Q&A with the author of *Immortal*: 
*A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*

**Q: Why do you think it is important that we understand Iran’s military past?**

**Ward:** Iran remains a potential military opponent of the United States, and Americans need to know how Iran has been shaped by its history to better understand Iran’s security outlook and assess the threat it may present today and in the future. Also, military history matters in general because, as historians and strategists have noted over the years, our experience with the past provides the only real empirical data we have about how people conduct war and behave in crisis.

**Q: What made you want to write this book?**

**Ward:** With armed conflict against Iran a possibility after 2003 and no books covering the broad sweep of Iran’s military history available, I saw a gap that I thought I could help fill. In particular, I wanted to preempt a repeat of problems I saw during back-to-back assignments working on the intelligence side of the wars against the Taliban and Saddam Hussein when intelligence officers and military personnel unfamiliar with Afghanistan and Iraq were given duties to support these conflicts. Nearly all would have benefited from help in putting events into a larger historical context to better understand America’s opponents. Also, the emotions surrounding 9/11 and the Iraq War reminded me that a stronger grasp of the history shaping foreign cultures was one of the best means to prevent our own heightened nationalistic and ethno-centric views from distorting our analysis.

**Q: Why do you refer to Iran and its armed forces as Immortal?**

**Ward:** The Immortals were a royal guard of 10,000 men established in the fifth century BC by the Persian Emperor Xerxes. Their losses allegedly were immediately replaced to give the impression of invincibility. Thereafter, almost every Iranian dynasty, including the last Pahlavi shah, created a similar royal guard called the Immortals. I chose *Immortal* as a title because of this history and because it also describes the Iranian armed forces’ renown and their phoenix-like regenerative capabilities over the centuries.

**Q: What did you find most striking in your research for this book?**

**Ward:** Recognizing that there isn’t direct continuity between ancient Persian armies and today’s Iranian armed forces, I was surprised by the similarities in problems—such as maintaining central authority against competing military forces, the state’s relationship with the religious establishment, and the threats posed by technologically superior enemies—faced by Iranian rulers over the centuries and by their resort to common solutions such as authoritarian government, terrorism, and hit-and-run and scorched-earth tactics through the ages up to today.

Also, although I was generally aware of the strains in U.S.-Iran relations since the start of the twentieth century, I was struck by the number of instances in this history in which both sides would be justified in feeling aggrieved by the other. Of course, famous incidents such as the CIA-supported 1953 coup or the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-81 still cloud the countries’ relations. But I also wonder about the lingering impact of episodes such as America’s refusal to heed Iran’s pleas for support during World War I, an Iranian ruler’s sanction of the murder of a U.S. diplomat in 1924, the U.S. occupation of parts of Iran during World War II, and the last shah’s major role in instigating the 1973 oil shock and Western economic crisis.
Q: What do you see as Iran’s traditional military strengths and weaknesses?
Ward: Iran’s greatest strength has always been the perseverance, resourcefulness, and patriotism of Iranian soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Iran’s armed forces also have distinguished themselves over the centuries by clever tactics and the exploitation of Iran’s imposing geography. Iran’s military, however, has consistently suffered from competing military services, inadequate budgets, failures to procure or absorb appropriate technologies, and weak professionalism and excessive politicization among its leadership cadre.

Q: Do you have a favorite story, anecdote, or event from Iran’s military past?
Ward: There are a lot of heroic, sad, and amusing stories in the book, but, if I had to choose one, my favorite short anecdote is the observation made by a Russian officer in the late nineteenth century when Iran was its weakest under the feeble Qajar dynasty: “Persia can be conquered with a single company without firing a shot; with a battalion it would be more difficult; with a whole regiment it would be impossible for the entire force would perish of hunger.”

Q: What motivated you to focus your career on Iran and the Middle East?
Ward: I joined CIA to serve my country, and Iran and its neighbors have been at the center of U.S. national security interests throughout my Agency career. In addition, Iran is endlessly fascinating and it has been a pleasure to concentrate on this country in my work.

Q: You say that you’ve attempted to gain a more Iranian perspective than a Western one in the writing of this book. Do you think you have succeeded?
Ward: I think I did as well as the available information and my lack of Persian (Farsi) language skills allowed. Most of the historical record on Iran, including ancient and medieval Persia, comes from Western sources. But, for the modern era, I was able to draw on the work of scholars such as Mohammad Gholi Majd (Persia in World War I and Its Conquest By Great Britain) and Stephanie Cronin (The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910-1926) and on three doctoral dissertations that drew on Iranian archives and publications. I also benefited from having access to translated contemporary Iranian media, including some Iranian military publications, for the final chapters.

Q: What is the main message of Immortal?
Ward: When looking at Iran, Americans should avoid our tendency to view potential military adversaries as weak and unworthy or as evil and ten-feet-tall, because Iran fits neither category. Immortal shows that Iran should not be underestimated because its military has retained many historical strengths and is much better prepared and motivated than recent American enemies to upset U.S. military operations. At the same time, the Iranian armed forces suffer from numerous longstanding weaknesses that make Iran very vulnerable to—and reluctant to engage in—a direct conflict with America.

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