

Book Review Forum

Introduction

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

To anyone with even a passing interest in the politics of postrevolutionary Iran, the justification for an authoritative guide to the labyrinthine institutions and complex networks of elite actors comprising and shaping the Islamic Republic requires little elaboration. The ever-proliferating and evolving array of (in)formal organizations—e.g. social and economic foundations, bureaucratic agencies, political and military institutions, political parties, etc.—and the relationships among them, are only beginning to be rigorously examined by scholars of Iranian politics and society. The dearth and fragmentary nature of such studies, moreover, is itself a reflection of the intricately tangled political landscape inside Iran that too often serves as a barrier, rather than a gateway, to research. Given this context, the publication of Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kouros Rahimkhani's *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* is a seminal contribution to contemporary Iranian Studies. Inspired by the “desire to understand the practical functioning of Iranian politics,” the Handbook is an indispensable reference guide to Iran's political institutions and political elites since 1978. Taking into account the inherent limitations attending to data collection and access to reliable sources in an arbitrary political system such as the Islamic Republic, the breadth of historical and contemporaneous information meticulously curated in the compendium is especially remarkable.

Undoubtedly, the singular contribution of the volume lies in the background information about the Iranian political elites and their professional as well as family ties with one another. As the authors note in the “Preface” to the Handbook, “We know embarrassingly little about the class origin, ethnic background, age composition, educational pedigree, postrevolutionary prison experience, familial ties, party affiliations, or patterns of political mobility of the revolutionaries who came to power in 1979.” Indeed, the cumulative imprint of these deficits on contemporary studies of Iranian politics and society cannot be overstated. While the lack of granular

information about political elites has led to an overdetermination of ideological and structural factors in political inquiries into the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policy dynamics, cultural and sociological studies of state–society relations are increasingly informed by abstract conceptual and normative assumptions rather than empirical precision. It is a credit to the perceptiveness of the authors that *Post-revolutionary Iran* directly addresses itself to these deficits in existing scholarship on Iranian politics, and proposes a number of questions for future inquiries in elite studies, electoral behavior, gender and politics, party politics, institutional design, and comparative studies of pre- and postrevolutionary elites.

The following forum features a range of scholarly engagements—from across social scientific specialties within Iranian Studies—with the content of *Postrevolutionary Iran*, and especially with its implications for the study of Iranian politics and society under the Islamic Republic. Respondents were asked to reflect broadly on ways in which the information about the background of political elites and the ties that bind different cohorts across Iranian political institutions might complement existing studies of Iran's political development or yield new research endeavors on Iran's domestic politics, foreign policy analysis, political sociology, and the sociocultural anthropology of its elites. More specifically, the respondents were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- How does this study contribute to our understanding of the nature of the state in postrevolutionary Iran?
- What discernable trends can we see in the social mobility of elites after the revolution?
- What have we learned about elections and electoral behavior in Iran since 1979 with the help of the data assembled in this book?
- How does this book help us better understand the clerical class?
- What might future studies of Iranian political elites include that was left out of this compendium?

The contributors to this forum are identified with a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, but all share an appreciation of sound empirical knowledge as the basis for social, political, and historical inquiry. Such a collective commitment to scholarly reflection, good-faith engagement, and critical inquiry is representative of the very best intellectual traditions in Iranian Studies, and long may its rewards continue to find expression in the pages of *Iranian Studies*.

Hussein Banai
Associate Editor (Social Sciences), *Iranian Studies*
© 2020, Hussein Banai
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1770550>