



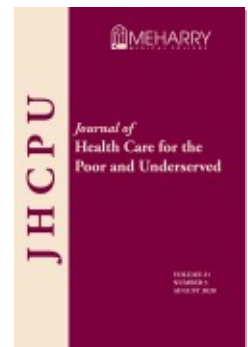
PROJECT MUSE®

A Modern Contagion: Imperialism and Public Health in Iran's Age of Cholera by Amir A. Afkhami (review)

Kusha Davar

Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, Volume 31, Number 3, August 2020, pp. 1505-1507 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/763709>

A Modern Contagion: Imperialism and Public Health in Iran's Age of Cholera by Amir A. Afkhami, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1421427218

A Modern Contagion by Amir A. Afkhami is not only an excellent, but timely, description of the epidemics that have plagued Iran for much of the 19th and 20th century. Throughout the book, Afkhami dives into details surrounding the multiple bouts of cholera and other pandemic outbreaks experienced by Iran and the incremental increases in public health responses that came as a result. The book captivates any member of the general audience, while additionally engaging members of the health care field based on its ability to highlight the consequences in the gaps of care for the underserved, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic we are currently experiencing.

A Modern Contagion walks the reader through the *coronation* of Iran's cholera epidemics in the 19th century. At that time, Iran's public health consisted of religious and galenic ideals that served to describe infectious diseases and guided treatment responses. However, as the century progressed, Iran's public health leaders began coming in contact with the West and receiving formal European education in medicine, which increased Iran's capacity to address pandemic cholera outbreaks. This ultimately led to the country having a formal public health system that was autonomous and clear from control by Russia and British-India. At the time, Iran represented an underserved region and thus formal education had proven beneficial to allow for the country to prosper and advance. Afkhami beautifully illustrates that each time Iran was stuck with illness, the country seemed to have strengthened public health measures, displaying the benefits of a reactive society. The book describes the formation of several International Sanitary Conferences that led to the eventual creation of a distinguished Iranian Sanitary Council as a formal advisory board to the Iranian government. Lastly, *A Modern Contagion* parallels Iran's advancements and challenges in public health growth to historical events such as the advent of print, helping with the spread of information, and increased international travel leading to the dissemination of infection, respectively.

Afkhami describes how the underserved often lacked autonomy and decision-making power due to a lack of resources and capital. As time progressed in the 19th century, the weakness of the executive authority of Iran became more apparent leading to further epidemics, a fractured economy, and the country's first foreign loans, setting a pattern of borrowing and dependence in a global economy. Afkhami also notes additional obstacles, including outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague in the 19th century leading to quarantines, and the closing of Iran's borders and its relinquishing of jurisdictional power over its public health to Russia and Britain. Ultimately, the saving grace of Iran's control of cholera was the adoption of revolutionary ideas, such as the germ theory of disease, which radically altered the perception of illness among the country's

KUSHA DAVAR MD, MBA, MS, is affiliated with Department of Infectious Diseases, University of California, Los Angeles. He can be reached at 3202 N. Allegheny Ct., Thousand Oaks, CA 91362

healthcare leaders and eventually the general public. This led to a downstream series of events including The Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, which made Iran's government more democratic; again, this was a direct result of the public's increased understanding of diseases and the government's responsibility to provide sanitation and prevent disease. With a more representative government and success in disease prevention came increased funding to implement Iran's first national vaccination campaign, specifically against smallpox. At that point, Iran was creeping out of the shadows as an underserved region from a medical and public health standpoint. As the 20th century advanced, Iran opened the Pasteur Institute which helped to promote microbiology and infectious diseases in the country's system of medical education. Lastly, as the Iranian Ministry of Public Health was established, Iran began working with the World Health Organization, helping its public health system rise to international standards and largely eradicate the scourge of cholera from the country. Afkhami closes the book by discussing the current implications of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Iran and the subsequent rise of the opioid epidemic; he places a mirror to illustrate for the reader Iran's past with cholera epidemics and its present with both the opioid epidemic and now the global pandemic of COVID-19.

A striking and timely event occurring currently is the pandemic of COVID-19. As a global community, we are learning from the current pandemic and adjusting accordingly in terms of quarantining, contact tracing, and public health measures to ensure such an event does not occur again. This compares to Iran's prior quarantines during the Bubonic Plague outbreaks and their history of reactive changes due to large scale epidemics described in *A Modern Contagion*. Iran has been devastated by the consequences of Sars-CoV-2 infections, plagued by some of the highest rates of infection and fatalities. Even among developing countries, we are seeing a disproportionate number of underserved individuals falls victim to Sars-CoV-2. In Iran's case, it suffers from having many underserved provinces and regions. The current pandemic has also raised our awareness of sanitary practices for food handling and the importance of vaccines; this is at a time during a seemingly counterintuitive antivaccination movement, not too dissimilar to Iran's experience in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The current pandemic might have a similarly transformative effect on the world, including a change in routine medical and social practices. The pandemic may also change how business is enacted to keep the vulnerable safe, how people travel, and how access to health care is offered. In essence, the current global pandemic has illustrated the importance of prioritizing health as the cholera epidemics in Iran did over a century ago.

A Modern Contagion presents a non-biased and general overview of the cholera outbreaks in Iran in the modern era and is an important read for any audience interested in the transformative impact of diseases on societies. It declares the importance of public health and treatment for the underserved. Infectious diseases more often afflict such populations due to the lack of sanitary conditions and access to care; this is only compounded by a lack of formal education and understanding of the science behind diseases. Such is the case with the current COVID-19 pandemic in Iran and worldwide. Afkhami provides a descriptive count of a series of epidemics that have plagued Iran leading to incremental changes in their public health, leadership, and economy and, with that, positive change has grown out of disasters. This can only serve as a roadmap

for what may come out of the current COVID-19 pandemic, providing some hope and optimism for our global community.

—Reviewed by *Kusha Davar MD, MBA, MS*
Department of Infectious Diseases, University of California, Los Angeles