GlobIS Review

ایران‌شناسی در جهان

October 2026

Iran and the New Middle East?

• *New Horizons in Studying Iran–US Relations* Afshin Matin-Asgari • *The Crown Center: Middle East Studies at Regional and Global Intersection* Naghmeh Sohrabi & Ramyar Rossoukh • *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare* Mahmood Monshipouri • *Rethinking Iran's Grand Strategy with Vali Nasr* Esmaeil Izadi • *When Categories Cease to Explain* Farideh Shahriari • *Global Middle East* Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera • *War as the Production of Space* Aidin Torkameh • *Iran's National Security on the Border of Thought and Might* Samar Saremi • *Dominant Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* Nima Shojaei • *An Impossible Love for the Persian Cat in Lebanon* Shima Vezvaei • *The Axis of Resistance and the New Middle East* Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani

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Editorial Note



Editorial

This issue of GlobIS Review aims to introduce some of the key themes and debates around the rise of a new regional order in the Middle East. This initiative would not have been possible without the support of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University. Dr. Afshin Matin-Asgari served as the special issue advisor on Iran–US relations, and Dr. Arang Keshavarzian's support was essential to this effort.

Since 9/11, the Middle East has undergone profound political, economic, and social transformations. Long-standing regimes in several Arab states have been displaced by foreign intervention, popular uprisings, and internal conflict, while the growing economic power of new regional actors has not necessarily translated into commensurate political influence. As the United States, the region's dominant external power, becomes increasingly unable to sustain a functional regional order, regional powers seek to insulate themselves from instability through coalition-building, political and military intervention, cooperation with emerging global powers, notably China, and pressure on Washington to serve their strategic interests. Any new regional order

that emerges from these efforts will therefore be shaped by intense competition among the region's major powers, the deployment of their full military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, and the role of the United States in containing—or intensifying—violence.

For some, the current war on Iran represents the culmination of these contested regional dynamics.

This issue of *GlobIS Review* engages with the literature on the "New Middle East" and scholarship examining Iran's regional politics, treating these bodies of scholarship as a basis for rethinking the interconnectedness of transformations often examined separately in these two domains. As we will see, scholars in the field differ in their assessments of the forces shaping the Middle East and the extent of continuity and rupture within its prevailing order. Yet many have identified developments that challenge the existing order and point toward a possible "new regional order." These studies have drawn greater attention within the political community to the Middle East as a region, its historical formation and political characteristics, and the structures and forms of agency shaping its transformation.

> *"Nasr argues that Iran's foreign policy follows a logic of survival and that, despite factional competition over the relative priority of security and economic development, regime security has remained paramount."*

The idea of a "New Middle East" dates back to the early 1990s, when the end of the Cold War and the Oslo peace process were seen as opening the possibility of major

transformation in the region's political and security relations. Yet the failure of the peace process, the Gulf War, and increased US military presence contributed to the rise of transnational jihadi networks in the region and set the Middle East on a different trajectory. The September 11 attacks and the US response—the "War on Terror," including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—ushered in a decade of war and instability across the region— an era in which conceptions of regional order remained largely confined to a US-centered order sustained by military power.

The Arab uprisings of the early 2010s gave rise to a popular social imaginary of regional solidarity, centered on the possibility of replacing authoritarian regimes that had entrenched poverty and inequality through the dismantling of old welfare states through 1990s neoliberal economic policy initiatives. At the same time, the rapid economic growth of China and East Asia was reshaping the region's external economic relations, redirecting oil and non-oil trade, investment, and infrastructure development toward expanding networks across Asia and Africa.

The books and other materials under review in this issue primarily engage with five major debates about the ME regional order. The first debate concerns the Middle East and global powers, particularly US hegemony in the region. In addition to works examining the history of Iran–US relations (Matin-Asgari, 2026; Ghamari, 2026; Kashani-Sabet, 2023; Ghazvinian, 2021), this debate encompasses studies of the impact of economic sanctions on Iran (Bajoghli et al., 2022); the effects of security threats and war on the formation of a security-oriented state in Iran (Nasr, 2025); the consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the failure to establish an integrated state (Clark, Lucasik, and Oushakli, 2023); the emergence of a multipolar regional order (Lynch, 2021); and the historical entanglement of war and violence with state formation in the ME in context of the colonial legacy (Robson, 2020). The second debate centers on the Arab uprisings of 2011–13 and their implications for the possibility of transforming the regional order from below. It shifts attention from interstate power relations to the capacity of popular mobilization, collective action, and transnational political imaginaries to challenge entrenched authoritarian regimes and reshape regional politics (Lynch, Schwedler, and Yom, 2025; Andrews and Kinn, 2025; Bayat and Herrera, 2021; Gelvin, 2021).

The third debate examines the rise of Arab states of the Persian Gulf as centers of capital accumulation and geoeconomic power, driven by their growing influence in global financial markets, inter-Arab state financing, and participation in China's

development projects. It explores how Gulf competition is increasingly shaped by geoeconomic interests and extends beyond the region (Hanieh, 2018; Gelvin, 2021; Habibi, 2025; Batmanghelidj et al., 2026). The fourth debate examines how rivalries among competing ideological and political blocs shape the existing and future regional order. Some scholars trace these rivalries to ideological, religious, and ethnic divisions and the historical formation of dominant state identities (Ghahramanpour, 2015; Ahmadi, 2024; Akbari Dizgah, 2022). Others examine how these rivalries translate into political and military pacts and alliances, including the Abraham Accords, the "Axis of Resistance," and the Mecca Pact (Fakhro, 2025; Azizi, 2026; Batmanghelidj et al., 2026). Finally, the fifth debate addresses the regional repercussions of the Israeli–Palestinian war and the ways in which its expansion is transforming the Middle East, marking a departure from four decades of largely covert hostilities between Iran and the US. (Nasr, 2025; "Iran War" roundtables, Crown Center, 2026).

This issue includes two interviews with scholars specializing in the region, reviews of seven books recently published in English, translations of five analytical pieces from the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, and reviews of three books published in Iran, including two on international relations and

> *"Blending the forms of a novel, travelogue, and documentary narrative, the book follows his journey to Beirut to make a documentary about Imam Musa al-Sadr."*

a novel recounting the journey to Beirut of a young writer supportive of the Islamic Republic. Eight additional books are featured in the short reviews section.

In a conversation on the history of Middle East studies and recent regional developments, Arang Keshavarzian speaks with Naghmeh Sohrabi and Ramyar Rossoukh, directors at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies. Drawing on the Center's two decades of experience, they discuss the importance of regional and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the Middle East as an interconnected space, the political challenges of conducting field research in the region, the limited availability of new teaching positions, and constraints on comparative research. They argue that the Middle East has been continuously changing and that claims about the emergence of a "new order" require further research and more evidence.

The Middle East and Global Powers

The opening interview in this issue is with Afshin Matin-Asgari, author of *Axis of Empire: A History of Iran–U.S. Relations* (2026) and an adviser to this issue on Iran–US relations. We discuss the significance of Iran–US relations in shaping the regional order, as well as his views on the Islamic Republic's anti-imperialism and the prospects for normalizing relations with the United States and ending hostilities with Israel. The issue also features short reviews of several recent books on Iran–US relations, including John Ghazvinian's *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present* (2021), Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran* (2023), Behrooz Ghamari's *The Long War against Iran: Recent Events, Old Questions* (2026), and Nader Entessar and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi's *Trump and Iran* (2019), which examines the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, the reimposition of sanctions, and its regime-change policy. However, most reviews in this section engage with international relations literature examining the consequences of US interventions in the region, including sanctions, military intervention, and involvement in regional wars. *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare* (2024), by Narges Bajoghli et al., suggests that sanctions functioned as an invisible war against civilians and, contrary to their intended purpose, have encouraged militarization, strengthened Iran's ties with Russia and China, and marginalized advocates of engagement with the West. Mahmood Monshipouri finds the book's analysis of sanctions valid, and its anticipation of sanctions' shift into warfare consistent with subsequent developments.

Vali Nasr's *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History* (2025) traces the Islamic Republic's

formation back to the revolutionary period, emphasizing how insecurity stemming from the United States and the Iran–Iraq War shaped its security-oriented state. Nasr argues that Iran's foreign policy follows a logic of survival and that, despite factional competition over the relative priority of security and economic development, regime security has remained paramount. In his review, Esmail Izadi argues that Nasr's account of government rationality under the Islamic Republic is state-centred and persuasive from this perspective, but it underestimates the role of its ideology in foreign policy and sidelines tensions already emerging from the imbalance between survival and inclusive development in the country.

A Thousand Saddams: The Fate of Iraq's Democracy (2023), a conversation with Killian Clarke, Candace Lukasik, and Kerem Uşşaklı, examines the decentralization of coercive power in Iraq, where parliament is dominated by parties closely linked to militias. It suggests that the United States failed to build a state capable of securing broad political consensus and curbing authoritarianism. The current government has also failed to match Saddam's regime in providing basic services and infrastructure.

Gelvin's *The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheavals* (2021) links the expansion of regional states' military and security capacities to heightened insecurity and perceptions of existential threat following the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, arguing that regional actors increasingly came to wage wars that during the Cold War had often been driven by global powers.

Lara Robson's *The Politics of Mass Violence in the Middle East* (2020) traces the historical entanglement of war and violence with state-building in the region through three stages: the colonial use of exceptional violence to sectarianize and divide the Ottoman Empire; postcolonial states' adoption of violent colonial practices to claim territory and eliminate rivals; and twentieth-century foreign interventions aimed at securing access to oil and containing communism, or justified by efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and provide humanitarian assistance.

The Arab Uprisings as Social Transformation

The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings (2025), edited by Lynch, Schwedler, and Yom, examines scholarship on Arab politics produced in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. In her review, Farideh Shahriari notes that the contributors' findings challenge the myth of the absence of pro-democracy forces in the Middle East. Yet they caution against generalizing from their findings given the uneven trajectories of democratic change across societies and

states, and consider talk of a "new Middle East" premature in the absence of a coherent and durable regional order. *The Global Middle East* (2021), edited by Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, examines how transnational exchanges and global interconnectedness shape the region's political, cultural, economic, and social formations. It traces these connections through music, football, food, globalized fashion such as the keffiyeh, solidarity with regional protest movements and the circulation of their images, as well as migrant workers and diasporic communities, arguing that these exchanges transform societies on both sides. The introduction has been summarized and edited under the editors' supervision for republication in this issue.

Nader Andrawos and Daniel Neap's (2025) conversation with the Crown Center examines recent political developments in Syria and its gradual emergence from isolation under Ahmed al-Sharaa, the first Syrian leader to address the General Assembly since 1967. *Syria's Uncertain Transition* argues that Sharaa's government must engage with civil society, while the transition remains uncertain partly because of the risk of ethnic and sectarian fragmentation, despite the integrative aspirations of civil-society networks and grassroots groups that emerged during the collapse of the Assad state. Gelvin (2021) likewise identifies the Arab uprisings as a major force in transforming the Middle East, with contributions to his volume tracing instances of passive revolution in some monarchies, welfare reforms in others, and the incorporation of Islamist movements into parliaments, alongside the growing moderation of some movements and the repression of others.

The Emerging Geoeconomics of the Persian Gulf

The oil economy has long been viewed as the foundation of the region's economic order, a driver of colonialism and foreign intervention, and a pillar of authoritarian rule. Against this background, debates over changing patterns of economic development in the Gulf states—which have emerged over the past three decades as major centers of capital and wealth accumulation—constitute another line of argument in scholarship on transformations in the Middle Eastern order. Rohan Advani's review of *Money, Markets, and Monarchies,* which details the inexorable links between regional economic liberalization, the expansion of Gulf capital and the entrenchment of monarchical power across the region, was translated and published in our special issue on Persian Gulf Studies. In this book, Hanieh traces the relocation of the Middle East's financial center from Lebanon to the Gulf and the transformation of the GCC financial markets into a vital space for Middle Eastern capitalism. A substantial share of foreign

investment in the financial sectors of major Arab countries is linked to GCC capital. This issue reviews Laleh Khalili's *Sinews of War and Trade* (2020), which examines the intersection of oil, war, and maritime trade in the development of capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula. Recently translated into Persian, the book shows how regional capitalism has been fueled by wars and "war spoils," from the Suez Crisis to the Iraq War, while reshaping the region's geography through maritime infrastructure, trade routes, and new ports and urban centers. In his review, Aidin Torkameh argues that the book contributes to understanding the development of capitalism in the region and how it differs from factory-based industrialization: the region's oil and construction giants have emerged largely through the production of space itself. On the other hand, Nader Habibi (2025) and Kahalzadeh (2026) emphasize China's role in providing these states with a new economic landscape and the potential to shift away from geopolitical conflicts. Habibi argues that China's emergence as a trading partner and investor has given governments facing domestic pressure to avoid geopolitical competition an opportunity to pursue economic reform. Kahalzadeh extends this argument to Turkey, arguing that China has provided Saudi Arabia and Turkey—both of which had encountered setbacks in their interventionist policies toward their neighbors—with the tools and confidence to pursue de-escalation and move toward investment in infrastructure and regional cooperation.

Competing Political and Ideological Blocs

The emergence of a multipolar order in the Middle East is driven by different factors; as noted above, this includes the role of global powers in heightening regional insecurity, the impact of the Arab Spring on both political reform and instability, and economic transformations that have shifted the region's centers of power. However, current scholarship has also examined the political and ideological dimensions of this multipolar system, and its inner conflicts, the weakness of mechanisms for resolving conflicts without resorting to force, and patterns of coalition-building for proxy wars.

Raihan Ismail (2023), in *Saudi Salafi Clerics under MBS: Reform and Survival*, examines the simultaneous decline of political Islam and conservative Islam in the country. She notes that enforcing Islamic norms expanded during the 1970s, followed by two decades of growing Salafism after the Iran Revolution. However, due to international scrutiny of Salafism and its undeniable association with the rise of ISIS in the post-September era, the Saudi leadership distanced itself from the movement. Today, Saudi Arabia is seeking to

construct a form of nationalism alongside a project of economic regionalism.

Among recent international relations scholarship on Iran, studies that explore the role of ideology and political identity in shaping the region's growing conflicts are popular. One is *Political Currents in the Middle East and Iran's National Security*, a university text by Hamid Ahmadi that examines Iran's security challenges through six ideological and identity-based currents in the region: Pan-Arabism, Pan-Turkism, Jewish nationalism and Zionism, Marxism, Islamism, and ethnic nationalism. He argues that Iran's shift toward a "transnational idealism" following the US invasion of Iraq, and its support for Islamic movements in the region, intensified the conflicts with the Arab world and existing sanctions. In her review, Samer Saremi appreciates the book's framing of Iran's security challenges, while noting that it gives less attention to divisions within ideological blocs and political alliances that cross identity boundaries.

In *Identity and Foreign Policy in Iran and the Middle East*, Rahman Ghahramanpour examines four regional states through the lens of their dominant state identities and explores how these identities shape their definitions of national interests and foreign policy. According to him, the Islamic Republic's dominant identity is shaped by political Islam, revolutionary ideology, and Shi'i ideology, just as Kemalism/post-Kemalism, Pan-Arabism, and Zionism emerged from different combinations of ideological elements at particular historical junctures. These identities may adapt to changing circumstances or become increasingly rigid, potentially obscuring underlying national interests—a risk he identifies in both Iran and Israel. In his review, Nima Shojaei appreciates the book's grounding in historical sociology but notes its limited attention to the role of foreign intervention and economic interests in rendering these ideologies more rigid.

Beyrut (2022) by Ebrahim Akbari Dizgah is an account of the waning of transnational ideological solidarity as experienced by a young Islamic intellectual from Iran. Blending the forms of a novel, travelogue, and documentary narrative, the book follows his journey to Beirut to make a documentary about Imam Musa al-Sadr. A popular read in Tehran, the book portrays Beirut's Shi'i district of Dahiyeh as increasingly marked by sectarian divisions, contrasting this with al-Sadr's vision of Sunni-Shi'i-Christian unity. It urges readers to confront today's "Beyrut" rather than romanticize solidarity with Lebanon's Shi'a. In her review, Shima Vezvaei interprets the fading of transnational solidarities, the author's enthusiastic return to Iran, and his turn toward nationalism as signs of a new generation of Muslim intellectuals coming to terms with the end of the Islamic solidarity era.

Another group of studies in this field examines existing military-security pacts, institutions, and agreements rather than states' ideological orientations. Elham Fakhro (2025) examines the Abraham Accords and their success in establishing formal relations between Arab states and Israel—an agreement whose very name was intended to evoke reconciliation among the three Abrahamic faiths. She argues that Washington's growing focus on expanding normalization with Israel came at the expense of attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reinforcing conditions that contributed to regional instability. We introduced her book in the short reviews section of this issue.

Hamidreza Azizi (2026), in *The Axis of Resistance: Iran, Israel, and the Struggle for the Middle East*, reviewed in this issue by Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani, examines the so-called "Axis of Resistance" from Iran's perspective, defining it as an umbrella for resisting a much stronger adversary by distributing "vulnerability." He traces its development through four stages: the revolutionary period and the idea of exporting the revolution; the post-2003 creation of coordinated networks for Iran's preemptive defense; its expansion during the war against ISIS and the instability following the Arab uprisings; and its post-Soleimani transformation into a more horizontal structure with considerable autonomy. He argues that the Axis was intended to compensate for Iran's "strategic loneliness," but that its strength was weakened by the Gaza war, limiting its effectiveness as a deterrent.

Arash Reisinezhad's *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*. (2019), reviewed in this issue by Hamidreza Yousefi, traces Iran's use of non-state actors for regional alliance-building during the Pahlavi era and the Cold War. He shows how, fearing the rise of Pan-Arabism following the overthrow of Iraq's monarchy in 1958, the Shah pursued a policy of cultivating Lebanon's Shi'a and supporting Iraqi Kurds. This history suggests that alliances with non-state actors stem less from recent regional multipolarity or Iran's "strategic loneliness" than from the absence of regional agreements prohibiting interference in internal affairs. Sunni-Shi'i polarization and competing Saudi- and Turkey-led alignments offer further examples of alliance-building through non-state actors in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

The Question of Palestine and the Israel–Iran Conflict

The wars ignited by the October 7 Hamas attack demonstrated how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could expand beyond immediate neighbours, reigniting old hostilities between Israel and Iran—contained and managed for more than four decades—and drawing fuel from tensions in Iran–US relations. Israel's response to the Hamas attack

has been devastating and, according to a UN report (Report 227), has resulted in more than 73,000 deaths by June 2026. Accordingly, some scholars examining the regional order in the Middle East identify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a fifth factor shaping the solidarities and conflicts that structure the region, particularly when the conflict extends beyond its conventional boundaries.

Vali Nasr (2025) views the expansion of the Gaza war to Iran as the inevitable consequence of Iran's collapsed deterrence. He argues that, as Israel gained the upper hand over resistance in Gaza, Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Syria could no longer serve as effective deterrents against an Israeli attack. Israeli strikes on Hezbollah severely weakened its capacity to fight in Syria, contributing to the collapse of the Assad regime and leaving Israel prepared to strike Iran directly. In June 2025, Israel launched a twelve-day war against Iran, followed by US strikes on three Iranian nuclear sites. A new round of US-Israeli attacks began in February 2026, targeting Iran's leadership and missile and nuclear capabilities for 40 days. The Islamic Republic survived the attack, despite expectations of regime collapse, and, in response to US attacks, struck military bases and infrastructure used by the United States in the southern Persian Gulf. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the disruption of oil and other trade flows further expanded the war's regional and global repercussions. A growing body of literature examines the drivers of these attacks and their implications for Iran and the regional order. This issue features translations of three Crown Center roundtables on the "Iran War."

In the first roundtable, Mehdi Kahalzadeh, Naghmeh Sohrabi, and Esfandiar Batmanghelidj examine the war's implications for the Iranian state, society, and economy (Kahalzadeh et al., 2026). To explain the origins of the attacks, they point to several factors, including the Islamic Republic's declining political legitimacy, perceptions of its imminent collapse, and the Trump administration's insufficient knowledge of political dynamics in Iran and the wider Middle East. They also discuss how the costs of continuing the war would be transferred onto Iranian society, as it has exacerbated economic hardship and deepening poverty to this day. Finally, they argue that sustainable peace and stability will require lifting sanctions to enable meaningful economic reconstruction and help Iran move beyond a prolonged "condition of survival." Equally important for peace is fostering hope for the future in a society that feels trapped in profound uncertainty about the country's future

The second roundtable brings together Ben Joseph-Hirsch, Shai Feldman, and Gary Samore (Joseph-Hirsch et al., 2026) to examine the war from US and Israeli

perspectives. They discuss how the US and Israel entered the war with different objectives and highlight a growing divergence in US and Israeli public support for the war over Iran's nuclear program. They also examine the disagreements that emerged as the conflict extended beyond the quick resolution the United States sought and discuss how the war has affected domestic politics differently in the two contexts.

The third roundtable, featuring Nader Habibi, Arang Keshavarzian, and Sanam Vakil (Habibi et al., 2026), examines the war's consequences from the perspective of the Gulf states. They discuss the Gulf countries' efforts to manage regional tensions, their growing recognition of the region as a shared, interconnected geography, and their concerns about the vulnerability of the Gulf's development trajectory. From this perspective, the region's future depends on initiatives to establish multilateral conventions and institutions that can regulate and protect a shared living environment and ensure disputes are resolved through negotiation rather than war.

Conclusion

The works reviewed in this issue examine the erosion of the US-dominated unipolar world of the 1990s in the Middle East over the past three decades, and the collapse of regimes that maintained power for decades by aligning with one of the two global power blocs. While some of the works consider the concept of a "New Middle East" timely and appropriate for describing the order emerging from this collapse, others regard it as premature to say that either the old order has broken-down or a new one is forming. Instead we may be in the midst of a protracted interregnum. These works share, however, the view that current transformations do not signal either the demise of US imperial power in the region or a revolution in social relations against its capitalist order. Rather, they point to the growing will, capacity, and opportunities of the region's major states to shape its internal relations.

Does this transformation have a democratic and emancipatory character? It does so only insofar as it prevents future military attacks and inter-state wars. Yet we need to recognize that popular pressure also contributed to the collapse of the old order and shaped states' growing determination to assert a greater role in regional affairs. This transformation reflects not only military competition, geopolitical rivalry, and responses to external threats, including the rise of radical Islamism, but also the legacy of the Arab uprisings and continuing demands from below for socio-economic reforms that benefit wider society. The rise of Saudi Arabia as major regional power has also been accompanied by top-down cultural reforms that mark a shift

from its historical role as a source of radical Islamist influence across the region.

The war with Iran has brought to a critical turning point the ideological and religious divisions that have long masked regional power struggles and the alliances through which regional powers have waged proxy wars. Regional powers now stand at a crossroads between redirecting competition toward economic development and cooperation, and pursuing military buildup at the risk of recurrent and potentially interminable wars. The prospects for a shift toward economic competition, however, remain constrained by US support for Israel, whose regional strategy has continued to generate successive rounds of conflict.

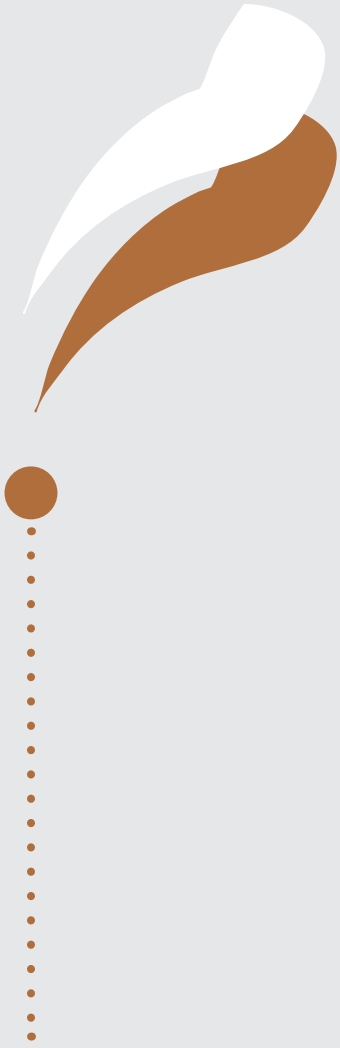


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All sources cited in this commentary, except for the following, refer to reviews published in this issue.

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DIALOGUE

Dialogue / Afshin Matin-Asgari in Conversation with Azam Khatam / October 10, 2026

New Horizons in Studying Iran–US Relations

In this dialogue, Azam Khatam speaks with Afshin Matin-Asgari, special advisor on this issue, about his new book, Axis of Empire, and how Iran–US relations intersect with other factors that shape or transform the regional order in the Middle East.

Afshin Matin-Asgari is a Distinguished Professor of History at California State University, Los Angeles. He specializes in the 20th-century Middle East, modern Iran, and modern political and intellectual movements in Iran. He is the author of *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (2002), a study of the Confederation of Iranian Students, and *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (2018); his last book, *Axis of Empire: A History of Iran–US Relations* (2026), was published by Verso Books.

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Afshin Matin-Asgari

Azam Khatam (A.K.): Dr. Matin-Asgari, thank you for agreeing to discuss your book, *Axis of Empire: A History of Iran–US Relations* (2026), with us and for sharing your knowledge and insights in shaping this issue, particularly by guiding us in selecting books on Iran–US relations. Iran–US relations have long attracted scholarly attention across several disciplines. Yet interest in the subject has recently been renewed, with five or six books published around the same time as your book, some of which we feature in this issue. Would it be fair to see this renewed interest as reflecting scholarly curiosity about the failures of US policy in the post-9/11 Middle East? I am thinking particularly of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the establishment of dozens of US military bases across the Persian Gulf, partly intended to counter Iran. In your view, what explains this renewed interest in Iran–US relations?

Afshin Matin-Asgari (A.M.): Thank you for including my book among your reviews. I am not sure how recent books on US–Iran relations show changing scholarly understanding of the Middle East. Iraq and Afghanistan have been examples of American

policy failures in the Middle East, and they do not receive major scholarly attention. Israel/Palestine continues to be the center of attention in Middle East scholarship and for good reasons. Turkey and Egypt receive less attention than Iran which has become even more important because of the ongoing war. The war has made the Persian Gulf region a central concern of scholars and global policy analysts, arguably marking a changing moment in US interventions in the Middle East, although the direction of the change is not clear.

A.K.: Turning to *Axis of Empire*, one of the book's central arguments is that the United States has consistently pursued its imperial interests throughout more than a century of relations with Iran. What are these interests, and how has the United States sought to advance them over this period? How have these interests shaped its relations with successive Iranian states, both before and after the 1979 Revolution?

A.M.: US priorities in Iran have been clear, focused on oil, other commercial interests, and geostrategic control through linkage to the Iranian military under the monarchy and systematic pressure to change the behavior of post-revolutionary Iran via onerous economic sanctions, political and military pressure, and now war. As we see in the current war, the American approach was never due to misunderstanding because there was always ample information about realities on both sides. Under the monarchy, Washington chose to ignore blatant evidence of the Shah's unpopularity and his regime's instability. After the 1979 revolution, all experts within and outside the government knew while the Islamic Republic defied America's imperial designs, it posed no significant threat to the US or Israel, was not building a nuclear bomb, and its regional policies at times coincided with Washington's, for example in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A.K.: Your book examines two contrasting episodes in Iran–US relations: the US role in the 1953 coup against Mosaddeq's government, following Iran's nationalization of its oil industry, and the Obama administration's pursuit of a nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA). What do these two cases tell us about the prospects for reaching an agreement with the United States and changing its policy toward Iran?

A.M.: Throughout the book, my narrative emphasizes the agency and responsibility of Iranian actors in their engagement with the American imperial hegemon. Thus, my account of the oil nationalization campaign and the 1953 coup is different from typical narratives in several respects. First, I locate the origins of the oil nationalization movement in working class struggles of 1920s, two decades prior to its more famous articulation by Mosaddeq's middle-class National Front

coalition. Second, I criticize Mosaddeq's failure to recognize that both Truman and Eisenhower administrations acted to undermine him during the oil nationalization dispute with the UK. Truman's outward gesture of support for Mosaddeq was meant to loosen the British monopoly of Iranian oil and carve out an American share in Iran's oil. Nor did Mosaddeq have a strategy to build a party-based nationalist movement or manage relations with the communist Tudeh Party and the Soviet Union. Finally, he failed to end or curtail intimate American ties to Iran's armed forces, leaving intact the instrument Washington would use to bring about his demise in 1953. I don't agree with scholars who argue that regardless of his policy choices, Mosaddeq would have been overthrown by the British and the Americans.

The Mosaddeq era is not comparable to the Obama period, but, during his first term, Obama took a strong anti-Iranian stance by making existing economic sanctions more onerous. At the same time, Obama quietly initiated negotiations with Ayatollah Khamenei, which, during his second term, led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed upon in 2015 with President Rouhani in Iran. Netanyahu and the Israel lobby tried hard but failed to prevent the JCPOA, which showed two things: First, the Israel lobby was not all powerful and, second, de-escalation, if not normal relations, between Iran and the US was possible. However, catering to the Israel lobby, Trump pulled the US out of JCPOA, which led to the hardening of Iranian positions especially when Ebrahim Raisi replaced Rouhani as Iran's President. At that point, I think the Islamic Republic made a strategic mistake by leaving the JCPOA and increasing uranium enrichment toward bomb-building capability. Instead of deterring military aggression, Iran's approaching the nuclear threshold seemed to justify US-Israeli allegations about the Islamic Republic's bomb-building intention.

A.K.: Following the US and Israeli attacks on Iran in 2025 and 2026, and the Islamic Republic's survival despite the killing of its supreme leader and military commanders, political activists have become deeply divided over the government's motives for resisting the United States and the extent to which its resistance can be considered anti-imperialist. Your account takes a critical view of the Islamic Republic's state-centered anti-imperialism. How do you assess its claim to anti-imperialism in light of these developments?

A.M.: On this question, my view diverges from leftist perspectives that prioritize anti-imperialism as the ultimate benchmark to evaluate political regimes. *Axis of Empire* shows from its 1979 beginnings, the Islamic Republic could have been considered

anti-imperialist, while its domestic policies were reactionary. This understanding of the Iranian Revolution emerged in Iranian left circles during 1979–1980 and was echoed by Fred Halliday, the leading international Marxist expert on Iran, affiliated with the journal *New Left Review*. In fact, Halliday went as far as labeling the Islamic Republic "fascist," calling its defiance of the US "the anti-imperialism of fools." Chapter 5 of *Axis of Empire* shows how, during its first year, the Islamic Republic fashioned a constitutional dictatorship where absolute power was held by a Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, presiding over unelected clerical institutions superimposed on a republican state frame. This was the outcome of intense post-revolutionary struggles whereby the fledgling Islamic Republic crushed the freedom of press and association, workers councils, autonomous ethnic and national minorities, and women's rights. The turning point ushering the regime's peculiar anti-imperialist posture was the November 1979 seizure of the American embassy in Tehran. While some leftists hailed this as a great anti-imperialist move, others saw it as a project of domestic power consolidation, diverting the revolution from its socially emancipatory agenda toward an existential faceoff with the global hegemon. In the long run, the Hostage Crisis proved enormously damaging to Iran, starting the US economic sanctions regime that is still in place, while internationally isolating the revolution, allowing Iraq to invade Iran and plunge the country into eight years of destructive war. The war further solidified the Islamic Republic into a military-security state that brutally wiped out all dissent, killing thousands of Islamic and secular leftists during the early 1980s and in the war's immediate aftermath in 1988. The regime's militarization intensified in the post-Khomeini decades when the Revolutionary Guards became its backbone and most powerful shareholder in Iran's crony capitalist system. The Guards reap tremendous financial rewards by managing a black-market economy that systematically bypasses the sanctions which choke the people's livelihood. Repeated grassroots and civil society attempts at peacefully reforming the system have been crushed violently by the state's repressive organs, particularly the Basij militia tied to Revolutionary Guards, killing thousands of Iranians in 1999, 2009, 2018–2019, 2022–2023, and most recently in January 2026. Tens of thousands of dissidents have been imprisoned and tortured during the past five decades. If impressed by the Revolutionary Guards' current effective resistance to US-Israeli aggression against Iran, we should remember the bloody repression the Iranian people continue to endure under a regime that now seems to be an open military dictatorship.

A.K.: You point to factional disagreements within the Islamic Republic over anti-imperialism. What were the main points of these disagreements during the Reform era and the 1990s, and later during Hassan Rouhani presidency (2013–2021)? Do you still see these disagreements today under wartime conditions, and what role have they played since then?

A.M.: The book's last chapter covers the post–Iran–Iraq War era, when President Rafsanjani tried to reduce tensions with the US, a policy that was relatively successful while the Clinton administration probed business deals with Iran and softened its anti-Iranian rhetoric, without, however, removing economic sanctions. However, the 1990s was a time when Israel and its American lobby sharpened their anti-Islamic Republic campaign to prevent any US–Iranian rapprochement. The reduction of US–Iranian tensions reached their peak during the first Khatami presidency through Iran's "sports diplomacy" and Khatami's Dialogue of Civilizations campaign. That was when Secretary of the State Madeleine Albright admitted the 1953 US intervention against Mosaddeq had been damaging to Iran's democratic prospects. But US–Iranian relations took a turn for the worse when, after September 11, 2001, President George Bush placed Iran among the "Axis of Evil" countries considered major US enemies. This turn of American policy was accomplished by neoconservatives in the Bush administration and the Israel lobby, even as the Islamic Republic was quietly cooperating with the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic was accused of threatening Israel's existence, trying to build a nuclear bomb, and supporting international terrorism. The charge of Tehran pushing its nuclear energy program toward bomb-building capability moved to the top of these allegations, where it has stayed all the way the present war.

A.K.: Two interpretations frame the nuclear dispute: the US supported Iran's nuclear program under the Shah but opposed it under the Islamic Republic, which was no longer a compliant ally. Yet you argue that only Nixon promised the Shah domestic nuclear fuel production. Was this linked to Nixon's secret understanding with Israel to maintain its nuclear capability without overt testing? Why did Ford and Carter oppose domestic fuel production in Iran? Were they concerned about two nuclear powers emerging in the Middle East, as Carter reportedly told the Shah in 1978? What explains this shift in US policy?

A.M.: Nixon and Kissinger encouraged the Shah's ambitions to develop nuclear energy, agreeing to sell nuclear reactors to Iran. They did not endorse the building of nuclear bombs by the Shah, and the revolution

prevented the implementation of US–Iranian nuclear energy deals, including discussions of whether nuclear fuel production could take place inside Iran. Nuclear energy deals with the Shah, along with the Nixon-era policy of massive arms sales to Iran, faced growing criticism in US Congress and media during the second half of the 1970s, when the Shah's regime was increasingly seen as an unstable ally. Carter continued the massive arms sales program, which collapsed as the Iranian Revolution gathered momentum in 1978. While Carter's backing of a nuclear Israel never shifted, he was forced to change his Iran policy and accept the removal of the Shah by early 1979. Post-revolutionary Iran was under intense pressure, mainly from the left, to not only end all military purchases from the US but to end relations with Washington, seen as the Shah's supporter and the revolution's enemy. In fall 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini suddenly adopted this "anti-imperialist" line in the service of his "Second Revolution" launched with hostage-taking at the US Embassy.

A.K.: How should we understand the achievements of IRI's support for the Palestinian cause within your broader framework? I mean through the lens of regional conflicts and its implications for Iran–US relations?

A.M.: The Islamic Republic's grand strategy of defying Israel, by building a regional "Axis of Resistance," could not change the material conditions of occupation, prevent genocidal Zionist attacks on Palestinians and Lebanese, or deter Israel from invading Iran. Prior to October 7, 2023, Iran had helped construct an Axis of Resistance around Israel, forging military ties to Palestinian organizations like Hamas, Lebanon's Shi'i Hezbollah militia, and the Bashar Assad regime in Syria. The assumption in Tehran was for this military ring to bolster Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian resistance to Israeli aggression, while acting as deterrence to Israel's ultimate objective of invading Iran and overthrowing the Islamic Republic. After October 7, Israel's ferocious and genocidal onslaught, and Assad's collapse in Syria, rendered the Axis of Resistance largely dismantled or diminished. Meanwhile, Tehran's direct military support of Hamas and Hezbollah bolstered false Israeli claims branding them Iranian proxies. Nor did the Axis of Resistance project ever receive meaningful popular endorsement in Iran where many saw it as a failed venture draining the country's depleted resources without any tangible benefits, not even to Palestinians.

A.K.: Some of the books reviewed in this issue discuss Iran's "strategic loneliness" in its geopolitical environment, arguing that it has driven governments before and after the Revolution to ally with non-state armed groups in the region. What is your assessment

of this argument? Should Iran's ties with Lebanese Shiites and its support for Iraqi Kurds, both before and after the Revolution, be understood as expansionist interference in other countries' internal affairs or as defensive policies?

A.M.: The argument about the Islamic Republic's "strategic loneliness" is valid because Iran has no major state actors as its allies. The recent "Mecca Agreement" between Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia shows how Iran is excluded from regional defense pacts, while in fact being the potential adversary against whom such pacts are formed. Neither can we consider powerful global actors, like Russia and China, as Iran's allies, though they benefit from Iran's clash with the US and thus provide Tehran with limited diplomatic support and some relief vis-à-vis American economic sanctions. Nor can Lebanese and Iraqi Shiites or Kurdish factions be considered Iran's strategic allies, because their backing is limited and tactical at best. Yemen's Houthis have emerged as Iran's most effective ally in the recent war, but the Houthis' own fortunes are precarious, and their agenda is not the same as the Islamic Republic's. Currently fighting for survival, the Islamic Republic attacks American military targets in its Persian Gulf neighboring countries, but this policy is not sustainable in the long run when the Islamic Republic, or its successor regime, must mend fences with

> *"From a long-term perspective, Iran, no matter what kind of regime rules it, is shifting away from its 20th-century entanglement with America's global imperial architecture and moving toward integration into a broad Asian economic and geopolitical bloc, into which it fits more naturally."*

its neighbors and avoid military intervention outside its borders.

A.K.: The United States has also consistently been accused by Iranian elites of supporting the "illegal and illegitimate regime" of Israel. Could you elaborate on this dynamic and how it has impacted US–Iran relations? Since when, and during which periods, has this factor played a more important role in shaping tensions with the United States? I am thinking in particular of the Ahmadinejad era and his Holocaust denial rhetoric.

A.M.: Israel is an apartheid state with a long history of illegally occupying Palestinian land and recently committing genocide in Gaza. Neither Iran nor other countries are under any obligation to recognize Israel's inhumane genocidal regime. This is different from calling for Israel's physical destruction, something that even Ahmadinejad did not advocate, though he stupidly dabbled in Holocaust denial. As the recent war has shown, Israel is the enemy of the Iranian people, bombing their cities, killing thousands of them, and destroying their schools, hospitals, and the infrastructure sustaining their livelihood. So, I do not agree with those who argue Iran, under any regime, should normalize relations with Israel or recognize the monstrosity the Zionist state has become.

A.K.: If we focus on Iran–US relations in the 21st century, how do you assess the impact of the emergence of an Asian capitalist power bloc, and of the China–Russia bloc, on the evolution of Iran–US relations? Liberal and neoliberal groups in Iran have consistently opposed an eastward orientation, while this closer alignment has been more strongly supported by military and oligarchic factions. What is your view on this?

A.M.: From a long-term perspective, Iran, no matter what kind of regime rules it, is shifting away from its 20th-century entanglement with America's global imperial architecture and moving toward integration into a broad Asian economic and geopolitical bloc, into which it fits more naturally. Russia is Iran's powerful neighbor and China is a global superpower rivaling the US. Iran's trade partners are its neighbors, including the Gulf states and India. Neoliberals who advocate Iran's realignment with Western Europe and the US are in denial of 21st-century realities. They also ignore the fact that almost half a century of onerous American and European sanctions has been an act of war against the people of Iran who have borne the brunt, while the regime has adapted and survived them. So, the Islamic Republic's alignment with Russia and China is understandable and even more so considering the present war's destructive impact on the Iranian nation.

A.K.: How have US imperial strategy and Israeli regional interests converged to shape this war? Your book traces Israel's strategic shift in the 1990s, when it increasingly replaced its hostility toward Arab states with hostility toward Iran as the peace process with the Palestinians and Arab countries advanced. You also note AIPAC's role in shaping George W. Bush's designation of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil." If Israeli interests were the main driver of this war, and Iran has demonstrated the military and strategic capacity to resist, are we witnessing a shift in the regional order since the 1970s—one in which regional powers have become more consequential actors vis-à-vis global powers?

A.M.: There is now almost unanimous consensus that Prime Minister Netanyahu prevailed upon Trump to go to war with Iran. Thus, Israel finally achieved the goal it had persistently pursued for three decades. Many, if not most, observers also agree that for decades Israel has been the most powerful actor shaping US policy in the Middle East. At the same time, we see growing recognition, in the US Congress, foreign policy establishment, media, and among the public, that unconditional support of Israel is detrimental to American interests, no matter how they are defined. This sentiment is spreading exponentially in the wake of the current war and is now shared even by segments of Trump's MAGA base. The war with Iran has acutely exposed a dangerous fault line in the architecture of America's global imperial standing, whereby a bellicose elite has repeatedly dragged the country into failed military engagements in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, the Persian Gulf states, and Lebanon. Israel has been involved in all these ventures, often acting as the blunt instrument of the American empire, though it also has its own specific agenda, i.e., upholding a genocidal apartheid state at any cost. Given the failure of the current US-Israeli war against Iran, we have reached an historical inflection point where American imperial hubris and overreach have disrupted the global economy and Washington's relations with its Gulf region and NATO allies, with Russia and China waiting in the wings to exploit America's loosening grip on the axis of its empire in the Middle East.

A.K.: Do you think the Islamic Republic might succeed in securing an agreement in this war that includes the lifting of sanctions? Or could the prospect of normalizing relations emerge in the future?

A.M.: I can't see how anyone can predict the outcome of this war, particularly given the fact that Trump randomly shifts his policies, attacks in the middle of negotiations, and voids agreements he himself might make. Trump's war objectives were never clear and his current focus on supposedly preventing an Iran nuclear bomb is an obvious excuse

for prolonging the war. Iran is not building nuclear bombs and lifting US sanctions or other incentives are not necessary to change this. So, I don't see Trump abandoning the sanctions leverage until Iran surrenders to maximalist US-Israeli demands. After almost fifty years of hostility, destructive economic warfare, and the current devastating war, normal US–Iran relations seem like a fantasy. Unfortunately, the best realistic outcome at the moment seems to be a fairly stable ceasefire, allowing both sides to slowly reduce tensions and recalibrate their attitude toward each other.

A.K.: Your book provides substantial evidence of the commitment to independence among leftist, nationalist, and Islamist groups. Yet this sentiment seems to have weakened among Iranians after half a century of anti-Americanism. During the Dey protests in January 2026, some young protesters in Iran may have viewed Trump as a potential "savior." These developments have sparked debates about the people's right to define who their "enemy" is—that is, the idea that the state is not the only actor entitled to determine Iran's enemies. What do you think of this idea? Are there historical precedents in Iran where people's views of foreign enemies differed from the state's? What implications does this outlook have for the future of politics in Iran?

A.M.: A significant portion, though not a majority, of Iranian public opinion might have welcomed US-Israeli military intervention against a very unpopular regime. But I think the actual experience of the war, including massive suffering inflicted on ordinary people and the destruction of the infrastructure sustaining their daily lives, has shown many people the irrationality of wishing for a foreign savior. Monarchists who endorsed the US-Israeli invasion of Iran have suffered a major setback, while a portion of the population, and not those paid by the regime to rally in public squares, seem to, for the moment, stand by the Islamic Republic out of nationalistic sentiment. All of this, plus the fog of an ongoing war, makes it extremely difficult to see clarity in Iran's political future, but existing conditions make the path of gradual reformist transition beyond the Islamic Republic much more difficult.

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Dialogue / Naghmeh Sohrabi and Ramyar Rossoukh in Conversation with Arang Keshavarzian / August 13, 2026

The Crown Center

Middle East Studies at Regional and Global Intersection

In this conversation, Arang Keshavarzian discusses the history of Middle East studies and recent regional developments with Naghmeh Sohrabi and Ramyar Rossoukh.Naghmeh Sohrabi is the Charles (Corky) Goodman professor of Middle East History and the Director for Research at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University. She is an historian of modern Iran and is currently finishing a book about the revolutionary generation in Iran titled The Intimate Lives of a Revolution: Iran 1979. Her scholarship on the 1979 revolution has been published in History Compass, International Journal for Middle East Studies, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and various edited volumes. Her analyses of contemporary Iran have been featured across a variety of media in Persian and English including the BBC and Equator magazine. Prof. Sohrabi regularly publishes translations of writings from inside Iran on her substack These Are the True Things. Ramyar Rossoukh is an anthropologist who focuses on culture and media in the Middle East. He spent time with the Bakhtiyari, a tribal group in southwestern Iran, before undertaking a three-year fieldwork project on the Iranian film industry, which is the subject of his first book project. Rossoukh co-edited (with Steven Caton) the volume Anthropology, Film Industries, Modularity (Duke University Press, 2021), and contributed one of the volume's essays on the first uses of digital film editing technologies in Iran. He holds a PhD in anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and is the Associate Director for Research at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University.







Naghmeh Sohrabi / Ramyar Rossoukh

Arang Keshavarzian (A.K.): The Crown Center is one of roughly fifteen academic centers in the United States focused on the Middle East. Some of these centers date back to the 1950s and 1960s when the US invested in regional knowledge in the context of the Cold War and other are newer, such as Crown. Like many of these centers, it offers interdisciplinary coursework, creates spaces for scholars to present research, and develops research projects. Some centers work closely with academic departments, while others are more autonomous. How would you describe the Crown Center, and how is it similar to or different from other Middle East centers in the United States?

Naghmeh Sohrabi: The Crown Center was established in 2005 through a generous gift from the Chicago based businessman and philanthropist, Lester Crown.

It was established with several core ideas: The first was to look at the region as an integrated whole. Rather than focusing on one place or giving primacy to a single country in the Middle East, the idea was to analyze the

Middle East as a region and to look at the interconnections among events. There is a tendency, particularly in the United States, to treat Iran as simply "Iran" when Iran is in the news, or Palestine as simply "Palestine," as though events in one country or two countries away do not have ripple effects and there are no linkages between events across the region.

The second idea was whether in a polarized atmosphere we could create a center in which people could engage in what the founding director, Shai Feldman, called "dispassionate analysis."

People sometimes interpret dispassionate analysis to mean an absence of passion. That is not what we mean. It means lowering the temperature in the room enough that people can disagree with one another without disagreement becoming a reason to exclude or cancel someone. That idea runs through our public events, our community, and our publications.

The third principle was interdisciplinarity. You cannot have an integrated view of the Middle East without having a center that is multidisciplinary. And the fourth was the commitment to public-facing knowledge.

Ramyar Rossoukh (R.R.): One thing that distinguishes the Crown Center is that it is explicitly a research center rather than primarily a university-based Middle East studies center. We are relatively small, with a core group of faculty, but we build a resident scholarly community each year through our fellows, who are recent PhDs and faculty who spend their sabbaticals with us.

The fellows are not simply given an office and left to work independently. The center is a space in which fellows, faculty, and graduate students read one another's work, participate in workshops and retreats, and spend a great deal of time talking across different interests. People are working on different countries and different subjects, so the center is not only interdisciplinary; it also tries to use different disciplinary perspectives productively.

That structure frees fellows from having to think entirely within their disciplinary silos. It encourages them to think across the boundaries of their work. That also connects to the commitment Naghmeh mentioned to producing public-facing scholarship.

Much of our programming deliberately reaches beyond an academic audience. When we invite someone because they have an important new book, for example, we do not want them simply to discuss the book's intervention in the scholarly literature. We use the research as a jumping-off point for thinking about larger questions in the contemporary Middle East.

We do the same thing with our publications, including the *Middle East Brief* series and

Crown Conversations. We ask authors to think about what someone outside their immediate disciplinary or country specialization can understand from their research. So I would describe what makes the Crown Center distinctive as a combination of a resident research community, a fellowship program, an interdisciplinary structure, and a commitment to taking scholarship beyond its immediate disciplinary setting and making it legible to a broader public.

Naghmeh Sohrabi (N.S.): Just to add to what Ramyar said, I think in 2005, the language of "public-facing scholarship" was not as common or as emphasized in universities as it is now. At the Crown Center, it was a commitment from the beginning.

At the time, people sometimes understood public-facing work to mean that your work had to be policy-relevant. But that was not what we mean. Scholars spend years developing knowledge through language study and through time spent working on and in the region. We have a social responsibility to translate some of that knowledge for audiences beyond the academy.

A.K.: You both work extensively on modern Iran. The Center itself has scholars working on Iranian economics, history, society, and politics, as well as fellows and graduate students whose work addresses different dimensions of Iran.

> *Naghmeh Sohrabi: When you study Iran as part of a wider region, you begin to see that many things we think are singular to Iran are actually replicated elsewhere, perhaps in different forms and through different factors. You see similarities and the ways ideas travel across the region. That does not necessarily provide solutions, but it gives you better insight into how to think about a conflict or a war and about possible paths forward. You have to have a comparative perspective for that.*

How do you integrate Iran into this broader understanding of the Middle East as an integrated whole? What are the benefits and challenges of thinking about Iran in relation to other histories, geopolitical struggles, and social movements?

R.R.: As noted earlier of the things that the Crown Center has tried to do since it was established is to treat a country such as Iran as an integral part of how we think about the Middle East as a whole, rather than as a separate field of study that becomes interesting only after a crisis emerges.

That means bringing deep knowledge of Iran into conversation with the rest of the region, but it also means asking what looking outward from Iran allows us to see differently about the region as a whole.

One concrete example is our recent work on the Iran War, which is included in this issue. We look at the war from multiple levels, not only through Iran's domestic politics but also through the regional dimensions and larger geopolitical dynamics surrounding it. Over my time at the Crown Center, I have learned how difficult it is to understand Iran—or any country—without factoring in these broader processes. It makes us rethink the boundaries of what we are actually studying.

I have found the same thing in my own work on Iranian cinema: even a seemingly national subject looks very different once you follow the technologies, labor, and circulation that connect it to wider regional and global processes.

N.S.: There is a tendency in American media—which is something we are always thinking about at the Crown Center—to construct a particular understanding of what the region is. Our goal is not necessarily to "correct" that understanding but to add nuance to it.

There is a tendency to make Iran stand singularly outside of history. It is the Islamic Republic of Iran; it is the mullahs; it is this or that. One example of why this is problematic is the notion that because Iran is an Islamic Republic, it somehow does not participate in a global market-capitalist system or operate within a global economy that shapes its political decisions. But when you study Iran as part of a wider region, you begin to see that many things we think are singular to Iran are actually replicated elsewhere, perhaps in different forms and through different factors. You see similarities and the ways ideas travel across the region. That does not necessarily provide solutions, but it gives you better insight into how to think about a conflict or a war and about possible paths forward. You have to have a comparative perspective for that.

The current war is a particularly good example. You cannot understand it by

thinking about one country alone. As your own work shows, the Persian Gulf is a multi-country space. If I analyzed the war only by talking about Iran and no other country, I would simply be missing part of the analysis.

A.K.: What you are describing is also a kind of de-exceptionalization of Iran: thinking comparatively or dialogically about events and histories in Iran and beyond treats Iran not as an enclosed box. That seems important in the United States, but perhaps also in Iran, where, for understandable historical reasons, people can sometimes see Iran as uniquely confronted with US hegemony, economic crisis, and other problems.

N.S.: Absolutely. Comparison can help make visible the ways in which problems that appear unique to Iran are also part of wider regional and global processes.

A.K.: Another dimension of the Crown Center's work is its engagement with policy analysts, think tanks, and people in Washington. These experts are often translated into Persian and invited onto BBC Persian, Voice of America, and other Persian-language media, and in some ways they are more visible in the broader Persian-language mediascape than university professors. What is the logic behind engaging with policy analysts, and what has that experience been like?

N.S.: The logic begins with a simple question: Do scholars have a responsibility toward the world in which they live? The Crown Center was founded on the idea that they do and government is an important part of this world.

But just because the question is simple, it doesn't mean it is simple or easy to create this engagement between the policy and scholarly worlds.

In the United States, these two worlds often understand themselves as opposites rather than complements. The scholarly world sometimes believes that by refusing to engage the policy world it is speaking truth to power. The policy world often rejects the scholarly world by calling it irrelevant to "real politik."

I once had a conversation with people in the policy world in which I was giving a detailed explanation of Iran's political system. The policymaker stopped me and said, essentially, "I don't have time for nuance. I need to know: Is the Supreme Leader good or bad? Is Shiism good or bad? That is the space in which the policymaker wanted to operate. It goes against every fiber of a scholar's body. Scholars do not generally like to live in black and white. We are comfortable with gray areas. So, in answer to the question of how to engage with the policy world, the answer is: with great difficulty, and by finding different avenues, including our publications.

At the Crown Center, we try to produce what we call policy-relevant scholarship, but we deliberately do not make policy recommendations. That goes back to the principle of dispassionate analysis. We do not want to advocate for one particular position.

R.R.: I would add that one way the Crown Center has intervened is by changing the question being asked, or at least shifting what is understood to be the most important question.

Think tanks often frame a problem in terms of immediate policy needs. We can sometimes shift that framing and ask what the problem looks like from inside Iran, for example, rather than beginning with the question of what the United States should do about Iran.

That means grounding the question in the deep regional knowledge that exists at the Crown Center. It also means avoiding the emphasis on prediction that can dominate policy conversations.

A.K.: Right. Rather than asking, "Will the Islamic Republic fall?" or "What should the United States do about Iran?" the questions might be: What is actually happening? To whom is the war happening? How are different strata of Iranian society being affected?

R.R.: Exactly. There does seem to be a recognition that the questions being

> *"Ramyar Rossoukh: I do not have a simple answer, but I think these discussions point to the continued importance of area studies."*

asked and the knowledge that currently exists are inadequate to approach some of the challenges we face. Perhaps that is contributing to a broader range of voices being included. Whether those voices actually affect policy is a separate question.

One thing a place like the Crown Center can do is create some space in which the urgency with which think tanks identify problems can be questioned. We can open up space for depth, context, and historical explanation to contribute to the conversation.

A.K.: The Crown Center was established in a particular historical moment, in 2005, shortly after 9/11 and during the Iraq War. We are now in a very different moment. The 2026 war on Iran has been remarkably unpopular in the United States, including from the beginning. At the same time, there has been increasing discussion of a decline in US global power, the rise of China and East Asia, and the emergence of a more multipolar world.

Within that broader transformation, people have also begun talking about a "new Middle East." What does that phrase mean? What are the new realignments and reorderings? And what is the role of an area-studies center in this changing and fluid global structure? Is it still useful to think about the Middle East as an integrated whole when the world around it is itself undergoing such profound changes?

R.R.: I do not have a simple answer, but I think these discussions point to the continued importance of area studies.

Some of the changes we are describing are obviously real. But one of the conversations we have all the time at the Crown Center is about distinguishing what has actually changed from what has persisted. The depth of knowledge that exists here allows us to contextualize the effort to categorize something as new and to think through what that designation actually means.

A good example is Iran's domestic politics. There has been discussion about a new generation now governing Iran or taking over. But we need to be cautious about that claim. There is a great deal that we do not know about what is happening inside the political system or how decisions are being made. And even if we simply look at the individuals who are now in charge of many things, they are also important political figures who were active before the war.

That is a small example of what it means to think historically about claims of a new regional order. Even in the case of Iran, it suggests the significance and value of expertise that is not committed to generalizing too quickly but is grounded in deep knowledge of the region. And I think this also speaks to the broader question of what a field such as Middle East studies

can do. We can take an event that is often presented as a rupture and place it in longer histories, while also examining the transformations that followed it.

The point is not to deny that things change. It is to ask what has changed, what has persisted, and how those things interact.

N.S.: In the 1990s, people thought Middle East studies and area studies were going the way of Soviet studies and would essentially disappear. Then 9/11 happened, and there was a burst of funding for positions. I received my PhD at a time when there were roughly forty different jobs just in Middle East history. There were jobs throughout the field. We came of age in a post-9/11 academic boom in which money was being put into positions, language programs, and area studies.

That boom eventually petered out. Some of the decline has to do with the broader way in which funding is being siphoned away from higher education, not only in North America but also in Europe and elsewhere.

But if you simply look at what has happened to the world, the recent US-Israel war on Iran is an argument for Middle East studies as something that needs to exist.

If we think about the linkages beginning with October 7, 2023, and follow them through to the present, the Middle East as a region has been embroiled in conflict with the United States in different ways. No part of the region can simply say, "This has nothing to do with me."

That makes an argument for continuing to think about the Middle East as an object of study. But how we think about it has changed. We should not think about the Middle East as a whole that is disconnected from the rest of the world. We should think about the region within a global context, considering both the linkages within the region and the linkages between the region and the wider world.

The practical problem is that the gutting of higher education is having real effects. After 2001, money was put into positions, and the Crown Center itself emerged from that period. Now we are seeing the opposite trend. Universities are eliminating programs and majors, and the resources available for this kind of scholarship are shrinking.

We are therefore in a strange situation. The reality on the ground requires the study of the Middle East as a whole if we want to understand what is happening. But the economics of higher education are making that study more difficult.

And that returns us to the reason for thinking about the Middle East as a region. The region is not isolated from the rest of the world, but neither are its internal connections incidental. We need to think about both.

A.K.: So perhaps the challenge for Middle East studies is not to abandon the category of the region, but to rethink what it means to study a region in a world in which regional and global processes are increasingly intertwined.

N.S.: Exactly.

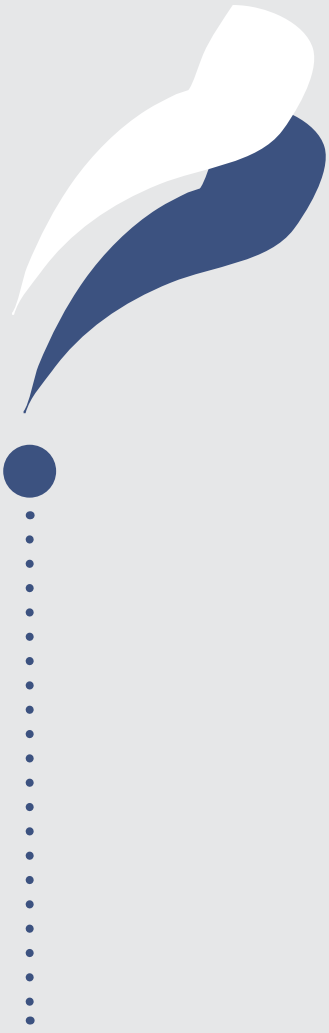
R.R.: Yes

A.K: Many readers in Iran may not be aware of the extent of the contraction of higher education in North America, and also in Europe. People may apply to graduate programs and discover that there are fewer places for MAs or PhDs, or that a department they had planned to apply to is being closed.

N.S.: I still think people should get higher education, and I do think people should get PhDs.

But it is important to understand how the shrinking academic system affects people coming from Iran. You may be fortunate enough to obtain a student visa, complete a PhD, and then have to find a job. The problem is that the system that supported the creation of that knowledge is increasingly unable to support people after they have created it.

On one hand, the knowledge being produced is extremely important to understanding what is happening in the world. On the other hand, once that knowledge has been produced, there is much less of a support system that allows scholars to continue working in universities in North America and Europe, not to mention the dismal situation of universities inside Iran.

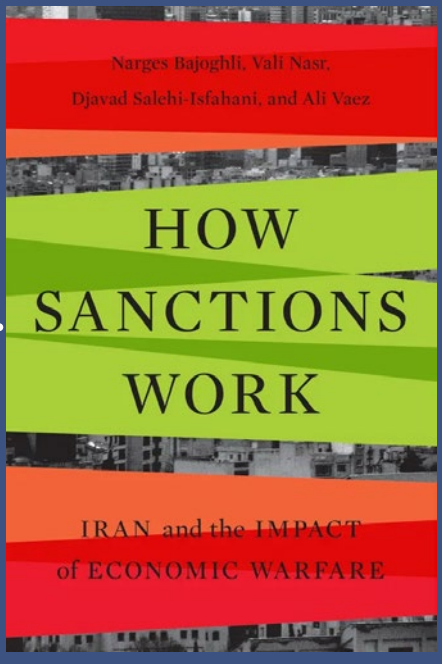


Iranian Studies in the World

IRANIAN STUDIES in the WORLD

How Sanctions Work

Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare



How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare

Narges Bajoghli, Vali Nasr, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, and Ali Vaez

Stanford University Press, 2024

Mahmood Monshipouri

This timely, conceptually rich, and methodologically sound book draws on multiyear, long-form oral history interviews with many Iranians inside Iran, including activists, political actors, university professors and researchers, former members of the Revolutionary Guard who are now business owners. Additionally, multiyear discourse analysis of Persian-language media and social media, alongside survey data and official global and Iranian statistics are utilized throughout the book. Chapters examine the impact of sanctions on the internal society and politics of Iran, explore the economic history of sanctions alongside their escalation over the decades, and reveal the actual costs of sanctions, not only for Iran but also for the world more generally.

The authors skillfully bring an anthropologist, political scientist, economist, and policy analysts together to inform the audience on the largely understudied and unknown political efficacy of sanctions on Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, as the country has become the most sanctioned country in the world (p. ix).

Growing evidence suggests that sanctions—favored foreign policy tool in

Washington and the EU capitals—have become counterproductive and so difficult to lift irrespective of whether they are accomplishing their goals. Trump's maximum pressure sanctions on Iran in 2018 caused several attacks on Saudi Arabia' oil facilities by Iran in retaliations, contrary to what such pressures were supposed to accomplish. It has become abundantly clear that sanction "have strengthened the Islamic Republic, weakened and impoverished its population, and increased Iran's military posture vis-à-vis the US and its allies in the region." (p. xi). The longevity of the Islamic Republic is an obvious sign that a nation can indeed resist this so-called invisible war.

Several themes highlight the book's main thrust that is built around calling into question the efficacy of sanctions as a foreign policy tool: (1) that ratcheting up sanctions without seeking a diplomatic offramp could risk war, (2) that the war with Iran would be costly to Washington and its Persian Gulf allies who had supported US policy, (3) that maximum pressure sanctions against Iran by the Trump administration were effective and devastating to Iran's economy, yet they failed to force Iran to abandon its nuclear program. Instead, Iran returned to negotiations only after it had built a *larger* program, and (4) that the impact of sanctions on societies and civilians has become equated with an invisible war on "noncombatants," raising serious moral questions (pp. 134–147).

Elsewhere, the unethical impacts of sanctions are underscored by John Mearsheimer who finds that US sanctions have killed 38 million people between 1971 and 2021. He has described these economic measures as a form of "mass homicide" deployed to inflict massive suffering on civilian populations.

The book goes on to examine how sanctions have affected Iran's society, politics, and economy, but additionally, they consider the blowback costs of sanctions to the international community and regional as well as global powers such as Russia. In the case of Iran, increasing evidence points to the way the Iranian state has become more militaristic because of ongoing sanctions. The result has been that the state has become engulfed in further deepening of security paranoia and repressive methods. Sanctions have failed to compel Iran to compromise its foreign policy, but rather forced Tehran to innovate: "just not in ways that are amenable to the West" (p. 7). Sanctions against the Islamic Republic have brought on paradoxical results, strengthening hardliners while weakening reformists and moderates, thereby marginalizing those who advocate for a balanced foreign policy and détente with the West and the United States. This trend became obvious most notably after the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under President

Trump and the subsequent imposition of secondary sanctions, which weakened the middle class and drove its political disengagement from the political system. That may explain why hardline factions have gained increasing leverage over both the Iranian parliament (since 2019) and the executive branch (since 2021).

Trump's exit from the nuclear deal and the resulting secondary sanctions amplified hardliner voices—echoing the Supreme Leader's longstanding narrative of mistrust toward the West—to a degree that even after Masoud Pezeshkian's administration took office, his authority over strategic foreign policy issues, including negotiations with the United States and the post-February 2026 management of the Strait of Hormuz, has been entirely stripped from the executive branch. This trend is unlikely to be corrected and reversible if the current pressures abound. The book argues that "sanctions have created an economy both resilient and resistant, one capable of—and ready to—shower missiles on US military bases or Ukraine's civilian infrastructure." (p. 7).

Sanctions have targeted the economic lifelines of Iranian society. Across the country, sanctions have adversely affected cost of living, plunging the country into poverty, creating black and gray markets from which the top strata of society have enormously benefited. Over eight million individuals have fallen from the middle class to the lower middle class. As a result, the ranks of the poor have swelled by more than four million (p.11). The maximum pressure since 2018, combined with the waves of COVID-19 pandemic, impacted Iran more than any other country in the Middle East (p. 14). The result has been entrenching anti-Americanism not only withing the ruling establishment in Iran but also among ordinary Iranians who did not express such sentiments before maximum pressure sanctions (p. 19).

Increasingly, the country's politics was equally sanctioned as demonstrated by the lowest turnout in postrevolutionary Iranian history. In June 2021, less than 50 percent of the electorate cast ballots (p. 29). Maximum pressure and comprehensive US sanctions have resulted in political hardening and increased military control over political culture. Most critically, they have done so while suffocating the voices for engagement and change (p. 31). While sanctions have weakened the independent businesspeople who had more ties to the West, they have enriched certain Revolutionary Guard enterprises and almost exclusively regime loyalists (p. 51). These sanctions have made those tied to the Revolutionary Guard and Khamenei's inner circles the owners of most of the wealth inside Iran (p. 52).

The JCPOA, widely known as the Iran

Nuclear Deal, concluded in 2015 under the Obama administration, was an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the U.K., and the US, plus Germany) that was designed to place limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Before seeing daylight, it was suspended with the election of Donald Trump (p. 67). A new wave of sanctions (2018-present) was imposed on Iran at a time that Iran was adhering closely to the nuclear deal. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Iranian support of the Russian war adventures there, by providing drones and missiles to the latter, the Biden administration started imposing more targeted sanctions on Iran (p. 71). The book's argument that sanctions remain a preferable option to military confrontation, as their removal might provide a way to advance negotiations in a diplomatic process, is credible. It should be noted, however, that "Because the United States has placed all of its eggs in the sanctions basket, failure may appear to leave no other option for the US but war." (p. 73)

The impacts of sanctions on Iran's economy are carefully scrutinized in chapter four, which demonstrates two realities: (1) all economic indicators point to a sharp change from growth to stagnation or decline and (2) a decade of harsh economic sanctions has failed to instigate economic collapse or change the regime or its behavior (pp. 74–75). In the case of Iran, employment increased under sanctions, and it only fell once, in 2020, due to the disruption of the COVID pandemic (p. 103). The stability of employment under sanctions was due to several factors, including the fact that virtually half of all workers in Iran are self-employed, and that labor laws discourage employers from laying off workers, and most notably, those who lose their jobs often tend to move to the large informal economy (p. 103). Meanwhile, because of the government's decision to allow the currency devaluation, traded goods regained their advantage. Between the two bouts of sanctions, Obama's in 2011 and Trump's in 2018, inflation erased a good part of the devaluations, causing the real exchange rate to fall by nearly 80 percent (pp. 108–109).

Most significantly, sanctions marginalized Iran's middle class, who were once known as the driving force for the country's democratic reform. In some cases, the protests were directed at the political elites' social policies rather than policies that had triggered the sanctions. If sanctions aimed to create a politically moderate Iran, they certainly failed (p. 76). Yet the fact remains that sanctions were instrumental in ending Iran's robust growth of prior decades (2002–11). The disruption in oil exports, investment, currency values, and the growth rate of the

GDP made clear that sanctions dealt a serious blow to Iran's economy (p. 82).

This chapter argues that no clear patterns can be discerned regarding the impacts of sanctions on foreign exchange, living standards, nutrition, wages, the middle class, social protection, and employment. While these factors cannot be examined with their connections with the oil boom and oil bust in a country that is heavily dependent upon oil revenues and exports, the fact remains that there is an upward trend in non-oil GDP that accounts for the resilience of the Iranian economy under sanctions (p. 109). For the restructuring of economy to unfold, the author of this chapter argues for four preconditions: (1) economic stability must be provided for producers, (2) producers must gain access to credit to finance their investments, (3) producers must have access to global markets to import new technologies and to produce new inputs, and (4) producers should have access to external markets (pp. 109–110). The present conditions contain no sign that restructuring is steady or even accelerating (p. 110). While there have been a multitude of protests, thus far they have not reached the level that would threaten the regime or force it to submit to US demands (p. 110).

Increasingly, the sanctions have thrown Iran into the arms of Russia and China, moving Iran from its traditional neutral position vis-à-vis the "West and East" toward aligning herself with Russia and China (p. 124). What is missing from this chapter is the risks of Iran's so-called Eastern policy. Tehran's uneven geopolitical foreign policy reorientation has raised several questions: Does this foreign policy reflect the interests of ordinary people and not just specific groups or factions? Will the reformists—mostly familiar with Western ideas, systems, and cultures—be willing to embrace and adapt themselves to this Eastward shift largely harbored by Iran's security apparatus?

The book concludes by noting that the overreach of US sanctions on Iran and Russia, as well as constraining the EU's trade with Iran, is likely to lead to dethroning the supremacy of the dollar. The extraterritorial nature of sanctions, the authors contend, has led to decoupling global economic relations and promoting self-reliance. This prediction, however, falls short of reality, as Russia and China have yet to successfully dethrone the US dollar. As most experts argue, while they have nearly eliminated the dollar in bilateral trade—conducting over nearly 99 percent of their transactions in rubles and yuan—the US dollar continues to be the dominant global currency by a landslide.

Given that this book was published in 2024, before the US and Israeli attacks on Iran in June 2025 and subsequently in late February 2026, its findings dovetail nicely

with the aftermath of these recent attacks, both of which have further strengthened the durability of the Islamic Republic even as it has lost several key leaders. The fact that the Trump administration began this unprovoked war and futile attempt to overthrow the Iranian regime serve as a somber reminder that the US policymakers now badly need to take a hard look at their sanction policy. To reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear program will require considerable geopolitical ingenuity, restraint, and diplomacy. War and further sanctions are hardly the solution. That said, while I concur with the book's central thrust and themes, it is important to recognize that sanctions should not be seen as the primary variable in Iran's internal political dynamics.

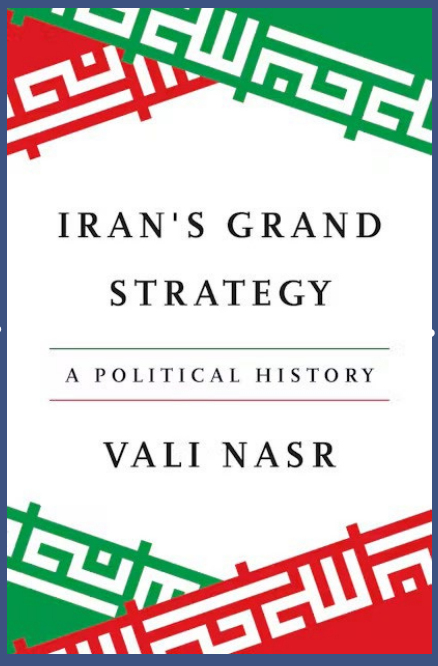
The systematic exclusion of liberal, secular nationalists, reformists, and moderate factions has been pursued by Iran's ruling institutions since the very inception of the Iranian Revolution, irrespective of sanctions. The case in point: At the dawn of the revolution, the liberal government of Mehdi Bazargan was practically undermined by revolutionary factions, as it was accused of maintaining ties with the West. Subsequently, secular progressive and nationalist currents were removed from Iran's power structure. That explains why and how the Khatami administration was gradually weakened, as was the Rouhani administration. The Pezeshkian administration, despite its ostensibly moderate appearance, is indeed directed by hardliners, with the initiative resting with powers and institutions outside his administration. Arguably, while sanctions have acted as a catalyst, the underlying variable continues to be the Islamic Republic's power structures and foundational approach since the 1979 Revolution have systematically marginalized and excluded the reformists political currents. Furthermore, Iran's continuing high inflation rates in the past four decades have been and are primarily a result of an economic structure that is rooted in deeply embedded corruption and mismanagement. These quibbles aside, the book makes an invaluable contribution to the existing literature on the impacts of sanctions on Iranian politics and its foreign policy orientations. I highly recommend this book as it bridges the gap between scholars and policymakers.



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Book Review / Vali Nasr / 2025

Rethinking Iran's Grand Strategy with Vali Nasr



Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History
Vali Nasr

Princeton University Press, 2025

Esmaeil Izadi

Vali Nasr's *Iran's Grand Strategy* (Princeton University Press, 2025) provides a historically grounded reinterpretation of Iranian foreign policy. Rejecting portrayals of the Islamic Republic as driven by ideology or irrationality, Nasr reconstructs a century of strategic calculation through the lens of national security. His central claim is compelling: the regime's behavior follows a coherent logic of survival, rooted in Iran's modern political experience.

At the heart of Nasr's argument lies a powerful premise: state behavior has a rationale, and the Islamic Republic is no exception. That rationale is, broadly, state survival. State-building serves as its primary instrument, comprising two interrelated wings. The first is security-driven foreign policy, which manages rivalry, deterrence, and external threats. The second is a theory of development that supplies the material and institutional foundations for long-term consolidation through economic growth and social transformation. In Nasr's reading, post-revolutionary Iran prioritises the first wing. Because for reasons rooted in Iran's modern history threats to survival are perceived

as foreign-born, security policy takes precedence, with development sequenced to follow once survival is secured. Nasr is right to center survival, but he is incomplete on how survival and development are politically determined within a contested nation-state.

This review engages Nasr on these two pillars but reframes them through the lens of the modern nation-state. It first reconstructs Nasr's survival logic historically, then shows how three key episodes—the 1953 coup against Mossadegh, the 1979 revolution and the fall of the Shah, and post-Iran-Iraq war domestic politics—expose tensions between state survival and legitimacy in the eyes of the nation. In a nation-state, balancing survival with inclusive development is essential for a sustainable long-term path. When either is defined narrowly, resources can be diverted toward regime preservation, weakening legitimacy and constraining development.

Nasr admittedly does not attempt a complete theory of everything; a fuller account would need to integrate domestic legitimacy and distributional conflict into the analysis of survival and state-building.

Even a sympathetic reader may have questions. Granting the state's security concerns, one can still ask whether the strategies used to address them have been costly or misguided. From different strands of political thought, critics might argue that Nasr is too dismissive of ideology and of how the national-security argument has been used by the Iranian government to justify repressive domestic policies. Many such criticisms, however, apply broadly to state-rationality arguments in international relations, where the assumption of a unitary rational state remains central.

This review offers a more limited commentary. It tracks the coherence of Nasr's argument on its own state-centric terms but brings nation-state dynamics into the foreground to illuminate how state survival is always tied to the political relationship between the state and the nation, and to the groups that constitute each.

Nasr organizes his book around the claim that Iran's foreign policy is driven by national security concerns shaped by deep historical insecurity. He presents this as the primary lens through which the post-1979 state chooses among its options. Many of the regime's apparently contradictory policies, he argues, make sense once the pursuit of independence is understood as the dominant strategic priority.

Nasr begins by tracing how a persistent sense of insecurity emerged from Iran's territorial losses, painful occupations during both world wars, and the crisis surrounding oil nationalisation under Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh's anti-colonial

strategy, though initially popular, was ill-suited to the state's weakness, Nasr argues. He underestimated security risks and overestimated domestic support. His downfall is thus presented as nearly inevitable: the state's weakness led to economic deterioration, clerical and popular backing faded, and the threat of a communist takeover alarmed foreign powers.

Crucially, Nasr notes that despite concerns about economic performance, Iranians did not view the 1953 coup as inevitable or benign; they felt betrayed, and this resentment lasted for decades. That is an important sign that prosperity and sovereignty are intertwined pillars of a nation-state. The collapse of the monarchy, despite rapid economic growth between 1963 and 1977, further illustrates that material success failed both to consolidate a sustainable development path and to repair the rupture in the nation-state relationship created by the coup.

The second chapter turns to the revolutionary period and the emergence of *esteqlal* (independence) as the defining pillar of post-1979 policy. Nasr argues that independence was not a revolutionary invention but a long-standing national demand, and that factional struggles after 1979 were fought through competing claims to embody it. The hostage crisis becomes the pivotal episode: by seizing

“The hostage crisis becomes the pivotal episode: by seizing the anti-imperialist mantle, the clerical establishment marginalised liberal and leftist rivals and consolidated authority.”

the anti-imperialist mantle, the clerical establishment marginalised liberal and leftist rivals and consolidated authority. In this account, foreign confrontation and domestic consolidation were intertwined, as the language of external threat reinforced internal regime survival.

The chapter on the Iran–Iraq War is where Nasr's two-wing model becomes clearest. The conflict strengthened the foreign-policy wing by institutionalising a security-first logic and empowering coercive institutions, while redefining development as security provision rather than broad-based transformation. In consolidating survival, the war narrowed the developmental horizon and tied material policy more closely to regime preservation. It also reshaped the state–society compact, entrenching security institutions that would dominate postwar politics.

The post-Khomeini chapters examine competing visions within the Islamic Republic: one emphasizing confrontation and security-led consolidation, the other economic development and reform. Nasr shows how liberalisation efforts under Rafsanjani and Khatami remained constrained by a security-centred structure, producing cycles of partial opening followed by retrenchment. Ahmadinejad's rise marked a renewed consolidation of the security-first approach, reinforcing the structural oscillation between reform and preservation that shaped both domestic politics and foreign policy.

Later chapters cover the nuclear dispute and the expansion of the state's presence through allies and direct involvement in the broader Middle East. The feedback loop between domestic politics and foreign policy becomes especially visible here. Factional competition between reformists and hardliners shaped how successive administrations interpreted external threats and calibrated negotiation versus confrontation. Nasr shows how fears of encirclement and regime overthrow influenced Iran's regional posture, but his framework is less explicit about how these foreign-policy shifts were rooted in struggles over domestic legitimacy.

By the end of the book, it is clear that foreign policy is endogenous to domestic legitimacy struggles, and that state and nation are both at work in almost every episode. National security concerns intersect with the state's development agenda, the rent-seeking and survival strategies of ruling elites and the IRGC, and the need to maintain credibility with the nation. Foreign-policy decisions in Iran have never emerged from a unified state actor, but rather from continuous struggles among competing institutions and social forces that together form the fabric of the Iranian nation-state.

It is in light of this tense relationship within

an evolving nation-state environment that one may better explain the political impact of the 1953 coup, the fall of the Shah despite rapid growth, Khatami's landslide victory, Ahmadinejad's rise after a period of relative stability, the controversial 2009 election and repression of the Green Movement, and the recurrent protests and crackdowns of 2017, 2019 and 2022.

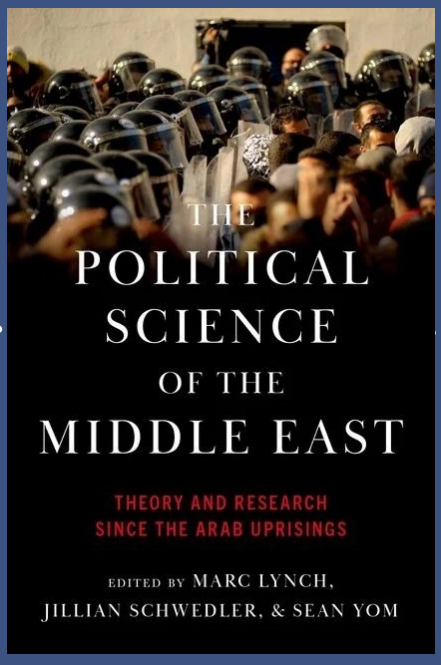
Ultimately, Iran's trajectory can be read as an ongoing conflict and evolving relationship between state survival and national legitimacy, between sovereignty and inclusive development. As recent protest waves in January 2026 and their brutal crackdown have made clear, the nation demands not only security but freedom and economic opportunity, and increasingly questions whether the Islamic Republic embodies those aspirations. The state, for its part, continues to equate its own survival with Iran's survival. That the state has, for the moment, shown resilience and survived the existential threats of the two brutal wars imposed on it by the United States and Israel in 2026 may lend some merit to its security-first logic. Yet the result is a strained nation-state in which the two wings of state-building sometimes pull in opposite directions.

By clarifying what a national-security framework illuminates and what it obscures, Nasr's book ultimately invites a broader inquiry: whether durable grand strategy in modern Iran can emerge without reconciling state survival with genuinely representative development.



When Categories Cease to Explain

Political Science and the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings



The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings

Marc Lynch, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean Yom (eds.)

Oxford University Press, 2022

Farideh Shahriari

The Arab uprisings unsettled more than rulers, alliances, and territorial orders. They unsettled the conceptual grammar through which political science had rendered the region intelligible. Authoritarianism could no longer be treated as political stillness; protest could not be sorted adequately into success or failure; sects could no longer stand in for political actors; migration could not remain a mere aftereffect of war; and the local could not be assumed to be a smaller, self-contained version of the national. The strongest achievement of *The Political Science of the Middle East* is to deprive these familiar nouns of their explanatory innocence. Across twelve chapters written by forty-seven authors, it recasts them as condensations of history, institutions, strategic practice, and relational power.

This is not, strictly speaking, a book about the Arab uprisings. It is a book about Middle East political science as refracted through the scholarship that the uprisings generated. Its object is therefore narrower than Middle East politics in general and more ambitious than a chronology of 2011 and its aftermath. Lynch's introduction rejects the recurring indictment that the field had failed because

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it did not predict revolutions, the rise of Islamism, interstate conflict, or terrorism. The decade before 2011, he argues, had already produced scholars who combined immersive regional knowledge with stronger theoretical and methodological training, as well as public-facing institutions capable of carrying that expertise beyond the academy. The uprisings did not create this intellectual transformation so much as expose and accelerate it. They also made the region newly legible to mainstream political science not as a culturally exotic exception, but as a critical site from which questions central to comparative politics and international relations could be reformulated (Lynch, 2022, p. 5). The collection is consequently conceived as "a field-building exercise, not a scorekeeping one" (Lynch, 2022, p. 6): an effort to establish what a decade of research altered, where disagreement remains, and which questions should organize the next stage of inquiry. For an issue concerned with the "New Middle East," this is the volume's consequential proposition: novelty lies less in a wholly new regional essence than in the field's capacity to rethink the categories through which change and continuity are known.

The architecture serves that purpose. After Lynch's disciplinary history, ten thematic chapters survey the major research programs reshaped by post-uprising scholarship. Chapter 2, "Authoritarianism Reconfigured," asks how authoritarian continuity has depended on changing forms of personalism, repression, ideological compliance, and international support; as its authors write, "Continuity, in other words, has required change" (Bank et al., 2022, pp. 35–36). Chapter 3, "Between Two Uprisings," refuses to make immediate regime change the only measure of protest's significance. It follows how contention reshapes participants, institutions, emotions, repertoires, and later waves of mobilization. Chapter 4, "International Relations and Regional (In)security," treats alliances as instruments of domestic regime security as well as responses to external threats, and asks how proxy warfare and armed nonstate agency unsettle state-centered security analysis. Chapter 5, "Militaries, Militias, and Violence," places regular armed forces and nonstate military organizations within a shared comparative frame of agency, ideology, and organization without collapsing the distinction between them.

The remaining chapters extend the same operation into political economy, religion, identity, measurement, mobility, and space. Chapter 6, "Political Economy and Development," organizes development around inherited structures and political agency rather than historical determinism or voluntarism. Chapter 7, "Islam and Islamism," disaggregates religion, religiosity,

political organization, electoral strategy, welfare provision, and violence, refusing to let Islam function as a self-sufficient cause. Chapter 8, "The Politics of Identity and Sectarianism," performs a parallel operation on sectarianism. Its concise insistence that "sects are not political actors" is more than a terminological correction: it requires analysts to specify whether a claim concerns particular parties, organizations, elites, or neighborhoods, and to examine the class, regional, and gender divisions concealed by collective labels such as "the Sunnis" or "the Christians" (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 190). Chapter 9, "Public Opinion," shows how survey research became both a source of substantive findings and a methodological laboratory. Chapter 10, "Migration and Displacement," treats mobility as constitutive of states, citizenship, and political economy. Chapter 11, "Toward a Relational Approach to Local Politics," turns locality from a fixed territorial level into a relation produced through institutions, infrastructures, flows, and material environments. Anderson's conclusion turns the volume back upon the discipline itself, connecting the substantive findings to field access, research ethics, academic hierarchy, and the unequal geography of knowledge production.

A Field Rewrites Its Questions

The collection enters a long dispute over the relationship between area studies and political science. Scholars of the Middle East were once faulted for descriptive particularism, weak causal inference, methodological conservatism, and insufficient presence in leading disciplinary journals. They were also attacked, from opposing political directions, either for serving Western security interests or for betraying them. The editors do not answer these charges by choosing disciplinary universalism over regional expertise. Their more consequential claim is that the strongest post-2011 scholarship joins language, history, institutions, and field conditions to methodological innovation.

That claim is persuasive not because every chapter offers a new general theory—most do not—but because the volume repeatedly changes what must be explained. Authoritarianism becomes authoritarian reconfiguration. Sectarianism becomes sectarianization and possible de-sectarianization. The apparent failure of protest becomes a question of temporal and institutional scale. State and nonstate violence become overlapping organizational fields. The local and the international cease to be self-evident levels and become relations assembled through institutions, infrastructures, and flows. The volume's

best chapters do not merely add variation to established concepts; they show how concepts themselves can conceal the politics that produce them.

This is also how the book challenges exceptionalist approaches to the region. Oil does not by itself explain political economy; rentierism has to be historicized through institutions, coalitions, class formation, and state-building. Islam does not by itself explain authoritarianism or violence; the Islamism chapter shifts attention toward organizations, participation, electoral behavior, social services, repression, and political opportunity. Sect does not by itself explain identity politics; the identity chapter examines the processes through which sectarian differences are constructed, instrumentalized, institutionalized, and sometimes contested. These are not minor qualifications; they turn "Middle Eastern exceptionalism" from a premise into a problem.

The argument also changes the periodization of the uprisings. The contributors do not treat 2011 as an absolute rupture. They reach back to Ottoman legal orders, colonial rule, postcolonial state formation, earlier protest cycles, welfare settlements, labor migration, the Iranian Revolution, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and pre-2011 survey research. This historical reach resists the presentism that made digitally mediated mobilization, post-2011 displacement, and renewed armed nonstate actors appear wholly unprecedented. The subsequent decade also permits revision. The protests of 2019 complicated claims about societies supposedly demobilized by memories of civil war; counterrevolution exposed the limits of transition-centered analysis; and prolonged conflict revealed new forms of governance beneath the language of state failure.

Methods, Evidence, and the Conditions of Knowing

The volume is therefore best understood as an expert stocktaking rather than a collection of original empirical studies. This matters because the chapters are authoritative syntheses of research programs, not new datasets, archival studies, or fieldwork monographs. Their evidentiary strength lies in the range of research they assemble: ethnography, interviews, archives, protest-event data, election results, public-opinion surveys, experiments, social-media analysis, geospatial techniques, firm-level economic evidence, organizational studies, and interpretive work on ideology and affect. The public-opinion chapter and the political-economy chapter's discussion of firm-level research on crony capitalism effectively demonstrate what new data infrastructures made possible. Surveys no longer merely record attitudes; interviewer effects, nonresponse, and preference concealment can themselves disclose relations of hierarchy and political fear. Firm-level

research moves the analysis of crony capitalism beyond general indices of corruption to identifiable companies, sectors, regulatory privileges, and employment effects.

The methodological pluralism is substantive rather than ceremonial. Here pluralism means the use of diverse methods, the coexistence of different theoretical traditions, and the collective organization of multiple scholarly voices around shared research areas. No single technique is presented as the badge of disciplinary maturity. Locally constructed event datasets can recover protests missed by international sources, while ethnography reconstructs interactions and meanings that coding cannot register. Survey experiments can isolate response effects, but historical and interpretive work can explain why the same political term carries different meanings across settings. Geospatial methods can map uneven provision; relational approaches can trace how ports, credit, roads, food systems, municipalities, donors, armed organizations, and distant states jointly produce a locality. The strongest contributions make method answerable to the question rather than allowing available technique to decide what counts as one.

The chronological range is productive but not uniform. Most chapters take the decade after 2011 as their principal horizon, usually ending around 2020 or 2021, while moving backward when their object requires it. "Since the Arab uprisings" consequently names a common provocation more than a common periodization. Some chapters assess literatures generated directly by 2011; others reconsider research programs whose decisive developments preceded it. The difference might have been stated more explicitly, but it ultimately strengthens the volume by resisting the fiction that one event created every relevant problem.

The hierarchy of sources is not always equally clear. Peer-reviewed articles and university-press monographs form the core, but fast-moving subjects also draw in working papers, policy reports, public-facing essays, and research still described as forthcoming. Such materials are unavoidable in a stocktaking exercise written close to events. Still, some chapters move quickly between evidence that has undergone sustained scholarly testing and claims drawn from strategic commentary or provisional research. The international-relations chapter's discussion of American decline and regional multipolarity, for example, necessarily moves among academic international-relations scholarship, policy-facing debate, and still-unsettled interpretations of US retrenchment (Darwich et al., 2022, pp. 88–90). This is not a fatal weakness. It means that the volume is strongest when

it signals an argument's status and weakest when an emerging proposition is given the confidence of a settled finding.

The book's ethical seriousness, however, is unusually sustained. Lynch examines the pressure to conduct dangerous research for professional distinction and the distortions produced when repression channels scholars toward safer countries, safer subjects, or remote methods. Arar and her coauthors treat overresearched refugee communities, expectations of assistance, sampling bias, and retraumatization as problems of evidence as well as morality (Arar et al., 2022). Benstead, Gengler, and Robbins connect transparency to the possibility of auditing dubious or fabricated survey data (Benstead et al., 2022). Anderson extends scholarly responsibility beyond formal consent procedures to local colleagues, students, institutions, and the infrastructures that make research possible (Anderson, 2022). Access, safety, collaboration, and academic hierarchy therefore enter into the evidence itself.

There are limits to the book's claim to comprehensiveness, but they follow in part from the method best suited to its purpose. For a field-building volume, inviting specialists to synthesize recent literature is not a defect; it is precisely how such a project becomes possible. The limitation lies elsewhere. Many contributors are leading participants in the research programs they assess, and the chapters generally do not specify how publications were selected, which languages were searched, or how conflicting findings were weighed. These are expert syntheses, not systematic reviews. That does not diminish their value as guides to major debates, but it limits claims to comprehensive coverage. Collectively, they map the scholarship most visible within Anglophone political science more fully than the wider body of research produced in and about the region.

The volume's pluralism is also sometimes additive rather than cumulative. This is not to demand that distinct mechanisms be reduced to a single model. The more pertinent question is how they interact, when one becomes more consequential than another, and what evidence would distinguish among them. The authoritarianism chapter, for example, appropriately treats personalism, repression, ideological compliance, and international support as different dimensions of political control, but says less about how these processes reinforce or constrain one another. The protest chapter similarly brings routine contention, affect, and long-term consequences into view, although these concern different objects and levels of analysis rather than components of one explanatory framework. These are not

failures so much as consequences of a field-building form designed to open research programs rather than close debates.

Structure, Prose, and Editorial Precision

Lynch's introduction and Anderson's conclusion perform much of the integrative work. The former reconstructs the institutional history of Middle East political science; the latter draws from the thematic chapters a wider challenge to methodological nationalism, methodological individualism, and democracy-centered political science. Between them, the intervening chapters remain recognizably part of one enterprise. Cross-references are frequent, and the collaborative architecture appears in recurring concerns with history, scale, domestic–international entanglement, field access, and the politics of classification.

The prose is generally lucid, energetic, and well suited to graduate teaching. Several chapters survey substantial literatures without becoming annotated bibliographies. The discussions of sectarianization, survey interaction, migration ethics, and relational locality are especially memorable because they formulate analytical problems rather than catalog findings. Some passages are denser, but usually for conceptual reasons. In the protest chapter, "affect" names the embodied and emotional force through which fear, anger, hope, humiliation, and solidarity shape mobilization and demobilization. In the local-politics chapter, topology and material agency push readers to think of locality not as a bounded administrative unit but as a set of relations among infrastructures, commodities, environments, state agencies, donors, armed groups, and distant centers of power. Readers unfamiliar with interpretive theory or political geography will work harder in these sections, but the difficulty is part of the argument rather than a failure of style.

Editorial precision is less consistent than the intellectual design. A small number of verifiable errors appear across the volume. Chapter 2 identifies Erdoğan's governing party as the "Freedom and Justice Party" rather than the Justice and Development Party and dates the constitutional amendments that enabled Sisi potentially to remain in office until 2030 to April 2014 rather than April 2019 (Bank et al., 2022, pp. 39, 41). Chapter 12 refers to the Saudi crown prince as "Muhammad Bin Sultan" rather than Mohammed bin Salman (Anderson, 2022, p. 285). These errors do not affect the central arguments, but they slightly diminish the volume's reliability as a reference work.

Iran and the Geography of the "Middle East"

For readers of *Global Iranian Studies Review*, the most revealing question is not whether Iran appears in the volume. It appears often. The more consequential question is the position from which it appears. Lynch recognizes the problem directly: Arab countries have frequently been treated as the natural universe of Middle Eastern comparison, while scholarship on Iran, Israel, and Turkey has remained partly disconnected because of language, divergent political contexts, and political considerations (Lynch, 2022, p. 9). The collection does not fully overcome the division it diagnoses.

This criticism should not become an unreasonable demand that every thematic chapter devote equal attention to every state. The editors deliberately rejected country chapters, and the book is organized through post–Arab Spring scholarship, which necessarily gives Arab cases a particular weight. It is also understandable that Iran appears most fully in the chapter on international relations, where it is indispensable to discussions of regional power, alliance politics, and armed nonstate actors. The question is narrower and more precise: when Iran appears, does it appear only as a force acting upon the Arab region, or also as a domestic political field and a site of knowledge production?

Iran is most prominent in Chapter 4, where it appears as a regional power, an object of balancing, a member of durable alignments, and a patron of armed nonstate actors (Darwich et al., 2022, pp. 88, 92–96). In Chapter 5, it appears as a supporter of Hezbollah and Hamas and, through the Basij, as a case that unsettles the distinction between state and nonstate coercion (Albrecht et al., 2022, p. 122). Chapter 8 treats the 1979 Revolution as a regional critical juncture and Iran as one pole of an increasingly sectarianized rivalry with Sunni-led states (Haddad et al., 2022, pp. 193–194). Chapter 7 invokes the Iranian Revolution more briefly as a case in which an Islamist movement seized state power and pursued broad Islamization (Masoud et al., 2022, p. 165). In these discussions, Iran acts upon the region.

Two chapters depart more substantially from this outward-facing treatment, while a third provides a smaller comparative opening. The political-economy chapter uses postrevolutionary Iran to show how welfare institutions, some inherited from the Pahlavi period, mediated elite competition and popular mobilization during regime consolidation and the Iran-Iraq War, while Reconstruction Jihad extended infrastructure and social provision in underserved rural areas (Eibl et al.,

2022, p. 140). The protest chapter cites Mohammad Ali Kadivar's study of pre-electoral contention as evidence that protest can reshape the state outside revolutionary moments (Allam et al., 2022, p. 68). Most generative is the local-politics chapter's use of Arang Keshavarzian's Tehran Bazaar. Here Iran is not an exotic illustration but a site from which relations among spatial organization, commerce, collective action, and state authority can be theorized (Clark et al., 2022, p. 273). These moments indicate what a more sustained incorporation of Iran as both a domestic political field and a source of theory might have added.

Elsewhere, the incorporation is thinner. The public-opinion chapter is substantively centered on Arab survey research, and the migration chapter does not bring Iran into its principal analysis, even though both frame their findings as contributions to the study of the wider MENA region (Arar et al., 2022, pp. 232–249; Benstead et al., 2022, pp. 206–210). The chapter on armed organizations confines its systematic treatment of state militaries largely to Arab cases. Iran's configuration of the regular army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij, elected institutions, and the supreme leader could have tested its framework of agency, ideology, and organization especially rigorously. The Islamism chapter candidly acknowledges its concentration on English-language and predominantly Sunni scholarship, but the Islamic Republic's combination of clerical authority, electoral institutions, factional competition, and religiously framed opposition remains peripheral to its account (Masoud et al., 2022, p. 159).

The issue is not Iran's simple absence but the position assigned to it. Iran is highly visible as revolution, security actor, patron, foundational case for rentier-state theory, sectarian pole, and exceptional regime; it is less visible as an internally differentiated political field, and less visible still as a location of scholarly community and theoretical production. Persian-language scholarship is scarcely represented. The volume thus unsettles many inherited analytical categories while leaving the geography of knowledge production largely intact: its Middle East remains predominantly Arab-centered, with Iran incorporated chiefly through geopolitics or as an exceptional case. This matters precisely because the book seeks to show a diverse Middle East political science capable of escaping inherited regional enclosures.

The Reach of the Project

The collection is most persuasive when it treats the categories that have long organized the study of the region—authoritarianism, Islamism, sectarianism, the state, and the

local—not as explanations in themselves but as phenomena whose production and operation require explanation. It offers no unified theory of the post-2011 Middle East, nor does its value depend on doing so. Its achievement lies in showing a field becoming more historically grounded, methodologically plural, and self-conscious about the ethical and institutional conditions of knowledge. In this account, the uprisings neither rendered earlier scholarship obsolete nor confirmed an unchanging authoritarian order. They made visible the transformations through which continuity is maintained and exceptionalist explanations are displaced.

That achievement is visible in the strongest chapters. Authoritarian persistence is not explained by a timeless culture of obedience, but by changing institutional, coercive, ideological, and transnational strategies. Islamist politics is not explained by Islam alone, but by organizations, electoral incentives, social-service networks, repression, and voter expectations. Sectarian politics is not reduced to ancient hatreds, but examined through processes of construction, mobilization, institutionalization, and possible de-sectarianization. These examples show why the volume matters beyond the history of the uprisings: it demonstrates how scholarship on the region can revise political science's concepts rather than merely furnish cases for them.

The volume belongs on graduate reading lists in comparative politics, international relations, and Middle East studies, and several chapters can be assigned independently in advanced undergraduate courses. It is best approached as disciplinary stocktaking rather than as an introductory political history of the uprisings, and it should be read alongside country-specific and regional-language scholarship. Readers in Iranian studies will find a productive set of comparative questions, but not a sustained treatment of Iran as an internally differentiated political field or of the multilingual scholarly communities through which Iranian politics is studied. The Political Science of the Middle East is therefore both an accomplishment and a diagnostic. Its patterns of comparison and citation reveal how much remains to be done before "Middle East political science" encompasses the region's intellectual and political diversity not only as an object of inquiry but as a source of concepts, questions, and theory.



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Global Middle East



Global Middle East: Into the Twenty-First Century

Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera (eds.)

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Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera

About the Authors

Asef Bayat is a prominent scholar of politics and society in the Middle East and a professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He has published extensively on social movements, everyday politics, Islam and modernity, urban politics, and political transformations in the region, particularly in Iran and Egypt.

Linda Herrera is an anthropologist and professor of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on education and power, youth and generational politics, citizenship, and the social and political effects of technological change in the Middle East and North Africa.

The book **Global Middle East: Into the Twenty-first Century**, *edited by Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, is an elegant exploration of the globality of the Middle East. Organized into seven sections and twenty-seven chapter, the volume examines the region's global entanglements through social, economic, artistic, scientific, cultural, intellectual, and religious perspectives, with each section written by a leading expert in the field. To introduce this important work, we present an excerpt from its introduction with the permission of the editors.*

Rarely do localities, countries, and regions develop over centuries and millennia in isolation; rather, they develop in complex interaction with others. The societies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region also referred to as North Africa and West Asia (NAWA), are not an exception. Their economic, political, cultural, scientific, intellectual, and artistic formations have come about from a complex set of flows, innovations, interactions, and exchanges with those outside and within the region. Ever since the idea of "global" or "worldliness" has been part of people's consciousness, the region has been immensely influenced by various global forces. It has also profoundly impacted developments in other

parts of the world, including what is generally called the "West."

Yet the Middle East has long been viewed from an "exceptionalist" lens in much of the Western press, cinema, television, literature, and scholarship. This exceptionalism depicts peoples and societies as being resilient to change, entrapped by their own history, culture, and religion, and prone to tribalism and nativism. In such a view, culture and religion rarely change, and contemporary conflicts are often attributed to stubborn religious and sectarian rivalries dating back centuries, if not millennia. News media, for instance, are replete with explanations of the Middle East as a region of continuous war, sectarian bloodshed, the cradle of extremism, oppression of women, and religious conflicts, as if these are the result of an innate, inward-looking, and change-resistant culture. Only rarely do analysts take into consideration how the role of geopolitics, multinational entanglements, arms sales (which are among the highest in the world), military interventions, climate change, technological advances, social media networks, high rates of internal and external migrations (the list goes on) influence, transform, and alter societies, from all directions.

For a short period during the Arab uprisings of late 2010 through 2013, a break to the mainstream narrative occurred. Media from much of North America and Europe celebrated the protestors as global models of pro-democracy, nonviolent warriors from progressive youth movements.1 However, the so-called Arab Spring soon turned into what countless analysts prosaically dubbed the "Arab Winter," and a return to the old paradigms of regional stagnation and sectarianism ensued. This resorting to stereotypes to understand the region while sidelining crucial developments in geopolitics, markets, technology, social policies, climate change, grassroots movements, and other dynamics is partially rooted in what Edward Said famously termed "Orientalism."

Today a powerful neo-Orientalist approach depicts the region as largely homogenous, closed, parochial, and resistant to change. Imagined in this fashion, the Middle East has little of value to offer to the world and is responsible for its own troubles. This binary of the (Middle) East versus the West has come to occupy a central place in the well-known "clash of civilizations" theory advanced by political scientist Samuel Huntington in 1993. Huntington viewed an essential opposition between the Western and Islamic civilizations. The idea of this clash has considerably shaped perceptions in the United States about Islam and the Muslim-majority Middle East, in the media and foreign policy circles as well as among different publics.

Few would deny that in past decades countries in the region have suffered from

debilitating wars, stifling political repression, new forms of patriarchy, growing inequality, and more entrenched religious extremism and radicalism. But are these features rooted in local culture and an outgrowth of longheld traditions? Take, for instance, Islamic radicalism, jihadi terrorism, or the phenomenon of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). If these were inherent landscapes of local cultures and traditions, why did they emerge largely after the 1970s and seldom appeared before that time? How do we explain the fact that only "very few radicals have a past of long-standing piety, and most of them are religiously illiterate," as Olivier Roy asserts (chapter 21) in this book?

The truth is that jihadi terrorism did not naturally arise from certain values intrinsic to local culture. Rather, it was imported and spread by thousands of youths from diverse national, class, and educational backgrounds who joined the Mujahedin in Afghanistan during the Cold War. The Mujahedin, with the support of the United States, worked to expel the Soviet invaders. At the time, al-Qaeda was under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, the son of a construction magnate with close ties to the Saudi royal family, who advanced the cause of global terrorism in the name of Islam. He turned on his former US ally and is widely reputed to have masterminded the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. As Roy argues, violent radicalism of militant Islamists or jihadi terrorists has little in essence to do with the idea of "jihad" as understood in the legal Islamic tradition.

Another example can be found in the ongoing conflict between Palestinians and successive Israeli governments. Although some analysts try to shape the narrative by claiming Israel's "biblical right" to the land of Palestine, or reduce the conflict to "age-old" hostilities between Islam and Judaism, the conflict is in fact rooted in far more recent history, particularly since World War I. This history includes British support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, European anti-Semitism that culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust, the development of strong strategic alliances between the United States and Israel, and the capitulation of certain authoritarian Arab states to the status quo. Evangelical Christians in the United States point to end-time prophecies in their support of the modern state of Israel.

Each chapter in this edited volume is a testimony to the global interlinkages of the Middle East in the political, economic, cultural, intellectual, and artistic domains. The authors narrate how these domains have been shaped by interconnections to transnational forces, peoples, and geographies. But this globality has been

complex, taking different expressions and involving different layers, scales, and directions. Sometimes it is expressed in how certain events or interests from outside affect a particular society; other times it is manifested in how persons, products, or cultural registers circulate, travel through national boundaries to be taken on and shared by others.

Geopolitical Effects

Although we do not hold the Orientalist view of cultural exceptionalism, there does exist a kind of "geopolitical exceptionalism" in the region, forged by the trilogy of geography, oil, and Israel—elements that have historically heightened imperial dominance and intraregional rivalry. In the aftermath of World War I, Ottoman provinces were carved into zones of British and French influence in the infamous Sykes-Picot/Asia Minor Agreement of 1916. These artificial borders divided peoples and historic communities, splitting contiguous groups like the Kurds and Druze. In the postcolonial period of the 1950s through the 1970s, the forced creation of distinct nation-states planted the seeds of territorial claims and conflicts, instigating wars between neighboring countries.

Thirst for raw materials and control over trade routes brought the lives of the colonized people into global circuits of trade and transportation, production and profit. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, 80 percent to 90 percent of Egyptian exports, mainly cotton, went to British and European textile mills, not only because the American Civil War (1861–65) cut down the US cotton production in the world market, but especially because British colonists wanted Egypt to export its raw material rather than produce its own textiles. Today, even though it is theoretically free from colonial control, Egyptian cotton is entangled in a global network that connects a cotton grower in the Nile Delta to a seaport in Alexandria, a cotton exchange in Liverpool, a factory in Lancashire, a retailer in America, and courtrooms in various major capitals of the world.

To add salt to the wound, the highly desirable commodity of Egyptian cotton used to make sheets and shirts may not even originate in Egypt because, as Ahmed Shokr discusses (chapter 15), the label "Egyptian cotton" in legal and commercial parlance is not a national marker but a quality brand.

A number of countries in the MENA region— Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, and Syria to name but a few—already suffer from inadequate water and energy, and in some areas the situation is dire. As Jeannie Sowers relates (chapter 13), key human factors contributing to drought and other forms of environmental degradation include wars, civil

strife, occupation, and mismanagement. Egypt shares the river Nile with Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, and conflict between these countries can very quickly trigger crisis in the supply of water, energy, and agricultural products—elements that are so deeply interconnected.

The discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula transformed geopolitics and transnational trade, triggering massive transregional migration flows as well as economic and social developments. Since the 1970s, Iran and the Gulf Arab countries gained immense revenues from oil and in turn experienced remarkable economic growth, the rise of a middle class, infrastructural development, social changes, and quests for democracy. At the same time, oil enabled autocratic and authoritarian governments to rule as "rentier states." They dispensed welfare to their citizens and attempted to appease and essentially buy off dissenting groups. More significantly, as oil became an energy source driving global economic growth, foreign powers and their corporations established influence in the region and supported autocratic regimes in exchange for direct access to oil and economic and political favors. As Timothy Mitchell shows (chapter 14), the largest oil-importing countries encouraged massive arms sales to recycle the money they would pay for importing oil.

In other words, the absence of democratic rule in the region is not simply an outcome of religion or age-old traditions or cultural practices. Rather, this absence is largely linked to the region's political economy and powerful enablers of repression and autocracy. People in the region have responded to these challenges partly by deploying the language of "human rights" adopted from United Nations (UN) charters, conventions, and international NGOs. Yet as Lori Allen illustrates (chapter 23), "human rights" have been torn between the imperial desire to use them as a tool of geopolitical dominance (e.g., invading foreign countries in the name of "bringing democracy," "enforcing human rights," and "protecting women and children") and the indigenous urge to invoke rights as an empowering language for social struggle.

Circulating Beliefs, Arts, and Foods

If global forces and processes—such as colonialism, oil markets, or arms sales—have deeply influenced the politics and economies of individual countries in the Middle East, ideas and cultural products from the region have equally shaped the social and cultural landscapes outside the region.

The remarkable global circulation of belief systems, technologies, music, and foods that originated in the Middle East profoundly transformed the course of human history. The very idea of monotheism as a state

religion likely originated in ancient Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1353–1336 BCE). The idea of a single universal deity has been the cornerstone of the three main Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all of which were born in what we now refer to as the Middle East. It is remarkable to note that in the twenty-first century, more than half the world's population adheres to an Abrahamic religion, a topic pondered by Ebrahim Moosa (chapter 2). Moosa shows how the idea of prophecy in these monotheistic religions underlined the impulse to create a worldly political order in which God occupied a central place, beginning with the notion of "heavenly king" and continuing with today's religious fundamentalisms. The monotheistic God has had enormous global staying power and remains as strong a phenomenon as ever despite relentless challenges from science and secular sensibilities.

As notions of prophecy and worship traveled with merchant ships, pilgrim caravans, and migrants, so too did food and recipes. Today we take for granted certain food or drinks but have little knowledge of their origins. Sami Zubaida (chapter 9) lays out the historical circulation and art of food. As empires spread, so too did their quest for culinary distinction. The diffusion of small dishes or appetizers known collectively as "mezze" (originally a Persian word) into global diets has transformed the traditional European meal pattern from full course meal into largely shared "small plates." Nowadays, in what Zubaida calls a global "foodie milieu" in the Western foodscape, such Middle Eastern foods as kebab, hummus, falafel, baklava, or mezze have entered common food vocabularies.

Like food, music holds an extraordinary capacity to spread and merge cultures. With an intangible nature, semantic ambiguity, and no impassible social boundaries, music remains a most "globalizable expressive substance," as Michael Frishkopf recounts (chapter 11). Musical instruments and sounds of the region traversed Europe, the United States, and Latin America through such channels as West African Islam, the slave trade, colonial encounters, and immigration. They have been adapted and incorporated into local musical genres, from hip-hop to Hollywood soundtracks.

Hollywood and Bollywood may dominate global commercial cinema, but Middle East cinema has carved an important niche. Kamran Rastegar (chapter 10) takes three examples—from Egypt (Yousef Shahin), Iran (Mohsen Kiarostami), and Lebanon (Nadine Labaki)—to trace changes and influences in Middle Eastern cinema. He grapples with questions of art and power and asks, "Can global be reimagined as a more revolutionary

possibility, a world of new connections and opportunities that surpass the limits of nationalism and regionalism?" Cinema exemplifies a globality of multidirectional flows that strives to modify the prevailing pattern of center-periphery flows.

Exchange and Transmutations

From the period of modern colonialism the diffusion of knowledge often appeared to be a one-way street, typically flowing from the rich to the poor nations or from the center to periphery. Things looked different before. During the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid dynasties (750–1258), with seats of power in Damascus and Baghdad respectively, new knowledge and staggering scientific discoveries occurred within a multilingual and "transregional scientific culture" that "continued through the nineteenth-century encounter with modern science," as Robert Morrison points out (chapter 3). Medicine, philosophy, and mysticism conversed and converged with various linguistic, regional, and ethnic communities of learning and worship. The translation movement (from Greek to Arabic and Arabic to other languages) was for centuries a key factor in advances in science, medicine, alchemy, navigation, and astronomy, among other fields. Morrison writes, the "scientific cultures of Islamic societies and Renaissance Europe owe much to other parts of the world." Whether it is effect, exchange, or simply circulation, globalizing cultural registers often get modified, transfigured, indigenized, and take new meanings.

Such has been the case with the Palestinian kufiya. As Ted Swedenburg traces (chapter 12), this form of headwear originated with peasant-guerrillas fighting the British occupation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the kufiya became the key symbol of resistance of the Palestinian peoples against the Israeli occupation. It was soon taken up by people around the world to exhibit solidarity with Palestinians and as a general symbol of resistance. The kufiya also entered the world of youth chic and high street/shopping mall fashion. As Swedenburg concludes, "in whatever context and whatever form, as it continues its transnational migrations and transfigurations, the kufiya in some manner or the other usually refers back to Palestine, and its struggles."

World as Home?

What can we say about a form of globality where the home is the world? Where home is not anchored to a specific place or even region but carries within it a multiplicity of cultures, and echoes of a common humanity. The thirteenth-century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi embodies such a vision of world as home—a vision that the Persian word

jahan-vatani perfectly captures. Rumi's life and poetry represent the quintessential timeless figure who traversed multiple lands, life worlds, and cultures. As highlighted by Fatemeh Keshavarz (chapter 4), "his goal was simple—to speak through a language that transcended barriers such as class, ethnicity, culture, and religion, that would reach Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and atheists alike." Rumi lived a cosmopolitan life and reflected on its merits in his poetry.

In contemporary times, exiles, refugees, and displaced people wander between the world and home striving to rebuild a "home" through their language, networks, food, music, and memory. "The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction," writes Edward Said in his seminal essay, "Reflections on Exile." Yet precisely because of this "fictional" character, the experience of exile can lend itself to immense intellectual empowerment and resilience—think of Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, or Said himself. His essay is a reflection on his own exiled and global life.

The kind of life experienced by Rumi, Marx, or Said is often described in terms of "cosmopolitanism," which refers to both social conditions and an ethical project. Cosmopolitanism also has ethical and normative dimensions; it is a project, something to be cherished. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is deployed to challenge the language of separation and antagonism, to confront cultural superiority and ethnocentrism. The social environment, fascinating life trajectory, and influential body of work of the philosopher Seyla Benhabib represent an aspect of such cosmopolitanism. In an interview with Benhabib (chapter 24), Linda Herrera seeks to "tease out connections between biography, political philosophy linked to cosmopolitanism, and global Middle East." Benhabib recounts her memory of the "incredibly cosmopolitan" Istanbul where her Sephardi Jewish family lived next to Greeks, Italians, Kurds, and Turks in the 1970s. She traces her own political awakenings, life trajectories, and studies that enabled her to make contributions in the areas of German philosophy, feminism, and the rights of stateless people and migrants.

Sadly, that type of cosmopolitanism that Istanbul enjoyed began to fade following the Arab-Israeli War and the rise of religious politics in Turkey since the 1980s. However, a new kind of cultural diversity has emerged in the Persian Gulf with the heavy presence of foreign residents and migrant laborers. But can we call this cosmopolitanism? Indeed, what Dubai represents is not unique in the region. As Ahmed Kanna demonstrates (chapter 18), the massive presence of foreign workers in Bahrain,

Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates has virtually turned the area into a non-Arab region where 90 percent of the population in UAE and Qatar—and 50 percent in the region as a whole—are currently immigrants. Indeed, migration has essentially altered the meaning of "nation" in this part of the region and the world.

The great ports of the Persian Gulf have historically drawn people from a mix of Arab, Persian/Iranian, African, and South Asian cultures. Ports are in essence worldly spaces, as Laleh Khalili reveals (chapter 16), "not only because of goods transiting through their harbors, but because of the flows of merchants and mariners, capitalists and colonizers, soldiers, sailors and spies, and adventurers and dreamers." At closer examination, cosmopolitan Dubai turns out to be no more than a city-state of relatively gated communities marked by sharp communal and spatial boundaries, with labor camps (of South Asian migrants) and the segregated milieu of parochial jet-setters, or the cosmopolitan ghettoes of the Western elite expatriates who remain bounded within the physical safety and cultural purity of their own reclusive collectives. Ahmed Kanna shows how the extraordinary labor migration to the Gulf has substantially altered the economic and cultural landscapes of these societies. These states have reinforced colonial patterns of segmented labor where the highest paid managerial jobs go to Western elites, while the menial, backbreaking, and domestic labor is assigned largely to South and East Asian men and women.

Waleed Hazbun (chapter 17) recounts how from colonial times, the Middle East became a destination for millions of people to visit ancient monuments, religious sites, and the expanding tourist resorts. Beirut famously became the "Paris of the Middle East" in the 1960s before the civil war and the Arab-Israeli conflict ended its fortunes. But Holy Land tourism and the Muslim Pilgrimage, the Hajj, to Saudi Arabia has continued to attract two million Muslim visitors from around the world every year. Tourism does not necessarily bring about more exchange and human connection, particularly if it remains an "enclave" industry concentrated in pockets across the region. Tourism can also perpetuate global hierarchies and zones of exclusion.

Counter Currents

"Cultural imperialism"—a term that conveys how flows of knowledge and paradigms for understanding the world tend to move from the rich countries of the Global North (the "center") to the poorer nations of the Global South (the "periphery")—is often a reality but not a given. Good ideas and cultural traits that resonate with global humanity

can stir countercurrents capable of breaking barriers and shifting the direction of history. The spectacular Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread to Egypt and several other Arab countries inspired and informed the imagination of millions of people around the globe who were fighting for social justice. Asef Bayat (chapter 20) discusses how Tahrir Square in Egypt became a global emblem, a model for the global Occupy Movements that emerged in eighty countries and five hundred cities around the world.

Egypt had championed a different global movement some five decades earlier. It was not a fight against autocracy and neoliberalism but a nationalist movement to undercut imperialist domination. The Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was instrumental in leading a coup against the monarchy and British rule in Egypt, spearheaded a worldwide Non-Aligned Movement along with Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Josip Tito of Yugoslavia, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Their aim was to unite the postcolonial nations against the dominance of both the capitalist West and the Soviet bloc. As Khaled Fahmy elaborates (chapter 8), while Nasser's autocratic military rule decisively reshaped Egypt's politics away from liberalism, his anti-imperialist and pro-Palestinian posture made him a hero of the Third World masses, including in Latin America. A large Arab diaspora largely from the Levant spread throughout Latin Ameria. As John Tofik Karam observes (chapter 19), this group who were labeled as turcos (people of Ottoman lands) warmly embraced the ideas of their fellow Arab leader, Nasser.

Today, people are much more likely to know the great Egyptian soccer star, Mo Salah. Like Nasser, Mohammed "Mo" Salah also comes from humble beginnings and, like Nasser, he represents Arabs and Muslims in the world. With some four billion fans worldwide, Salah is arguably more known and famous than Nasser was in his time. In a sense, as Amro Ali recounts (chapter 7), Salah compensates for the absence of an Arab leader of the stature of Nasser. Salah "is a redemption of something lost, a substitute in an era devoid of real Muslim leaders." But for the rest of the world, particularly Europe, "he is the disrupter of the secular realm and obstacle to bigotry who can jam the wires of Islamophobia." Chants by English fans describe Salah as a "gift from Allah."

Conclusion

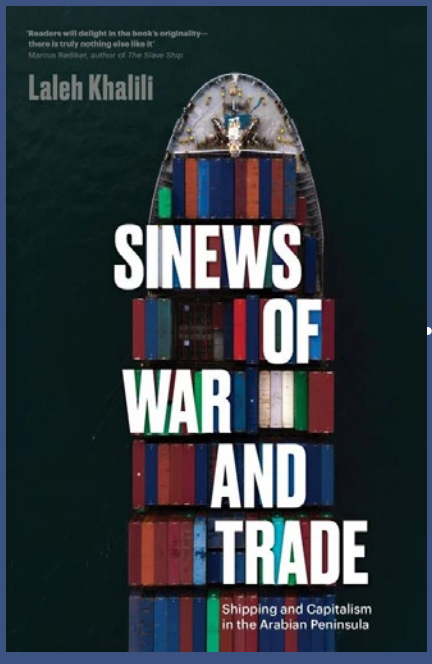
Why should we get surprised about the globality of the Middle East, if not for the all-too-common and widespread assumptions about the innate parochiality and nativism of the region frozen in time? Indeed, a large part of this discourse about globality or parochialism of the Middle

East has concerned the modern era, the era of nation-states, when the territorial borders came to shape national and cultural hierarchies. Otherwise, as Hamid Dabashi highlights (chapter 5), before the very designation of the term "the Middle East" by European colonists, the region was integral in at least "three global Muslim empires that ruled half of the civilized world: the Mughals, the Safavids/Qajars, and the Ottomans." Perhaps notions of diffusion, of give-and-take, are too simple to capture the complexities and myriad ways cultural landscapes have been interconnected. Consider how much, as Dabashi shows, Persian philosophy, poetry, prophets, and figurative symbols found their ways into the works of thinkers like the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophon, into the Hebrew Bible, in Montesquieu's Persian Letters, Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, or Mozart's Magic Flute. These display not simply the influence of Persian culture on the European literary consciousness—the opposite of which would be that infamous Westernization of the rest.

In the age of the nation-state and the current outflow of offensive nationalism and nativism, nations may take pride in this or that discovery, idea, or famous personality. But in truth there is no totally pure people, thought, or culture with a fixed geography. In the large span of time and space, humans have moved around, gained new experiences, and their ideas have circulated over time and in the expanse of this planet. From this standpoint the homeland is our shared world to which all of us—peoples, knowledges, and ways of living— belong.

Book Review / Laleh Khalili / 2020

War as the Production of Space



Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula
Laleh Khalili

Verso, 2020

Aidin Torkameh

There could hardly be a more urgent moment to return to Laleh Khalili's *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (2020, Verso). The recent war has made the significance of the Strait of Hormuz more visible than ever in headlines. Khalili's book offers a historically grounded framework for understanding the long entanglement of war, trade, and infrastructure in the region and beyond. Written with narrative clarity and based on a remarkably wide range of archival materials, interviews, and shipboard travel, it reconstructs the histories through which maritime infrastructures have made the Peninsula central to global capitalism. The book is about practices of shipping with a focus on ports, oil, roads, law, labor, and the changing geographies of power.

I read *Sinews of War and Trade* through the intersection of several fields that shape my own work: critical urban studies, political economy, radical geography, Middle East, Persian Gulf and Iranian studies, and nationalism studies. Khalili's major contribution is that she shows capitalism not as an abstract, intangible, and elusive system-idea, but as something made materially

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Laleh Khalili is a Professor of Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter. With a PhD in political science, her research focuses on violence, war, repression, and the infrastructures of conflict in the Middle East.

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concrete through the constant production of space, even if she does not name it as such. The book shows how maritime infrastructures produce space by connecting ports to hinterlands, transforming relatively autonomous and disconnected regions into national territories, extending state reach through techno-political projects, and turning law and logistics into everyday instruments of domination. The book's importance therefore exceeds any single field. It is essential for students and scholars of political economy, Middle East and Gulf studies, international relations, urban studies, labor studies, legal geography, border studies, and critical security studies.

Chapter 1, "Route-Making," traces how shipping routes are produced through imperial expansion, steamship technologies, telegraph cables, and financial speculation. Routes may appear fluid, yet they "have a solidity, a durability that their marine ephemerality belies" (p. 14). Capitalism, state, and law reorganize the natural materiality of the sea into routes, charts, chokepoints, insurance zones, and financial indices, turning maritime space into a calculable geography of power where "dangerously unrigorous mathematics is essentially a euphemism for wild gambling on a completely imaginary future" (p. 46).

Chapter 2, "Harbour-Making," demonstrates that ports are shaped by colonial, *and* nationalist forces. The construction of harbours requires dredging, land reclamation, cement, stone, sand, labor, and the transformation not only of coastlines but also of distant extraction sites. This has created environmentally colonial relations, for instance between Singapore and Myanmar, where riverbed sand has been extracted from many rivers and shipped to Singapore to support its land expansion, leaving Myanmar's waterways more vulnerable to flooding and bank erosion (p. 83–84). Importantly, harbour-making appears here as a mechanism of territorial expansion: "the construction of Jabal Ali consolidated [Shaikh] Rashid's claim over the contested borderland" (63–64). Ports, then, do not merely serve the state; they actively help extend its spatial reach, as when the seabed becomes "an extension of the border" (99).

Chapter 3, "Palimpsests of Law and Corporate Sovereigns," moves to the legal infrastructures of maritime capitalism. Khalili shows that law is not secondary to shipping; it is one of its conditions of possibility. The Onassis-Aramco episode, the invention of the "continental shelf" as a physical-legal category (p. 97–98), the legal fiction of 'freedom' of navigation, and the rise of free zones all reveal how legal practice produces space of and for capital. Law mattered: not just to sovereignty, but to capital accumulation (p. 91). This chapter

is especially important for scholars of legal geography because it shows that legal categories do not merely describe reality; they actively shape it by creating regimes of ownership, extraction, and accumulation. Law is not a neutral framework but a spatial practice that draws boundaries, erases older landscapes, and turns common spaces into private spaces of domination.

Chapter 4, "Roads and Rails Leading Away," connects ports to hinterlands. Roads and railways are not merely technical extensions of ports; they draw interiors, peripheries, and oil fields into state space: "The roads brought along the reach of the state" (p. 125). They (re)make centers and peripheries. Roads weave coastal and inland spaces into emerging national territories, partially integrate fragmented polities, and undermine regional autonomies (p. 132). The chapter also shows that road-building is inseparable from the political economy of oil. Aramco's roads facilitated the export of oil and the importation of materials, but they also created demand for asphalt, expanded the market for gasoline, and helped normalize automobility as a petroleum-based form of movement (p. 129). Road-building is one of the spatial practices through which the nation-state materializes itself.

Chapter 5, "'Mechanic, Merchant, King,'" examines the rise of local capital by analysing the formation of actors who transformed shipping: merchants, bankers, state officials, and engineers. Khalili is particularly strong in showing how private capital and state are not separate spheres but mutually constitutive relations (pp. 152–153). The chapter also helps us frame planning as a multi-modal practice of the state production of space. The chapter also explains that capitalist class formation in the Gulf did not follow the factory-centred industrialisation: "the coming of oil in the 1930s created a new class of Arab capitalists in the Peninsula, especially contractors and construction magnates" (p. 147). Capitalism in the region was formed, to a significant extent, through the production of space itself: ports, roads, company towns, and labor camps became central sites of class formation.

Chapters 6 and 7, on landside labor and shipboard work, bring workers into the center of the analysis. Khalili examines strikes in Aden, racialised labor hierarchies, migrant control, the *kafala* system (pp. 185–86), deportations, dual-wage systems, and the history of lascars. She writes, "containerisation entailed slashing labour rolls, fragmenting dockworker communities, and spatially isolating the ports" (p. 189). Khalili notes that the "one certain effect" of these technologies is "a further drive towards automation," one that seeks to purge ports of "those stubbornly resistant elements: workers" (p. 180). This is not

only a labor question but also a question of state power. Since the state's economy depends on ports and oil terminals, "work stoppages are seen not only as a challenge to the employer but also to state security" (p. 212). Shipboard labor is likewise shaped by borders and exclusion: even port visits, which could break "the boredom of being at sea," were restricted in places such as Khor Fakkan, where the port "does not have a border crossing" and therefore cannot accommodate non-nationals or visa-holding workers (p. 224).

Chapter 8, "The Bounties of War," traces how wars repeatedly reorganize shipping, finance, oil flows, ports, and one can add, urbanisation, in the region. The Suez crisis, the 1973 war, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Tanker Wars, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the Iraq war all produced new routes, new ports, and new military-commercial infrastructures. By the time Suez reopened in 1975, "regional geopolitical power had shifted from Cairo to the Arabian Peninsula" (p. 247). The Lebanese Civil War intensified this shift: after the Beirut docks were burnt down, "most major international firms had moved their headquarters to Dubai and Sharjah" by 1977 (p. 248). The production of Dubai as we know it today was therefore not simply the result of visionary development or natural market growth; it was produced through war, displacement, and the rerouting of capital. The war is not an interruption of trade; it (re)produces the very spaces through which trade circulates.

The central strength of Sinews of War and Trade is its *spatio*-temporal materialism. Khalili insists on the physical and spatial substances of capitalism: cement, asphalt, sand, stone, dredged seabeds, land, fuel, pipelines, roads, ships, ports, labor camps, free zones, and military bases. Capitalism, therefore, is not represented as an abstract system; it has weight, texture, smell, sound, fuel, heat, pain, and landscape. It is poured as concrete, dredged as seabed, burned as oil, transported as cargo, and guarded as a private property: "to make cement, limestone is baked at around 1,450°C," that "consumes huge amounts of fuel" and produces "around one tonne of carbon dioxide per tonne of cement" (p. 85). Cement, then, is not merely a building material; it condenses oil, extraction, and atmospheric damage.

This spatial lens also opens a productive conversation with critical urban theory. The book could become even more analytically powerful if read alongside the literature on planetary urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). From the perspective of planetary urbanisation, urbanisation is not confined to "a bounded, universally replicable settlement type" but extends through the infrastructural, extractive,

logistical, and territorial networks that reproduce urban forms differentially. The ports of Dubai, Jabal Ali, Jubail, Aden, Khor Fakkan, and Fujairah are not merely logistical nodes that are pushed "out of city centers" (p. 78) or "deliberately located far from city centers" (p. 199–200). They are new urban forms, and probably, extensions of the current urban centers, produced through oil, war, migration, and securitization. They show that urbanisation is not limited to cities in the conventional bounded sense. It extends through ports, free zones, roads, labor camps, military bases, and offshore-onshore legal enclaves. Neom makes this argument especially visible. Khalili describes it as "another commercial fantasy and legally variegated enclave" (pp. 118–19). The point becomes sharper when she notes that "ignoring major popular discontent about the deal" Egypt "has also ceded the islands of Tiran and Sanafir" to Saudi Arabia (p. 119). New urban forms in the region thus emerge through what I have called national colonial practices (Torkameh, 2025).

If the postwar American Dream was increasingly organized around suburban homeownership, private automobility, the nuclear family, the Gulf reveals a later and more planetary mutation of that dream. Here, US-Americanisation does not take the form of the classic suburb. It is now a planetary form of suburbanisation. It is reproduced through increasingly privatized spaces of ports, free zones, logistics corridors, oil terminals, refineries, labor camps, and military bases. In this sense, Dubai, Jabal Ali, and the wider port-urbanisation of the Gulf are not simply regional success stories or by-products of war. They are spatial forms through which the American dream (of freedom, consumption, security, and development) is externalised in planetary scale. If, drawing on Dolores Hayden, one argues that the suburban house, the car, and the highway materialized the American Dream domestically, Khalili's book helps us see how ports and free zones sought to materialize a comparable dream abroad: "Free zones in their various incarnations have become modular technologies for frictionless transfer of capitalist ideology from one place to another" (p. 110). By the 1980s the World Bank made free zones "a condition of structural-adjustment programmes for indebted countries of the global South … to repatriate profits" (pp. 112, 114).

This is where Khalili's opening epigraph from Heaney becomes unexpectedly generative: "whatever is given / Can always be reimagined." This applies to the American Dream, too. Read with Hayden, this is not only a critique of the American Dream's imperial afterlife; it is also an invitation to ask

what kinds of spaces would be required to reimagine and redream. Reimagining is not merely a matter of changing ideals; it requires the actual production of different spaces, and perhaps, different scales. The question of housing is particularly important here. The labor camp, the company town, the free zone, the chokepoints, and the port are all part of the same spatio-temporal regime. Khalili does discuss labor camps, but the history of labor could be even more closely tied to the history of dwelling. As Khalili shows, workers do not only labor in ports; they live in segregated, monitored, and often racialized spaces. Such segregation was intensified on construction sites where "loneliness was a condition of work" (pp. 199–200).

Khalili's analysis invites a further question about nationalism and the nation-state. While Khalili offers a powerful and illuminating analysis of imperialism, the book gives comparatively less attention to one of imperialism's key political and spatial forms: the nation-state and its accompanying nationalisms. By leaving the nation-state largely unexamined as a historically colonial spatial formation, the book risks placing state-led projects outside the analytical frame of imperialism. Nationalism does not necessarily resist empire; it can reproduce colonial relations on different scales (Torkameh, 2025). Roads, ports, customs regimes, security practices, and military bases often integrate not-yet-national spaces into the state territory while undermining their autonomy. In this sense, colonialism should be understood not only as domination between states but also as a multi-scalar relation of domination between any center and its peripheries.

Read through the literature of radical geography, Khalili's book allows us to rethink nationalism as a spatial technology tied to the making of the national economy. Here Timothy Mitchell's concept of *economentality* can also be useful: the nation appears not only as an imagined community, but as a calculative apparatus organized around the national economy. In Mitchell's terms, the economy embeds political life in a projected future of national growth and national security. Khalili shows how that future is materially installed through ports, roads, railways, and shipping routes. Mitchell and Khalili allow us to see nationalism as a spatial and economic technology that frames class struggle in national terms and, in doing so, largely neutralises it, separates workers and subaltern groups across borders, and recodes and naturalizes exploitation and coercion as development or national necessity.

This point raises important questions about nationalism and left politics. Khalili shows that communists, nationalists, and

anticolonial movements often intersected. Yet the same history also shows how nationalism can weaken class struggle. As Khalili repetitively discusses, national security repeatedly turns labor action into a threat to the state. She shows that the fear of communism and nationalisation helped generate legal regimes designed to protect foreign property, and systems of international arbitration that secured the property of Western investors (pp. 92–93). In this sense, anti-communism did not simply repress left movements; it helped produce the legal geography of global capitalism. Moreover, policies such as Saudisation or Kuwaitisation of labor—as forms of economic nationalism—can intensify the vulnerability of migrant workers. This tension is especially visible when Khalili notes that even "ostensibly radical, cohesive, and militant" dockers' unions could "stand on the side of US security interests," as when the SIU[1] boycotted a Swedish ship because Sweden had sent supplies to North Vietnam, situated within the communist bloc during the Cold War (pp. 216–17). This confirms that nationalism can override even militant union politics, emptying labor action of its transnational force. Yet Khalili does not fully deal with this tension as a problem for left strategy. Her historical material nevertheless makes it possible to ask how nationalism repeatedly weakens class struggle. These moments suggest the need to rethink left strategy beyond the nation-state form, so that it does not reproduce the very socio-spatial order it seeks to challenge.

This question is particularly important for any reading of the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and Baluchestan. Khalili's scattered but suggestive references to Gwadar, Iran, Baluchistan (p. 188), Iranian and Baluchi migrants (p. 194), Parsis (pp. 169–170), and Palestinians (p. 195) reveal a spatiotemporal matrix that long exceeded the borders later imposed by modern states. Gwadar for instance remained under Omani rule "until 1958, when Oman sold Gwadar to Pakistan" (p. 168). Moreover, the fact that Baluchestan appears alongside, rather than simply as part of Iran and Pakistan also matters: it suggests a geography whose historical, maritime, and labor connections cannot be contained by national borders. In this sense, the book opens a path for thinking about pre- and non-national geographies. This aspect could have been brought more fully into the argument, because it would make even clearer how the nation-state tends to obscure older spatial relations. These insights are also useful for resisting nostalgic or nationalist accounts of the region that detach contemporary crises from their longer histories of non-national territories. The same issue matters

for the history of race. Khalili gives careful attention to racialised labor, especially in relation to British imperial hierarchies, lascars, migrant workers, labor camps, and dual-wage systems. Yet a fuller account of slavery and its afterlives in the region would have deepened the book's analysis of race. Racism in the Gulf and the broader Indian Ocean world cannot be understood only through European colonial rule. It also has local, regional, and non-Western histories, including enslavement, anti-Blackness, and the colonisation of peripheralized peoples.

The book's treatment of war suggests a broader theoretical claim: war is not only destructive; it is also spatially productive. The distinction between war and trade is therefore unstable. What appears after war as development may in fact be the continuation of military logistics by other means. This is one of the book's most urgent lessons for critical urban studies. This logistical reading of war also allows us to rethink imperialism. An already urbanised imperialism operates through logistical networks, private security companies, extractive investments, border control, armed protection for trade routes, and the production of "frontier" spaces for capital. Erik Prince's activities illustrate how these infrastructures can cut across the apparent China-US divide. As Khalili says, after providing security for military transport, Prince founded Frontier Services Group in 2012 to supply logistics, insurance, and armed protection to Chinese mining and energy companies operating in East Africa. Listed in Hong Kong and backed partly by the Chinese state-owned Citic Group, the company was designed to provide paramilitary and intelligence-related services in places where Chinese investments required protection. It has also reportedly pursued interests in Pakistan, where China is involved in construction of the port of Gwadar. From this angle, China cannot be understood only as a rival to the United States; it also participates in the expansion of capital, extraction, and securitized logistics across African and Asian spaces. The China–US binary therefore becomes less stable when contractors associated with US military power can also become embedded in the protection of Chinese overseas investments (pp. 263–265).

Such a critical understanding of imperialism can potentially change how we understand the national border. The border is not only a line on a map; it is a career, a market, and a security industry. Consultants, former soldiers, private security firms, and surveillance experts all profit from the multiplication of borders and the further fragmentation of space. Khalili shows this clearly in her account of the US Army Corps of Engineers, whose military construction

programme became both "a visible indicator" of US protection and a "conduit for the diffusion of US business expertise" (p. 259). The rise of Agility, a Kuwaiti multinational logistics company, makes the point even sharper: its revenue rose from US$154 million before the US invasion of Iraq to US$6.3 billion in 2008, and by 2010 it had received more than US$8 billion in contracts from the US military (pp. 262–263). Most revealingly, the Kuwaiti government granted Agility a twenty-five-year concession to run "the state's entire customs business" at all ports of entry (p. 263). Border control thus becomes not only a sovereign function but a privatized industry, one that profits from regulating the movement of people, goods, energy, and money.

Khalili writes about charts, routes, ports, borders, and spatial transformations, but the book would have benefited from visual mapping. Since the argument is so deeply spatial, maps could have helped readers see the changing geography of routes, ports, hinterlands, free zones, labor migration, and military-logistical infrastructures. This is not a major weakness, but it would have made the book's spatial argument even more visible.

Sinews of War and Trade is a rich, careful, politically relevant, and beautifully narrated book. Its achievement is not only that it tells the history of shipping in the Arabian Peninsula. The book's final political force lies in its insistence on the erased bodies beneath legal and logistical abstraction. In the history of maritime capitalism, workers often disappear behind contracts, ships, ports, insurance claims, and court cases. Her account makes this point with devastating clarity: "the bodies whose hunger earned profit" were erased from legal history (p. 241). Khalili refuses this disappearing. This quotation from the book captures its ethical and political importance. Sinews of War and Trade asks us to look at the spaces and infrastructures of capitalism, but also at the bodies that build, move, guard, and suffer under them.

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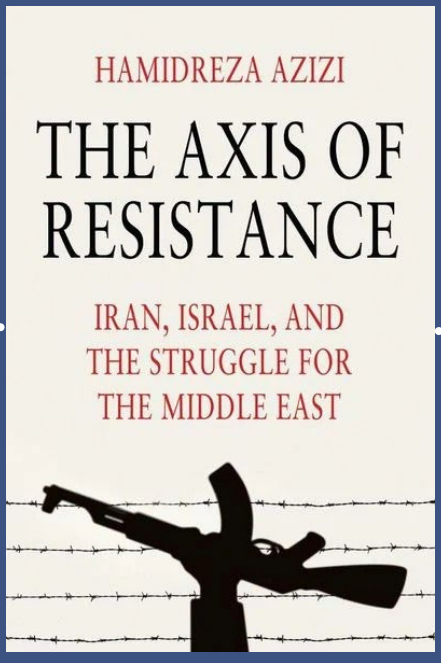
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Notes

1. The Seafarers International Union.

Book Review / Hamidreza Azizi / 2026

The Axis of Resistance and the New Middle East



The Axis of Resistance: Iran, Israel, and the Struggle for the Middle East
Hamidreza Azizi

Polity Press, 2026

Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani

The Axis of Resistance: Iran, Israel and the Struggle for the Middle East offers fresh insight into the Axis of Resistance as one of the most significant and resilient actors shaping the Middle East's regional dynamics over the last few decades. Drawing on his extensive expertise in Iran's foreign and security policy, Azizi provides a detailed historical analysis of the Axis of Resistance—its origins, evolution, mission, regional impact, and central role in Iran's military and security strategy. The book bridges military security and regional studies, highlighting the growing influence of non-state actors within a predominantly state-centric international system.

Because the book's primary perspective is security strategy, it addresses Iran's foreign policy only as the broader context in which the Axis developed and has evolved. In other words, it does not examine shifts in Iranian foreign policy across its different periods unless those changes have significantly altered the country's approach to the Axis or its core mission and objectives. Nor does it discuss individual foreign policy challenges with security implications, such as nuclear development.

About the Authors

Hamidreza Azizi is an analyst of Iran and Middle East geopolitics and security. He is a Visiting Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin and a Nonresident Fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs in Doha. He was an assistant professor of regional studies at Shahid Beheshti University (2016–2020).

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The author's main argument is that Iran invested heavily in the Axis of Resistance as a central pillar of its forward defense strategy to address vulnerabilities stemming from its strategic loneliness. However, the post-Gaza War depletion in the power of the Axis has left it unable to fulfil the effective deterrent role it was envisaged to provide for Iran's security. Spanning six chapters plus an Introduction, Conclusion, and Afterword, the book traces how Iran united several state and non-state actors under the banner of "resistance" to form a powerful political-military network, while also charting the network's ideological foundations, internal structure, division of labor, ebbs and flows.

The first chapter explores the ideological and strategic underpinnings of the Axis within the Islamic Republic's broader narrative. It attributes Iran's post-revolutionary hostility toward the US to the 1953 US-orchestrated coup to overthrow Mosaddegh and its subsequent support for the Shah's autocratic rule, as well as the strong anti-imperialist identity that united its revolutionary leadership. The focus of this anti-imperialism gradually shifted from broader hegemonic powers towards anti-Americanism and fierce opposition to Israel as the regional embodiment of global hegemony and arrogance following the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (pp. 22–23). The chapter then examines the concept of the "Export of the Revolution," enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution as a foundational pillar of Iran's foreign policy, and explores the practical measures taken to embed this doctrine in the Islamic Republic's strategic planning and worldview. Within this context, post-revolution Iran first developed relationships with non-state military and political actors across the Middle East. However, Azizi agrees with Reisinezhad (2019) that Iran's engagement with such groups, regardless of who rules the country, is a compensatory measure for its loneliness in its strategic environment. (p.46) In other words, despite the essential differences between the Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic, both in political character and foreign policy, the continuation of certain geopolitical constraints, such as strategic loneliness, leads to the adaptation of similar strategies, such as building alliances with non-state regional armed groups.

The chapter introduces four stages for the evolving role of non-state armed groups in post-revolutionary Iran's strategy. Initially viewed as vehicles for exporting the revolution, these groups later became the building blocks of Iran's forward-defense doctrine—confronting threats beyond its borders to safeguard the homeland. In the post-Arab Spring era, the collapse of strong Arab states (Egypt, Libya, and Syria) and

the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq enabled Iran to expand its regional influence through the Axis, marking a strategic shift from mere defense and deterrence (p. 11). Although Qassem Soleimani's assassination initially caused disarray, the subsequent creation of a Joint Operations Room (JOR) —supported by Hezbollah—ushered in a new phase of coordinated command. This moved the Axis away from Soleimani's centralized, vertical model toward a more decentralized, horizontal structure that grants greater autonomy to its members (p. 12). Such formulation of evolution stages demonstrates the author's systemic approach. In other words, greater importance has been attached to the impact of regional geopolitical developments rather than the Islamic Republic's domestic developments and the role of its individual decision makers.

Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), a foundational doctrine of the Islamic Republic articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, holds that during the Major Occultation a qualified faqih should exercise political leadership to implement Islamic law and ensure just governance. Its enshrinement in Iran's constitution established clerical supremacy and gave the Supreme Leader near-absolute authority. Though primarily domestic, it carries a strong universalist and transnational dimension tied to the Ummah and the export of the Revolution. Unlike "resistance," a full adherence to *Velayat-e Faqih* is not required for the membership of the Axis, but groups such as Hezbollah and certain Iraqi Shi'a militias that fully embrace it, enjoy a privileged status. (p. 31)

Shaped by the trauma of the 8-year war, the doctrine of *'forward defense'*, which became the cornerstone of the Islamic Republic's security strategy holds that Iran must constantly prepare for war and be willing to use offensive measures for self-defense. Rather than waiting for threats to reach its borders, the forward defense demands proactive engagement far beyond Iran's territory to pre-empt them (p.32). At the core of forward defense lies the concept of strategic depth, which drove Iran's shift "from passive deterrence to forward defence" and justified its expansion into neighbouring regions. In essence, strategic depth seeks to create deterrence by posing credible threats to adversaries' interests beyond Iran's borders. Iran's overarching objective has been to build a "resilient and multifaceted deterrence strategy" to dissuade adversaries from aggression (pp. 33–34). Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, are viewed by Iran's Supreme Leader and senior officials as the primary arenas for achieving this strategic depth.

Iran has pursued two main strategies to sustain its strategic depth and overcome the constraints of isolation, long-standing sanctions, and arms embargoes: First, it

has developed robust asymmetric warfare capabilities, centred on ballistic missiles, drones, advanced naval assets, and cyber operations. The author interestingly does not include nuclear threshold achievement as part of Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities or its deterrence strategy. Second, it has cultivated extensive ties with non-state and semi-state armed groups to construct a broad network of proxies and partners across the Middle East. The strengthening of the Axis of Resistance is therefore central to Iran's military strategy (p.37)

The three subsequent chapters focus on the introduction of the Axis of Resistance constituent groups within three tiers based on Iran's vision of offensive defense deterrence. Those closest to Israel, as Iran's main regional adversary, being perceived as the frontline or the first tier. Chapter 2 examines the evolution of Iran's relations with the front line, Palestinian movements, tracing their roots to the pre-revolutionary period and the incorporation of revolutionary groups' anti-imperialist ideology into the Islamic Republic. It traces Tehran's shift from its initial partnership with the PLO to its alignment with Hamas after disillusionment with the PLO following the Oslo Accords. As a result, Iran threw its support behind Hamas, thereby strengthening Hamas's position in the Palestinian political landscape. A similar level of support has been extended to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), who become even more closely aligned with Iran due to its heavy military and financial dependence. The *Unity of arenas* strategy enabled coordinated action among various Palestinian factions of the Axis, resulting in the sophisticated October 7 attack on Israel and their sustained resilience despite prolonged Israeli military campaigns in Gaza. (pp. 58–61)

Chapter 3 examines Lebanon and Syria as the second tier of the Axis of Resistance against Israel. After reviewing Iran's historical ties with Lebanese Shi'a communities—which expanded significantly after the 1979 Revolution—the chapter highlights the centrality of Hezbollah's alliance to Iran's regional strategy and the pivotal role of Assad's Syria within the broader Axis. This strategic importance explains Iran's massive effort in preserving Assad's regime at all costs, transforming Syria from a mere logistical conduit for Palestinian and Lebanese militias into a key operational front in the Axis's confrontation with Israel, despite Assad's cautious reluctance. The author argues that Assad's weakening as a result of years of civil war and external pressures caused Hezbollah's defeat against Israel, which in turn led to Assad's downfall—weakening the Axis of Resistance's vital Levantine link and inflicting major damage on the network. While this account oversimplifies complex events by

overlooking multiple contributing factors, it correctly notes that the loss of the Levantine link significantly eroded the Axis's deterrent power, paving the way for Israel's 2025 attack on Iran.

Chapter 4 examines the third tier of the Axis—Yemen and Iraq—where Shi'a ideology and historical grievances underpin alignment with Iran. The chapter opens with a historical overview of Iran–Iraq ties, beginning with the Najaf–Qom seminary connections and Shi'a exiles. It then traces the evolution of Iran's political and military influence in Iraq, from the establishment of the Ramadan headquarters during the Iran–Iraq War to Tehran's support following the 2003 US invasion and its role in the fight against ISIS through the organization and training of *Hashd-al-Shabi* (Popular Mobilization Front-PMF) by Soleimani. Though his assassination resulted in a deterioration of Iran's control over the PMF, Tehran still manages to project power through this member of the Axis. However, the PMF remains deeply contentious domestically, as seen in the 2019 Tishreen protest movement, which challenged the PMF's legitimacy over corruption and perceived dependence on Iran.

Moving to Yemen, despite its long historical ties with Iran, the country only entered Tehran's orbit after the Arab uprisings, the Houthis' rise to power, and Saudi Arabia's military intervention against them. Their strong anti-Israel stance has served as a key asset, facilitating their integration into the Axis of Resistance, justifying their prominent role in post-October 7 efforts to contain Israeli actions in Gaza. The chapter concludes by explaining the importance of this tier in the face of depletion on the Levantine front by becoming "the most reliable surviving scaffold of the forward defence". (P.130)

Chapter 5 traces the evolution of the Axis's command-and-control system, from the highly centralized hierarchical network built by Qasem Soleimani to a decentralized model following his assassination, with Hezbollah playing a central role in repairing the resulting fractures. While decentralization improved flexibility and adaptability, it risked undermining the network's overall coherence. The establishment of the JOR was a strategy to coordinate military actions and operational decisions across multiple theatres in the post Soleimani era (p.147). Assessing the Axis's performance in the post-7 October developments, particularly the 12-day US/Israel war against Iran, the chapter argues that the JOR failed to deliver the effectiveness achieved under Soleimani and the once-unified fronts have shifted toward modular deterrence. Consequently, while the Axis of Resistance remains a network united by shared ideology, it no longer functions as the cohesive axis it once was.

Considering the Gaza War a stress test

for all competing visions for the Middle East regional order, Chapter 6 reviews the perception of the Axis towards the international system and its aspiration to reshape the Middle East regional order in a way that is more aligned with their strategic objectives and vision. The author argues that Iran perceived the October 7 attacks as a step towards realization of such vision. As such, despite clear lack of prior knowledge of Hamas's plans, the Axis mobilized maximum military capabilities as well as diplomatic potential to support Hamas in getting them closer to their aspired regional order. While post-October 7 regional developments have in many ways resulted in reducing the power of the Axis, one cannot underestimate its diplomatic achievements, including the suspension of Saudi-Israel normalization process and the opportunity for Axis members to expand their diplomatic reach internationally.

The afterword section explains how the cumulative weakening of the Axis members shaped US-Israel calculations to start their 2026 war against Iran as the head of the Axis. While the first and second tier are either neutralised (Syria) or under siege, the Axis failed to operate as an "integrated and mutually reinforcing structure" that Iranian strategists had once envisaged. (p.190)

Increased interest in the Axis of Resistance, especially in the post-October 2023 era, has led to some quality publications on this subject in recent years. Sobelman's (2025), *Axis of Resistance: Asymmetric Deterrence and Rules of the Game in Contemporary Middle East Conflicts,* is one of the closest books to Azizi's. Using Hebrew, Arabic and English sources and interviews with Israeli politicians and commanders, Sobelman offers Israel's perspective, as opposed to Azizi's Iranian perspective. While networked deterrence remains the central concept in both these analyses, Azizi's point of departure is political ideology, while Sobelman's is International Relations. In other words, in Azizi's argument, ideology is the focal point of different groups coming together within the Axis. For Sobelman, it is 'imbalance of power' which leads the weaker actors to come together under the Resistance umbrella. These weaker actors use asymmetric deterrence to subject their much stronger opponent to limitations, which balances vulnerabilities by imposing high costs on that opponent in case of escalation while holding reserve capabilities for coercive leverage. (p.10)

Mirzaei's *Axis of Resistance: Persia's Strategy of Resistance from Antiquity to Modern Iran* (2025) is another relevant book with a more historical and anthropological approach, examining the Axis within the context of Iran's historical statecraft. He frames the Axis of Resistance as part of Iran's unique survival strategy and ideational philosophy that

continues to influence today's geopolitical landscape. As such, while Azizi examines the Axis of Resistance as a post-revolution, anti-imperial phenomenon, Mirzaei perceives it as a cultural continuum embedded in the Iranian history of resisting external invaders.

While each of these publications offers a distinct perspective and methodological approach, they effectively complement one another and collectively exemplify rigorous academic scholarship. That said, Azizi's analysis could be further strengthened by examining the Axis of Resistance's role not only in Iran's national security but also in the regime's domestic survival, particularly given documented involvement by groups such as Hezbollah and the Hashd al-Shaabi in the suppression of internal unrest since 2009. A valuable addition would also be a discussion of Iran's unsuccessful efforts to recruit or sponsor such groups in countries such as Azerbaijan (Hossainiyun) and integrate them into the Axis of Resistance. Furthermore, the work offers limited examination of the Afghan (Fatemiyun) and Pakistani (Zainabiyun) brigades, whose contributions—though constrained—merit closer examination, alongside an analysis of the structural and political factors that have limited Iran's broader success in incorporating additional resistance groups from these states.

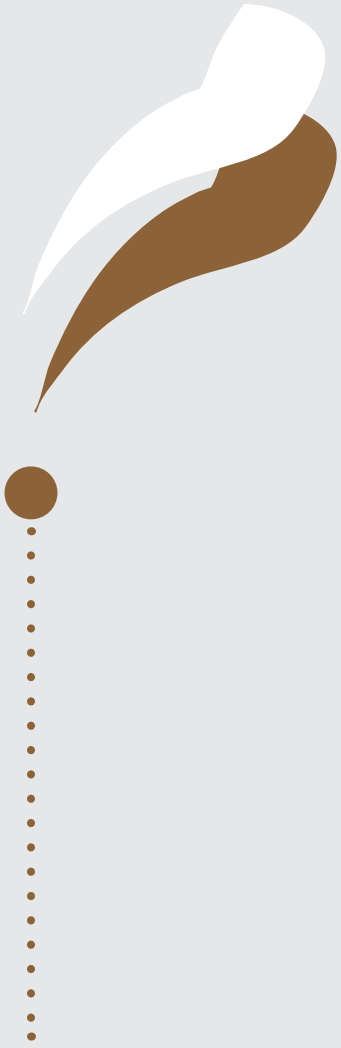
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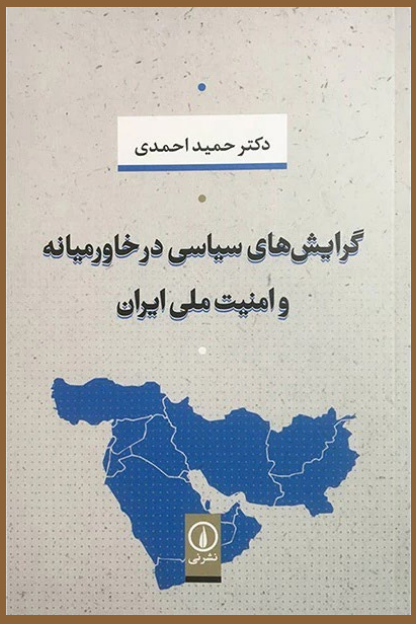


SOCIAL SCIENCE in IRAN

Book Review / Hamid Ahmadi / 2024

Iran's National Security on the Border of Thought and Might

Re-reading Political Rivalries in the Contemporary Middle East



Political Tendencies in the Middle East and Iran's National Security

Hamid Ahmadi

Ney Publishing, 2024 (in Persian)

Samar Saremi

The book *Political Tendencies in the Middle East and Iran's National Security* critically examines the relationship between the Islamic Republic's regional policies and the Middle East's intellectual-political movements, along with the resulting threats to Iran's national security. Re-reading this book assumes double importance, especially in light of the military aggressions by the United States and Israel against Iran, which forced two wars upon the country in the spring of 2025 and the winter of 2025.

The book's author, a senior political analyst and commentator at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies, has written and translated numerous works on this subject in Iran. This book is one of three interconnected volumes that rank among his latest publications. The first volume in this series, titled Politics and Government in the Middle East and North Africa, was published in 2021; the second, titled Regional and International Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, came out in 2023; and finally, the third volume—which is the focus of our review here—was published in 2024 by Ney Publishing.

About the Authors

Hamid Ahmadi, a professor of international relations and senior analyst of Middle East affairs in Iran, has served as the Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Tehran (1998–2003). He is the editor-in-chief of the quarterly journal Middle East Studies published by the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies.

Samar Saremi, an architect and urban anthropologist, is a graduate of McGill University who works as an associate at Tajeer Consulting Architects in Tehran.

This three-volume set is primarily aimed at university-level education, providing a wealth of data to students and researchers in political science and international relations—including those new to the subjects of Iran's geopolitics and national security. At the same time, it also addresses diplomats and decision-makers in the field; adopting a cautionary tone, it expresses the hope that "awareness of such policies and an understanding of regional political tendencies and their associated challenges" will lead to the placement of "knowledgeable elites—well-versed in politics and the regional and global landscape—within the country's foreign policy institutions" (p. 43).

Ahmadi's efforts to disseminate fresh ideas and critique state policies—with the aim of reforming high-level policymaking—represent an emerging approach within the realm of regional security politics, even though such practices are well-established in Iran's social sciences. Until a few years ago, critical discourse in this field was confined to closed government circles and had no place in the public sphere; however, recent setbacks and the perilous situation that culminated in war transformed foreign policy into a matter of widespread public concern, drawing academics into the debate over major strategic challenges.

In this book series, the author adopts a broad definition of the Middle East, identifying three distinct zones within the region: the first comprises the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, encompassing Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait; the second is the Eastern Arab zone—referred to by some Arab nationalists during World War I as "Greater Syria"—which includes Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, and Turkey (a non-Arab country); and the third is the Western Arab zone, or North Africa, comprising Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco.

In the first chapter, Ahmadi outlines the theoretical framework of his argument by contrasting "classical realism" with the "comprehensive approach" to security policy, ultimately advocating the latter. The book is organized into two main sections: the first examines the genealogy of six contemporary political tendencies in the Middle East, while the second analyzes the impact of these tendencies on Iran's national security; finally, the author's concluding argument—emphasizing the necessity of prioritizing the element of "Iranian nationhood" in Iran's security policies—is explored.

The opening chapter contrasts these two foundational national security paradigms. Grounded in the theories of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, the realist paradigm prioritizes military security and territorial

sovereignty, centering its analysis on state actors and the structure of international relations. Conversely, the "comprehensive security" paradigm—grounded in the Copenhagen School and the work of theorists like Barry Buzan—extends beyond purely military boundaries to integrate economic, cultural, identity, and value-based dimensions as core security components. Ahmadi (p. 31) observes that while "nation-state-based realism" and "transnational idealism"(*armangaraei fara-meli*) have competed within Iran's national security policy since the 1979 revolution, the balance has increasingly tipped toward transnational idealism since the early 2000s. Vali Nasr also describes this shift in his recent book, *Iran's Grand Strategy* (2025), as a transition to a "forward defense" doctrine—a shift that formally took place in 2001 and entailed defending the homeland through an active presence in the Arab world (p. 217). The shift must also be understood in the context of the geopolitical developments that followed the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center, including the US designation of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" and the subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003. Citing Arash Reisinejad (2019), Nasr traces the roots of this strategy to the Pahlavi era, particularly the 1958 Arab nationalist coup in Iraq and the onset of the Lebanese Civil War. Documents from the period show Colonel Mojtaba Pashaei, who oversaw the Middle East portfolio in Iran's intelligence apparatus, describing Iran's regional approach in terms strikingly similar to those of its contemporary proponents: "We must contain the threat on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to prevent bloodshed on Iranian soil" (p. 218).

While Nasr seeks to identify the objective, non-ideological factors that drove Iran toward the "forward defense" doctrine, Ahmadi focuses on the adoption of an idealistic foreign policy and argues that the shift toward "transnational idealism" has not produced positive results for Iran: "The reality is that, four decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the transnational objectives of its foreign policy—namely, striving for Muslim unity, supporting the world's oppressed, and backing Islamic movements—have not been realized" (p. 384).

Ahmadi argues that the emphasis on "Muslim unity" and "emancipation" in the discourse of resistance, while rooted in ideological commitments, has contributed to conflict between Iran and the Arab world and fostered hostility toward the West, particularly the United States and Europe. He suggests that this idealistic policy has not only weakened Iran's diplomatic capacity to build coalitions with international institutions but has also contributed to the imposition of

international sanctions. Ahmadi therefore calls for a return to "realist policymaking," centered on Iran's national interests and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, as a means of restoring the country's diplomatic bargaining power (p. 385).

As noted earlier, the first part of the book—chapters 2 through 6—provides a concise examination of six major political currents in the Middle East against the historical backdrop of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chapter 2, devoted to the genealogy of Arab nationalism, argues that Arab nationalism—and its broader manifestation, Pan-Arabism—was among the most significant political movements in the Middle East's modern history. The author traces its emergence to interactions between Arab intellectuals and elites, Christian missionaries, and French nationalists, highlighting their role in weakening and ultimately contributing to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. From the ashes of that collapse emerged a new Middle Eastern order, characterized by territorial boundaries shaped by colonial policies.

Chapter 3 focuses on Turkish nationalism and its more extreme manifestation, Pan-Turkism. The author analyzes this movement across various periods of modern Turkish history, tracing its evolution from the late Ottoman era through the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and subsequent developments. Within this framework, Pan-Turkism is not viewed merely as a cultural current but as a political ideology with transnational potential and implications for countries with Turkic-speaking populations, including Iran. In Chapter 4, Ahmadi examines Jewish nationalism (Zionism), tracing its ideological evolution from its European origins to its profound impact on the Middle East. While he does not revisit the Palestinian conflict and peace processes—topics extensively covered in his earlier work, *Regional and International Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa*—he places significant emphasis on Jewish nationalism as a key driver of the region's changing political and security order.

Chapter 5 examines leftist and Marxist ideologies and forces in the region. The author partly explains the rise of leftist currents in the Middle East through Soviet support, while also pointing to alliances or policy overlaps between the left and nationalist forces in Iraq and Syria. In this account, the history of the Middle Eastern left is largely confined to its relations with states and is approached primarily from a security perspective. In fact, the activities of Marxist parties and organizations receive the author's attention only insofar as they have posed a challenge to the states of the

region, particularly through articulating ethnic demands and seeking to mobilize the social and political support of ethnic communities, including in Iran. Ahmadi even regards the radicalization of some Arab and Islamist currents as partly the result of their engagement with the literature, organizational practices, and methods of struggle of leftist movements. The author also attributes the radicalization of certain Arab and Islamic movements, to some extent, to their adoption of the rhetoric, organizational structures, and methods of struggle characteristic of leftist movements.

Chapter 6 examines Islamism—a movement the author regards as the region's most prominent political trend over the last two decades. Ahmadi traces the evolution of Islamism starting from the second half of the nineteenth century—a period he terms the "reformist era"—during which issues such as liberty, constitutional government, foreign domination, and the necessity of ijtihad (independent legal reasoning) in Islam came to the fore. He then follows this trajectory through the victory of political Islamists and the emergence of moderate currents, culminating in the rise and decline of Salafi tendencies in the twenty-first century.

Ahmadi attributes the rise of radical Islamism in the Middle East to the interplay between regional political developments and foreign interventions, citing events such as the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, the 2011 Arab Spring, and developments in Syria from 2012 onward. He identifies the insecurity prevailing in war-torn and politically abandoned territories—such as Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal and Iraq following the US invasion—as well as the instability in Syria after the Arab Spring, as fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamist groups. However, he considers the decisive factor to be the financial and political support for extremism originating within the region, particularly from Saudi Arabia. From this perspective, radical Islamism is fundamentally a Middle Eastern phenomenon, and understanding it requires examining its regional roots and internal dynamics rather than reducing it to the consequences of foreign intervention. This emphasis on the ideological dimensions of the region's states and non-state actors differs from Laura Robson's (2020) approach to collective violence in the Middle East, which highlights the colonial origins and geopolitical interests behind extremism.

Chapter 7 examines the region's "ethno-nationalist tendencies," through which Ahmadi traces the emergence and evolution of independence movements rooted in ethnic identity among the Kurds, Baluchis, and ethnic groups in North Africa. In discussing the Kurds, the author analyzes

the various phases of ethnic movements and demands in terms of their impact on the regional political order and security. He then turns to ethnic movements among the Baluchis and in North Africa. Ahmadi largely attributes the rise of ethno-nationalist sentiment in the twentieth century to the hopes and promises of independence or autonomy extended to ethnic groups by major powers—particularly Britain and the Soviet Union—in pursuit of their own interests. He identifies two discourses—the Wilsonian notion of "liberal self-government and the right to self-determination" and the "Leninist-Stalinist Left"—as influential in the rise and spread of this tendency, tracing their impact through the writings of intellectuals and elites from these ethnic groups. Notably, he points to the 1920 Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, which aimed to propagate socialist ideology and was attended by representatives of groups such as the Kurds, Armenians, Baluchis, and Pashtuns (p. 175).

In this analysis, unlike his earlier approach to examining Islamic extremism, Ahmadi places disproportionate weight on the role of foreign interventions and Cold War rivalries. In doing so, he falls short of examining the historical documents and evidence that other scholars have brought to bear in analyzing ethnic tensions in the emergence of the centralized modern state in the region. Notable among these works are studies examining the fate of various tribes and ethnic groups during the era of authoritarian state-building under Reza Shah, such as the writings of Stephanie Cronin (2007) and Laura Robson (2020), the latter of whom examines a similar phenomenon in postcolonial Arab states. Consequently, Ahmadi's analysis in this area remains aligned with centralist and state-centric approaches, which tend to interpret ethnic demands as the product of foreign interference, incitement, or manipulation. Such a perspective, however, leaves little room for understanding contemporary dynamics. The formation of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, the establishment of Rojava's autonomous administration in Syria, and the Turkish government's evolving policies toward Kurdish parties, for example, represent forms of "ethnic politics" in the Middle East that transcend the "foreign intervention" paradigm and are better understood in relation to the region's internal dynamics and structural transformations.

Regional Political Currents and the Configuration of Iran's National Security

In the second part of the book, the intellectual and political tendencies of the Middle East are examined from the perspective of the challenges they pose to Iran's national security. Ahmadi seeks to demonstrate the actual or potential impact of each of these tendencies

on Iran's interests, territorial integrity, national cohesion, and security. In Chapter 8, where Pan-Arabism is presented as the dominant nationalist movement in the Middle East, Ahmadi emphasizes that, contrary to its historical anti-colonial roots, the movement has come to embody different concepts and orientations, with Iran gradually replacing the former adversaries of Arab nationalism. As he puts it, "The Saudis and their allies in the Persian Gulf, as well as across the Arab East and West, have positioned Iran as the successor to the previous enemies of Arab nationalism—namely, the United States and Israel" (p. 235). He views the expansion of military cooperation between certain Arab states in the Persian Gulf and the United States and Israel as a serious threat to Iran's national security.

Pan-Turkism—the subject of Chapter 9—is presented as a threat to Iran's territorial integrity, particularly in light of the historical precedent of the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party under Ja'far Pishevari and the establishment of the autonomous government of Azerbaijan in 1945 with Soviet backing. Ahmadi argues that the historical memory of these events continues to resonate among Pan-Turkist circles in Iran (p. 253). He contends that the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey seek to exploit these tendencies in pursuit of their political objectives (p. 259). At times, moreover, the Shiite-centric policies of Iran's ruling establishment appear to overlap with, or even converge with, Pan-Turkist tendencies in their attacks on manifestations of Iran's national identity—including the Persian language, which the author regards as its most important constituent element (p. 256).

Chapter 10 addresses the challenges that Jewish nationalism and Zionism have posed to Iran's national security. In this chapter—one of the more critical chapters of the book—Ahmadi examines the history of Jewish nationalism and the emergence of Zionism, as well as Iran's approach to issues concerning Jews, Israel, and Palestine during both the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic. By analyzing Benjamin Netanyahu's role in advancing policies of "Iranophobia" and escalating tensions between the two countries, the author identifies three interconnected dimensions of the resulting threats—political, military, and economic—which operate within the broader framework of an anti-Iranian regional and international coalition. At the first level, he addresses ethno-political threats, arguing that while Zionism does not inherently pose an identity-based threat to Iran, potential Israeli support for ethnic-based movements—such as Pan-Turkist circles in the Republic of Azerbaijan and their adherents within Iran—could pose a serious challenge to Iran's territorial integrity and national unity.

Citing the work of Brenda Shaffer (2002)—a scholar associated with conservative circles in the United States—Ahmadi acknowledges the influence of her writings on the formation of ethno-nationalist discourse in Iranian Azerbaijan and notes her recommendation that the United States employ ethnic divisions as an instrument against Iran (p. 379). He also discusses Israel's military, economic, and geopolitical policies as additional dimensions of the security challenge. In particular, he points to the normalization of Israel's relations with Arab states, exemplified by the "Abraham Accords" and multilateral gatherings such as the "Negev Summit," as evidence of the emergence of broad political and security cooperation directed against Iran, sometimes referred to as an "Arab NATO" (p. 277).

To counter Iranophobia, Ahmadi ultimately argues that Iran must engage in "narrative management" on the global stage and make a "conceptual distinction" between opposition to the policies of governments, including Israel, and the denial of the existence of particular communities or religions, such as Judaism and Zionism. In his view, distinguishing among religion, nationalism, and state policies, while simultaneously working with the international community to address the Palestinian issue, could be an effective step toward easing tensions and overcoming

> *"A renewed nationalism detached from democratic principles risks aggravating, rather than resolving Iran's internal ethnic tensions and regional nationalist challenges."*

diplomatic deadlocks (p. 277).

Focusing on the relationship between Marxism and Iran's national security, Chapter 11 examines the historical trajectory and ideological evolution of leftist movements from a state-centric and security-oriented perspective. Ahmadi traces the roots of these security concerns to Iran's proximity to the Soviet Union and Moscow's political and ideological influence since the 1920s—factors that led Iranian governments, both during the Pahlavi era and after the Revolution, to view leftist movements not merely as domestic political forces but also as instruments of foreign influence and potential threats to Iran's territorial integrity. From this perspective, events such as the *Jangal* Movement, the activities of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, and Kurdish movements illustrate the links between leftist movements and Soviet policies.

The author observes that, following the 1979 Revolution, similar developments gradually transformed the initially cooperative relationship with some of these forces into one of confrontation. He acknowledges that leftist forces contributed to the revolutionary victory and that some leftist movements around the world initially sympathized with the Islamic Republic because of its anti-American stance. However, factors such as the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the escalation of political violence, and the association of certain leftist factions with ethnic conflicts led the government to regard these forces as serious threats to national security.

From Ahmadi's perspective, drawing on the views of the Syrian leftist philosopher Sadek Jalal al-Azm[1], the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a turning point that precipitated a theoretical crisis among Marxists. The influence of the Left subsequently waned as some factions shifted their focus from socialist ideals toward promoting secularism in the Middle East, although Ahmadi notes the continued presence of labor and student activism and their radical opposition to the government's cultural policies. In examining the intellectual evolution of Iran's leftist movements following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the author discusses the shift among some of them toward "national" and "Iran-oriented" ideas, which he interprets as a reaction to their previous experience of supporting ethnic autonomy and to the possibility of the future misuse of federalism-related discourse. In his view, this development reflects the high degree of sensitivity within Iranian society toward national identity, such that any instrumental or political exploitation of ethnic issues will lead to the political isolation of the groups advocating them (pp. 259, 298).

Chapter 12 returns to one of the book's

central concerns: the implications of radical Islamism for Iran's national security. Taking a comparative perspective, Ahmadi contrasts Iran's trajectory from the relatively moderate Islamism of the 1990s toward more radical religious policies with the seemingly opposite development that unfolded during the "Arab Spring." In several Arab countries, moderate Islamist movements increasingly distanced themselves from the Islamic Republic's model and instead gravitated toward forms of political Islam associated with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) (p. 309). He also notes the rise of "Salafism" in parts of the Middle East and identifies Wahhabi ideology as a fundamental threat to Iran's national security—a threat that, fueled by hostility toward Shi'ism and sustained by the financial support of certain regional actors, seeks to undermine Iran's religious and social cohesion (p. 312).

The impact of ethnicist tendencies on Iran's national security is the subject of chapter 13, in which the author examines the growing "sensitivity" and "over-politicization" of ethnic issues in Iran. He identifies four key factors contributing to this crisis: the consequences of poor national policies across economic, political, cultural, and social spheres; the impacts of Cold War-era ethnicist discourses; elites' mobilization of ethnic groups for electoral gain; and regional actors' media influence. Ahmadi criticizes Iran's educational and political policies for excessive emphasis on religious identities and the downplaying of "Iranian national identity" for paving the way for the rise of ethnicism (p. 382). However, he does not offer a precise analysis of the discriminatory economic and social policies against ethnic groups; He merely notes that the economic pressures imposed on the government by foreign sanctions diminish its capacity to develop regions inhabited by Iran's ethnic groups, thereby fueling widespread discontent. (p. 324)

In an effort to substantiate the central hypothesis that Iran's national security paradigm needs to be revised, Ahmadi presents a table at the end of the chapter classifying regional threats according to their scale and intensity. He argues that the six ideological and political forces analyzed earlier could threaten Iran's stability at five distinct levels: separatist, economic, military, political-identity, and existential (p. 374).

To elaborate on these threats, he argues that 1) the territorial and separatist threat involves separatist actors initially seeking regional autonomy and eventually moving toward formal secession, thereby undermining the legitimacy of national sovereignty and fragmenting Iran; 2) the military threats extend beyond direct warfare to encompass the bolstering of foreign powers' military

capabilities, the disruption of the regional balance of power, and support for proxy forces to exert pressure on or launch attacks against Iran; 3) economic threats aim to destabilize infrastructure, production resources, and the public's secure access to capital and prosperity—objectives that can be pursued through regional pressure or by rendering border areas insecure; 4) political and identity threats—classified as "soft threats"—involve the efforts that try to reshape or alter the existing order from within. The weakening of the shared language and other elements of national identity, and their replacement with transnational identities, may undermine social cohesion; 5) an existential threat to Iran, Ahmadi argues, can arise only from "Salafi Pan-Islamism" because, owing to its *Takfiri* nature, hostility toward Shi'ism, and transnational violence, this movement does not merely target part of the country but seeks to destroy the Iran as a political community.

The conclusion at the end of the chapter outlines the author's strategies for strengthening Iran's national security across three domains: foreign policy, development, and identity and participatory politics.

Ahmadi suggests that national security is inextricably linked to societal conditions, arguing that economic and political underdevelopment are primary drivers of discontent and factors that undermine human security. Nevertheless, his analysis remains fundamentally grounded in a state-centric approach to security, such that even issues such as political participation and the development of deprived regions are framed primarily as means of mitigating discontent and averting security threats. In this section, the author largely reiterates his earlier arguments about prioritizing national interests, reaffirming Iranian identity, and promoting development; he does not, in effect, propose distinct strategies in foreign policy, development, or identity. Moreover, in some sections, his tone shifts from scholarly analysis to direct, aspirational recommendations addressed to policymakers, an approach more characteristic of official policy reports.

Assessing Iran's National Security Challenges in the Absence of Political Economy

Political Tendencies in the Middle East examines the challenges that competing intellectual and political tendencies in the region pose to the Islamic Republic, and can be assessed in terms of both its analysis of these discourses and its evaluation of their threat to Iran's national security.

The author's primary aim is to address a gap in prevailing economic and political narratives that, by emphasizing colonialism, oil, and political economy, often overlook

the significance of collective and ideological identities. By highlighting how political ideas and discourses mobilize collective action and shape security policies, Ahmadi effectively identifies the power of ideology in shaping security policies and categorizes the competing discourses that shape states, quasi-state entities, and opposition groups. However, these ideologies and tendencies appear static, with little attention to their transformation, including the post-Islamist discourses and forces examined by scholars such as Asef Bayat (2013), or the pro-democracy social tendencies that spread across the region during the Arab Spring.

While the author's attempt to situate Iran's security challenges within six discourses and identity politics offers a general overview, it does not clearly analyze the temporary, issue-specific alliances in the region—whether supporting Iran's security or opposing it. Such analysis is especially important amid the Middle East's rapid transformation, driven by a host of shifting factors. Recent developments, such as Saudi Arabia's accommodation of Iran during the conflict and the mediating roles of Qatar and Pakistan, are difficult to explain within the book's framework. Likewise, its treatment of intra-Arab conflicts remains limited, resulting in a relatively static, identity-based view rather than a dynamic account of shifting power configurations.

While the author's Iran-centered approach keeps national security at the core of the analysis, it comes at the expense of a broader view of structural convergences and conflicts across the Middle East. It leaves little room to examine key confrontations, such as Pan-Arabism and Zionism after Gaza, or Pan-Turkism and Kurdish ethno-nationalism in Turkey. Moreover, by separating political discourses from the region's political economy, the analysis overlooks the material forces shaping their rise and decline. Thus, its explanation of Arab nationalism's shift from anti-colonialism to accommodation with colonial powers remains focused on political failures rather than the underlying causes of this transformation.

The final assessment suggests that, despite the book's emphasis on Iranian nationhood as a foundation of national security, it fails to establish a meaningful link between democracy and security. It leaves unresolved whether national identity is imposed through state-centered, top-down narratives or shaped through the free and equal participation of diverse citizens. While the author advocates replacing religious idealism with Iranian nationalism, to liberate the country from security challenges, a renewed nationalism detached from democratic principles risks aggravating, rather than resolving Iran's internal ethnic tensions and regional nationalist challenges. Iran

has experienced a rigid form of twentieth-century nationalism, marked by the 1941 occupation and the exile of its ruler.

Ultimately, the significance of *Political Tendencies in the Middle East and Iran's National Security* lies not only in its content but also in its publication context. Written amid severe security crises, the book reflects a shift in discussions of regional security from the exclusive domain of state institutions to a matter of public and academic concern. In this sense, the author's effort to critique and reform state policies takes place within an epistemological shift from the private to the public sphere and represents a necessary and commendable step toward bringing political debates into the public sphere.

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Notes

1. Sadek Jalal Al-Azm (1934–2016)A prominent Syrian philosopher and thinker; an advocate of secularism and Enlightenment in the Arab world; an analyst of the relationship between Islam and modernity; and a critic of the link between political power and religious identities in the region.

Book Review / Rahman Ghahramanpour / 2015

Dominant Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East

A Critical Assessment



Identity and Foreign Policy in Iran and the Middle East

Rahman Ghahramanpour

Roozaneh Publications, 2015 (in Persian)

Nima Shojaei

Identity and Foreign Policy in Iran and the Middle East is originally written as Rahman Ghahramanpour's doctoral dissertation in Political Science at Shahid Beheshti University and was published more than a decade ago. However, it remains an important contribution to the scholarship produced in Iran on a central question in the study of Middle Eastern politics: how do political identities and orientations shape divergent foreign policy patterns and contribute to the persistence of conflicts in Middle Eastern societies? (Ghahramanpour, 2015).

Within the social sciences, the well-known proposition that "all history is contemporary history" suggests that revisiting the past is ultimately a means of illuminating the problems of the present. Ghahramanpour's work can be read precisely in this spirit. Ghahramanpour approaches this question through a historical and comparative examination of state formation in the Middle East, tracing the identity-based foundations of foreign policy behavior. He argues that many regional conflicts cannot be adequately explained by material interests, power balances, or rational calculations alone (2015:

About the Authors

Rahman Ghahramanpour is a political sociologist and foreign policy scholar who worked at the President's Office's Center for Strategic Studies (2002–2005) and later at the Center for Strategic Research of the Expediency Discernment Council, where he headed the Disarmament Group. He also served as editor-in-chief of Hamshahri Diplomatic.

Nima Shojaei is a political sociologist, researcher, and instructor. He was a distinguished researcher at Allameh Tabataba'i University in 2017.

26–27).

The significance of the book lies in its departure from approaches in International Relations that focus primarily on material, security, and geopolitical factors, instead drawing attention to the role of identity, culture, and historical experience in shaping states' foreign policies. In this respect, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that brings history, political sociology, and international relations into dialogue to offer a more nuanced understanding of political developments in the Middle East.

The book builds on a scholarly tradition that emphasizes long-term historical processes and the enduring influence of historical structures on political action. Its distinctive contribution, however, lies in its introduction of the concept of "dominant identity," which the author describes as, "with some degree of approximation," equivalent to the identity of the state (ibid., p. 459). Ghahramanpour conceptualizes dominant identity as the intermediary between society and foreign policy. Drawing on a constructivist approach, he argues that states do not simply pursue pre-existing interests; rather, dominant identity shapes what comes to be defined as the "national interest." From this perspective, national interests are neither fixed nor objectively given but are socially and historically constructed through the interaction and competition of social forces, political actors, and historical processes.

The opening chapters establish the book's theoretical foundations, while Chapters 5 to 8 constitute its principal empirical contribution. In these chapters, Ghahramanpour applies his theoretical framework to four major case studies—Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt—to demonstrate how the dominant identity within each country has influenced the definition of national interests and, ultimately, foreign policy behavior.

The selection of these four cases is far from arbitrary. According to the author, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt represent three historical and civilizational states whose political and cultural traditions predate the emergence of the modern nation-state. Israel, by contrast, represents a distinct case in which political identity was shaped through the modern Zionist project of state-building (ibid.: 144–150). Comparing these four cases therefore provides an opportunity to assess the explanatory power and broader applicability of the book's conceptual framework.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology: From Constructivism to "Dominant Identity"

The central concern of *Identity and Foreign Policy* is to reconsider some of the theoretical assumptions underlying the analysis of foreign policy in the Middle East.

Ghahramanpour suggests that conventional approaches in International Relations, particularly realism, neorealism, and other rationalist perspectives, have important limitations when applied to many political developments in the region (ibid.: 26). In particular, these approaches tend to treat states as rational actors pursuing relatively fixed interests, with limited attention to their cultural and identity contexts. He argues that the region's historical experience calls for a broader perspective that accounts for the roles of identity, historical memory, religion, ideology, and collective narratives in shaping how national interests are understood.

Within this framework, the author situates his analysis within the constructivist tradition. Constructivism, most notably associated with Alexander Wendt, holds that political reality is socially constructed rather than determined solely by the material distribution of power (Wendt, 1999). Ghahramanpour extends this perspective by combining constructivist insights with historical analysis and comparative methodology. He examines how political identities form and transform in relation to historical events, political crises, wars, and interstate rivalries. The "dominant identity" thesis implies that the state is not merely a passive reflection of society but the institutional expression of an identity that has prevailed over competing identities. Since multiple identities coexist in the public sphere, Ghahramanpour asks why a particular identity succeeds, at specific historical moments, in becoming the state's official identity. He attributes the success to the interaction of three interrelated variables: (1) how state identity has been formed in its initial formation stages; (2) the role of strategic actors in shaping and institutionalizing that identity; and (3) the influence of internal environment and external structures (ibid., p. 460). As these factors interact to shape the trajectory of identity formation and transformation, identity should not be understood as static but as a dynamic and continually reproduced process.

In contrast to classical theories of international relations, the author argues that what counts as "national interests" is fundamentally determined by the dominant identity, rather than by states first identifying their interests and then formulating foreign policy to pursue them. For example, if a state's dominant identity is grounded in the idea of "exporting the revolution," supporting ideologically aligned movements across the region may become an integral component of its national interest. Conversely, if that identity later shifts toward economic development and integration into the global order, the definition of national interest will likewise change. In this respect, the dominant

identity thesis is indebted to Benedict Anderson's influential work *Imagined Communities* (1983), in which nations are conceptualized as "imagined communities" constructed through narratives, institutions, and historical memory.

Comparative Historical Method and the Significance of Critical Junctures

Methodologically, *Identity and Foreign Policy* exemplifies comparative historical research on foreign policy in the region. Comparing Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt, the author identifies both common patterns and key differences in how these states define their national interests. The concept of the "critical juncture" is central to explaining the evolution of these identities to poltics: These are historical moments when major events fundamentally alter the developmental trajectories of societies, such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of Israel, the discovery of oil, the 1953 coup d'état in Iran, the Arab–Israeli wars, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War, the US invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Spring. During these pivotal moments, dominant identities are redefined, giving rise to new directions in foreign policy (ibid.: 110–113).

By historicizing foreign policies and moving beyond single-cause explanations, this framework offers a deeper, multidimensional analysis of inter-state relations in the region.

Nevertheless, it has several limitations, especially in defining the concept of "dominant identity" and its transformations. First, in some cases, it remains unclear which empirical indicators can reliably establish when a particular identity becomes dominant. Second, the author's emphasis on the possibility of identity redefinition occasionally creates the impression that identity transformation depends primarily on the decisions of political actors, raising questions about how these elites interact with the institutional, local, and international structures that constrain their actions. More broadly, it remains unclear how the dominant identity thesis engages with frameworks such as political economy, class analysis, and geopolitical approaches to foreign policy, which shed light on other dimensions of intergovernmental relations in the region.

The Islamic Republic of Iran: Revolutionary Identity and Ideological Foreign Policy

In Chapter 4, Ghahramanpour conceptualizes Iran's dominant identity under the Islamic Republic through six fundamental components: (1) Shi'a political Islam; (2) *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist); (3) cultural independence and nativism; (4) revolutionary popular sovereignty; (5) anti-Westernism and anti-imperialism; and (6) the pursuit of justice (ibid.: 164). According to the author, these

elements extend beyond political rhetoric to form the Islamic Republic's ideological foundation. They consequently shape the state's conception of national interest and its foreign policy practices—from supporting resistance movements in the region and opposing Israeli policies to criticizing the existing international order and pursuing political independence—as manifestations of the regime's dominant identity rather than merely tactical choices. From this perspective, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic cannot be understood apart from the identity foundations established by the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Yet Iran's foreign policy adjustments over recent decades suggest that identity alone cannot account for changes in foreign policy behavior. These adjustments cannot be attributed to identity transformation alone but must also be understood in relation to international structural pressures and the state's imperative of survival. This limitation reflects the book's insufficient attention to political economy, economic sanctions, oil revenues, and geopolitical imperatives.

Turkey: From Kemalism to Post-Kemalism

Chapter 5, which examines Turkey's dominant identity, is arguably the book's strongest case study. Ghahramanpour demonstrates how Kemalist identity, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, became dominant and shaped the new Turkish Republic. The six principles of Kemalism—(1) republicanism, (2) Turkish nationalism, (3) secularism, (4) statism, (5) populism, and (6) revolutionism (ibid., p. 276)—collectively produced an identity that oriented Turkish foreign policy toward the West, NATO, and the United States for several decades. The more interesting aspect of this analysis concerns the emergence of post-Kemalism and the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The author argues that the political transformations of the first decade of the twenty-first century signaled a redefinition of Turkey's dominant identity, marking a significant shift in both domestic politics and foreign policy orientation.

Israel: Security, Zionism, and the Garrison State

Chapter 6, devoted to dominant identity in Israel, is also a significant and, at the same time, controversial section of the book. The author's central argument is that Israeli foreign policy should be analyzed first through the social and cultural origins of Zionist identity and then through the formation of the Israeli state. He argues "if the Islamic Republic in Iran can be understood as a response to the question of returning to an authentic self, and Kemalism as a response to the humiliation

and weakening of the Ottoman Turks by European powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then Zionism can likewise be understood as a response to the Jewish Question. Unlike the previous two ideologies, however, Zionism emerged in Europe before the establishment of the state of Israel itself (ibid.: 339). Building on this argument, the author identifies four principal foundations of Israel's dominant identity: (1) exile, referring to the historical dispersion of the Jewish people; (2) redemption, understood as the fulfillment of divine promise; (3) settlement in the Promised Land; and (4) the establishment of a Jewish state (ibid.: 344). These elements were institutionalized through political Zionism and ultimately culminated in the creation of the State of Israel.

Ghahramanpour suggests that a foreign policy shaped by these factors tends toward a strategic alliance with the West; ambiguity in the relationship between religion and the state arising from competing interpretations of sacred texts; the construction of Arabs as the primary "Other"; the political instrumentalization of myth and religion; and a security-based collective identity (ibid.: 356–361). He concludes that a substantial part of Israeli foreign policy can be understood through the lens of a persistent sense of insecurity.

Egypt: The Exceptional Case

The Egyptian case occupies a distinctive place among the book's four case studies, as Ghahramanpour himself acknowledges that it poses challenges to his theoretical framework. He argues that Egypt's dominant identity under Gamal Abdel Nasser was constituted by four principal elements: leadership of the Arab world, Arab socialism, anti-imperialism, and populist politics (ibid.: 405). Unlike the cases of Iran, Turkey, and Israel, Egypt's dominant identity proved difficult to sustain over time. The presidencies of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, as well as the transformations associated with the Arab Spring, marked successive stages in its weakening.

Whereas relatively stable dominant identities can be observed in Iran, Turkey, and Israel, Egypt has experienced persistent competition among Egyptian nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Islamism, military rule, and statism. This suggests that states do not necessarily possess a single dominant identity at any given historical moment; at certain conjunctures, ongoing competition among identities may itself become a defining feature of the political system. Consequently, Egypt most clearly exposes the limitations of the dominant identity framework.

Empirical Analysis of Foreign Policy and Dominant Identity

Across the four case studies, the author applies the dominant identity framework to explain variations in foreign policy. He argues that identity formation shapes strategic actors whose responses to identity-related challenges can redefine the dominant identity and, consequently, redirect foreign policy. This relationship is most convincingly demonstrated in Iran, Turkey, and Israel, but proves more problematic in the Egyptian case.

In Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution marks the origin of the Islamic Republic's state identity, founded on Shi'a Islam, with religion and revolution serving as its principal sources of political legitimacy. The key strategic actors are the clergy and revolutionary elites, while relations with the West are characterized by confrontation and the United States and Israel constitute the principal "Others." Foreign policy is primarily oriented toward regime survival and the dissemination of revolutionary identity. The state is thus characterized as ideological, with democratization and globalization identified as its central challenges. Within the author's framework, the prospective redefinition of this identity would take the form of post-Islamism, potentially leading to a more balanced regional foreign policy.

In the Turkish case, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire constitutes the historical origin of the dominant identity, while Kemalism provides its ideological formulation. Republicanism and the nation serve as the principal sources of legitimacy, with the military and Kemalist elites acting as the key strategic actors. Turkey's relationship with the West is characterized as one of alliance, although it has evolved over time. The primary "Others" are ethnic separatism and regional instability, while foreign policy is oriented toward economic development and regional security. The state is characterized as national-secular, with the central challenge being the tension between Islam and secularism. The anticipated redefinition of this identity is post-Kemalism, potentially facilitating greater integration into the international system.

For Israel, the emergence of political Zionism constitutes the historical origin of the dominant identity, with Zionism providing its ideological framework and the establishment of a Jewish state serving as its principal source of legitimacy. The strategic actors are the Zionist movement and the country's security elites. Israel maintains a strategic alliance with the West, while Arabs and Iran constitute its principal "Others." Foreign policy is primarily oriented toward security and national survival, producing a security-oriented state identity. The central challenge is the tension between religion and

democracy. According to Ghahramanpour, a future redefinition of Israeli identity through post-Zionism could ultimately reduce the state's garrison-style security orientation.

In Egypt, the Free Officers' Revolution marked the origin of the dominant identity, with Nasserism emerging as the state's prevailing identity. The nation-state served as the principal source of legitimacy, while the military emerged as the key strategic actor. Egypt's relationship with the West has varied over time, while radical Islamism has functioned as its principal "Other." Foreign policy has primarily aimed at regime stability, producing a military-bureaucratic state. Yet because the central challenge is the weak cohesion of the dominant identity, no clear trajectory for its redefinition emerges. As noted earlier, the Egyptian case ultimately exposes the explanatory and predictive limitations of the author's theoretical framework.

Critical Reflections

Identity and Foreign Policy in Iran and the Middle East stands among the relatively small number of books originally published in Iran that attempt to integrate historical sociology, comparative politics, and International Relations theory into a coherent analytical framework for understanding foreign policy developments in the Middle East. The book's greatest contribution lies in moving beyond purely geopolitical and security-oriented frameworks by emphasizing the role of identity regimes in shaping states' foreign policies. Ironically, the book's key strength is also a source of its limitations: the author pays limited attention to structural, geopolitical, and security factors, which are often overshadowed by identity-based explanations.

The first major strength of the book is its attempt to construct a theoretical model derived from the historical experiences of the Middle East itself, one that incorporates the region's distinctive cultural and historical trajectories into explanations of interstate behavior and regional competition. Much of the International Relations literature, particularly within the realist tradition, conceptualizes states as unitary, rational actors pursuing survival and power within an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). By departing from this perspective, Ghahramanpour shows that many aspects of Middle Eastern foreign policy are more convincingly understood through states' identities, ideologies, and historical experiences.

A second important contribution is the author's use of the comparative historical method. By selecting four contrasting case studies, he creates an analytical framework capable of comparing diverse trajectories of state-building, nation-building, and

foreign policy formation. This comparative perspective allows the study to transcend the Iranian case and move toward broader regional theorization.

A third strength lies in the framework's balanced treatment of structure and agency. Unlike many structuralist approaches that minimize the role of political actors, Ghahramanpour emphasizes the importance of strategic actors, illustrating how political leaders, elites, and governing coalitions can reshape dominant identities during critical historical junctures. This insight is particularly evident in his analyses of the Iranian Revolution, Turkey's political reforms, and Egypt's political transformations.

Despite these strengths, the book also exhibits several theoretical and methodological shortcomings. The most significant concerns the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition and measurement of dominant identity. Although this concept serves as the central analytical category throughout the book, the author does not clearly specify the empirical criteria by which a particular identity may be identified as dominant. It therefore remains unclear how to measure the relative strength of an identity against competing identities. This problem becomes especially significant in societies such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Iraq, where multiple, competing identities coexist among the ruling elites.

A second criticism concerns the limited attention given to political economy. The author's focus on identity variables leaves relatively little room for factors such as oil economies, class structures, economic dependency, globalization, and geopolitical competition, which have played a significant role in shaping foreign policy in the Middle East. This interaction shows up in many cases. In Iran, ideological identity interacts with the economic constraints of oil dependence and international sanctions in shaping relations with the West. For the Gulf states, foreign policy choices are likewise inseparable from petroleum wealth and the power structures of global energy markets.

A third criticism concerns the normative character of some of the book's conclusions. Although the author generally seeks to maintain an analytical perspective, several sections reveal an underlying commitment to the project of identity redefinition. Much of the argument ultimately suggests that reducing regional tensions requires transitions from Islamism, Kemalism, and Zionism toward forms of post-Islamism, post-Kemalism, and post-Zionism. While this conclusion may be analytically plausible and supported by empirical evidence, it occasionally narrows the distinction between scholarly analysis and policy prescription.

By emphasizing a policy-oriented recommendation, the author ultimately narrows the book's central contribution to redefining state identities as a solution to the Middle East's crises of peace, security, and democracy, leaving limited room for alternative projections of the region's future. Yet this policy-oriented conclusion leaves the book's own theoretical insights, particularly those emerging from the Iranian experience, underexplored. Important questions remain: What does the evidence on attempts to transform Iran's dominant identity reveal, and what alternative trajectories might these processes produce? Which social and political forces are likely to drive such a redefinition in the future? How does the state, as an institutional and bureaucratic organization, resist identity transformation? Finally, does a change in state identity necessarily lead to a reduction in regional conflicts?

These questions remain at the center of both theoretical and political debates concerning the contemporary Middle East. The enduring value of Ghahramanpour's work lies precisely in opening new avenues for thinking about the relationship between state identity and state transformation. For this reason, the book is highly recommended to students and scholars of International Relations, Political Science, Historical Sociology, and Middle Eastern Studies.

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Photo by Timon Studler on Unsplash • Israeli soldiers on a hilltop overlooking Jerusalem

Novel Review / Ebrahim Akbari Dizgah / 2022

An Impossible Love for the Persian Cat in Lebanon



Beyrut

Ebrahim Akbari Dizgah

Saad Publishing, 2022 (in Persian)

Shima Vezvaei

> — We have a saying from the Prophet (Muhammad) that says: "Loving cats is part of faith." Oh wow, what a saying (...)
>
> — I came across a sentence by Imam Musa al-Sadr. It was interesting: "If there is no love, there is no country."
>
> — He was right. But does the country even exist now? (Beyrut, p. 51)

Beyrut, intentionally spelled incorrectly instead of Beirut, by Ebrahim Akbari Dizgah, moves formally between a novel, a travelogue, and a documentary-style narrative. Published in 2022, the book had reached its fourth edition by the time this review was written. It has also won the Islamic Republic's Book of the Year Award and was selected as the winner in the novel category of the Jalal Al-e Ahmad Literary Award in 2023. Yet Beyrut is not easily found in the ordinary bookstores of Tehran, such as the Shahr-e Ketab chained bookstores. It must be searched from national book fairs, cultural institutes, or neo conservative shops that are spreading in central Tehran over the last 10 years. Reviews of the book must be sought not so much in literary magazines as at the Imam Musa al-Sadr Cultural Research Institute or

About the Authors

Ebrahim Akbari Dizgah is an Iranian writer, poet, and literary researcher in philosophy of literature and theory and story writing in Iran. Shah-Koshi (King-Slaying) is one of his novels.

Shima Vezvaei studied media and communications and teaches media management and journalism at various academic institutions. Her research and professional activities focus on women's issues, migration, and children's rights.

on literary websites close to the discourse of the Resistance and the promotion of Islamic culture. In fact, the readership of Beyrut constitutes a particular community of young, Islamic, politically engaged intellectuals.

Beyrut is a fictional account of the real journey of a writer born in the 1980s, who, with a background in seminary studies, travels to Lebanon to document the life of Imam Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian Shi'a cleric who lived in Lebanon for many years. The book can therefore be examined from various perspectives, and most of the reviews written about it have focused on the author's personal and spiritual experiences and his passage between doubt and faith during the journey. In this review, however, I attempt to examine the author's perspective on international affairs and his understanding of Lebanon as represented in the novel. What becomes significant from this perspective is the encounter between the story's protagonist, a disdainful Iranian intellectual man, and Lebanon's social and cultural-political fabric. Through such encounter he combines a curious international observation with a newfound nationalism and Iranian exceptionalism. I will also examine his understanding of the relationship between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, as well as his attention to the diversity of women's lives in Beirut, which he finds inspiring.

Through the eyes of the protagonist, I seek to reflect on the book, and on its readers, as a way of understanding how a young generation close to the Islamic Republic's ruling establishment imagines Lebanon: those who, perhaps, in these days of war against Iran, are present at the nightly gatherings in the central squares of Iranian cities.

About Beyrut

"For if a man stays too long in the company of others, he loses his individuality and grows a fool." (p. 48)

Beyrut is the story of the inner and outer journeys of Yahya Rabbani, a young philosopher and seminary student who is on the verge of emigrating to Germany with a scholarship he has received, on his thesis entitled "The Role of Prophet Moses in the Revival of Children of Israel, Based on the Old Testament and the Qur'an." One of the characters in the book describes this as "something akin to the role of Imam Musa al-Sadr in the revival of the Shi'a in Lebanon" (p. 195).

The author conveys Yahya's pessimism toward the West and Germany through his habit of naming characters and nationalities after animals that he finds similar to them in either their habits or appearance. He even refers to his academic supervisor as a "German boar" (p. 42), whom he considers to have failed to properly understand Yahya's knowledge and ideas. In 2013, Yahya accepts an offer from a

documentary-making team out of financial necessity and, while calling the two thousand dollars they pay him, in Marx's words, "the devil's dung," sets off with their professional team for Beirut to make a documentary about the life of Imam Musa al-Sadr.

At the beginning of the journey, we learn that Yahya has brought Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and a German language guide with him. Throughout the book, however, the author gradually introduces us to his deeper studies of Arabic and religious matters, which have led him away from the beliefs of his father, an ultra-conservative mujtahid who holds rigid and negative views about his son's view of faith and religion. His father reprimands him for writing online and for "writing against religion and faith" (p. 30).

Two sets of factors shape Yahya's experience during this journey. The first involves observing and becoming acquainted with Beirut's new and secular urban society: dealing with Shi'a and Sunni people; observing Muslim women without the hijab; and noticing the role of Arab songs and music in Lebanese media and in the nightlife of Beirut's cafés. The second involves being ensnared and trapped by Takfiris and ISIS, as well as, of course, becoming acquainted with the ideas of Musa al-Sadr, his associates and followers, and his ideology—an ideology that speaks of unity among sects, of building a country through "love," and of fighting oppression, particularly Israeli oppression.

At the intersection of these factors, Yahya arrives at a new spirituality, develops a new sense of belonging to the land of Iran, abandons his plans to emigrate, and returns alone to Iran to continue writing and rebuild his relationships. In the end, Yahya does not become emotionally attached or bound to Beirut; rather, he comes to the conclusion that Beirut has lost its way.

By writing "Beyrut" instead of "Beirut," the author also points to a city that has lost its balance. In an interview with the Khaneh-ye Adabiyat website in 2025, he explains his choice of title as follows: "In Shi'a thought, Medina becomes Medina when it has an Imam; Beyrut is a city that has lost its Imam. Beirut had a balance when Imam Musa al-Sadr was there, and when he left, it lost its balance and became 'Beyrut.'"

About Ebrahim and Yahya

"So, my father can tolerate smoking, but not religious intellectualism. For now, I'll get up and have a cigarette. When the time is right, I'll formally announce that I am not an intellectual; I am fed up." (p. 37)

Yahya Rabbani, the novel's protagonist, travels to Lebanon as a "religious expert" accompanying a documentary-making team. Yahya claims that he is not an intellectual, and throughout the book he speaks disparagingly of intellectualism and

of religious intellectuals, whom he identifies as Ali Shariati, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Mostafa Malekian. Yet the author portrays his hero, much like the protagonists of other novels in contemporary Iranian literature, as a fed up intellectual man who has given up on life, dislikes everything and everyone and understands things better than everyone else. Even in Lebanon, although he pretends to be impatient with others, he teaches them lessons in religion, unity, and culture. More precisely, in the first-person narrative, Yahya teaches the book's readers lessons about religion and unity, while forming little connection with the characters in the book.

When he is asked, "You're Iranian; are you Shi'a?", his answer takes on a philosophical tone: "Neither Shi'a nor Sunni, neither Zangi nor Rumi, nor anything else... suspended between earth and sky." The author portrays him, as suffering from an existential impasse, in keeping with the classical tradition of literature concerned with the search for meaning. Yahya repeatedly has theological and symbolic nightmares; he no longer prays and he smokes, while distancing himself from his father, the mujtahid. He distances himself from the first generation of the Revolution not only at the level of belief, but also symbolically and politically. This distancing can likewise be seen in his attitude toward Lebanon, in his sarcasm toward the Arabic-language experts on Arab television channels, and in his understanding of the relationship between Iran and Lebanon. At one point, in response to his colleague's commands and admonitions, Yahya says: "I don't accept my father's authority; now this guy has come along and is telling me what I must and must not do." (p. 157)

At one point, the author says, "Beyrut is me." It is therefore not far-fetched to consider Yahya's character to be drawn from the author's own personality. Dizgah, too, has a seminary education, but later became active in literature and literary criticism. In addition to publishing several books, his record includes positions such as secretary of the National Association of Seminarian Storytellers, head of content production at the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and Sacred Defense in Qom, and teaching at the Islamic Art School.

Writing the book was part of Dizgah's compulsory military service project. Commissioned by the Imam Musa al-Sadr Research Institute, he traveled to Lebanon in 2020 at the Institute's expense, in lieu of military service, and subsequently wrote the novel. According to the author, rewriting and publishing the book took several years, and it was rejected numerous times before a literary publisher finally agreed to publish it. In a 2023 interview with the website of the Imam Musa al-Sadr Institute, he says that he had not been particularly interested

in Musa al-Sadr and had regarded him as simply another good cleric, like Mohammad Khatami, the reformist former president of Iran. Gradually, however, he became drawn to other dimensions of al-Sadr's life, particularly his unifying activities and his experience as a Shi'a cleric in Lebanon. Eventually, the lost spirit of Beirut came, in his view, to represent the lost imamate of Musa al-Sadr.

He learns from al-Sadr's conduct toward Lebanon's Christians, Shi'a, and Sunnis, from his remarks on political events, and from his personal comportment, and places these alongside the divisions he observes among the people of Beirut. He is troubled by this distance and perhaps comes to feel that the threat posed by Israel and the rise of Takfiri and ISIS groups in Lebanon and Beirut would not have occurred during al-Sadr's era.

As noted above, from the perspective of the Iranian ruling religious class, its official ideology, and its concerns about ideological changes among Islamic literary and artistic circles, this book has been considered "radical" and has been denied publication. According to the author, however, its eventual publication became possible with the help of Ms. Sadr and because of the relatively open and "feminine" atmosphere of the Imam Musa al-Sadr Institute. I will first turn to the book's portrayal of the women of Lebanon and Iran, who receive considerable attention from the author, a concern already implicit in his reference to the Institute's "feminine" manner of administration. Second, I will examine his search for the "real Shi'a." Finally, I will reflect on his return to Iranian nationalism and his distancing from the cosmopolitanism of revolutionary Shi'a Islam. These three themes constitute the central concerns of Beyrut.

About What He Sees in Women

"I don't know why I keep thinking that so many of the girls of Beirut are feline, only a few are goat-like, and even fewer deer-like. I should investigate; perhaps, contrary to Darwin's theory, this group's lineage goes back to cats." (p. 165)

Perhaps the first thing that draws the reader's attention in Beyrut is the author's focus on women, which is not typical of books in this genre. This attention is so pronounced that one could argue that the book takes shape at the intersection of a loving obsession and hatred of women. Yahya repeatedly wants to go to Arab singers' concerts, contrary to the wishes of the rest of his team, and listen to Nancy Ajram, Julia Boutros, and Haifa Wehbe. Yet throughout the story, obstacles and events that may carry a spiritual significance keep Yahya from reaching the concert, until eventually he consciously comes to regret wanting to go.

He pays attention to the Lebanese women he sees in the streets and describes them using

the same terminology of that of animals. For example, he calls one a "Lebanese girl with a mane" (p. 53). The other characters in the book, from Yahya's family to the Musa al-Sadr research team, are also misogynistic. His grandfather calls Yahya's wife, Zari, from whom he is in the process of separating, "shameless" and "foul-mouthed," and advises Yahya: "Even if what you want is a cow to milk, you have to make her behave herself" (p. 377). They call Souad, a woman he meets in Lebanon, a "Christian whore." Yahya calls a woman who mistreated him and slapped him during a confrontation with the Takfiri groups an "Christian bitch," and generalizes her disposition to all women, at another point claiming that women harbor a grudge against the male sex: "Women treat men as a species, whereas men, by contrast, pay attention to the individual, because their concern is beauty." (p. 253)

This contradictory attention to women reaches the point where, at one place in the book, he says that others call him "anti-woman," but that those same people have also called him "anti-religion," and therefore they know nothing. The only woman in the story whom the author seems to genuinely love and regard as innocent is his sister Masi, short for Masoumeh (literally meaning innocent), who suffers from severe multiple sclerosis. Masi wears a chador, but beneath it she wears a colorful, shiny headscarf. This enrages her cleric father, and Yahya defends her decision. He subsequently writes about the hijab and women on his blog.

The author's particular views on women can also be found in "Dizgahiyat," his personal channel on the *Bale*, an Iranian local social network, where he writes about his experiences, particularly at the "Square" gatherings during the recent war against Iran. There, we see how a perspective different from that of the conservative religious generation that preceded him can occupy the center of power and connect the subject of women to politics:

"The city has reached a maturity in which both veiling and unveiling are values! In any case, it is the war in Iran that produces values; it places the unveiled woman alongside the veiled woman to prove that the female body is the homeland and the man its defender." (2026)

Through this lens, the presence of beautiful women in the streets can itself become a "possibility":

"After I said, 'They have filled the streets with women—with femininity and beauty,' several people insinuated that I was a 'lecher.' I must say that my gaze at women in the street is not the gaze of a man upon a woman. My gaze is theological; it has the reach and sharpness necessary to explain them in relation to the divine attributes of beauty, and to prove that

after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, women have set their will on making the street 'beautiful.'

Although I respect the lecherous eye and recognize its possibility. Because the sharpness of women's femininity in the home and the city is contingent upon the lechery of men's eyes. Without lechery, women become sisters. So, reflect upon this."

It seems that, from the author's perspective, the embodied presence of women in the street, whether the streets of Beirut or Tehran, inevitably has to be reconciled with an Islamic gaze. The women who, in his view, are no longer deer but cats that claw, and who have now imposed their will upon the street, must be tolerated and transformed into a "possibility" serving the very hegemony toward which he harbors a hatred tinged with bigotry, even as he sees and celebrates their beauty.

About What He Wants to See in Shi'a Islam

"Saleh said it would be better if we stayed in the Shi'a neighborhood.Saleh's sectarianism is a constant torment for me." (p. 119)

When Yahya goes to Dahiyeh and realizes that the Shi'a of Beirut feel comfortable being together there, he says that sectarian thinking is a torment for him. As mentioned earlier, in his conversations with Lebanese people, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that, to him, there is no difference between Shi'a and Sunni. Yet a closer reading of the book suggests that, in his attempt to uncover the character of Imam Musa al-Sadr, when the narrator is caught in the clutches of ISIS terrorists, and in the historical and religious narratives woven into the story, he is in fact advocating a form of spirituality that might be called "true Shi'a Islam" from his perspective.

True Shi'a Islam existed during the era of Imam Musa al-Sadr, when Shi'a thought was a central force in shaping the country of Lebanon; a time when people went to pray and, in political conversations, said, "Officials must attend to the people's problems." (p. 200) The notion of true Shi'a Islam also relates to Iran. Yahya repeatedly encounters anti-Iranian sentiment among the people of Beirut and is constantly astonished and angered by the fact that Imam Musa al-Sadr's Iranian identity has not remained firmly present in people's minds.

The ISIS members in the story, whom he calls the "wolves of Beirut" because they kill Iranians (p. 265), speak openly of their hatred of Iranians. They also speak of their jealousy of Yahya when they see the attention and affection Lebanese women show toward him, and they talk about killing Iranians. On the other side of this binary, some of the novel's characters are delighted by his Iranian identity. The narrator ultimately distances himself from both poles and does not become

close to anyone. He learns nothing new from Beirut. He finds Beirut to be a city diverse in cultures, religions, and sects, yet disparate and unkind, a city that has lost its true identity—an identity that, in his view, derived from Shi'a spirituality and promoted unity among sects and "love for people and country."

In analyzing this sense of disappointment, one might consider various factors. Among them is the fact that transnational solidarities require an interest in learning about and establishing connections with other cultures, whereas the narrator, with his intellectual, top-down perspective, has no real interest in connecting with or understanding this other culture. Perhaps the author is also conscious of the loss of the Iranian politician's transnational influence in Lebanon and is saddened by the decline of the golden age of that influence under Musa al-Sadr. In this angry and depressed self-awareness, he holds "Beyrut" responsible and wants his readers to understand what has happened, so that solidarity with the Shi'a of Lebanon is no longer presented as either necessary or glorious.

Perhaps, also, he no longer believes in transnational bonds and solidarities, and a return to the homeland and a turn toward nationalism constitute his ultimate destination and purpose. All these states of mind may be understood as signs of a perception, among a new generation of Muslim intellectuals, that an era has come to an end: the end of solidarities that emerged from below with other Muslim communities, after those solidarities had for several decades become an arena for the alliances of state and quasi-state forces.

About What He Imagines Iran to Be

"Have you ever noticed that the map of Iran itself resembles a cat sitting on a pillow?" Charles Harvey Stileman, English clergyman (p. 7)

This is the opening quotation of Beyrut. The author refers to Iran as cat-like, and to his own history and Persian identity, and is angered by the fact that people in Lebanon are unaware of the Iranian lineage of Imam al-Sadr or of the belonging of great figures such as Rumi to Iran. He sees a resemblance between his own journey to Lebanon and the Persian cat's desire to wander through the world. For him, the Iranian cat must not remain only in Iran if it is to reclaim its Iranian identity. It must submit to movement and cross borders, if only to return once again and learn from its journey.

This movement, which since Iran's encounter with modern Europe has always been oriented toward the West, now encompasses the new Middle East as well. It is a cat whose eyes are fixed on other cats, caught in a simultaneous and dual condition of love and hatred toward them. For the

author of Beyrut, life outside Iran and in the new Middle East is both astonishing and frightening; he feels both a sense of inferiority toward it and a sense of superiority rooted in his identity. He is inspired by it to save himself, while at the same time believing that he knows the way to save it, even if he cannot succeed in establishing a genuine connection and friendship among the cats.

The author of Beyrut is searching for a country that, in Imam Musa al-Sadr's words, is built through love. Yet this love remains fruitlessly concealed within the author's supremacist, weary, and impatient thinking, and does not lead to genuine empathy or connection between the two peoples, or between the people of Tehran and Beirut. He constructs an exceptional image of the homeland in which its national, religious, and gendered dimensions are pronounced, but, like the narrator's dreams/nightmares, it is not particularly real or grounded in intercultural and transnational dialogue.

If we consider the three main themes discussed above, we see that the author views the transformations taking place around women in the Middle East and accepts them, reluctantly and uneasily, but he opens no new horizon for recreating Iranian Shi'a cosmopolitanism in a transnational space. Instead, tired and alone, he returns to his own imagination of the homeland.

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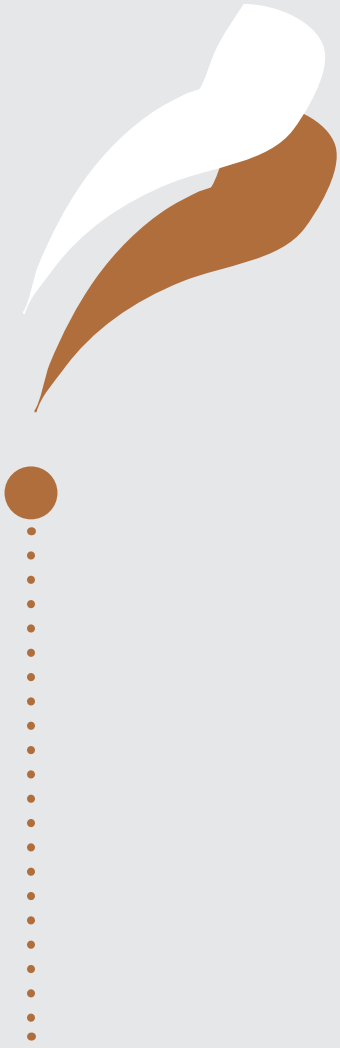
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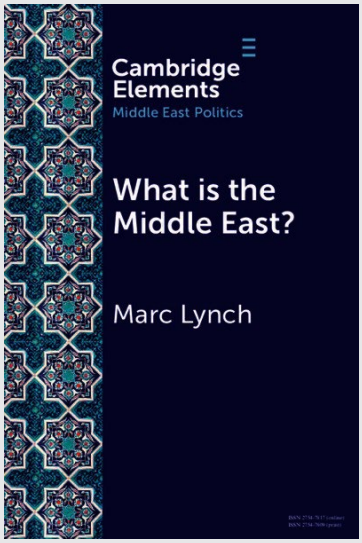
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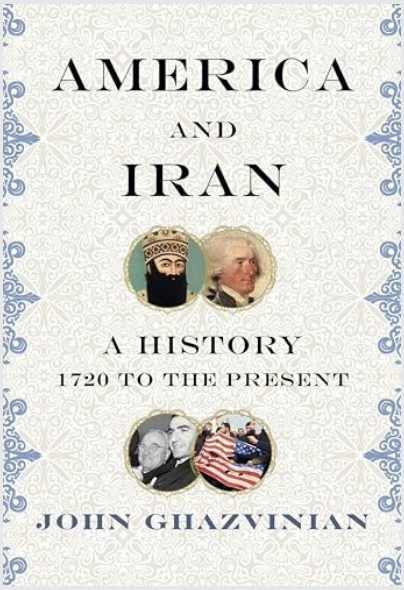
NEW RELEASES

* Summaries are adapted from publishers' websites with minor edits.

What Is the Middle East?
The Theory and Practice of Regions
Marc Lynch
Cambridge University Press, 2025



What Is the Middle East?: The Theory and Practice of Regions, by Marc Lynch, questions a region whose boundaries are widely assumed but rarely defined or justified. Lynch traces how today's idea of the Middle East took shape through colonial rule and Cold War politics, and how it became embedded in both global diplomacy and American academia. He shows that competing definitions of the region carry real strategic weight, reflecting ongoing struggles over its political identity. The book argues that treating the Middle East as a single, coherent unit has skewed political-science research by narrowing which cases scholars compare and by obscuring the deeper politics behind regional labels. Lynch calls for a broader, more flexible understanding of the Middle East, one that accounts for connections stretching beyond its conventional borders, as part of a wider case for .comparative area studies

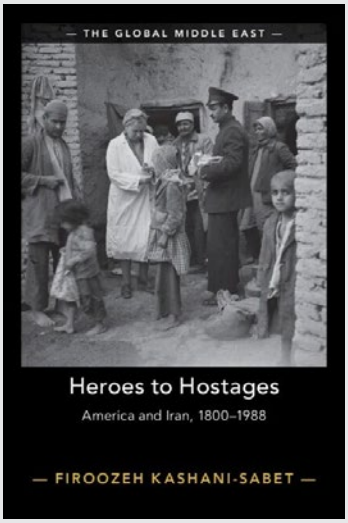


America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present
John Ghazvinian
Alfred A. Knopf, 2021

America and Iran, 1720 to the Present, by John Ghazvinian, traces three centuries of relations between the two nations, beginning with the Persian Empire that so impressed Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, and an Iran that once looked to America as a model of government. Drawing on extensive archival research in both countries, including rare access to Iranian government records, the Oxford-trained, Iranian-born historian organizes this history into four phases: an early period of mutual admiration, a stage of growing contact, an era of close strategic partnership, and finally decades of deep mutual distrust. Ghazvinian pinpoints where and how the relationship broke down, explaining why two nations that once held each other in genuine esteem became such determined adversaries, and why this outcome was never inevitable.

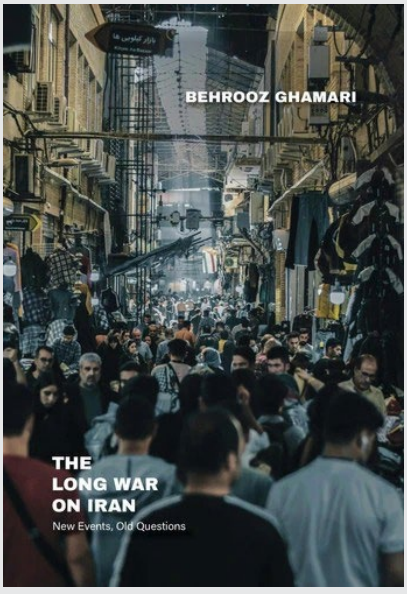
Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988
Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet
Cambridge University Press, 2023

Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988, by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, revisits a US–Iran relationship that, before the last half-century of hostility, was once marked by genuine cooperation. Spanning two turbulent centuries, the book asks when and how this partnership unraveled. Drawing on both English- and Persian-language sources, many previously overlooked, Kashani-Sabet argues that the rupture was not caused solely by dramatic events such as the 1953 coup or the 1979 revolution, but developed gradually through social and cultural as well as diplomatic shifts. Told largely from the vantage point of Iranian society, the book follows both countries through war, decolonization, and revolution, offering a fresh history of a rivalry that continues to shape regional politics today.



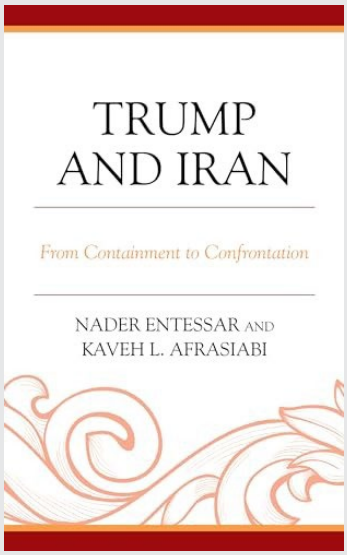
The Long War on Iran: New Events, Old Questions
Behrooz Ghamari
OR Books, 2026

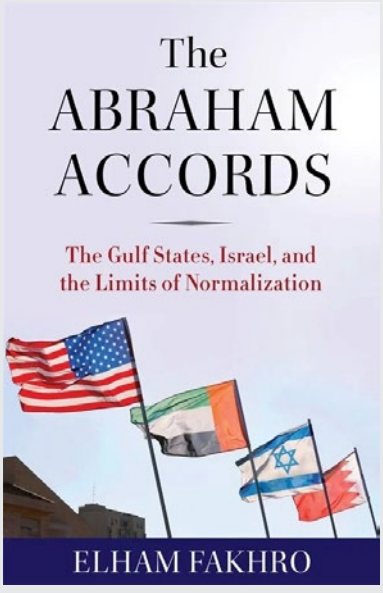
The Long War on Iran: New Events, Old Questions, by Behrooz Ghamari, examines the decades-long standoff between the United States and Iran, shaped by miscalculation and conflicting ambitions on both sides. Drawing on twenty years of political analysis, Ghamari traces the history of American intervention in the region, focusing on sustained sanctions and Washington's persistent view of the Islamic Republic as an obstacle to its influence. He argues that, despite state repression, Iranian society remains dynamic, with active intellectual, cultural, and social-justice movements that continue to reshape the country's politics. Challenging the common portrayal of Iran as a monolithic, totalitarian state, Ghamari calls for a more informed and nuanced American approach to the region, warning that failing to recognize Iran's internal transformations will only perpetuate the same unresolved questions.



Trump and Iran: From Containment to Confrontation
Nader Entessar and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi
Lexington Books, 2019

Trump and Iran: From Containment to Confrontation, by Nader Entessar and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, examines how US–Iran relations grew sharply more confrontational under the Trump administration, to the point that war between the two countries became a real possibility. The authors trace the administration's withdrawal from the nuclear accord and the reimposition of sanctions as part of a broader break from the containment strategy pursued by previous US administrations, driven by a cabinet with a long history of hostility toward Tehran. They argue that this shift toward regime change carried significant consequences not only for Iran but for its neighbors and for long-term stability across the Persian Gulf. Drawing on a social-scientific framework, the book analyzes the escalating pattern of hostility between Washington and Tehran and considers the risk that this dynamic could spiral into open conflict.

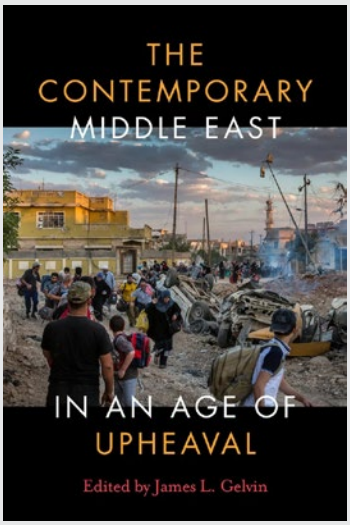




The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization
Elham Fakhro
Columbia University Press, 2024

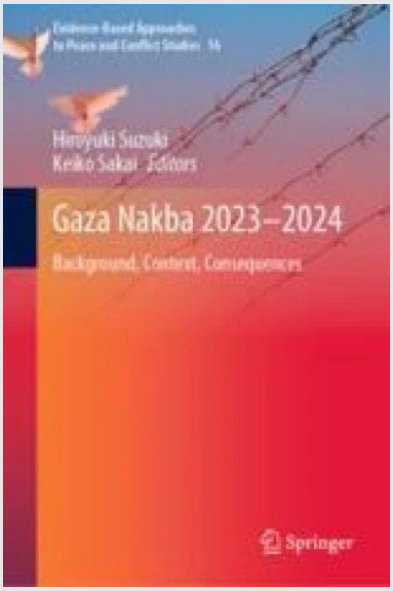
The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization, by Elham Fakhro, examines the 2020 agreements that normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, later joined by Bahrain—the first such accords between Israel and Arab states in over two decades. Fakhro asks how these agreements came about, why the parties saw normalization as being in their interest, and how the accords have reshaped Middle Eastern politics and the question of Palestine. She shows how shared security concerns, economic interests, and regional political shifts drove an unexpected strategic alignment between the Gulf states and Israel, bringing long-covert ties into the open, and examines the Trump administration's role in brokering the deal. Fakhro argues that Washington's growing focus on expanding normalization came at the expense of attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, entrenching conditions that continue to destabilize the region.

The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval
James L. Gelvin (ed.)
Stanford University Press, 2021



This book examines the emergence of the New Middle East in four sections: continuity and change in the neoliberal state; culture and community; old states and new dilemmas; and global and regional dynamics. The first section traces the Arab revolutions to economic adjustment policies. The second focuses on the transformation of political Islam and Islamism. The third explores political changes in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq amid Wahhabism, occupation, war, and refugee flows. The last examines regional proxy wars, once driven by global powers during the Cold War but now increasingly initiated by regional actors. The introduction identifies the occupation of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and rapid population growth as key developments. The emerging regional order is marked by a crisis of political legitimacy, state-sponsored sectarianism, more state interventions in neighboring countries, the US's growing tendency to withdraw, and the declining significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Gaza Nakba 2023–2024: Background, Context, Consequences
Hiroyuki Suzuki and Keiko Sakai (eds.)
Springer, 2025



The Gaza Nakba 2023–2024: Background, Context, and Consequences argues that the Gaza war cannot be understood as an isolated military confrontation triggered by October 7, 2023, but must be situated within the longer history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the enduring structures of occupation, displacement, and settler colonialism. Through an interdisciplinary examination of Gaza's humanitarian crisis, Palestinian resistance and political culture, Israeli public opinion, regional responses, Iran and the "Axis of Resistance," and the international legal dimensions of the war, the volume shows how the conflict has exposed the profound limitations of existing mechanisms of conflict management and peacebuilding. At the same time, it highlights a widening gap between the universal norms proclaimed by the international order and their uneven application in practice. The contributors further argue that the war is reshaping the politics of international response by expanding the role of Global South states, non-state actors, and civil society movements in challenging established approaches to the conflict and the international order that sustains them.

GlobIS Review

ایران‌شناسی در جهان

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Iran and the New Middle East?