



Essential Reading Important New Strategic Literature

US, Turkey, Iran ...

Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future. By Stephen Kinzer. New York, 2010: Times Books. Henry Holt and Company. ISBN -13: 978-0-8050-9127-4. ISBN-10: 0805091270. Hardcover, 288pp, \$26.

Reviewed by Dr Assad Homayoun

DREAMS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE Middle East, and especially in Iran, have often produced monsters along the passage of the past century. But now, with the new social awareness achieved by communications technology and the information revolution, it is possible that these dreams may finally materialize.

Stephen Kinzer, in his new penetrating new book, *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*, is trying to explain why and how this could happen and US may reset its position — with a new approach to the region and the projection of a new policy in the Middle East — and shape the destiny of the region, with special relationships with Iran and Turkey.

Kinzer offers good analysis of politics and governments of the Middle East, especially Iran and Turkey and their people's struggle for freedom and democracy. The book proves the author's knowledge and understanding of the region's history and cultures, and of Turkey and Iran as the two important players in the greater Middle East. He describes in detail the two countries' peripatetic relations with the United States and the repeated mistakes of US strategy and policy in the region. He explains in detail the coming to power of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran; their reforms; and how Atatürk abdicated the Islamic Caliphate and Reza Shah put an end to clerical influence in Iran and, with reform and tenacity, preserved the unity of Iran which had been practically in a state of chaos and collapse.

The author examines dispute between the Shah and Prime Minister (1951-53) Mohammad Mossadegh, and the US rôle in Iranian politics in the early 1950s. He reviews and analyzes the débâcle of the collapse of the Iranian Government in 1979 and subsequent control of the Government by the clerics for the first time in modern Iranian history. And he also offers reasons why, after 1980, Turks and Iranians struggled for democracy and why Turks found a version of it while Iranians did not. This, despite the fact that, historically, Persian culture is in its fundamentals democratic and strongly advocates tolerance and respect for all people irrespective of their political and religious ideologies.

The author correctly believes that be-

cause of Persian culture there is far more fertile ground for democracy in Iran than in Turkey. Iran, or Persia, was the first known power to promote tolerance.

Mr Kinzer argues that Iran and Turkey are the two important forces in the Middle East which could work together and rebuild their strong relationship with US and shape the destiny of the Middle East. He believes that restoration of relations between Iran and US could tremendously contribute to the stability of greater Middle East. He believes that engagement with Iran would be good for Iran and the US and that the right approach with Iran could finally cause US reconciliation and partnership with Iran, but his prescription is rather vague.

Accord between Iran and the US would dramatically enhance security of the region — it did so until the US Carter Administration destroyed this accord in 1978 — but Mr Kinzer does not properly explain how it could now be achieved. This reviewer also rather disagrees with the author's analysis of democracy in Turkey. The author believes that Turkey, which he portrays as the most democratic Muslim country (more so than Indonesia or Malaysia, for example?) offers vivid proof that Islam and freedom can thrive side by side. I have doubts about this, based on an historical view of Islam.

Presently, Turkey is run by the avowedly Islamist *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party: AK or AKP). It has a relatively strong economy, has improved its relations with some of its neighbors (notably not Greece), and has become an important regional player. And yet its political direction and purpose is not clear. It is vacillating between Islam and the Atatürk notion of secularism, and recently has tilted toward Islam and keeping a distance from Kemalist secularism. It must be said that Turkey cannot be at the same time Islamic and a democracy. In physics as well as politics, two things cannot occupy a single space at the same

time. Basically, Islam means submission without question. Islam does not believe in equality between man and woman. The idea of democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam in the Islamic theory of international relations. Wherever the Muslim *ummah* is, there is the polity of Islam and there can be no question of checks and balances, of division of power, of popular sovereignty and there would be no real and fair election *unless the mosque stay away from politics*, as it does in, for example, Nigeria, Malaysia, and Indonesia, or in the former khanates of Central Asia.

It seems that US still does not have a clear policy and grand strategy for the Northern Tier region and especially for Iran. The US Obama Administration did make several genuine efforts to engage Iran but the Tehran leadership refused. Not only did the US Administration of Pres. George W. Bush miss an opportunity to enthusiastically support a popular will for democracy in Iran, but the Obama Administration also missed it.

Kinzer is right that geo-strategic reality necessitates that the US and Iran work together if the US is to retain influence in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Northern Tier. [The move by the Russian Federation to capitalize on the collapse of US influence in the region highlights Moscow's gains and Washington's loss.] Kinzer seeks to explain the past and proposes a way to reset US policy in the region, as well as specifically in Iran. But Accommodation with Iran as long as Islamic clerics are in power will not be possible. The clerics are anti-US in nature and their rule is apocalyptic and an aberration in the history of Iran. The clerical administration from its inception has been trying to fight and destroy the Persian past and its culture which has always been the most important strategic reserve and the true savior of Iran in the past three millennia of history. Kinzer's recommendations to the US should be to support the people who are opposed to the clerics and are friendly to the US. After the 2009 fraudulent election, more than three-million people went to the streets of Tehran in opposition against the clerics. It was the right time for the US to seize the opportunity to reset its approach, and to support the people to replace clerical rule with secular democracy. Nothing will be re-set until that happens.

In all of this, Stephen Kinzer's *Reset* is good work and an important contribution to the understanding of history and politics in the entire region in which Iran and Turkey are so dominant. But it may best be read for that exposé of history, rather than for its recommendations. ★