

**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.

Until the mid-2000s, the English-language social scientific study of the Islamic Republic of Iran suffered from severe shortcomings. Fieldwork-based empirical study on post-revolutionary Iran was rare. Researchers of Iranian background wishing to temporarily return to the country for fieldwork often faced difficulties, depending on the political positioning of their families before and during the revolution. Male researchers were confronted with the additional possibility of military conscription. Female researchers often faced the choice of staying with relatives, which could create its own challenges, or relying on local host families, as it would not be appropriate to stay on one's own, especially not outside larger cities. This dynamic would in turn affect how, where, and with what level of involvement one conducted research.

Further, relatively few of the locally produced social science studies from Iran made an impact across its borders—this was partly because studies were not yet widely accessible online, and collaborations between researchers from Iran and outside faced operational and institutional challenges, exacerbated from the 1990s onwards by international sanctions. The latter also affected the relationship between international libraries and Iranian publishers, so that acquisition of material newly published in Iran often reached foreign libraries only with a 2–3 year time lag.

Finally, social scientific research inside Iran recovered only slowly from the political upheavals of the revolution and the Iran–Iraq war. This situation changed during the reformist period of President Khatami (1997–2005), which facilitated a turn towards more data-based social policy: the procurement of research funding was professionalized, licenses for social scientific surveys were issued, and new think tanks and research centers were created that provided avenues for more independent-minded scholars to rise to prominence.

Over time, this flowering of social science research inside Iran since the early 2000s also fed into an empirical turn in the social scientific study of Iran by researchers based abroad. More and more graduate students received visas for year-long stays in Iran, often returning with boxes of surveys, locally produced theses, and oral histories. Institutional collaborations were (re-)established, co-authorship between scholars inside Iran and outside became more commonplace.

From the early 2010s on, one could perceive a decidedly different publication strategy also with several academic presses. I. B. Tauris had long been at the forefront of high-quality publications in Iranian modern history, literature, and also social science. With the move of one of its editors to Cambridge University Press, a new wave of Iran-focused publications has set in, and other leading university presses have since changed gear towards more positive assessments of Iran-focused monographs.

Mehrzad Boroujerdi has been at the forefront of the empirical turn in social science studies of Iran. Since the mid-2000s, he has collected countless pieces of information on

the political elite of Iran. For long, although much was written about the Iranian state, the state itself often appeared as a black box. Beyond the individuals leading the three branches of power, rather little was known about the second tier of decision-makers: the complete lists of the members of the clerical councils and the national security council, the judges in the highest courts of the country and their terms in office, the top bureaucrats in the various ministries and in the provincial administrations.

This information is now all available thanks to the magnificent collection of information put together by Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kouros Rahimkhani. Their handbook provides full data on membership of all important political institutions and offices in the country, and it does so from the beginning of 1979 until 2017. But beyond previously unavailable institutional member lists and electoral data, the handbook offers something even more valuable. Its second half contains a Who's Who in post-revolutionary Iran and an overview of the family ties among Iran's political elite that enables readers to trace individuals' careers across institutions and councils in relation to their social network. Iran's regime has often been described with fascination as a highly pluralistic political system where power is dispersed between several clerical and non-clerical councils as well as the parliament and the executive. As Boroujerdi has shown elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the regime is pluralistic within the limits of a finite group of about 300 elites who are sociologically highly networked with one another (through educational institutions, military service, and marriages) and who rotate between the country's key political institutions, giving the regime a much more competitive and pluralistic outlook than it actually features. Thanks to the granular biographical documentation of hundreds of political elite players, these networks can now be studied in depth and with meticulous attention to detail.

Further, anyone who has ever attempted to research the biography of a member of the political elite will appreciate how difficult it is to establish reliability. Too many accounts been re-written after the revolution, are otherwise politically inflected, and/or have been tainted by rumours and hear-say where facts considered to be part of "common knowledge" not seldom turn out to be wholly invented. The handbook will save generations time in verification and hopefully take the teeth out of some of the less useful controversies in the discipline.

The value of the information provided in the handbook can therefore hardly be overstated. No serious study in political science and political sociology on Iran will be able to do without the handbook in the near future.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1765951>

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Boroujerdi's presentation to the "Iranische Kulturgemeinde in Österreich", Vienna, 29 June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibZA9ieIwc>.