

Reviews

Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic, Narges Bajoghli, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-5036-1029-3 (pbk), 176 pp.

As I was reading Narges Bajoghli's fascinating new book, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, news broke of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. A major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and head of the Quds Force, Soleimani died in a US drone strike on Baghdad International airport on 3 January 2020. In the wake of the attack, various paintings and posters began to circulate in which Soleimani was invariably depicted as a martyr. In one image, his bloody and lifeless body is tenderly embraced by Imam Hussein. Considered within Shi'a Islam as the third Imam, Hussein's own martyrdom in the seventh century on the plains of Karbala serves as a seminal story that has been used to forge the Islamic Republic's official national identity, particularly during the Iran–Iraq war. One painting, entitled “The Apocalyptic Companion of Aba Abdillah,” by celebrated pro-regime artist Hassan Ruholamin, appeared on Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's Instagram page and website on 3 January 2020, the very day of Soleimani's death.¹ This was just one among several propaganda images produced not merely to commemorate Solei-

¹<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7851525/Iran-issues-poster-showing-slain-commander-Qassem-Soleimani-hugged-Prophet-Mohammeds-grandson.html>

mani, but importantly to paint him as one in a long line of martyrs stretching back to Imam Hussein. This was an uncanny moment, for I could see, unfolding in real time, the mechanics of the Iranian state's propaganda machine, the many dimensions of which Bajoghli reveals in her compelling and meticulously researched book.

Iran Reframed successfully achieves its goal of uncovering and analyzing the multifaceted dimensions of Iran's state media landscape, or more specifically "regime media," by conveying the stories of some of the men that work within it. Bajoghli dispels the myth of a singular, monumental and carefully coordinated propaganda machine, to show that this is in fact riven through by generational conflict and factional divisions, even within the same generation. The reader learns that this is a complex and competitive environment with various players vying for control over the regime's messaging and we learn of the strategies the media producers are using to appeal to a younger audience. Propaganda need not necessarily be monolithic, and as we discover, it also need not look anything like propaganda. The book is underpinned by Bajoghli's long-term fieldwork in Iran. Indeed, one of the book's many strengths is the richly varied ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews and informal conversations with more than 200 regime media producers, all members of the Revolutionary Guard or the Basij, as well as government officials in cultural institutions, filmmakers, journalists, students, freelancers, audiences and censors. She also observed production meetings, sat in on university classes, attended film festivals, visited museums and went on trips to battlefields organized by regime centers. Names and biographical details of her interlocutors have been changed to protect their identities. The results of this extensive fieldwork never feel rushed, compressed or glossed in the volume's rather slim 120 pages. The book provides readers with deep insights into the evolution of Iran's regime media organizations, particularly as they attempted to combat a crisis of legitimacy after the 2009 post-election unrest. Bajoghli shows us in vivid and personal detail how they have evolved with the times and the various tactics they use to influence the hearts and minds of the people. Importantly, *Iran Reframed* explains how the post-2009 regime media landscape has become considerably decentralized as filmmakers attempt to make their products more appealing to younger viewers.

The book is logically divided into five chapters, looking first at generational change. In chapter 1, Bajoghli provides a brief history of the formation of the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij following the 1979 revolution, highlighting how the Iran–Iraq war "turned them into central institutions in Iran" (p. 29). This not only sets the scene for later discussions about these organizations' involvement in Iran's media sphere, but also helps to account for how generational change has inflected their approach to media production. Bajoghli identifies three generations of the Basij, defining them not by decade of birth, but rather by the period that they joined. She explains that after the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the primary role of the Basij shifted its focus to combat a "soft war," confronting the cultural influence of western powers like the US, Europe and Israel. Of particular interest is her discussion of what she describes as a "fluid" relationship between Iranian diasporic media and regime media producers, particularly of the third generation. As one of her interlocutors explained: "Let's adapt

what they do, but within our own values” (p. 45). Her account of generational change and conflict also pays attention to how each generation views the other. For example, the first two generations complain that the third generation are “blindly ideological” and lack any understanding of actual combat, while the third generation believes that “the revolution has gone astray because the older generation has lost touch with its values” (p. 47). Through her interviews and observations, Bajoghli provides us with an understanding of how the various generations of regime media producers offer differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of revolutionary values.

Chapter 2, “Cracks in the Official Story,” provides insight into how official narratives about significant national events are presented by regime media, but also delves below the surface to relay stories of contemporary regime media producers who do not necessarily believe in the “truth” of the stories they tell. The chapter focuses primarily on the regime media’s contributions to the “culture of the sacred defense” that “was developed to support the eight-year Iran-Iraq war” (p. 58). Documentary filmmaker Morteza Avini, who is briefly discussed in the chapter, was a leading figure during the war era; his films exemplify the official perspective and deliberately censored out critical perspectives. The tropes developed by Avini and his contemporaries continued to be used after the war to forge a sense of “proper citizenship” (p. 60). During her research, however, Bajoghli met numerous regime filmmakers and media producers who want to bring a critical perspective into their work, but are pushed out of regime media organizations, accused of no longer being “loyal” to the revolution. In a media environment where opportunities for full employment outside of regime media organizations are limited, many of them take the work in order to pay the bills. One of these, whom she calls Mr. Ahmadi, provides a compelling example for the chapter.

Chapter 3, “Insiders, Outsiders and Belonging,” begins with the story of Mr. Hosseini, who summoned Bajoghli one day in 2014 to a meeting he had arranged with a group of hardline critics from conservative newspapers with the aim of persuading them to refrain from coming out in criticism of a film by young independent filmmaker Mohsen Amir-Youssefi, set during the 2009 Green Movement. Hosseini appeals to the group of hardliners, arguing that instead of making the film more famous by banning it, they should watch the film and “decide if we can take a different approach [...] try to minimize the impact of this film” (pp. 69–70). What follows is a very candid and revealing exchange between the critics and the filmmaker, not just about the film, but about a range of social and political issues. The strength of the chapter lies in part in Bajoghli’s ability to vividly capture the various perspectives and nuances of the debate, and she follows this with a fascinating analysis of the insider/outsider (*khodi/gheyr-e khodi*) divide that frames Iran’s socio-political and cultural landscape more generally. Importantly, the chapter provides a clear illustration of how and why Iranian film censorship is not clear-cut. According to Bajoghli, what frustrates the regime producers is that it is the *gheyr-e khodi* wield the social and cultural capital, particularly in the international arena and, frequently, the censoring and censoring of such filmmakers by the *khodi* only adds to the outsider’s value and diminishes their own.

In chapter 5, “New Strategies,” Bajoghli turns to look at strategies being developed by the regime media producers to raise their cultural capital and in doing so to try to

better appeal to and influence a younger generation of viewers. The chapter opens with a revealing conversation between Mr. Hosseini, Mr. Ahmadi and Bajoghli, which took place in the relative privacy of a moving car. It is revealed that Mr. Ahmadi, a regime producer, voted for reformist presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi and participated in the 2009 Green Movement. In hindsight, however, he buys into the view held by many pro-regime proponents that the movement and ensuing protests were a conspiracy fermented by the MEK (People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran) in collaboration with the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel. This conversation sets the scene for a discussion of the regime's production of anti-MEK films, taking a 2015 documentary film by Morteza Payehshenas, *An Unfinished Film for My Daughter: Somayeh*, as a case study. The film tells the story of youths that had been allegedly conscripted by the MEK against their will and aims to discourage youth from joining any opposition movement. Importantly, the filmmaker deliberately uses techniques to make the film seem like an independent, even underground production and, more importantly, appear to be an anti-regime film. In fact, great efforts are made to prevent the film from looking like propaganda, including avoiding using terms frequently used by the regime. This kind of dissimulation was also extended to the distribution of the film, which was circulated on VCDs and sold through street vendors that usually deal in contraband films. In her analysis, however, Bajoghli discusses how the regime treats its audience as an abstract imagined community that is invariably male and highlights that the regime hires young male filmmakers on the assumption that they will best be able to understand this young, imagined and gender-limited audience. The filmmakers, she concludes, see themselves as fighting an important war of ideas to safeguard the nation.

Chapter 5, "Producing Nationalism," delves further into the strategies being employed by regime media producers to craft their content to appeal to a young audience whose imaginaries are far less invested in the traditional Shi'i symbolism that has been the mainstay of Iranian national identity since the revolution. Quoting Mr. Hosseini, Bajoghli writes: "no one aspires ... to be mourning all the time!" (p. 101). As well as briefly discussing new approaches to framing the Iran–Iraq war in the Sacred Defense Garden and Museum, the chapter focuses on the regime media's turn to the production of music videos. Bajoghli quotes one producer: "This generation wants everything quick and in small bites [...] so let's give them our own music videos" (p. 105). The chapter describes how the regime recruited a popular rapper, Tataloo, who had previously worked underground and even been arrested, to create a music video about the nuclear issue to coincide with the finalization of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. While the video's depiction of the tattooed, long-haired rapper together with Iran's military caused some surprise among many Iranians, Bajoghli notes that she had witnessed this strategy used frequently by regime media organizations since the rise of the Green Movement in 2009. She gives several other examples of recent music videos that use this strategy and discusses how they are supported by massive social media campaigns. It is here that the construction of Soleimani's high-profile media presence is brought into the spotlight as an important and, as it happens, topical example of how regime media has attempted to "recast the

Revolutionary Guard” through multimedia campaigns, many of which featured Soleimani (p. 109). According to Bajoghli, due to this media campaign Soleimani was constructed as a national hero and came to be adored not only by supporters of the regime, but also “those who view themselves as critical of the regime” (p. 110). The massive public outpouring of grief upon his assassination in 2020 is perhaps not surprising given that he had been built up to virtual rock star status over the preceding years. It is a testament to Bajoghli’s extensive research and deep insights that events like Soleimani’s assassination that have occurred after the completion of the book can be better understood because of her book, and it is my belief that it will continue to offer up valuable insights and a framework for understanding Iran’s regime media landscape for some time to come.

Throughout *Iran Reframed* Bajoghli writes in a lively and engaging style, inserting herself into the stories she narrates and frequently letting her interlocutors speak for themselves to provide a vivid picture of Iran’s regime media landscape and the people who work within it. It is a testament to her persistence and determination that she was able to gain unprecedented access and the trust of her interlocutors. This allows her to provide the reader with rare and valuable insights into this fascinating topic. Over the last few years Bajoghli, who holds a PhD from New York University and is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins University, has established a profile as an authoritative media commentator, writing intermittently for the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*. Her book finds the perfect balance between scholarly authority and accessible expression, the words flowing off the page elegantly, making it simply a pleasure to read. *Iran Reframed* is a valuable addition to the field of Iranian media studies and will be of great value to anyone interested in Iranian media, film, culture, society and politics.

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The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qājār Persia, c. 1760–c. 1870, Thomas S. R. O. Flynn OP, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017, ISBN 978-90-04-16399-7 (hbk), xxvii + 1113 pp.

The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qajar Persia is by all accounts a monumental work; in its heft, with almost 1,000 pages of sprawling text; in the depth of its research, with some twenty-five archives and around 2,500 printed sources listed in the bibliography; as well as in its ambit, aspiration and achievement: it covers the entirety of the western missionary enterprise and activity in Iran writ large—modern Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan as well as the Caucasus, between the mid-eighteenth