Middle East service and the son of a former commander of US Central Command (USCENTCOM). As preparation for writing this book, he conducted a substantial number of interviews with US government officials involved in formulating Iranian policy, including many people at the top level of the policymaking process. He also made extensive and productive use of large numbers of declassified documents. The result of this effort is a masterpiece, developed through his skills as a historian as well as his understanding of US governmental processes and military operations and strategy.

Throughout the work, Crist notes the activities and views of various personalities in the White House, the State and Defense Departments, USCENTCOM, and other organizations involved in formulating and implementing Iran policy. An additional strength of the book is Crist's discussion of efforts by various regional allies to influence US policies toward Iran. Saudi Arabia is a particularly important player in this effort, although a number of other regional countries including Israel have sought to influence Iran policy as well. More to the point of the title, Crist uses declassified information to provide surprisingly comprehensive discussions of US espionage and covert actions in Iran as well as the activities of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). He further provides an extensive and fine-grained analysis of the numerous confrontations at sea between US and Iranian naval forces as well as Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks against US targets in Lebanon. All of this is done with a straightforward and compelling writing style.

The actions of the Reagan administration consume a significant portion of this work. There are some solid intellectual reasons for this approach, since the 1980-88 timeframe witnessed a prolonged US confrontation of an energized Iran as well as the Iran-Iraq War. This was also one of the most critical eras for individuals in both nations to decide if reconciliation was possible or not. The Reagan administration leadership, especially the president, basically believed most of the problems the United States faced overseas resulted from the efforts of the Soviet Union. The US administration correspondingly viewed Iranian

events through the filter of the Cold War, and Reagan had hoped the two religious nations could align against the Soviets. This improvement of relations clearly did not occur, and the two countries instead entered into a quasi-war involving confrontations at sea, armed clashes involving Iranian proxies in Lebanon, and extensive efforts at covert action. Yet Reagan was never fully prepared to give up on Tehran and is described as deeply hopeful that the secret supply of weapons provided to Iran during the Iran-Contra Affair could yield important results. Instead, the initiative declined into nothing more than a weapons-for-hostages swap and then a major political scandal. Future presidents would take these events as a warning of the dangers of dealing with Iran.

Crist also writes a valuable and insightful account of the relations between later administrations and Iran, but his access to declassified source material clearly thins out over time. President George H. W. Bush is portrayed as cautiously seeking improved relations with Tehran for some of the same reasons as the Reagan administration, but mutual suspicions made this effort impossible and the president backed away from promised goodwill gestures that were to follow the release of remaining US hostages in Lebanon. President Clinton and Iranian President Khatami also showed some interest in accommodation, but Khatami was too internally weak to respond to the modest American hints about improving relations. Things changed again after Clinton left office. Relatively early in his administration, President George W. Bush included Iran in a rhetorical “axis of evil.” This statement took the Iranians by surprise since they had been working in tandem with US interests in Afghanistan, and did not expect such a harsh denunciation from the administration. The rapid defeat of Iraq’s conventional military in 2003 also alarmed the Iranians and caused them to show an increased interest in a rapprochement with the United States. Such a rapprochement had no appeal for the Bush administration, which expected US interests to be secured by a post-Saddam, democratic Iraq that would inspire other Arab nations and Iran to overthrow undemocratic leaders. The administration, therefore, rejected the concept of dialogue on the basis of neoconservative ideology, although it remains uncertain what accommodations Iran would actually make. According to Iranian documents provided through Swiss intermediaries, they were prepared to give up a great deal, but these suggestions of accommodation were never tested. Also, as the United States became more bogged down in Iraq, the Iranians became much less fearful that they faced a serious threat from the United States. Their interest in an accommodation declined accordingly.

President Obama came into office openly hoping to improve US-Iranian relations but eventually shifted to a policy of sanctions and preparations for war, which Crist describes as “a policy nearly identical to that of his predecessor.” Crist does not directly assert US involvement in the Stuxnet computer malware attack on Iranian sites as David Sanger does in *Confront and Conceal*, but he does state that “[s]ecurity experts believed the evidence pointed to a joint US and Israeli program.” Obama had initially hoped that Iran might be willing to respond to his entreaties for better relations with at least some limited gestures of goodwill, but Tehran chose instead to behave in ways that the US State Department described as “disappointing and unconstructive.” Crist, nevertheless, identifies Obama’s policy of seeking negotiations as a much more

sophisticated approach than has been widely realized. Once the initial policy of diplomacy failed to gain the desired results, Obama's credibility in seeking global sanctions against Iran was dramatically greater. Thus, the United States and Iran were again locked in a hostile relationship that threatened to become more difficult as the Iranians continued to move forward on a nuclear capability.

Crist's book does not end optimistically. He suggests that anti-Americanism remains a pillar of the Iranian government policies and that this approach is unlikely to change while members of the revolutionary generation remain in power. But does that mean that war is inevitable or even likely? Crist's study ended long before the most recent policies of economic sanctions really caught fire. Obama has now applied a very serious stick, and Iran can hardly ignore its contracting economy or the significant drop in the value of its currency. While anti-Americanism may be popular among the Iranian leadership, economic misery may be even more unpopular than agreeing to US demands on nuclear weapons issues. The shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979 partially because he lost the support of the urban poor. These people are now struggling under sanctions, although not starving due to the artificially low price of staple foods. The lesson of a discontented underclass would not be lost on the revolutionary generation, and the rise of new and more pragmatic Iranian leaders is also at least vaguely possible. Meanwhile, the United States and Iran remain engaged in something at least akin to a twilight war.