

## Coming of Age in Revolutionary Iran

*A Chicago author's memoir about growing up in a nation*

*Struggling with traumatic change holds insights that resonate today.*

By Scott Pemberton

Just over forty years ago on November 4, 1979, at age eighteen, newly married Iranian bride Jacqueline Saper grabbed an anorak on a “beautiful autumn day” and let a cool breeze blow through her hair. She was window shopping “the few high-end boutiques” left in Tehran to find a birthday gift for her husband, Ebi, an Iranian physician. In about a year, he would be a front-line surgeon in the as-yet-undeclared Iran-Iraq War. [p. 103] [p. 120]

She noticed an elegant bottle of Yves Saint Laurent cologne, “a gift that both of us would enjoy.” But when she heard shouts of “Marg bar Amrika” (“Death to America”) and saw crowds and raised fists, she caught a taxi home, moving quickly out of harm’s way. Her life was moving quickly, too, toward a destination without anoraks, wind in her hair, or luxury foreign colognes. [pp. 103-104]

Saper’s book, *From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), is a complex, autobiographical memoir about life in the Middle East during the tumultuous years from 1967 to 1987. Told simply using everyday language and experiences, the narrative plays out against a backdrop of dramatic, historic events that have reverberated for decades. Three of the most defining were the Shah’s departure in early 1979, the return of Ayatollah Khomeini two weeks later to establish an Islamic republic, and the Iran-Iraq War (1980 to 1988). Like the country itself and the author’s early life, the book is a collection of paradoxes and contradictions. For example, isn’t the title backward? Shouldn’t it be *From Hijab to Miniskirt*? [[Iran-Iraq War History.com](http://Iran-Iraq War History.com)]

That evening with her mother, a British citizen, and her father, an Iranian engineering professor, Saper watched the television news. Iranian students had seized the American Embassy in Tehran, also known as “the nest of espionage of the Great Satan,” for what would be a 444-day diplomatic standoff with the United States. [p. 103] [[Iranian Hostage Crisis History.com](#)]

Just ten months earlier the triumphant return of Ayatollah Khomeini after fifteen years in exile—and the Shah’s departure—made the Iranian Revolution a reality. The implications became clearer almost daily. During decades of enforced Westernization, the monarchy had banned hijabs, the head coverings Muslim women traditionally wear. The new republic would require them. [[Khomeini Returns](#)] [[Iranian Women BBC News](#)]

*From Miniskirt to Hijab* can be read not only as a memoir but also as a tale of suspense. Tension builds even before the revolution and its repression, grows with Saper’s frustration at living one way behind closed doors and another in public, and finally peaks as she realizes that she, her husband, and their children (a daughter, six; a son, two) must get out. [p. 182]

The book holds timely insights into why Iran is the enigma it is today and why Americans, especially, continue to be mystified by its paradoxes and afraid of what they might be hiding. Ironically, and unintentionally, it provides perspective on current events. Unease, even fear, driven by ever-present uncertainty and restrictions on individual behavior pervades the book. Saper’s feelings at the time resonate with those the coronavirus pandemic calls up now. A related lesson is how quickly shocking, unexpected events can turn life upside down.

Readers also glimpse a side of Iran and its people rarely seen by outsiders. Worries about the country as an emerging nuclear power or bottomless ATM for terrorists play no role—they didn’t yet exist. Instead, Saper speaks lovingly of the country’s beauty, especially the quiet public gardens; a high regard for education and intellectual achievement, and centuries of religious diversity that no longer exists.

Languages play an important role in this story, just as they always have in the author’s life. Farsi (Persian), Arabic, and Hebrew (Saper is Jewish) are incorporated into the text and help readers

better appreciate what it was like to navigate multiple overlapping cultures. Brief translations add context and texture without getting in the way. (An international affairs analyst, Saper had been scheduled before the pandemic to deliver a lecture in Farsi at the [University of Chicago Center for Middle Eastern Studies](#). She's also been a resource for local news media, most recently on a WTTW *Chicago Tonight* panel, [Iran Mourns Soleimani and Vows Retaliation](#).)

Beginning with her childhood, *From Miniskirt to Hijab* describes a life layered in nuance. Each day, for instance, her parents embraced their two cultures, and educated their daughter about them, through routine activities such as afternoon tea:

*As was the Iranian custom, my father drank his tea (chai) from a glass (estekan) to better assess its quality and consistency of color. A three-legged, lidded bowl . . . contained the lump sugar and thin, transparent yellow disks—Isfahani candies known as poolaki.*

*For Mom the rules changed. Dad would pour her tea into a fine English bone china cup with a saucer, leaving space at the top to add milk. Mom never drank her tea black and told me that the extra milk is “the English way, Jacqueline.” [p. 3]*

And, yes, Saper is named after Jacqueline Kennedy, an icon of a third culture. [p. 10]  
Starker contrasts emerge as the story unfolds.

As a Westernized high school junior, a year before her wedding, Saper lives a privileged life that leaves her largely unconcerned about the coming radical change. The Shah will be gone in less than a year, but she is enamored of American clothing, style, and TV—*Dallas* is a favorite. In England for the summer, she resents being dragged away for a phone call from Iran, complaining, “There are four commercial breaks, but I have to get up now.” The call is from her sister with a warning: “Don’t come back. Things are changing rapidly here. The Jewish community is alarmed.” [pp. 41- 42]

When she does go home a few days later, she finds the foundation of her 17-year-old life under assault. The Shah is desperately trying to retain power and has declared martial law; Khomeini's followers are violently trying to wrest it away. Senior year, graduation, and college have already fallen through the cracks. Privilege no longer affords protection and can in fact diminish it. [pp. 42-50]

A fluid, informal writing style allows Saper to enrich her story in two unusual ways. She educates by matter-of-factly juggling the three languages. Another element requires imagination and suspension of disbelief. Readers eavesdrop on intimate conversations occurring thirty or more years ago. Are they imagined or real? Did she keep a journal, work from correspondence with family and friends, reconstruct them from interviews? She doesn't say.

And the backward title? It isn't backward at all, of course. What's backward is the perspective of a reader steeped in traditional Western thinking. Saper's interpretation of "*from . . . to*" isn't linear, and it's not about "progress." It's about change--twenty years of wrenching personal and cultural transformation in a region increasingly, and dangerously, in conflict with itself. A paradox greater than the title is that after nearly a half century so little seems to have changed. P.S. To the publisher: A book with so much to share deserves an index.

*Jacqueline Saper, [From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran](#). \$29.95. University of Nebraska Press. 240 pages.*

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