

khani implicitly acknowledge the limitations of the data by pointing to the type of research they hope the handbook could aid, which essentially focus on the institutional and/or provincial background of the elites chosen, their circulation, and discernible career patterns rather than the extent of their ideological or consensual unity or disunity, which has generally been the instigation for elite theory accounts of relationships between types of national elites, elite transformations, and political (in)stability. In short, there is plenty to chew on here even if the broader questions regarding sociopolitical transformations wrought by the persistence of the Islamic Republic may require a look beyond political institutions and individuals who have occupied them.

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## **A Political Prosopography of the Islamic Republic**

**Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Handbook**, Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018, ISBN 978-0-8156-3574-1 (hbk), 896 pp., 22 illus.

What does the state look like in post-revolutionary Iran, and who is occupying state offices? No publication has ever come close to providing as detailed a picture as Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani's *Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*. The handbook is invaluable in the breadth and depth of the data it offers, from the complex history of the many conventional and non-conventional political institutions of the Islamic Republic to the socioeconomic backgrounds of the people who populated those institutions, and still to the degrees of electoral support garnered by different branches of government. The fact that different layers of information such as the membership structure of key institutions, election data, cabinet votes of confidence, political groups' membership data, and individuals' background are presented all in one place provides scholars of Iran with an unprecedented opportunity to both qualitatively and quantitatively analyze hitherto obscure aspects of Iranian statesmanship. Most important to capture, in my opinion, is the intricate parallelism that characterizes post-revolutionary state structures—the conventional government institutions such as the presidency, parliament, ministerial departments, and other bureaucratic agencies on the one hand, and the office of the supreme leader and its myriad satellite institutions, on the other. The extensive list of officials directly appointed by the supreme leader (pp. 46–9), breaking down the membership categories of Expediency Discernment Assembly (p. 60), and the history of the development of different min-

istries (pp. 107–11) are only among the few resources that may be mined for further research or instruction in this volume.

More important than the detailed and practical picture of the parallel structures that the book brings to life are the quite peculiar norms of informality that dominate the parallel and ever-changing non-conventional part of the Iranian state; norms that, although commonly acknowledged, have usually escaped further analysis thus far. The authors appropriately signify the political elite as individuals who not only have the power to make decisions, but also shape and maintain political norms and values (pp. xvii–xviii). The fact that Iran’s political sphere is “defined by an opaque structure” and “lack of transparency” (p. xviii) is partially explained by the circulation of offices among a relatively closed elite group. That is not the whole story, however. It is also the *nature* of this circle—the particular relationships among its individuals and their socio-cultural background—that enables a certain level of structural flexibility and the continuation of functioning despite constant, unpredictable changes and overlapping structures. *The Political Handbook* allows us to track such characteristics in some detail. For instance, thanks to this volume it is now possible to study the “elites with highest number of influential positions” (pp. 294–6) in terms of their socio-economic, religious, and political background, and their ties or lack thereof to “ten prominent clerical families” (pp. 796–805).

Take Hassan Ebrahim Habibi, who has had the highest number of “influential” offices in post-revolutionary Iran, as an instance. Habibi is neither a cleric nor a member of groups characteristically closer to clerics, such as Hezb-e Mo’talefeh-ye Eslami. He holds no familial ties to prominent clerical families either. His education outside of Iran further detaches him from the traditional clerical class. What the handbook allows us to examine in light of this information is the nature of his state positions. From the eighteen offices he occupied, eleven were conventional offices for which he was elected by popular vote, either directly (e.g. as a parliamentary deputy) or through the Parliament (as minister or legal jurist member of the Guardian Council). The exceptions consist of his membership in the Expediency Discernment Assembly for six sessions (appointed by the Supreme Leader), and his membership in the Revolutionary Council, which, although not delineated in the *Handbook*, was secondary to the clerical core of the council. Knowing the fact that the highest influence comes from non-electoral offices and circles of “prominent” clerics, Habibi emerges as a prime example of limited influence despite the highest number of *potentially* “influential” positions. The range of data presented in the book on a case like Habibi’s provides a vivid manifestation of why the conventional section of the Iranian state has proved to be the less powerful one over the decades.

Exactly for this reason, the data in the book needs to be complemented by a deeper understanding of informal but influential groups, offices, and individuals that are not included herein. For justified practical reasons, the handbook excludes entities and individuals such as “parastatal foundations” and “leading clerics who did not hold official governmental posts” (p. xxi). For a plausible analysis of the political norms of informality in post-revolutionary Iran, therefore, additional data needs to be procured: on groups and individuals that enjoy indirect but powerful influence, such as Hey’at-e

Razmandegan-e Eslam and the Friday Prayer Leaders' Policy Council, and on individuals' non-governmental but politically influential activities, such as Mohsen Rafiqdoust's attempts to provide the Revolutionary Guards with funds and equipment before the Revolutionary Guards Ministry was established. Regardless, *Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* is bound to elevate the quality of scholarship on political life in Iran by serving as an empirically solid platform on which to build research.

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In the Islamic Republic, writing about politics, more so participating in politics, is a knotty affair. The representation of the state as a self-reproducing regime by researchers and intellectuals has its corollary in high officials themselves characterizing Iran's political order as a bounded and self-purposed system. The "*nezām*" is not just a category of political analysis, in other words, but also a category of practice, a category which individuals inside and outside of the Iranian government deploy to engage in politics.

Scholars habitually conflate the two modes. The result is a folkish functionalism. Our methodological approach is often to look at an outcome, ask "cui bono?," and assume backwards that the internal workings of the Iranian state, the intention of political elites, the organizational charts of authority-making, and the resources of government institutions somehow interacted, even if inefficiently, to arrive at an observed effect. We all too easily move from proclamations to policies to end products without checking the pathways in between. In sum, we rarely open up the black box of the state. With the publication of *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*, we no longer have any excuse to be so lazy.

Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani provide these reams of biographical and organizational data not to fit the entire Iranian state apparatus into one more abstracted category of a typological set—be it sultanistic, rentier, predatory, hierocratic, hybridized, hydraulic, or theocratic-republican—but rather "to understand the practical functioning of Iranian politics" (p. xvii). They point out that any grand method of examining