

Explaining Iran's 'Surprise' Election

By [Dave Schneider](#)

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*The dogs of war in the U.S. media bark and, in true Don Quixote fashion, it's a sign that authors Hillary and Flynt Leverett are on the move. In their electrifying new book, *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, the former National Security Council experts – who were forced out of their positions for their opposition to Washington's war-mongering and occupation – take on the growing myths told by the U.S. government about Iran.*

Liberals, conservatives and centrists in the U.S. media hysterically attacked *Going to Tehran* as soon as it came out. The Wall Street Journal derided the Leveretts as "Washington's most outspoken defenders of the mullahs." In a particularly nasty hit-piece called "I Heart Khomeini," Laura Secor of the New York Times called the book "one-sided" and a "mirror image" of the anti-Iran propaganda churned out by the U.S. government. Foreign Affairs claims they "overargue" their case for ending U.S. hostilities. The Weekly Standard accused them of "paranoid dogmatism." The New Republic called the book "an act of ventriloquism," presumably with the Iranian government as the puppet master.



Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett. (Photo credit: Penn State)

When I see a book receive universal condemnation from the corporate-owned media, I take it as a sign that I need to read it. And ultimately every anti-war activist in the U.S. owes it to the people of Iran to check out this well-researched, persuasive and highly readable case against war with Iran. After all, we live in a country where *Argo*, a ludicrous xenophobic hit-piece on the Iranian Revolution, wins the Academy Award for Best Picture at the 2012 Oscars.

As the Leveretts show in their book, the U.S. government and the corporate media work hand-in-glove to dominate the narrative on Iran, telling and repeating all sorts of myths and falsehoods to build the case for war against a large, independent, oil-producing country in the Middle East. *Going to Tehran* sets the record straight.

The book focuses on dispelling three elements of the U.S. mythology around Iran, breaking each into three-chapter parts. First, it challenges the myth that Iran is an irrational state "incapable of thinking about its foreign policy interests," arguing instead that the Islamic Republic is incredibly rational in its fight for survival as a revolutionary state in a region historically dominated by U.S. imperialism and Israeli militarism.

Second, it unravels the myth of Iran as an illegitimate state, by showing the overwhelming popularity of the Iranian government and refuting the unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud in 2009. Finally, it challenges the myth that the U.S. can – or should – topple Iran

through sanctions, diplomatic isolation and the threat of war.

A Strike Against Imperialism

The Leveretts devote a serious chunk of their book to tracing the roots and trajectory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and detailing the history of U.S., Israeli and Iraqi aggression against the Islamic Republic. They contextualize Ayatollah Khomeini's Shi'a Islam, which strongly focused on social justice and anti-imperialism, and they detail the Iranian people's history of resistance to the brutal U.S.-backed Shah monarchy.

Khomeini's thought and popularity casts a long shadow, even into Iranian society today, and the Leveretts give him appropriate treatment. Agree or disagree with their analysis, you have to admit that it's a far cry from the cynical chauvinism of most Western commentators, who paint a crude (and often racist) caricature of the leading figure in Iran's revolution.

Equally important is their handling of the Iran-Iraq War – called the “imposed war” by Iranians. In that war, then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein launched a U.S.-backed war of aggression against Iran. The Iranian people, inspired by the revolution's promise of self-determination, sacrificed dearly to defend their country, with well over a million killed from both sides in the eight-year war. The Leveretts show how the “imposed war” still impacts Iranian policy today, seen in the election and re-election of war veterans, like current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for political offices.

U.S. policymakers constantly refer to Iran as a theocratic dictatorship, but the Leveretts expose this argument as baseless, chauvinistic and out of touch with ordinary Iranians. They write, “Most Middle Easterners do not think that the Islamist features of Iran's political system make it undemocratic. ... For most Egyptians and other Middle Easterners, the ‘main division in the world’ is not between democracies and dictatorships but between countries whose strategic autonomy is subordinated to the United States and countries who exercise genuine independence in policymaking. For most people in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic is on the right side of that divide.”

The Leveretts argue that this divide between imperialist and anti-imperialist countries explains Iran's rising stock in the Middle East. After decades of U.S. wars and occupations, people in the Middle East support those forces that resist imperialism, rather than the Gulf monarchies that kowtow to Washington's agenda.

Counter-Revolution Defeated

It does not seem like four years ago that Iran held its last presidential election, which triggered the so-called “Green Movement.” With the 2013 elections just behind us, the Leveretts revisit some key facts about the election in 2009 that were overlooked and distorted by the U.S. media. By examining polls, debate transcripts, voting patterns and Iranian election law, the Leveretts prove that Ahmadinejad legitimately won the 2009 election.

They write: “The facts were evident for anyone who chose to face them: neither Mousavi nor anyone in his campaign nor anyone connected with the Green Movement ever presented hard evidence of electoral fraud. Moreover, every methodologically sound poll carried out in Iran before and after the election – fourteen in all, conducted by Western polling groups as well as by the University of Tehran – indicated that Ahmadinejad's reelection, with two-

thirds of the vote (which was what the official results showed), was eminently possible.”

Far from the popular rebellion that the U.S. media portrayed, the Green Movement receded just weeks after its beginning. The Green Movement represents the interests of businessmen tied to Western banks and corporations, well-off students, urban intellectuals and professionals, rather than the majority of Iranians. Many Iranians view the Green Movement as an attempted counter-revolution – backed by the U.S. – aimed at destabilizing a popular government that supports the Palestinian liberation struggle, Hezbollah in Lebanon and other resistance forces which the Leveretts examine in detail. ...

Even if the U.S. media refused to acknowledge the truth, the Iranian people clearly understood that the Green Movement was a threat to the independence of Iran. A Charney Research poll from 2010 found that “59% of responders said the government’s reaction had been ‘correct’; only 19% thought it ‘went too far.’”

According to the opposition’s numbers, about 100 people died in clashes with security forces. The Leveretts show that the protests regularly led to opposition-instigated violence, to which the state then responded. Most insightful of all, the Leveretts compare the hypocritical reaction to the Green Movement by the U.S. to the violent crackdown on African American and Latinos outraged at the 1992 Rodney King verdict. The State of California sent in the National Guard and killed 53 people for demonstrating against this racist miscarriage of justice, but rather than condemning government violence, the U.S. media called the uprising a ‘riot.’

Why did a solid majority of Iranians support Ahmadinejad in 2009 and approve of the government’s harsh response to the attempt at counter-revolution? The Leveretts argue in chapter four, entitled “Religion, Revolution and Roots of Legitimacy” that the Iranian people, especially poor farmers and workers, experienced real progressive gains from the revolution in 1979.

In spite of economic sanctions and external threats, “the percentage of Iranians living in poverty – less than 2% by the World Bank’s \$1.25-per-day standard – is lower than that in virtually any other large-population middle-income country,” including Brazil, India, Mexico and Turkey. Iran’s rapidly expanding public and low-income health care services have increased life expectancy by 21.9 years since 1980, according to the UN Development Programme. This serves as a model that even universities and NGOs working in Mississippi are implementing. Literacy rose from 40% under the Shah to 99% in the present-day Islamic Republic; voting suffrage is universal and religious minorities have guaranteed representation in the Majlis (parliament).

Despite Western Islamophobia, women’s rights in Iran have (in some ways) drastically improved. In addition to six months of paid maternity leave – far higher than the U.S. – “the majority of university students in Iran [and] the majority of students at Iran’s best universities are now female.” Some of the evidence the Leveretts present around issues of gender will genuinely surprise readers. For instance, they say that “rulings from [Ayatollah] Khomeini recognizing transgendered identity as biologically grounded, today provide the legal basis for free elective gender-reassignment surgery.”

While Iran still has many contradictions, related to gender and the role that working people play in society, the Leveretts argue that the Iranian people elect to build on the progressive gains rather than overturning them. The Green Movement represented a step backwards in

the history of Iran, and the majority of Iranians recognized that.

Setting the Record Straight

The Leveretts won themselves no friends in the political establishment with their chapter entitled “Myths and Mythmakers.” By far the strongest section of the book, they analyze the neo-conservatives, liberal interventionists, the Israel lobby and the Iranian expatriates as four distinct but inter-related groups that fuel anti-Iranian sentiment in the media and in Washington.

Many of these so-called ‘experts’ monopolize the corporate-owned press in the U.S., despite having never read a word of Farsi. Although these groups do not all outwardly advocate U.S. military intervention, the Leveretts show how even the more well-meaning liberal critics repeat the same myths told by the neo-cons and warmongers, effectively strengthening their case for a strike on Iran. It is disturbing to think that the U.S. media still gives a platform for the most vocal cheerleaders of the disastrous Iraq War – Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* and the xenophobic CIA analyst Kenneth Pollack – to spew their venom against Iran.

Even readers convinced that Tehran has nefarious intentions would benefit from the Leveretts’ book. In 1987, current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivered a speech to the UN laying out a fundamental distinction between opposition to U.S. imperialism and support for the people, saying, “This indictment is directed against the leaders of the United States regime and not against the American people, who, had they been aware of what their governments have done against another nation, would certainly endorse our indictment.”

Facing the hostile threat of a nuclear-armed Israel, and the U.S. military occupation of Iran’s next-door neighbors – Afghanistan, and previously Iraq – the people of Iran want peace and solidarity with the people of the U.S., not another war.

Going to Tehran is written primarily to persuade policy-makers to abandon the current U.S. strategy of toppling the government of Iran. Throughout the whole book, the Leveretts seem frustrated at the very likely possibility that their well-researched case against war with Iran will go unread by politicians. However, the primary audience that will benefit from *Going to Tehran* is not lawmakers, but rather anti-war activists. Anti-war organizers could use the book as a starting point for reading groups and teach-ins about the nature of U.S. aggression.

The disorganized response by the U.S. anti-war movement to NATO’s attack on Libya proves the need for a unified, principled, anti-imperialist opposition to war that seeks to build meaningful international solidarity. And in 2013, *Going to Tehran* is an important contribution to that struggle.

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