



# Iran No-Spoiler Alert



By Marty Kaplan

So where are we in the Iran narrative?

I mean no disrespect to the victims of Iran's terrorist clients, or the existential fears of Israelis and world Jewry, or U.S. security interests in the Middle East by calling it a narrative. Real events do happen in the real world, but people can't help trying to fit them into larger stories. We love to connect the dots. Storytelling isn't some atavistic remnant of our pre-scientific past; it's how our brains are hardwired.

Today, with the advantage of hindsight, a reasonably explanatory Iran narrative would connect these dots: In 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalizes the British-owned oil industry. In 1953, Mossadegh is ousted in a coup arranged by the CIA and MI6, and we put the Shah on the throne. In 1979, he — and we — were thrown out by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Shia revolutionaries, and it's been ugly between us and them ever since. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad never denied his desire to see Israel annihilated, which made it especially scary that he was barreling toward a nuclear bomb. But our sanctions hurt Iran. He was thrown out, and Iran got a new president, Hassan Rouhani, who sent Jews Rosh Hashanah greetings. He said he would come to the table, and now there's a deal.

Good deal, or bad deal? Here's where hindsight fails us. We don't know the ending of the story yet. So we have to figure out a way to tell the story going forward without knowing whether Geneva will be the coffin nail in Israel's security, or if it will be more like the destruction of Syrian weapons, a sign that talk can sometimes be at least as effective as, and always less costly than, military action.

There's no question facts will play a part in how we rate the deal, but there's too much input bombarding us to process as data. What will win the day isn't the power of facts, but the power of one story or another to feel right — yes, an emotion; we will retroactively find the facts we need to make our path to that feeling seem rational.

The public sphere is where competing storylines slug their way out, it's where politicians, journalists, experts and yakkers connect the dots, find patterns and fashion narratives. We take all that in, spoiler-free, in a state of genre-blindness, not knowing whether we're watching a tragedy or an adventure play out.

This process is often accused of being powered by political ideology, moral bias, religious dogma or personal psychology, and all that may be true to some degree, but I think the underestimated driver is our innate need for narrative. Once upon a time isn't kid stuff; it's species stuff.

However, stories that feel right may be clueless about reality. We are chronically required to revise the patterns we see in the past because we're forced to absorb history's hairpin turns. At any given moment, there's a fair chance that the stories we tell ourselves about the world are goofy.

My first job after graduate school was at the Aspen Institute, which was then deep into a relationship with the Shah of Iran and his wife, Empress Farah Diba. In September 1975, their Pahlavi Foundation's generosity enabled Aspen to invite more than 100 guests to a week at the Aspen Institute/Persepolis Symposium, with trips to Isfahan, Shiraz and Tehran, during which the Shah showed off his reforms and the richness of Iranian cultural history. The Institute reciprocated by inviting the Shabanou to Aspen, where she (and I, a peon) attended a trout fry on the Roaring Fork River under the eye of SAVAK sharpshooters. Locals nicknamed her the Shah Bunny.

I can't find the coffee table book about Iran that I scored during her visit, but I did turn up *Iran: Past, Present and Future*, which arose from the Persepolis Symposium. Maybe it's unfair to compare the book with what actually happened in reality, but as for Iran: Past, the name of Mohammad Mossadegh does not appear in the book, and as for Iran: Future, Islam is also MIA.

I forget that level of ignorance is normal. That's how untrustworthy our stories are. That's also what creates an opportunity to appeal to our passions. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry may say the Geneva agreement is a short easing of some sanctions in exchange for a delay in Iran's nuclear program, during which more negotiations can occur. But for the counter-narrative to that, there's Texas Republican John Cornyn, who tweeted, "Amazing what WH will do to distract attention to O-care," proving that the senator is himself something of an expert on distracting attention.

To other storyteller-critics of the accord, like Prime Minister Netanyahu, the dot that threatens to come next after Geneva is continuous with a narrative that began in Munich in 1938, with Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler; includes the story of Gush Etzion, where Jews living on land they purchased from Arabs in the early 1920s were massacred in 1948; and now threatens to conclude with Israel's nuclear annihilation.

For *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit, too, "The Geneva mindset resembles a Munich mindset: It would create the illusion of peace-in-our-time while paving the way to a nuclear-Iran-in-our-time." Yet though Shavit's narrative about Geneva ends where Nethyahu's does, he gets there via plot points that Netanyahu never would include: the expulsion, torture and killing of Arabs in the 1940s, which he calls in his new book, *My Promised Land*, "the dark secret of Zionism": "the nation I am born into has erased Palestine from the face of the earth."

By contrast, a recent RAND report — "Iran After the Bomb: How Would a Nuclear-Armed Tehran Behave?" — thinks the unthinkable. Even if Geneva fails, RAND's story goes, "it is very unlikely that Iran would use nuclear weapons against Israel, given the latter's overwhelming conventional and nuclear military superiority"; "a nuclear-armed Iran is unlikely to extend its nuclear deterrent to groups such as Hizballah or Hamas." If RAND's story turns out to be wrong, perhaps those dual unlikelyhoods will become plot points in a tale about think tank blindness. But if RAND is right, then a pre-emptive military strike on Iran's nuke-building capacity will turn out to be at best temporarily effective, and a nuclear-armed Iran will be as determinative of Israel's existence as a nuclear-armed North Korea is to America's survival.

When no one knows what comes next, the political advantage goes to the most powerful narrators. When no one knows how things will end up, the same events can be construed as signposts toward tragedy or triumph. The Geneva deal may turn out to advance America's Middle East interests; it may be a historic blunder; it may make no difference. But as we lay odds on those outcomes, it's useful to recall that the lessons of history are more art than science, and the art is the skill of the storyteller.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. On Sunday I won 1st Place for print columnist in the National Entertainment Journalism Awards. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.*