

BOOK REVIEWS

Amin Saikal. *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019. 344 pp. (ISBN: 9780691175478). doi:10.22679/avs.2023.8.1.007
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Amin Saikal, an eminent scholar specializing in the geopolitics of the Middle East and Central Asia, provides a unique glimpse into critical moments of the development of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the past four decades. *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*, as a continuation of Saikal's earlier work, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah: Iran from Autocracy to Religious Rule*, offers a fascinating study on major aspects of Iran's post-revolutionary politics as well as internal and external challenges that often undermine the country's founding theopolitical structures and principles. In his thought-provoking analysis of foreign and domestic affairs of the Islamic Republic, Saikal examines the country's underlying political and socio-economic trends responsible for the endurance and resilience of the Islamic regime.

The book, containing eight chapters, discusses the main political processes that have led to the establishment and resilience of the Islamic regime in Iran. The author has attempted to unfold questions concerning the survival of the Iranian revolution and its impact on shaping the political framework of the country as well as Iran's resourcefulness that buttresses its position as a "middle power" despite serious international pressure and sanctions. Although the meaning of middle power is often vaguely defined, Saikal uses Martin Wight's description that understands middle power through the prism of the material resources of a country.

Saikal introduces the theme of the *jibadi-ijtihadi* concept, exercised by Iran's highest state leading figures, which appears as a leitmotif throughout the book representing the major framework of the politics of the Islamic Republic. According to Saikal, this *jibadi-ijtihadi*—combative/reformist approach introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini and "diligently pursued" by his successor Ayatollah Khamenei—allowed the Islamic governance to successfully balance domestic and foreign threats and establish a relatively stable regime resistant to inner crisis and interference from outside. The *jibadi* dimension is defined as a traditional or conservative approach that is focused on the Islamization of politics and everyday life, while the *ijtihadi* dimension, a progressive and reformist approach, helps in applying an innovative interpretation of Islam grounded on independent human reasoning that further reinforces a

modern side of Islamic Iran.

Furthermore, Saikal extensively discusses the processes that led to the Revolution by exploring, in detail, the historical background of the Shah's regime and its policies at both the national and international levels as well as the emergence of Khomeini as a powerful political force in the country. Raising inequality, the Shah's ineffective reforms, extensive oppression by the secret police, and the interference of major powers with the sole aim to profit as much as possible from the oil business all caused a rise in general dissatisfaction among the people and a strengthening of the opposition that favored Islamic governance based on Shia religious principles.

Saikal continues examining Khomeini's ascendance to power and implementation of his political vision based on a two-tiered Islamic political system that incorporates, on one hand, the *Vali-e-faqih* or the "sovereignty of God" embodied in the Supreme Leader who possesses "extraordinary powers of jurisdiction over the entire system" and, on the other, "sovereignty of the people" represented by an elected president, national assembly (Majlis), and appointed judiciary (p. 70). Saikal notes that Khomeini succeeded in establishing a repressive theocratic system by applying the *jibadi-ijtihadi* paradigm, which led to the entrenchment of a tight structured Islamic regime through the *jibadi* approach but left room for flexibility and reform when the circumstances required such adjustments, through the *ijtihadi* approach.

Saikal further highlights how Khamenei has continued to successfully implement Khomeini's *jibadi-ijtihadi* concept in ruling the regime. Khamenei's era of rule has required accommodating the post-revolutionary generation without endangering the rigid, theocratic framework of the Islamic order. In that spirit, Khamenei has allowed reformist and pragmatist clusters to enter politics, which has proven to be an effective strategy that has managed to concurrently guard the conservative basis of the political system and allow reinvention and flexible reforms to take place, if necessary.

When it comes to resource capabilities, Saikal notes that Iran has managed, over the years, to develop a resilient enough economic system as well as hard and soft power potential to consider itself an influential regional actor. Although the economy of Iran has remained predominantly state-led and oil-dependent, with shifting intervals of growth and steep decline, it still has managed to sustain itself and survive the consequences of serious international sanctions, poor economic management, and widespread corruption. In terms of military doctrine, Saikal argues that by pursuing a defensive approach that incorporates deterrence and denial as the two main aspects of military strategy, Iran can position itself as a middle power and compensate for the lack of the country's hard power. Moreover, Saikal adds that Iran has used its soft power, although in a limited scope, to promote itself as a Shia power, appealing to other Shia communities abroad, mainly through charitable organizations (bonyads).

Saikal claims that the *jibadi-ijtihadi* approach, besides being a driving force in Iran's domestic politics, has also defined much of its foreign policy, enabling the Islamic regime to act as a major regional player. Consequently, Iran has developed defiant, but imbued with pragmatic reflexivity, regional policy behavior that has enabled the country to handle

serious regional crises by converting them into advantageous opportunities for a further strengthening of the regime's strategic position in the region.

Continuing the analysis of Iran's foreign policy behavior, Saikal further notes that the country's relations with major powers remain in line with the two-pronged *jibadi-ijtihadi* concept. Thus, the Islamic regime shows "perseverant but flexible resistance" in relations with its enemies but leaves room for developing pragmatic friendships, especially with major powers that display a certain degree of flexibility (p. 207). Iran's relations with world powers have been heavily defined by its relations with the United States, which most of the time have been explicitly antagonistic. The isolated stance of the Islamic Republic, caused by sanctions, mostly imposed by the United States, has forced the country to develop tighter relations with other major players such as Russia and China.

Saikal concludes that the *jibadi-ijtihadi* modus operandi will continue to play a major role in Iran's politics and society in the foreseeable future and that the understanding and acknowledging of this combative/reformist paradigm by the outside world would help in better dealing with the Islamic Republic. *Raising Iran* represents a valuable reading for students and researchers interested in understanding contemporary Iran, a country that constantly surprises and intrigues the international community, by portraying a strong survival force capable of resolving inner crises and deterring outside threats.

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Rebecca Ruth Gould. *The Persian Prison Poem: Sovereignty and the Political Imagination*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 312 pp. (ISBN:9781474484039). doi:10.22679/avs.2023.8.1.008

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Gould's work is the first monographic study in the English language devoted to Persian prison poems (*habsiyyāt*) with particular attention to the crystallization of political theology in this transgressive genre. The thesis of the work is that with the gradual disintegration and desacralization of caliphal authority throughout the twelfth century, a new political theology emerged in Persian prison poems that exposed the corruption and hypocrisy of the sultanates that aspired to fill the power vacuum. This book connects Sunil Sharma's seminal monograph dedicated to the most significant early practitioner of Persian prison poetry called Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān with Alireza Korangy's intertextual inquiry into Khāqānī's multi-layered works in whose pen the genre reached its zenith.¹ Enriched

¹ Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān of Lahore* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000); Alireza Korangy, *Development of the Ghazal and Khaqani's Contribution: A Study of the Development of Ghazal and a Literary Exegesis of a 12th c. Poetic Harbinger* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013).