Ignoring Iran: a Hastily Drafted Response to Ahmed Rashid’s Article in the New York Review (Sept 8, 2013)

China does have legitimate interests and growing influence in the region that became independent at the break-up of the Soviet Union but to ignore Iranians in a discussion of Central Asia is unwise and to demonize and attack them, as we have already demonized and attacked Arabs and even Muslims, may be fatal. Rashid’s ‘Why, and What You Should know about Central Asia’ astonishingly ignores the nation that has exerted the most influence there over time: Iran. That author of several books of his own about the region as well as ‘Pakistan on the Brink’ reviewed five other books about Central Asia without even mentioning Iran. Whereas Russia and China are plagued by serious problems from Muslims within their borders who might have sympathizers among the Central Asia Muslim, Iranian does not have that problem.

The Iranians were the first civilised people, meaning those possessing writing and cities, to enter that region, and they have had more influence on it than any other people. Unlike the Indians, shut out by the Himalayas, crossable only by the Khyber Pass, the Chinese, blocked by the Gobi, the third largest desert in the world, the Russians, who couldn’t even dream about that region before Catherine the Great seized the Ukraine from the Tatars, had her former lover, Potemkin develop it, the Iranians can easily enter Central Asia.

The Medes from North West Iran were the first Iranians to establish an empire. They annexed the northern part of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC but their own ephemeral Empire fell around 550 to Cyrus the Great. Inspired by the first ethical religion, the dualistic Zoroastrian, that hero, from Persia, located on the South East coast of Iran on the Gulf named for them, began to conquer what became the largest, most dynamic and most tolerant of the Near Eastern empires. That founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty, whose insane son Cambyses (529-521) conquered Egypt, had as his second successor, Darius the Great (485-465). He organised the
administration with satrapies connected by highways, replete with caravansaries and a pony express. He tolerated local customs, reduced taxes, unlike the Assyrians, who had transported many people including the Ten Lost tribes of Israel and let the Jews, whom Cyrus had freed from the Babylonian captivity, to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, where they soon completed their Holy Scriptures. To smooth out his frontiers, Darius expanded his Empire in several directions. He annexed the land between Iran’s northern border and the Oxus River which flows into the Aral Sea, separating the arable land from the nomadic-dominated Steppes. He even attempted to march from Thrace, around the Black Sea to cross the Caucasus and re-enter his Empire. Ruling from India to Egypt with ever-growing influence over Central Asia, the Achaemenid Empire flourished for almost two centuries. During this benevolent rule, the Iranians became a nation with one language, one religion, one administration, one ruler, and one culture, a feat no one has ever been able to achieve in Mesopotamia, or in the Indian Sub-Continent, but which had already been achieved in Egypt and was to be done by the Han in China (206 BC – 220 AD).

During the early 330s, Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire and extended it in all directions except west, north east into Afghanistan, east into India, and further south from Egypt into the Sudan. He also expanded his father’s own kingdom north from Macedonia and Thrace to the Danube River. His successors in Asia, the Seleucids, began to lose control of Eastern Iran about 250 BC. Around 170, the so-called Parthian Empire arose, whose first dynasty, the weak, religiously tolerant Philhellenic Arsacid, annexed much of Mesopotamia from the Seleucids, whose capital was at Antioch in Syria, which Pompey the Great conquered and annexed for Rome, returning home to enjoy the glory of his great conquests. In 53 BC, his rival who had never conquered anything but rose to power through usury, the overly ambitious Roman triumvir Crassus, invaded from Syria incautiously into the Mesopotamian Desert, where he and his army, weakened by hunger and thirst, were annihilated at the
Battle of Carrhae by the Parthian cavalry, setting off the fatal rivalry between the remaining triumvirs Caesar and Pompey.

Intending to avenge this defeat, Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC on the eve of his departure for Mesopotamia. After Augustus Caesar defeated Anthony and Cleopatra, he decided to limit further Roman expansion. His *limes* in the east ran from the Black Sea, through Armenia, to the Euphrates, behind which he stationed a large army, to the Arabian Desert. The relative peace that ensued was more due to Roman restraint that to Arsacid strength.

From 222 AD, however, the nationalistic and fanatically Zoroastrian Sassanids, who equipping their cavalry with heavy armour, Marc Block described as a feudal society, aggressively attacked the Romans frequently over the next 400 years. Both sides encouraged religious heretics persecuted by the other side. The Jews, who had remained in Babylon when Cyrus freed the ones who wanted to restore their Temple in Jerusalem, flourished in Sassanid Babylonia, where their Rabbis composed a longer and better *Talmud* than their peers did in Jerusalem.

Inspired and united by Mohammed, the Arabs seized Palestine from the fatigued Byzantines in 636, Iraq from the exhausted Sassanids in 637, and Egypt from the Byzantines in 641, but they didn’t complete the conquest of Iran until 656. During its nine century existence, the Parthian Empire greatly expanded Iranian influence in Central Asia, often dominating and taxing the Silk Route, which had begun in the second century BC.

Of all the 7th century Muslim conquests, only the Iranians, proud of their ancient culture, refused to adopt the Arabic language and scorned their conquerors as ‘lizard-eaters’. The Koran specifies that ‘Peoples of the Book’, that is Christians and Jews will be tolerated although reduced in status as *dhimmis* but that pagans must convert or die. The Arabs, however, pragmatically exempted the Zoroastrians from such a fate. A few of the Zoroastrian elite however fled to the region around Bombay, where their
descendants, the Farsis, still practise their religion and a few poverty-stricken still exist precariously in the remote mountains of modern Iran.

The last of the 4 orthodox Caliphs, Ali (556-561) the husband of Mohammed’s daughter, Fatima, because was too haughty and failed to expand the Empire, was assassinated (pace all zealous Sunni Muslims who still deny that fact he was assassinated). He did, however, produce two sons: Hussain and Hassan. The Shias maintain that they should have inherited the Caliphate and that in fact only their direct descendants should have ever been eligible to become Caliphs.

Unwilling or unable to place a boy at the head of their threatened sect, the majority in 661 chose as Caliph the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty. Descended from rich merchants in Mecca, who, unlike the 4 orthodox Caliphs, only converted to Islam in 630, when Mohammed conquered Mecca, the Umayyads moved the capital from Medina to Damascus, where they ruled until 751. They always privileged Arabs over all their other subjects who converted to Islam, abrogating the Koranic diktat that all brothers in Islam were equal. They resumed the expansion that Ali had failed at, annexing the Magreb from Tunisia to Morocco and most of Spain. They also expanded east into what became Afghanistan and Sindh, which is modern-day Pakistan, and spread Islam north into Central Asia and further south into Africa. During their era, the most prominent works of the Greeks about science, medicine, mathematics, engineering and philosophy were often translated by Aramaic intermediaries into Arabic but for art, architecture, civil society, poetry, literature, and manners, the Umayyad subjects borrowed more from Iranian models.

In 751, the Umayyads were all assassinated during a great feast in Damascus, from which only one prince escaped, Abd al Rahman 1. After many dangerous adventures, he finally made his way to Spain, a province they called Andulusia that his ancestors had annexed between 711 and 713, the most distant of the provinces, from which the Umayyad-appointed emir
had not yet been removed. There he became king in 755, beginning the long, slow dissolution of the Arabic Empire.

Descended from Mohammed’s uncle, Abbas, the Abbasid Dynasty (751-1258) moved the capital from Damascus, whose port Beirut sat on the Mediterranean to Baghdad, on the Tigris which divided Mesopotamia from Iran. In 680, at the Battle of Karbala, the Abbasids slaughtered (pace pious Sunni Muslims) Mohammed’s grandsons who demanded the right to rule. Thereafter, the Shia, stressing the martyrdoms of Hussein and Hassan, began active underground opposition to the Sunnis. Though each, splitting into hostile factions and battling internally, these two main sects of Islam have been quarrelling and fighting ever since.

The first Shia Dynasty, the Fatimids, originated in Tunis in 909 and went on to conquer Egypt in 969, where they proclaimed themselves Caliphs. Thus, the three Caliph faiths vied for recognition, prestige, wealth, knowledge and power: an Abbasid in Baghdad since 751, a Shia Fatimid in Cairo since 969, and a Umayyad in Cordoba since 929 when Abdullah al-Rahman III had proclaimed himself Caliph. Even in distant Spain, where the Franks often attacked, Arabic architecture, science, and literature flourished. In Cordoba, in that symbiotic culture, Jewish writers flourished, including the greatest Jewish thinker of the middle ages, Maimonides.

Baghdad reached it height under Harun al Rashid (786-809), the wisest and richest of all the Abassid caliphs. Under him, it became the world center of learning, commerce, art and science. As we have seen, he no longer controlled Spain, which had broken free in 755. Morocco, after the Great Berber Revolt in 739, began to escape his control but it wasn’t until Idris ibn Abdallah founded the Idrisid Dynasty in 788 that he lost total control.

It was in Harun’s court that Scheherazade supposedly recited the Arabian Nights. She had noticed that when his concubines danced before him every night, he would throw down his handkerchief to the one he wanted. That one would be waiting for him when he retired to his bedouir, but she would never be seen again, because she had been beheaded after satisfying the
Caliph’s lust. Consequently Scheherazade fabricated these fabulous, fascinating, suspense-filled, tales for 1001 nights without telling him the denouement so that she could survive. In that diwan, the sources were diverse, ‘Sinbad the Sailor’ originated from India, some came from Greek tales, others from Arabic but a great many had Farsi originals. After Harun’s death, his successor al- Mamuk began delegating as many duties as possible to Persian grand and other vizars. As the Caliphate continued to diminish and degenerate, Turkish mercenaries, hired to prevent other nomads from invading Iran from the Steppes, seized more and more control of the pathetic Caliphate. The end came when Hulagu, the heir of the southernmost part of Genghis Khan’s Empire sacked Baghdad in 1258, priding himself on making a pyramid out of skulls.

Under the Abassids, Islam continued to expand in all directions, not as previously, mainly by military force, but more by admiration and imitation of the world’s leading civilisation and religion. Mainly through merchants and missionaries, it expanded south of the Sahara. The central point was Timbuktu, which, however remote, had its great libraries. At the top of the Niger River, just south of the Sahara, caravans exporting gold, slaves and ivory taken from the pagans from the rainforests south of the Sahel (the vast grazing lands from the southern edge of the Sahara to the northern edge of the jungle), went to and from two cities just north of the desert; Marrakesh in southern Morocco and Kaiowan in southern Tunisia. Several substantial Islamic Kingdoms arose in the Sahel, south of the Sahara, profiting from this trade.

With the Portuguese arrival on the south coast of West Africa in the 1480s, the Atlantic Slave Trade began. They, and their successors, Dutch, French and British, armed pagans on the coast to capture those further inland for export. Well before 1600, far more slaves, as well as more Ivory and gold, were being sent south to the coast, rather than north across the desert. In time the coastal tribes became more powerful and better armed, forming kingdoms of their own based primarily on profits from the transatlantic slave trade, and eventually they were Christianized. Since decolonisation,
the enormous conflicts and wars between the relatively impoverished Muslims of say, northern Nigeria and Ivory Coast, the two most populous, are taking over and trying to impose Sharia law upon the richer and more educated southern Christian areas. The most severe and protracted conflicts have been occurring in by far the most populous and oil-rich state, Nigeria, during which inept and sporadic interventions by the US has alienated both sides.

Islam also spread up the Nile, through northern Sudan (but not southern). The pagans and Christians in southern Sudan have just seceded from Khartoum, which had long oppressed them. Along much of the coast, Swahili developed as a lingua-franca, a mixture of Arabic and Bantu, but it didn’t displace either Somali or Eritrean, Muslim peoples on the Horn of Africa, separating Ethiopia from the coast. An important branch of Shiaism called Ismailism that elevated Mohammed more than any other off-shoot of Islam, flourished along the Swahili-speaking coastal parts of East Africa, south of Somaliland.

The greatest Islamic expansion skipped over northern India, where Hinduism was too firmly entrenched, to convert Bangladesh, all of Malay, almost most of Indonesia except for the island of Bali which remained Hindu, on Mindinao and other southern islands in the Philippines, and also the western part of New Guinea, far into Central Asia. Indonesia today has by far the largest Muslim population.

The son of the pagan Hulagu converted to Islam and his descendents, the Ilkhans, ruled a reconstituted Iran as well as Mesopotamia, more or less unchallenged to 1335 from their capital, Maragha in Azerbaijan. They were never able, however, to wrest Syria from the Mamaluks who controlled it from Egypt. Having appointed too many Jews and Christians to collect revenues, the Ilkhan was assassinated by disaffected Mongol nobles. Frequent rebellions of royal princes vexed the Khanate, as well as Tartar invasions, until it was divided into five minor dynasties. This, the last of the great Iranian Empires of the middle ages, produced outstanding art and
architecture, just before it degenerated under pressure from the nomads. Afterwards, Timurlane dominated all of Persia from 1395 till his death in 1404. His descendants ruled for a short while thereafter.

Around 1500, three Islamic empires contended against each other: the Moghuls in Delhi, whose official language was Farsi, the Ottomans in Istanbul who conquered Egypt in 1519 and all the other Arabs shortly thereafter, except Morocco, the furthest Arab land from Istanbul, and of course the Safavids in Iran. Thereafter the Shia Safavid (1499-1736), who fervently admired their predecessors the Sassanids, often taxed and even dominated from their capital in Isfahan, the Central Asian region that contained the famous silk route. Meanwhile they confronted the Ottomans along the Tigris and the Moghuls to their east. After their fall, Nader Shah, the founder of the Afsharid Dynasty (1736-96) in Iran sacked Delhi in 1739. He removed the Peacock Throne, which had been constructed under the Moghul Emperor, Shah Jehan, builder of the Taj Mahal, and carried it off to Persia before his assassination in 1747.

During the 18th century all three of these Islamic empires declined – a long, slow descent that only ended with the abolition of the Afsharid 1796, the Moghul in 1857, and the Ottoman in 1922. Clearly, in the so-called ‘Great Game’ dominated by Russia and Britain during the 19th century to control Central Asia, a debilitated Iran was the key. In 1907 the British and Russians, who were hostile to each other but allied to France, concluded an accord to form the ‘Triple Entente’ by agreeing to divide Iran. The British Ambassador in Teheran controlled the Southern third and the Russian Ambassador the Northern third but the two ambassadors had to agree what would happen in the Central third. In 1908, they suppressed a nationalist revolution. The ‘puppet’ Shah of the Qajar Dynasty thus became a mere figurehead to the grand designs of the British and Russians. The Kaiser’s hope of an Islamic Jihad against the British Empire ordered by his dupe, the last Caliph reigning in Istanbul, was thwarted, partly by the revolt of the desert Arabs led by Lawrence.
Although the Kaiser defeated Russia and Hitler defeated France, both were rotten racists who failed as diplomats but Hitler was a worse racist and worse diplomat. When World War Two broke out, Hitler, with typical double-dealing, incited the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, an Arab of the Arabs, and thus a Semite, to raise a Jihad against the British. Just as he had earlier proclaimed the Japanese as honorary Aryans when he allied with them to save their face, incongruously, he also praised the Iranians as Aryans, therefore as the ‘superior’ race to the ‘inferior’ Semites. Aryan derives from the same root as Iranian. As Sir William Jones, a British judge in India discovered in 1786 who had learned Persian, the official language of the Moghuls and studied Sanskrit as well, that all the so-called Indo-European languages are related, but the learned British magistrate did not say that the people that spoke them were racially superior. That was a 19th century derivative, which Hitler believed more strongly than the Kaiser had. When the Nazis, deciding who was a Jew, decreed that Michlings of the Second Degree, that is a person one of whose grandparents was a Jew, ruled if that grandparent was tithed to a Synagogue was to be exterminated, but if he didn’t he was to live. The question became so complicated, Hitler’s number two man, Goring, much-devoted to artists and actors, shouted, ‘I will decide who’s Jewish!’ The Shah of that time, a peculiar mixture of Kurdish and other blood, who had headed the Persian Cossack Division, Reza Shah Pahlavi, seemed ready to fight for Hitler. So to stop this, the Russians occupied Northern and the British occupied Southern Iran, deposing the Shah and replacing him with his compliant teenage son.

The Russian refusal to leave Northern Iran helped spark the Cold war. In gratitude for ousting the Russians from Northern Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah became an American puppet – a crucial ally against the resentful anti-Western Arabs, along with Turkey, Ethiopia, and Israel. The Ottomans, replaced by Ataturk, feeling threatened by both the Arabs and the Russians, made Turkey, Ethiopia, the only Christian state in Africa not to be converted to Islam, hated Muslims and the all allied with Israel.
The first of Israel’s allies to fall, Haile Selaisse, was overthrown in a Marxist-Leninist military coup in 1974. When the Iranian patriot Mossedgh tried to reduce American influence, the CIA assassinated him in 1953. Because of American weaknesses caused by our entanglements in Vietnam, in 1974 Shah Mohammad Reza became the leader of OPEC, which quadrupled the price of oil and did it again in 1979. In his expensive effort to modernize and westernize Iran, he neglected the Mulas, so he was overthrown by Ayotollah Khomeni in 1980. The last of Israel’s allies, Turkey, re-elected an Islamist Government in 2011, which has increasingly denounced and even threatened Israel over its brutal policies in Gaza.

Finally, the disastrous Neo-Conservative-backed US invasion of Iraq has handed Iraq, with its Shia majority, to ‘Iran on a silver platter.’ The countless deaths, casualties and destruction that it caused, wholly undermined our efforts to isolate Iran and nearly bankrupted us. The pernicious influence of Mossad, upon whom we so-long relied on for intelligence, has lost most of its reliable sources, because Jews moved out of all Arabic lands, and mostly even from Ethiopia and Russia, although ironically a few cowed ones still reside in Iran. Many now distrust Mossad and some even suspect it of being behind the chemical attack in Syria. Extreme Zionist fanatics, financing APAIX, which has ten times as much money as the very reasonable J-Street, which recommends that Israel stops persecuting the Palestinians, has proportionally more influence on our Senators and Representatives. Thus US foreign policy has been increasingly directed by extreme Zionist fanatics. Into this witch’s brew comes the Military-Industrial complex, bankers, financiers, arms dealers, dubious Wahabi Saudis, furious exiles aiming to get back home, and delusional ‘born-again Christians. Our current policy is not only unsustainable but insane.

To quote an old ditty from the 1980s, ‘I hope the Iranians love Their Children too’. 
Appendix: Additional Data


Iran: Surrounded by porous mountain ranges, the plateau, with a desert in its center, stretches from the Tigris Plain in the west to the Indus valley in the east, from the Caspian Sea and the Turanian Desert in the north to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the South.

Map: Iran

http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://i.infoplease.com/images/miran.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/iran.html&h=499&w=512&sz=37&tbnid=kFsyUFnRrORWPM:&tbnh=85&tbnw=87&zoom=1&usg=__P8Lcu0j7n0I1Q2fwSHaSX2PHqM8=&docid=ogmTsXR_RHUAsM&sa=X&ei=0nsrUv_1FfXK4AOGioCYBQ&ved=0CDkQ9QEwBA&dur=627

Map: Central Asia


Country Size

Indonesia: 1,904,561 Square Kms

Iran: 1,648,195 Square Kms

Nigeria: 923,768 Square Kms

Iraq: 438,319 Square Kms

Texas: 696,244 Square Kms

Alaska: 1,717,854 Square Kms
Population

Iran 77,176,930

Central Asia: 64,746,854

Iraq 31,129,225

Egypt 84,550,000

Nigeria: 170,123,740

Indonesia: 237,424,363 (87% Muslim)

Syria 22,530,746 (minus recent refugee exodus)

Arabs: 422,000,000

Muslims: 1.57 Billion (3 fold increase between 1970-2009)