Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

Iran is again in the news as the Trump administration makes threatening noises about throwing out the hard-negotiated nuclear agreement and re-imposing sanctions. Iran: A Modern History will be a sobering read to anyone interested in finding out what makes Iran tick. Abbas Amanat’s history reminds readers of the incredible passion and boundless energy that have driven this ancient civilization over the millennia and enabled it to rebound time and again from external challenges. If dealing with unpredictable North Korea is a challenge for the US, confronting the battle-hardened Iran that emerges from these pages could prove to be an even harder task. It certainly would further set back the hope of Iranian youth for change, because Amanat so eloquently argues that American pressure would only help strengthen the Islamic clergy’s hand.

Yale historian Amanat’s absorbing history takes readers from the battlefields of Anatolia, where the Safavid dynasty rose through many vicissitudes, through to trysts with democratic experiments to the 1979 theocratic revolution ushered in by Ayatollah Khomeini.

This history of Iran, which runs to 1,000 pages, makes publishing history not only because of the grandeur of its ambition — presenting half a millennium of history in a flowing narrative — but also by virtue of the author’s success in providing a vivid account forward to beyond the passing of ayatollahs and a monarchy to develop the country’s mining resources. Readers will recognize in the Reuter scandal many contemporary efforts at modernization through the efforts of favored foreign investors, cronies entrepreneurs and local oligarchs.

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Iran: A Modern History
by Abbas Amanat
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YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.

500 Years of Tumult and Still Counting

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