



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Iran Reframed

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Reviewing *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* by Narges Bajoghli

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1. Selling a Revolution

Gregory Brew

On Aug. 19, 1978, hundreds of people packed into the Cinema Rex theater in Abadan, Iran. The movie that night was *The Deer*, a 1974 film by acclaimed Iranian director Masoud Kimiai. Twenty minutes into the picture, a group of men locked the doors and set fire to the theater. In a matter of minutes, nearly 400 people were suffocated or burned alive.

The moment galvanized revolutionary fervor among millions of Iranians who were convinced that the perpetrators of the disaster had been agents of the shah's secret police, SAVAK. The episode is often considered one of the turning points in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979.¹ In fact, available evidence suggests revolutionary supporters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini set the fire, targeting the cinema as a symbol of Western cultural influence in Iran.

Less than five months after the Cinema Rex fire, in January 1979, the shah fled the country. A few weeks later, Khomeini declared the revolutionary government's official media stance: "We are not opposed to cinema. ... It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our leaders."² As the regime

¹ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1985), 375; Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 61–62.

² Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Routledge, 1981), 258, as cited in Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

founded by Khomeini consolidated its hold over Iran, it co-opted the film industry to provide messages of state propaganda and revolutionary zeal.³

That Khomeini's political experiment was accompanied by a revolution in Iranian filmmaking was not, on the face of it, entirely surprising. As Blake Atwood notes, "for more than a century, cinema has been ideologically and technologically entangled with the idea of revolution."⁴ The challenge of selling revolution is the focus of Narges Bajoghli's book, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Based on 10 years of fieldwork inside the Islamic Republic as well as 200 interviews with media producers, veterans, and state propagandists working for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij Organization, a state-sponsored paramilitary group, Bajoghli's book engages with the process of producing propaganda for the Islamic Republic, at a time when the legitimacy of the regime in Tehran and its accompanying revolutionary rhetoric are increasingly questioned by a skeptical public.

Scholars have produced detailed studies on the history, foreign policy, political economy, and internal social dynamics of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵ The regime's key institutions, such as the presidency and the IRGC, have been the subjects of scholarly

³ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vols. 3-4* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴ Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 1.

⁵ A sample includes Ariane M. Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy since the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), R.K. Ramazani, *Independence Without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

studies.⁶ Comparatively little has been written, however, on how the Islamic Republic of Iran views itself or how an organization like the IRGC packages and promotes its legitimizing message for a domestic audience.

Bajoghli's book seeks to fill this scholarly gap. *Iran Reframed* is a work of ethnographic exploration, constituting a deep dive into the minds of those who have taken on a unique challenge — how to sell the Islamic Republic to the people of Iran.

Selling the Revolution

The four reviewers for this roundtable found much to commend in Bajoghli's work. Farzan Sabet found the book "eminently readable" and concise at 119 pages. Sabet applauds the book's examination of the "hard core of power" within the Islamic Republic, and notes Bajoghli's ability to use specific figures in order to illustrate broader issues: "This enables the book to zoom out at critical points from individual narratives or specific findings to the big picture."

According to Saeid Golkar, Bajoghli explores the work of the IRGC in cultural and social spheres, where the organization enjoys nearly as much influence as it does in Iran's security apparatus and political economy. Michael Rubin argues that Bajoghli's book pulls the curtain back on the populist media produced within Iran, a task facilitated by the author's "unprecedented access to regime influencers and media strategists." Suzanne Maloney feels that Bajoghli "does a wonderful job of weaving snippets of background

⁶ Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, *The Quest for Authority in Iran: A History of the Presidency from Revolution to Rouhani* (London: Bloomsbury, I.B. Tauris, 2018), Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

material around her sketches of the pro-regime media producers,” and finds her narrative “rich with the texture of Iranian life,” which lends her book an authenticity that is frequently lacking in work on contemporary Iran.

Sabet also notes Bajoghli’s effort to re-center recent Iranian history around the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. While the legacy of the revolution looms large, Iran’s struggle against Ba’athist Iraq was more crucial in shaping major state institutions. “The Imposed War,” as it is called, was the crucible that forged the first revolutionary generation. As Sabet notes, the wartime experience shared by millions of young Iranians and the simultaneous development of the IRGC as the regime’s most powerful supporting institution had important consequences for how Iran would develop in subsequent decades. This is reflected in Bajoghli’s narrative, which follows a generational approach. Golkar describes how Bajoghli’s research takes her through three generations — from those who fought in the Iran-Iraq War, through those who joined the Basij and IRGC in the 1990s, to the more zealous producers who began working after the 2005 election of hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

By exploring the internal dynamics of each generation, Bajoghli gets to the socio-economic and class differences eating away at the central cohesion of the Islamic Republic. As Rubin notes in his review, such differences are often concealed by regime rhetoric that emphasizes social justice. But socio-economic divisions are evident in Iran, where a well-to-do class of urbanites live alongside millions struggling amid a stagnant economy, rising inflation, and pervasive public corruption. Those attracted to the Basij and IRGC often come looking for privilege and advantageous jobs and hope to secure a future for their children. There is an air of ambivalence to many of Bajoghli’s figures, who occasionally espouse moderate or reformist ideas, yet are drawn to the hard-line IRGC and Basij for reasons tied to basic economic need (and the dominant role these groups

have played in state media since 2005). These producers were tasked with an important yet daunting mission: to sell the Islamic Republic and its revolutionary ideology to a younger generation of Iranians who are skeptical of the central regime and eager for a greater degree of political participation.

The defining moment for many of Bajoghli's subjects is the 2009 Green Revolution, when millions took to the streets to protest elections widely believed to be rigged.⁷ The protesters were drawn chiefly from Iran's urban, young middle class, which had come to see the regime as illegitimate, corrupt, autocratic, and out of touch. After 2009, Iran's leaders became preoccupied with winning over the country's youth and upwardly mobile middle class. Maloney emphasizes this in her review, referencing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's surprising olive branch to regime opponents in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections. The role of state media after 2009 points to one of the hallmarks of the regime survival strategy: "relentless efforts to inculcate support for the revolutionary state among its own citizenry."

The job of IRGC and Basij media producers was to prevent a second Green Revolution by disseminating and popularizing messages the dissenting class would find attractive. As Golkar and Rubin note in their reviews, the producers are conscious of the gravity of their task, yet recognize the immense difficulty they face in convincing a skeptical public that a 40-year-old repressive, authoritarian, and inequitable regime still retains legitimacy.

The idea they fix on, according to Bajoghli, is nationalism. This is arguably the book's most significant scholarly assertion. As a revolutionary state, Iran eschewed nationalism,

⁷ For a recent study of the Green Revolution, see Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: The Green Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

an ideology of political mobilization and legitimation that had been used extensively by the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi state.⁸ Instead, the regime turned to shared religious identity, the iconography and mythology of Shia Islam, and the revolutionary ideology of Khomeini. As this message loses its power, Bajoghli argues that media producers have chosen to tap into latent Iranian nationalism, using nationalist images and rhetoric to extol major figures of the Islamic Republic — most notably Qassem Soleimani, a high-ranking leader of the IRGC and commander of the elite Qods Force who was killed by a U.S. airstrike in January 2020. In the wake of Soleimani’s death, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets in public mourning rituals. As Maloney notes in her review, the public veneration of Soleimani “was the intentional outgrowth of the propagation of war culture,” and a sign that the IRGC media producers’ message had found purchase among the general population.

Depth vs. Breadth

The reviewers also point to the book’s shortcomings. Golkar argues that *Iran Reframed*’s readability and brevity detract from the strength of its argument: The ethnographic work of Bajoghli’s interviews, which highlight the work of a small handful of producers, “does not capture the bigger picture of pro-regime media organizations.” Maloney makes a similar point, noting that Bajoghli works hard to present her interlocutors in a sympathetic light, “[eclipsing] any effort to draw wider analytical conclusions from the research.”

⁸ Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012),

1–32.

For Sabet, the crucial issue is of the media producers' relative significance in the crowded realm of modern Iranian media. The IRGC producers must contend with rivals, including programming broadcast by groups tied to the diaspora. Where this content takes on a political message, it is deeply critical of the regime, questioning the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and encouraging nostalgia for the Pahlavi era. "In this fractured media environment," asks Sabet, "how much significance can we attribute to regime media producers, even with the relatively vast resources and semi-captive audiences at their disposal?" In a personal anecdote, Rubin recalls how, during his time in Iran, films with an apolitical message attracted large crowds, while films aimed at pushing the regime's ideological agenda "showed to half-empty theaters." In Bajoghli's attempt to heap attention on the producers, the book's biggest omission, according to Maloney, "is that of the audience."

Another question raised by reviewers concerns the power of the media producers within the regime. Bajoghli emphasizes how producers were not always ideologically predisposed to support the messages they were developing. Some leaned toward more moderate or reformist positions. While Bajoghli is effective in illustrating the producers' individual feelings, Sabet notes that their particular place in the power structures of the Islamic Republic is less clear. "How effective," asks Sabet, "have regime media producers been in the grand scheme of things?"

Finally, reviewers grappled with Bajoghli's argument concerning the resurgence of nationalism in Iran's state media. Sabet argues that the "security nationalism" evoked by the IRGC in the 2000s or exemplified by the commemorations of Soleimani's death in 2020 is fundamentally different from previous forms of Iranian nationalism. Sabet questions the power of this new nationalism, noting how the resonance of Soleimani's death faded quickly in the aftermath of the Ukrainian airliner tragedy of mid-January

2020. Maloney also draws on the sudden decline in public veneration of Soleimani to suggest that general receptivity to the new narrative “may be more superficial and less durably resonant than initial impressions would indicate.” Golkar raises a similar point, questioning whether the new nationalism emerging from the producers’ work represents a strategic shift by the regime, “or a sporadic effort by a few individuals.”

As the reviewers attest, *Iran Reframed* is an exceptionally well-written book. Though slim, the volume conveys the significance of its subject and reveals a great deal concerning the development of state media within the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Iran Reframed* sheds light on the business of myth making in the Islamic Republic, illustrating the ambivalent attitudes and fraught intergenerational dynamics at work in the halls of the IRGC and Basij media production centers. A regime famous for its resilience, the Islamic Republic faces a profound crisis of legitimacy, one that Bajoghli’s subjects face on a day-to-day basis.

The timeliness of *Iran Reframed* was illustrated by the events of this past January, when the death of Qassem Soleimani triggered an intense reaction, both within the Iranian state and the broader Iranian public. The fact that such issues emerged as central features of Iranian discourse several months *after* Bajoghli’s book went to print testifies to her work’s relevance. Bajoghli has raised provocative questions that scholars, analysts, and observers of modern Iran will spend the next several years trying to answer. While *Iran Reframed* does not answer every weighty question it proposes, the reader is left with a palpable sense of a state, and a nation, at a profound moment of transition.

Gregory Brew is the deputy managing editor of Texas National Security Review and a historian of U.S.-Iranian relations.



2. Can Iran's Revolutionaries Convert the Next Generation?

Suzanne Maloney

In June 2013, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader who has ruled the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1989, deviated from the usual script in remarks exhorting Iranians to cast ballots in upcoming presidential elections. After the standard diatribe against “global arrogant powers,” praise for the boisterous election campaign, and appeal for high turnout to “frustrate the enemy,” Khamenei ventured an unprecedented olive branch: “It is possible that some people do not want to support the Islamic Republic for any reason, but in any way they would like to support their country. Therefore, these people should go to ballot boxes as well.”⁹

Khamenei's unusual appeal to the opponents of the ruling system reflected the exigencies of the moment. He was beating the drum for the first presidential ballot since the Green Revolution four years earlier, when the improbable reelection of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brought millions to the streets in protests that shook the post-revolutionary system to its core. Khamenei's outreach prior to the 2013 election highlighted one of the central factors in the Islamic Republic's durability: relentless efforts to inculcate support for the revolutionary state among its own citizenry.

The post-revolutionary regime has been intensely contested since its inception 40 years ago, when a diverse coalition ousted the monarchy despite little consensus around what should follow. That legacy and the intrinsic frictions within the polity, forged through the revolution and the transition to a new order, have sustained a commitment to

⁹ “Leader's Speech in Meeting with People from Different Social Backgrounds,” *Khamenei.ir* June 12, 2013, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1848/Leader-s-Speech-in-Meeting-with-People-from-Different-Social>.

mobilization and persuasion. Make no mistake: The Islamic Republic is an authoritarian state with little tolerance for dissent. Still, its legitimacy rests upon some foundational claim to popular support, and its leadership has invested heavily in a multifaceted set of instruments and initiatives to stoke internal support — even and especially where that support might be waning.

Despite considerable literature about post-revolutionary Iran, including more than 40 years of attempts to export the revolution to its neighbors, Tehran's continuous efforts to market the regime to its own citizens command disproportionately little attention beyond cursory media coverage of the routine passion plays that pass for pro-regime rallies. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, a new book by Johns Hopkins University professor Narges Bajoghli, offers a glimpse of this important aspect of the Islamic Republic's remarkable durability.

Iran Reframed is a slender book and, mercifully — given its origins in a doctoral dissertation — a narrative rather than a treatise. Bajoghli follows three pseudonymous “regime cultural producers” active in Iran's booming film industry: Mr. Hosseini, Mr. Ahmadi, and Mostafa, whom the author met during years of field research in Iran. Each man is caught in a version of the same dilemma: How to produce films that reinforce loyalty to the revolutionary system for audiences whose political priorities, cultural references, and media habits have been radically transformed by 40 years of rule by the Islamic Republic. Ultimately, their mission entails reimagining the revolution and reviving its popular legitimacy without running afoul of the ideological strictures and personality politics that demarcate Iran's power structure. In other words, they are fighting a losing battle, which the book's protagonists appreciate as keenly as any reader will.

The Origins of Iran's Film Industry

It should come as no surprise that Iran's post-revolutionary leaders have invested heavily in cultural programming. The 1979 revolution succeeded at least in part due to the old-school connectivity, including smuggled cassette tapes of his sermons and mimeographed messages, that enabled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to coordinate strategy with opposition leaders and convey his messages to the public despite his exile by the shah. The power struggle within the revolutionary coalition that followed the shah's ouster further incentivized a "massive propaganda program to claim the Revolution exclusively" for Islamism through public art, books and newspapers, radio and television, and other media.¹⁰

In the post-revolutionary battle for hearts and minds, it was hardly obvious that cinema would feature prominently. Because films offer such a powerful vehicle for molding political consciousness, especially in a society where many lacked literacy, their place in pre-revolutionary Iran was constrained by religious objections and political censorship (at various stages, productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* were blocked by the shah's government because they depicted a king's murder¹¹). Although there is a long, proud, indigenous tradition of Iranian filmmaking, imported films and cheap local imitations dominated the cinemas during the pre-revolutionary era. As American movie stars "became household names,"¹² cinema came under attack as a vehicle of cultural "Westoxification." On the night of dissident philosopher Ali Shariati's death, protestors

¹⁰ Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 25.

¹¹ Majid Tehranian, "Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm," *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980): 15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4310334>.

¹² Chelkowski and Dabashi, "Communication and Revolution," 185.

gathered in Shiraz and smashed the windows of the city's Capri Cinema, which had been showing *Spartacus*.¹³

Eventually, 180 movie theaters were set on fire during the revolution, including the infamous August 1978 arson at Cinema Rex, which killed 400 and amplified the opposition to the monarchy after rumors erroneously attributed the attack to the shah's secret police.¹⁴ The intense polarization also eroded the human capital from the pre-revolutionary media industry, as many journalists, actors, filmmakers, and artists fled their homeland.

In such an atmosphere, a less-enterprising leadership might have retreated into essentialism by implementing the instincts of the traditional clergy, who branded cinema as sinful and prohibited. Instead, Khomeini's ambitions for severing Western influences and reconfiguring Iranian society around his interpretation of Islam persuaded him to legitimize an indigenous Iranian film industry as "an instrument for 'educating the people' ... like all art, it was to 'be put in the service of Islam.'"¹⁵ The theaters still standing after the revolution were expropriated by one of the new state's powerful semi-governmental foundations. As then-president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani later advised Iranian film directors, "If you ... make good films, there will be no need for pulpits."¹⁶

¹³ Laura Secor, *Children of Paradise: The Struggle for the Soul of Iran* (New York: Riverhead Books 2016), 26.

¹⁴ S. Zeydabadi-Nejad, "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (December 2007): 378, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20455536>.

¹⁵ Zeydabadi-Nejad, "Iranian Intellectuals," 379.

¹⁶ Negar Mottahedeh, "New Iranian Cinema 1982–Present," in *Traditions in World Cinema*, eds. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 177.

The new government's embrace of cinema stemmed from its rejection of external influence. Its leaders wanted a monopoly over the cultural influences to which its population was exposed.¹⁷ And they understood that without domestic sources of entertainment and information, Iranians might become dependent on foreign media. New technology, such as video cassettes, already posed a challenge. Documents seized at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran persuaded Iran's leaders that private video circulation was intended to undermine the revolutionary state.¹⁸ Foreign videos and films were banned, and satellite dishes would follow.

As a result, the revolution begat a new cinema industry that bore little resemblance to its antecedents. After the new leadership purged universities and other institutions of liberal and Western influences, Iran's post-revolutionary film industry took off during the 1980s, thanks in part to a then-unknown culture minister, Mohammad Khatami. The government established training programs for filmmakers and subsidized their productions. By 1989, Iran's output of films ranked 9th in the world.¹⁹ Naturally, these perks came with strings, in the form of intrusive but ambiguous government censorship and control over the material requirements of film production. The successful rebirth of the industry only reinforced official resistance to external sources of entertainment. Revenues in the

¹⁷ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media Big Revolution: Communication, Culture and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 175-6; Mahmood Shahabi, "The Iranian Moral Panic Over Video: A Brief History and Policy Analysis," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, ed. Mehdi Semati (New York: Routledge, 2008), 122.

¹⁸ Shahabi, "The Iranian Moral Panic," 120-1.

¹⁹ Reza J. Poudeh and M. Reza Shirvani, "Issues and Paradoxes in the Development of Iranian National Cinema: An Overview," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 3 (June 2008): 328, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25597465>.

massive black market for Western videos reportedly dwarfed those of Iran's new film industry during the 1980s.²⁰

Many films produced during the revolution's first decade focused on the war with Iraq. The need to sustain support for the long, bloody conflict added urgency to the Islamic Republic's resuscitation of cinema and presented an opportunity to further fuse Iranian nationalism with a sense of religious obligation. "Within the first few months of war, a production of persuasion began, and everything from print to celluloid was used to illustrate the beauty of sacrifice."²¹ This was propaganda with a purpose—one element of a larger official "war culture industry" that encompassed everything from postage stamps to street murals, poetry, and music.

Film became an important vehicle for sustaining revolutionary fervor and maintaining high levels of recruits for the front. As Morteza Avini, Iran's most acclaimed director of war documentaries, explained, the narrative of an overwhelming, existential threat was essential for instilling the required determination in the nation and its soldiers.²² War cinema helped reinforce a sense of solidarity under siege from the outside world, glorify martyrdom, and legitimize the expansion of state authority. Over time, a variety of government institutions, directly controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, emerged to spearhead continuous production for the war culture industry.

²⁰ Shahabi, "The Iranian Moral Panic," 122.

²¹ Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 56.

²² Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 77.

“Bring the Arts and Media Back in Line”

The war’s end, via a 1988 ceasefire that left neither side satisfied, did not end the official embrace of war culture. Iranian leaders appreciated the utility of preserving the war “as a living memory”²³ and a tool to shape Iranian identity. They also resisted Khatami’s hesitant attempts at relaxing state restrictions on filmmakers and other artists, sparking his 1992 resignation in a letter that warned of an “unhealthy and tumultuous environment” facing the culture ministry’s work.²⁴

Iranian cinema, and the broader cultural sphere, experienced a turbulent ride after the war, as economic pressures and political changes buffeted both the state and the industry. Even as Tehran began to relax tensions with its neighbors and liberalize foreign investment and trade, Iran’s leaders sought to bolster the revolution’s “traditional” values by doubling down on the motifs and messaging that had animated the early war films.

Debates over the film that prompted Khatami’s resignation, *Time to Love* directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, accelerated the intellectual ferment that eventually culminated in the reform movement. That movement, buoyed by Iran’s post-revolutionary baby boom, catapulted Khatami to the presidency in 1997 and generated a burst of new cultural production and media during his eight years in office. Makhmalbaf and other filmmakers openly backed Khatami’s dark horse candidacy, and a campaign video by director

²³ Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 62.

²⁴ Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 28.

Saifollah Dad not only helped him upset the front-runner but also launched a new genre of election films.

The arts played a crucial role in defining the politics in the evolving revolutionary order, and during the reformist era, films pushed the boundaries of permissible social and political commentary. The war remained a potent theme, but the relaxation of the political atmosphere and the distance of time empowered a more jaundiced tone, with movies like *Azhans-e Shishehi* (“The Glass Agency”), which tapped into anger over the post-war treatment of veterans. However, despite signs of liberalization, Khatami’s presidency proved less successful at enacting meaningful changes to the power structure or improving Iran’s economy. The backlash to his modest opening targeted independent cultural activity and critical media. The judiciary, which is controlled by Iran’s supreme leader, shuttered hundreds of publications, banned movies that challenged the ideological claims of the revolution, and imprisoned filmmakers, journalists, and other artists.

Had Khatami and his allies achieved durable reforms to Iran’s ruling system, the state’s propagation of an official narrative steeped in war and religiosity might have receded as a defining feature of contemporary Iran. Meaningful political liberalization as envisioned by the most ambitious reformists would not have produced an unfettered democracy in Iran, but any abatement in the Islamic Republic’s authoritarian strictures would have expanded the space for contesting and reinterpreting the revolution and its aftermath. Instead, the system’s domination precluded its gradual amelioration, and the top-down limits on expression and dissent steadily widened the gap between the regime and society.

Khatami’s neoconservative successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, handed the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to a former Revolutionary Guard commander who sought “to bring the arts and the media back in line with a strict revolutionary interpretation of

the laws of Islam.”²⁵ Upon taking office, Ahmadinejad banned films promoting feminism, liberalism, or imperialism as well as those endorsing anti-religious or unethical activity, violence, and use of drugs or alcohol. He championed the values of the “sacred defense” and “*basiji* culture,” a reference to the regime’s popular mobilization corps that signifies self-sacrifice in service of Islam. Censorship of books, newspaper, theater, music, and movies intensified, and the construction of a national “*halal*” internet began.

Ahmadinejad’s attempt at cultural retrenchment was only one element of his ambitious agenda. He sought to assert Iran’s power across the region and stoked nationalist sentiments on behalf of the contested nuclear program. He undertook heavy-handed, populist socio-economic policies that fueled inflation and squandered an unprecedented influx of oil revenues. His chaotic approach to governance seemed deliberately provocative, and he alienated both ideological poles within the political establishment.

As a result, his 2009 reelection campaign assumed historic consequence, sparking protests by millions of Iranians who rejected Ahmadinejad’s dubious victory and demanded “where is my vote?” Those protests, which became known as the Green Revolution, had an important cinematic dimension, as video feeds and other visuals from the demonstrations mobilized domestic support and international sympathy. The image of Neda Agha Soltan, whose killing by security forces was captured on video, became a catalyzing force for opposition to the Islamic Republic. Iranian filmmakers mounted one of the earliest expressions of solidarity with the protestors. Five days after the election,

²⁵ Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran’s Radical Leader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 244.

as unrest intensified, 120 documentary producers issued a statement decrying the dishonesty of state broadcasters' coverage of the crisis.²⁶

More Questions Than Answers

Bajoghli's analysis in *Iran Reframed* begins with these challenges — the Islamic Republic's cultivation of a vast bureaucracy to propagate war culture as a means of reinvigorating support for the regime after the 2009 upheaval. The book approaches this question by chronicling the first-hand experiences of three men within the official machinery of cultural production, depicting their struggles to navigate the competing pressures of youth alienation and official ideological mandates in the Islamic Republic. Bajoghli illuminates the Islamic Republic's capacity to fashion and communicate a compelling national narrative that reflects evolving political conditions and social norms.

The decades of resources invested in this project created the context for mass mourning that materialized in the wake of the January 2020 U.S. strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force. Whatever proportion of the millions who jammed the streets for memorial services were expressing sincere dismay over Soleimani's death, their veneration of the man was the intentional outgrowth of the propagation of war culture, primarily by the various cultural arms of the security bureaucracy that *Iran Reframed* chronicles.

There are many aspects of this book to admire. Bajoghli does a wonderful job of weaving snippets of background material around her sketches of the pro-regime media producers.

²⁶ Pedram Khosronejad, "Some Observations on Visual Representations of the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Crisis," *Iranian Studies* Vol. 44, no. 3 (May 2011): 400-1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23033262>.

The book is rich with the texture of Iranian life, especially as seen through the eyes of a visiting researcher: the challenge of navigating Iran’s official interpretation of Islamic dress in the extremes of Tehran weather, the utility of a car ride for bridging the legal and social distinctions between private and public space, and the fault lines of class and generation that splinter even an ostensibly ideologically coherent segment of the political establishment.²⁷ Especially compelling are the narrative details surrounding the challenges the producers face as they try to pitch propaganda without the audience catching on. One filmmaker shrouds an exile interviewee in a *magneh* to cover her tattooed arms, while organizers of small-town film festivals struggle to find music to entertain the waiting audience that is sufficiently appealing, both because of the regime’s ban on popular music as well as the need to avoid diverting the assembled crowds from the main attraction.²⁸

The main characters are depicted in a sympathetic light — by turns self-deprecating and disarming, struggling with the disconnect between their personal aspirations and the stentorian official dictates imposed upon them from above. Bajoghli notes in the book’s introduction that her experience meeting members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps as well as *basijis* (members of the internal mobilization force) persuaded her that they are “grossly misrepresented and misunderstood,” and the text tends to channel their interpretation of history, rather than challenge or interrogate those conclusions.

However, Bajoghli’s determination to humanize and, by extension, vindicate the individuals she profiles eclipses any effort to draw wider analytical conclusions from the research. The book concludes without exploring the obvious implications of Tehran’s

²⁷ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 67, 833, 45-9.

²⁸ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 93, 96-7.

semi-successful propagandizing. Perhaps most importantly — is it enough? At a time when the Islamic Republic is facing epic pressures from within and without, can the regime’s cultural programming and revamping of war culture themes sustain sufficient popular legitimacy for the Islamic Republic to endure? Bajoghli does not venture into this debate.

In this sense, *Reframing Iran* is limited by the narrowness of its aperture. The book barely skims through most of the past 40 years of political battles over cultural policies. There is only glancing discussion of media other than film or the broader bureaucracy established to undertake the inculcation of the Islamic Republic’s ideological narrative at home and abroad. The book doesn’t adequately situate the official investment in modernizing war culture within the broader context that includes a wink-and-nod at more permissive cultural production, including the Turkish soap operas which have been widely available via satellite channels as a kind of safety valve tolerated by the leadership.²⁹

The most gaping omission is that of the audience. Bajoghli notes that “Iran’s regime filmmakers imagine their audiences, mainly the youth they wish to target, as abstractions,” but that is precisely how the book treats them as well. The reader is offered a front-row seat for the individual ruminations and intra-group deliberations among regime filmmakers, but the book provides only the most cursory suggestion of how the media these men produce is consumed within society. A more thorough research project would have balanced the personal perspectives of the men who are adapting the war culture to contemporary realities with more reporting on the responses of young

²⁹ Rebecca Joubin, “The Politics of Iran’s Satellite Era: Turkish Serials, Safety Valves and Youth Culture,” *Middle East Report* 274 (Spring 2015): 28-43, <https://merip.org/magazine/274/>.

Iranians, including those who went to the streets repeatedly over the course of recent years to denounce the Islamic Republic.

The persistence of these protests, including the backlash that erupted in January 2020 only days after the epic Soleimani ceremonies over the government’s accidental downing of a civilian jetliner, suggests that receptivity to official narratives may be more superficial and less durably resonant than initial impressions would indicate. In fact, the work of regime cultural producers generates a variety of reactions. For some, “the state’s discourse, of the strong mourning women and the heroic martyrs” has been counterbalanced by “the secular discourse, which is to evade, to ignore, to escape to the Caspian.”³⁰ Among others, the omnipresent themes of threat and martyrdom contribute to *depreshen* (depression) among otherwise healthy young people — the sense of “individual or collective grief, dysphoria, anxiety, melancholy, situational depression, clinical depression and/or what psychologists call ‘learned helplessness.’”³¹ And perhaps most dangerously for the Islamic Republic, the official narratives are also often deployed to advance a very different agenda: one of dissent. For example, music penned to commemorate the sacrifices of the war has been overlaid on videos associated with the Green Revolution.³²

Has the vast investment in cultural production, updated and attuned to contemporary culture, allowed the Islamic Republic to fashion a kind of nationalist attachment to the theocratic state? Or is the success offset by the undercurrent of frustration and misery

³⁰ Roxanne Varzi, “Iran’s Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War,” *Feminist Review* 88 (2008), 94, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400379>.

³¹ “The Psycho-Politics of Wellbeing An Interview with Orkideh Behrouzan,” *Middle East Reports* 286 (Spring 2018), 23, <https://merip.org/magazine/286/>.

³² Akhavan, *Electronic Iran*, 78-9.

that has infected the post-revolutionary political culture? The vignettes that comprise *Reframing Iran* are fascinating and illuminating, and make the book worthy of an afternoon's read. But they leave more questions than answers about Iranian politics and society today.

Suzanne Maloney is the Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. She has advised Democratic and Republican administrations on Iran and the broader Middle East. She has published three books and numerous articles, and holds a Ph.D from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.



3. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Manipulation of Iranian Hearts and Minds

Saeid Golkar

The number of studies on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij civil militia has increased dramatically since 2009.³³ Almost all of these studies focus on the IRGC and Basij's military and security functions, as well as their role in the survival and continuity of the Islamic Republic and involvement in Iran's politics and economy. Few recent studies examine their role in social and cultural spheres. *Iran Reframed* by Narges Bajoghli, an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University, is a welcome contribution to fill this gap.

As one of the first publications on the involvement of the IRGC and the Basij's in media production, *Iran Reframed* takes a deep dive into the world of pro-regime media producers. The book depicts the diversity and contestation among those who fiercely defend the survival of the regime.

³³ For example, see, Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2013); Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Bayram Sinkaya, *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015); Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016); Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

Iran Reframed has five chapters, in addition to its introduction and conclusion. Its aim is to show how the regime tries to survive while struggling to surmount two challenges: “how to safeguard the socioeconomic and class status of its leaders and how to appeal to younger generations and their demands for political participation.”³⁴

Bajoghli argues that pro-regime media producers have obscured the origins of regime discourse through strategies of dissimulations, created new distribution strategies, and appealed to notions of nationalism as a unifying force beyond political ideologies.³⁵ Well-written and engaging, Bajoghli’s analysis is limited by the narrow scope of her book. Though her points regarding the generational shifts in Iran’s hardline media are salient, they fail to acknowledge the subtle nuances affecting the generational changes in Iranian politics.

Regime Media Through the Generations

The book’s introduction begins by describing the gap between state and society and growing disbelief from Iranians of the regime’s media production, especially after the brutal suppression of the 2009 Green Movement. The regime in general, and the IRGC and the Basij in particular, has lost legitimacy in the eyes of millions of Iranians, especially the younger, more educated, and more urbanized. To win the hearts and minds of the people, pro-regime media producers have tried to replace their propaganda with attempts to communicate through the language of the youth and project the IRGC as the

³⁴ Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 116.

³⁵ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 7.

defender of the country, rather than merely a protector of the regime.³⁶ Instead of applying the standard labels of “reformist” or “hardliner” to Iran’s media producers, Bajoghli distinguishes between “independent cultural producers” who tend to oppose the regime, and “regime producers” who defend the regime. There are also several subdivisions in each of these groups, including generational divisions — a factor that influences their view on what the regime means today and how it should be defended.³⁷

Chapter one focuses on the transformation of the IRGC and the Basij and their generational changes. Using Karl Mannheim’s framework of generational analysis, Bajoghli identifies three generations of IRGC and Basij members. The first generation are the “battlefront and war guys” (*bacheh-ha-ye jebbeh va jang*) who fought in the Iran-Iraq War. The second generation joined the Basij in 1990s and were instrumental in the group’s postwar cultural campaigns. The third generation joined the Basij around 2005 — the year Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president. By tracing their development, the author discusses each generation’s involvement in confronting “soft war”: threats to the regime’s stability, such as diaspora media sources and foreign/external satellite television. The author also briefly touches upon social class and structures within the Basij, especially regarding its third generation, which became more deeply invested in the regime’s revolutionary ideology than previous generations.

These generational and social class differences can be seen in differing narratives of the Iran-Iraq War. In chapter two, the author identifies a double narrative of the war.³⁸ The Islamic Republic has created an official narrative, in which the war was an Islamic war

³⁶ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 5.

³⁷ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 15.

³⁸ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 53.

between right and wrong. In this narrative, all Iranian soldiers participated in the war to defend the Islamic regime and its leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, rather than for nationalistic reasons. It was a religious defensive, not a territorial war.

This narrative started to weaken over time. The official narrative was produced through the work of Morteza Avini and his group, particularly through their series *Ravayat-e Fath* (“Chronicles of Victory”) in the 1980s. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Avini continued his work. According to Bajoghli, he tried to “transform the war from a military confrontation to a cultural and social confrontation in Iranian cities and towns.”³⁹ Two important organizations responsible for creating the official narratives are briefly discussed: the Narrative Foundation (*Bonyad Ravayat*) affiliated with the IRGC and the Basij, and the Cultural Center (*Hozeh Honari*), which is subordinate to the Islamic Propagation Organization. The official narrative is far from the real one, as soldiers told the author; the war was not holy but “horrible.”⁴⁰ In the official narrative, the war is between good and evil, in which Iranian soldiers were eager to sacrifice their lives for the cause of ideology. In the real or unofficial narrative, the Iran-Iraq War was a bloody war defined by pain and suffering.

Chapter three returns to the idea of independent and pro-regime media producers and seeks to explain the division between “us” and “them” (or *Khodi* and *Gheyr-e Khodi*) and how belonging to one of these groups has “legal, material and social consequences.”⁴¹ The division between *Khodi* and *Gheyr-e khodi* can be found everywhere, not just among media producers. While the regime excludes the “other” producers (those who are

³⁹ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 60.

⁴⁰ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 53.

⁴¹ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 78.

opposed to or critical of the regime) through the restriction of funds, or by confiscating their products, the media production of this “other” are more welcomed by Iranians, especially the youth. On the other hand, while the pro-regime media producers huge financial and logistical support from the regime, they have been unable to resonate with people and communicate with youth.

In chapter four, Bajoghli argues that the regime media producers are using new strategies to solve this problem. For example, since Iranians do not trust the regime, these producers try to hide the regime’s fingerprints in their productions.⁴² The author mentions a movie called *An Unfinished Film, for My Daughter Somayeh* which was produced as an independent film in 2013 aimed to discourage frustrated youth from joining opposition groups, especially the *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MEK).⁴³ Producers often market their movies as “underground” independent products to conceal their identity as regime propaganda. Other strategies include broadening their audience base by screening their products in schools and creating film festivals across the country, particularly in small cities. These producers also leveraged songs and television celebrities to try to entice more people into watching their products.⁴⁴

The last and most important strategy which “the leaders of the regime media centers” are using is appealing to nationalism. The author discusses this in the fifth and final chapter. According to *Iran Reframed*, unlike the regime’s old stories based on a political interpretation of Islam and the “Shia ethos of fighting against oppression,” the regime’s new story “presented itself in the form of populist nationalism.”⁴⁵

⁴² Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 91.

⁴³ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 91.

⁴⁴ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 96.

⁴⁵ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 100.

The author argues that after the suppression of the 2009 Green Movement, the regime media producers reframed their story, in which the IRGC's driving force is nationalism — not political Islam.⁴⁶ The author provides a few examples to prove her assertion that there has been a concerted transition from the old narrative that focused on Islamic ideology to a new narrative focused on populist nationalism. These included the creation of the Sacred Defense Garden and Museum, which opened in 2012; three video music clips, which contain nationalist messages; and two social media campaigns. In one of these campaigns, General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of IRGC Qods force, is depicted as a nationalist hero who defends Iran against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The conclusion wraps up the entire book, which emphasizes the complicity, diversity, and contention among pro-regime actors in their struggle to defending the Islamic Republic.

The Regime Media Landscape

Iran Reframed is a well-written and highly readable book that analyzes the pro-regime media world. The book discusses the pro-regime media producers' strategies for creating a new “face” of the Islamic Republic and the IRGC as a nationalist force. As an anthropological study, the strength of the book lies in its methodology, which is based on 10 years of participant observation and interviews with 200 members of the Basij and IRGC, 150 of whom spent some time in the battlefield (the first and second generation), and 50 from the third generation of *basijis*.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 101.

⁴⁷ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 20.

This strength of the book is also its weakness. By relying on ethnographic work, the book does not capture the bigger picture of pro-regime media organizations. In a few paragraphs, Bajoghli briefly discusses the creation and development of the Narrative Foundation (*Bonyad Ravayat*) and the Cultural Center (*Hozeh Honari*). She states that while the Narrative Foundation “receives further funding and political clout from the IRGC and the Basij, *Hozeh Honari* as an overarching organization is subordinated to organization for the Islamic propagation.”⁴⁸ This is the only time the author talks about the organizational configuration of pro-regime media centers.

This lack of a bigger picture creates a blind spot regarding some of the most important pro-regime cultural organizations, such as the Owj Arts and Media Organization. The Owj was created by the IRGC in 2011 as a part of the propaganda machine intended to win the hearts and minds of Iranians after the suppression of the 2009 Green Movement. Consisting of 11 smaller organizations, Owj serves as the umbrella organization and is active in the production and distribution of conservative cultural products such as movies, music, animation, and posters. Some of the cultural representations discussed in *Iran Reframed* are actually the product of the Owj organization — a fact which Bajoghli does not mention. This includes “*Nuclear Energy*,” a song by Iranian rappers in collaboration with Iran’s army (*Artesh*), which contains patriotic messages.

Owj is one of the dozens of organizations created to produce content aimed at those Iranians who became critical of the IRGC and Basij after their role in the suppression of the 2009 protests. These cultural plans aimed to re-legitimize the IRGC by convincing the Iranian middle class of its goals and organizing a new generation of regime supporters.

⁴⁸ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 60-61.

But while the Owj remains under the control of the IRGC cultural deputy, the Narrative Foundation is under the control of the Oppressed Basij organizations. In 2017, the head of Owj was appointed simultaneously as the head of Narrative Foundation, but he resigned a few months later due to differences of views with the commander of the Basij. Gradually, Owj became one of the regime's most important cultural and media organizations after 2012. Yet *Iran Reframed* never mentions them nor does it give them necessary attention.

Furthermore, the author does not offer any insight into the relations between these media producers and the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)* — the most important media corporation in the country, which holds a monopoly over mass broadcasting. While Iran's supreme leader disapproves of the creation of new satellite television channels by the IRGC and Basij, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting has nonetheless allocated several TV and radio channels to these groups in order to showcase their products.

Without understanding the organizational and institutional affiliations of these media producers, their weight in the regime's cultural decision-making is an open question. The author has interviewed many people, some who work for the Basij, some for *Hozeh Honari*, a few for *Bonyad Ravayat*, and some like Mr. Ahmadi, who in his later career (after 2009) worked independently. Though the author refers several times to "the leaders of the regime media centers," their affiliation and their rank in the power structure is not clear.

Nationalism: The New Ideology?

The problem of determining the relative importance of these media producers begs a second question: To what extent is this transformation in propaganda and reliance on a new message of nationalism a strategic decision by the regime or a sporadic effort by a

few individuals? The author does not provide any evidence that the regime intentionally decided to rely on nationalist appeals instead of Islamic and religious ones.

There is no reference to central decision-making institutions, like the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, or even any of the supreme leader's speeches to support the notion that this was a calculated decision. Even when Ahmadinejad and his team tried to propagate "Iranian Islam" (*Islam-e Irani*)⁴⁹ as a doctrinal alternative to political Islam after 2010, he was criticized by both the supreme leader and the IRGC. This was one of the main disputes which divided Ahmadinejad and the supreme leader and serves as clear evidence that this nationalist spin was not a strategy sanctioned by the regime. Without evidence that appeals to nationalism stem from a strategic, official change in policy, the political importance of nationalist efforts by a handful of pro-regime media producers is questionable.

As Bajoghli rightly states, the Islamic Republic — as well as the IRGC and Basij — is not monolithic. There are socioeconomic and political divisions within the Islamic Republic's many groups. The author shows these divisions among the regime media producers. The question remains, however, whether these diverse groups represent the IRGC's and the Basij's leading echelon of decision-makers. Which group of top commanders, for example, are supporting appeals to more nationalistic motivations, and by extension the production of a new narrative? How powerful are they within the IRGC and the Basij? Answering these questions will help us to understand the possibility of a reform

⁴⁹ Robert Tait, "Iranian President's New 'Religious-Nationalism' Alienates Hard-Line Constituency," *Radio Farda*, Aug. 18, 2010,

https://www.rferl.org/a/Iranian_Presidents_New_ReligiousNationalism_Alienates_HardLine_Constituency/2131415.html.

movement emerging from within the regime, or the transformation of the regime into a militaristic one. The possibility of the IRGC taking control over the Islamic Republic is increasing every passing day, since the IRGC and the Basij have expanded their control over Iranian society. There is growing speculation that the next supreme leader will be a puppet of the IRGC after the demise of Ayatollah Khamenei, who is 81 years old and suffers from several serious health problems.

Further evidence is required to formulate a generalized theory that regime media producers are depending on populist nationalist narratives. For example, according to the director of the Owj, the organization had produced 11,000 pieces of work in various fields by 2017 in cooperation with 2,600 artists.⁵⁰ How many of these works focus on nationalist appeals? Assessing a real number, or perhaps comparing it with the work of the *Bonyad Ravayat* before and after 2009, would help us to understand the extent of this nationalist narrative. A more thorough examination of the number of movies created by these organizations and the degree of Islamic versus nationalist content is therefore required.

In looking at movies produced by the Owj organization, one can see that Islamic ideology still dominates their message, although they have used more modern cinematic techniques. In fact, among all the cultural products it manufactured, from music, movies, television series, posters, infographics, animations, and books, less than a handful contained nationalist messaging. This can hardly be interpreted as a “reframing.” The main message of these products continues to be Islamic; they promote religious and revolutionary values such as piety, martyrdom, protecting the downtrodden, jihad, sacrifice, and — most importantly — loyalty to *velayat-e faqih*, or the Guardianship of the

⁵⁰ Raz Zammit, “The Owj Arts and Media Organization,” *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, July 9, 2018, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2018/07/E_170_18.pdf.

Jurist, the foundation of Iran's clerical government. This ultimate loyalty to "guardianship," allows Khamenei to manipulate Islamic rulings as he sees fit. Despite spending millions of dollars on confronting "soft war" issues and "cultural invasion," slowing the speed of re-westernization and secularization of Iranians remains beyond the grasp of the IRGC.⁵¹

Reframing Iran: Success or Failure?

While there are initiatives by some pro-regime media producers to reframe Iran and the IRGC as the defender of the country, the extent of their success is another important question which the book tries to answer. The author believes the shift in narrative to depict the IRGC as a nationalist force was successful based on interviews with Iranian youth who saw the IRGC and General Soleimani as heroes saving the country. To support her argument, Bajoghli references the participation of young Iranians in a massive funeral in June 2015 for 175 diverse martyrs who were killed during the Iran-Iraq War. The IRGC's single success in manipulating public opinion happened only after the Islamic State's terrorist attacks in Iran in June 2017. In the aftermath of that attack, the IRGC was able to convince people that it was a necessary force for keeping terrorists out of the country and a barrier against the "Syriization" of Iran. Using the politics of fear, the IRGC was relatively successful in propping up General Soleimani, the former head of the Qods Force, as a hero keeping "Islamic zombies" out of Iran.

⁵¹ Saeid Golkar, "Taking Back the Neighborhood: The IRGC Provincial Guard's Mission to Re-Islamize Iran," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/taking-back-the-neighborhood-the-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-to-re-islam>.

However, this success was short-lived. In chapter four, the author shows that the strategy of regime filmmakers showing their products in every school failed because the teachers refused to show the films in class.⁵² Even with the IRGC's full support of the hardliner rival candidate, incumbent President Hassan Rouhani defeated Ebrahim Raisi in 2017. Rouhani obtained 57 percent of the vote compared to the mere 38 percent captured by Raisi. Another example that indicates the IRGC was not successful in re-legitimizing itself and swaying the public is that in any public demonstration in Iran, one the main slogans protestors shout is "Leave Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and think about Iran!" or "My life goes for Iran!" (implying that the regime should align its policies with domestic concerns rather than expansionist ones). This is in direct response to IRGC propaganda that claims its activities abroad are necessary for defending Islamic shrines.

Since 2012, when Iran became involved in the Syrian civil war, the regime narrative for its military forces in Syria was of a religious nature, labeling them as the defenders of the Shia shrine (*Modafean-e-Haram*). Investing in religious and Islamic symbolism, the regime has revived a religious tradition, *Arbaeen* — a Shia ceremony that occurs forty days after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, in which the regime annually sends millions of Iranians from all levels of society to Iraq. Since 2011, *Arbaeen* has transformed into the regime's biggest cultural festival. The Islamic Republic supports the *Arbaeen* walk financially and logistically, spending millions of dollars annually. Khamenei praised this new invented tradition, claimed that Iranian youth have found the right path, the path the Almighty God created for us: it has become an emblem for righteousness, illustrating the

⁵² Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 96.

regime's continued commitment to Islam and its regional role as a guardian of religious tradition.⁵³

Conclusion: Disputed Facts and Analysis

I have issues with some of Bajoghli's analysis. For example, Bajoghli divides the IRGC and the Basij generations based on three notable events: the Iran-Iraq War, the reform movement of the 1990s, and the election of Ahmadinejad as president in 2005. This approach simplifies the more complex picture of the IRGC and the Basij, since it undermines the importance of the 2009 Green movement.

In my own work, I have divided these generations into four groups based on official IRGC documents. The first generation entered the IRGC between 1979 and 1988: from its inception to the end of Iran-Iraq War. The IRGC's second generation entered in the 1990s. They came from conservative backgrounds but lacked the ideological zeal of the first generation. The recruits from the 1990s were more pragmatic than any before or after, with high numbers voting for reformist President Mohammad Khatami in both the 1997 and 2001 elections. But since then, a singular focus on the recruitment of religious subsections of society has produced far more radical, ideological members who represent the IRGC's third (entering in the 2000s) and fourth (in the 2010s) generations.⁵⁴ The transformation of recruitment and the intensification of indoctrination within the IRGC

⁵³ Seyed Ali Khamenei, "Arbaeen walk, a momentous phenomenon," *Khamenei.Ir*, Nov. 6, 2017,

<http://english.khamenei.ir/news/6033/Arbaeen-walk-a-momentous-phenomenon>.

⁵⁴ Saeid Golkar, "The Supreme Leader and the Guard: Civil-Military Relations and Regime Survival in Iran,"

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-supreme-leader-and-the-guard-civil-military-relations-and-regime-surviv>.

and Basij explains the greater degree of radicalization among the younger generation in these organizations. Bajoghli's emphasis on a "new nationalism" does not match this analysis, and her breakdown of the generational divides misses these key distinctions.

On the issue of generational gaps and social classes, Bajoghli argues that "not a single first or second generational *basiji* I met has allowed his son or daughter to become active in the Basij."⁵⁵ This is interesting since in my fifteen years of work on the Basij, I have met and interviewed many Basij members whose father or even mother was a member of the IRGC. In fact, one third of the IRGC's new personnel comes from IRGC families. The main difference between Bajoghli's interlocutors and mine can be found in the socioeconomic and cultural differences between the people who works in media world, who tend to be more openminded or intellectual, and the main body of the Guard, whose socioeconomic class lends them to identify on a more religious-ideological basis.

Moreover, the historical discussion of the transformation of *Bonyad Ravayat* is disputed. The author writes that Avini founded the *Bonyad Revayat*,⁵⁶ while in actuality Avini established the organization of "Chronicles of Victory" in 1991 based on his earlier television series by the same name with the support of the Basij and direct funding of Iran's supreme leader. A few years after his death in April 1993, the Basij created an umbrella organization, called the Narrative Cultural Foundation, and incorporated Avini's studio, which was renamed "The Shahid Avini Cultural and Artistic Organization."⁵⁷ The Narrative Foundation was then expanded in 2001 after the re-election of reformist president, Mohmmad Khatami. Avini's studio was only a particular aspect of the

⁵⁵ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 46.

⁵⁶ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 61.

⁵⁷ Mehr News Agency, Tehran, Febr. 15, 2005 <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/159911/>.

foundation. Bajoghli's claim regarding Avini and the Narrative Foundation is marred by inaccuracies.

Despite these issues, *Iran Reframed* is a pleasant read and offers a new take on pro-regime media producers, their divisions, and their struggles to defend the Islamic Republic four decades after its inception.

Saeid Golkar is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and a senior fellow at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in the UK.



4. Can Iran's State Media Warriors Reframe the Islamic Republic for a New Generation?

Farzan Sabet

Narges Bajoghli's *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* follows three generations of regime media producers, several with ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Basij Organization (Basij), and the principalist political current in Iran over a period of 10 years. The book explores their personal trajectories and illustrates how Iranian state media seeks to keep the flame of the revolution alive as the Islamic Republic enters its fifth decade. *Iran Reframed* provides a valuable guide to the politics of Iran during a moment of crisis and transition and is sure to attract experts and the general public alike. At the same time, given the depth and breadth of research Bajoghli conducted for the book, there are vital questions that could have been better addressed in the slender volume.

A Fresh Look at Iran's Media Warriors

Bajoghli's book is one of a handful of recent scholarly works that explores the hard core of power in the Islamic Republic.⁵⁸ This scholarship examines the central complex of interconnected principlist or "hardline" institutions such as the IRGC and Basij on their

⁵⁸ For two examples see, Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: the Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

own terms rather than leaning on the two-dimensional caricatures one often encounters in the Western media and policy debates.⁵⁹

The book's specific focus is on producers working in Iranian state media, their individual stories, and how they fit into the Islamic Republic's media strategy. The scale of the ethnographic fieldwork featured is impressive. The book draws on interviews with hundreds of subjects in Iran over a decade and includes a closer examination of a smaller subset. The author was also immersed in the daily life of the Islamic Republic's media culture. This enables the book to zoom out at critical points from individual narratives or specific findings to the big picture.

Equally commendable is Bajoghli's willingness to engage with subjects who are often the target of disdain and neglect by Iranian society and the diaspora or subjected to lazy portrayals in the Western press. When the IRGC, Basij, "hardliners" and associated institutions and figures are portrayed or studied, they are typically viewed through secondary sources or (less frequently) a smattering of primary sources, often in the service of specific foreign policy agendas. Yet, at a moment when they are reconsolidating authority over the Islamic Republic's elected power centers in the 2020 parliamentary and likely the 2021 presidential elections and sit at the helm of an "Axis of Resistance"

⁵⁹ Iran's factional politics is notoriously difficult to categorize. In many instances boundaries between different political currents in Iran can shift just between elections. For one attempt to characterize it please see, "Spotlight on Political Currents: How Is Political Competition Organized in Iran?" *Majlis Monitor*, Feb. 2, 2016, <https://majlismonitor.com/en/2016/02/spotlight-how-is-political-competition-organized-in-iran/>; for an attempt to define the principalists see, "Spotlight on Political Currents: The Conservatives." *Majlis Monitor*, Feb. 23, 2016, <https://majlismonitor.com/en/2016/02/spotlight-on-political-currents-the-conservatives/>.

sweeping across the Middle East, it is more critical than ever to understand who they are, what they want, and how they operate.

Another important contribution of the book, one that it shares with other works in the genre of academic and policy scholarship on the IRGC, Basij, and principlists, is the re-centering of the Islamic Republic's historical narrative around the Iran-Iraq War. The war is referred to as the "sacred defense" or the "imposed war" in the Iranian state's parlance. As the book emphasizes, "Despite the resounding victory of the 1979 Revolution, it is the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War that provides the master narrative of the Islamic Republic."⁶⁰ Most works on post-1979 Iran take the revolution as their point of departure and the axis on which everything else turns. But this represents only a single moment in time, during which the authority of the Khomeinists remained fragile and the shape of their rule unmolded. The next decade was arguably more determinative of the dynamics we witness in the Islamic Republic today.

From 1979 to 1989, Iranian state and society experienced several cataclysmic events besides the revolution: They were forced to dedicate much of their energies to the war; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, passed away; and the international system saw the beginning of the end of the Cold War. The Khomeinist ideology that emerged triumphant in 1979 provides an important lens for analyzing contemporary Iranian politics. But the socialization of millions of young men in the military at the front, and the subsequent consolidation of their experiences and trauma in the IRGC and Basij, groups which forms the steely backbone of the Iranian state, has had major consequences for the direction of the political system in Iran.

⁶⁰ Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 28.

This is reflected in the book’s discussion of state media content production on the war (“Chapter 2: Cracks in the Official Story”). It also emerges from the personal stories of Reza Hosseini, Mohammad Ahmadi, and other regime media producers. In telling their stories, Bajoghli shows how many in the older generation — those who took part in the revolution and fought in the war — have mellowed with age as they confront the results of their actions, the dizzying changes in the society around them (including in their own children), and the tug-of-war with a new generation of hardline youth in state media.

The book’s contributions thus include impressive research, attention to important but oft-neglected subjects, and a much-needed reframing of the last forty years of Iranian political history from the revolution and clergy to the war and IRGC-Basij. But the book’s main analytical insight is to delineate regime media producers’ approach to an Iranian public usually apathetic to their message at a moment when the Islamic Republic faces profound internal and external challenges and a generational and leadership transition. As the book argues, these producers face two critical questions: “How to safeguard the socioeconomic and class status of its leaders and how to appeal to younger generations and their demands for political participation.” The strategy formulated in response to these questions are threefold: “to hide the origins of regime discourse through strategies of dissimulation, to create new distribution strategies, and to appeal to notions of nationalism as a unifying force beyond political ideology.”⁶¹

This strategy and its successes are illustrated in a number of case studies scattered throughout the book. They include the successful underground distribution of a state-produced film against the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran opposition group; the social media campaign to mythologize the now-deceased Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani and

⁶¹ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 116-17.

rally support for the campaign against the Islamic State in the Middle East; and a commemoration of Iranian combat divers martyred during the war.⁶² This analysis provides substantial answers to questions regarding the types of responses the Islamic Republic has articulated to the challenges it has faced since at least the 2009 Green Movement and the perceived war of narratives.

Finally, the book benefits from being eminently readable. At a concise 119 pages, it flows smoothly from start to finish, with the personal stories of its characters, and Bajoghli's navigation of the media space in Iran, interspersed with scholarly analysis.

Parsing the Effectiveness of Iranian State Media

However, this brevity also means there are basic but important questions the book needed to either address better or in greater detail. My critiques center on three questions: How effective have regime media producers been in the grand scheme of things? How much agency do they have in the domestic and global media and political landscape in which they operate? And how powerful is the nationalism they have conjured against the backdrop of 20th and 21st century Iranian nationalisms? The answers to these questions provide important signals on how effectively regime media producers can reframe the Islamic Republic for a new generation.

The book highlights both successes and failures of regime media producers. Photographs from the Jan. 7, 2020 funeral of Soleimani that display massive crowds across the country rallying to mourn his death may show the success of regime media producers in stoking a kind of "securitized nationalism" of which Soleimani is a central figure, owing to his

⁶² Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 83-96 and 109-12.

status as Qods Force commander and role in forming Iran's regional foreign policy.⁶³ But how consistent are these media narrative victories over time? And have the media producers, for example, been able to shift the burden of blame for the country's woes to causes beyond the political system, like the massive onslaught of military and economic coercion and propaganda by the Trump administration and its regional allies? Persistent demonstrations since 2009,⁶⁴ capped by two large-scale waves of protests that rocked Iran starting December 2017 and again in November 2019,⁶⁵ suggest otherwise. The decidedly anti-system slogans that accompanied these protests, compared to the radical but still reformist bent of the Green Movement, points to a deterioration in Iran's domestic political cohesion. The Iranian leadership's decision to shut down internet accessibility during the 2019 protests betrays a lack of faith in regime media producers to control the narrative during a moment of crisis.

More to the point, Bajoghli could have provided metrics or a methodology to identify success or failure beyond the anecdotal cases we see in the book. If this was too tall an order, then she could have included a metric used by the regime media producers themselves to measure and define their own success in individual cases and within a larger narrative struggle. Or, she could have explained that their efforts are *ad hoc* measures and experiments amidst a chaotic media environment in which there is no

⁶³ Farnaz Fassihi, "Mourners Throng Iran's Streets for Suleimani Funeral Marches," *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/05/world/middleeast/iran-suleimani-funeral.html>.

⁶⁴ For examples of labor protests, see, Kevan Harris and Zep Kalb, "Analysis | How Years of Increasing Labor Unrest Signaled Iran's Latest Protest Wave," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/19/how-years-of-increasing-labor-unrest-signaled-irans-latest-protest-wave/>.

⁶⁵ "Protests: Overview and Timeline," *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Dec. 18, 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/nov/18/protests-overview>.

central oversight and monitoring to capitalize on successes and learn from failures, and vast sums of money are simply being spent in vain. As it stands, Bajoghli does not make this aspect sufficiently clear in her analysis.

The Narrow Agency of Regime Media Producers

A second issue is the agency of regime media producers and contextualization of this agency in the global and Iranian media space. In a publication from 2013 on the Iranian concept of “soft war,” Roozbeh Safshekan and I argued that the Islamic Republic’s approach to countering the draw of Western soft power favored coercion, instead of bolstering the political system’s own soft power to attract Iranians back to it.⁶⁶ How has this balance changed in the decade or so since the Green Movement protests, beyond coercive tools like media licensing and censorship, physical seizure of satellite television dishes, and a pervasive system of internet control? Bajoghli’s analysis does not make this clear.

Furthermore, the global media environment Iranians face today is arguably more competitive than in the period preceding 2009. The internet, smart phones, and social media have revolutionized the way Iranians consume content and interact with the state and one another. Even the field of television is more crowded. The DIY-quality satellite television channels of *Tehrangelles*, the Iranian diaspora community in Los Angeles, have slowly gone by the wayside. Today, satellite television channels, featuring high production value programming funded by the Islamic Republic’s adversaries, beam straight into

⁶⁶ Farzan Sabet and Roozbeh Safshekan, *Soft War: A New Episode in the Old Conflicts Between Iran and the United States*, Iran Media Program, 2013,

<https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=iranmediaprogram>.

Iranian households, providing content ordinary people cannot find on state television. Alongside this deluge of content comes a stream of political commentary advancing the interests of the Islamic Republic's geopolitical rivals or opposition, questioning the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and creating nostalgia for the *ancien regime*, among other political goals.⁶⁷

This is not to mention the vast power of Western media and culture to influence the relatively English-literate and media-savvy Iranians. In this fractured media environment, how much significance can we attribute to regime media producers, even with the relatively vast resources and semi-captive audiences at their disposal? For example, can the meteoric rise of Qassem Soleimani — from Qods Force commander to the most famous and revered military figure in contemporary Iranian history — be attributed solely to the efforts of these media producers? Or has the recognition of the Iranian general by foreign media, in the form of the dissemination of his likeness in news programs, magazine covers, and on social media, also played an important role in shaping his stature?

Another question related to the agency and political position of regime media producers is whether they are neutral arbiters in intra-system political competition in the Islamic Republic. The book correctly draws a line connecting them to the principalist establishment in the Islamic Republic. However, Bajoghli does not go on to illustrate how regime media producers, regardless of their personal political preferences, serve the

⁶⁷ Narges Bajoghli, "A London Television Station Has Convinced Iran the Shah Was Great," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/12/a-london-television-station-has-convinced-iran-the-shah-was-great/>.

principalist agenda and attempt to tip the scales in their favor in elections and the narrative war with the so-called “moderates” and reformists.

The anthropological and sociological exploration of regime media producers is a fascinating one that may subvert many readers’ expectations. For example, some readers may be surprised to learn of the reformist tendencies or career opportunism of many rank-and-file IRGC members and regime media producers, given the group’s association with the hardline principalist political current. But if much of their work is in service to a principalist establishment that is leading the country in a different direction than their personal preferences confessed to Bajoghli, it’s not clear why their personal beliefs matter, and what agency they actually have. In some places, the book suggests they have agency:

In this dynamic, regime cultural producers ultimately fall short in attempting to expand the revolutionary collective they fear is shrinking. They fall short for two reasons: First, they cannot agree on who should be included in the revolutionary collective and how flexible that inclusion should be.⁶⁸

But this is at odds with Bajoghli’s portrayal of regime media producers as politically and artistically frustrated individuals, operating in a context where senior figures are at times displaced by their younger and more hardline colleagues. So, do they set media narratives and strategy collectively, or do they merely execute it at the behest of political masters? Many signs, including those provided by Bajoghli herself, point to the latter.

⁶⁸ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 28, 82.

The Limits of Securitized Nationalism

The third critique is linked to the book's exploration of the new nationalism formulated by regime media producers. The question of reframing the Islamic Republic for a new audience — as the first two generations who led the revolutionary struggle in the 1960-70s and then consolidated power during and in the wake of the war retire and pass away — is central to the future of the political system. The political formulas of the last 40 years, be it the Islamism and anti-imperialism of the first decade of the revolution, or the struggle between reformism and principlism of the last quarter century, have a waning hold over Iranians. How then can the Islamic Republic hold on to the hearts and minds of its people in its fifth decade?

A key component of the new formula is nationalism, in a form that differs from preceding iterations. The nationalism constructed by regime media producers — what I earlier called a “securitized nationalism” — is rooted in Iranians' fear of the loss of sovereignty and territory, as well as instability. In Bajoghli's own words, “The new stories they [regime media producers] tell citizens portray the Revolutionary Guard (and the Islamic Republic by extension) as the only entity that can keep Iran safe and prevent it from falling into bloody conflict, like its neighbors.”⁶⁹

This new nationalism has had some success rallying the nation around the flag. Compared to the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, who respectively surrendered either Iranian territory and/or territorial claims, the Islamic Republic celebrates the ferocity with which it defended the nation against foreign invasion and its refusal to surrender a single

⁶⁹ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 7.

inch of land. Along the same lines, the Iranian campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, as well as the proxy war with the United States and its allies, signals the Islamic Republic's willingness to aggressively confront state and non-state threats abroad before they manifest on Iranian soil. This securitized nationalism has been personified by the late Qassem Soleimani, a figure who resonates with large segments of Iranian society, even though some of the challenges Iran faces abroad may have been a product of the very policies he and the Qods Force executed.⁷⁰

However, recent events suggest that this brand of nationalism may have limited political potential. The swift reversal of the public mood amidst Soleimani's funeral following the Iranian military's shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner carrying 177 passengers illustrated the ephemeral nature of the political system's propaganda success. This limited success in creating greater popular cohesion, despite the Trump administration's policies that have materially harmed ordinary Iranians, is a further sign of the limits of securitized nationalism.

A better elucidation of this nationalism and its relationship with other Iranian nationalisms would give the book greater explanatory power of an important narrative shift happening in the Islamic Republic. For example, how does this new nationalism compare and build on older and more successful and deeply rooted nationalisms? These include ethnic nationalism that draws on Iran's pre-Islamic culture and history and supposed "Aryan" heritage and anti-imperialist nationalism focused on the history of

⁷⁰ Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni and Clay Ramsay, *Iranian Public Opinion under "Maximum Pressure": A Public Opinion Study*, 2019, https://cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2019-10/Iranian%20PO%20under%20Maximum%20Pressure_101619_full.pdf.

foreign economic exploitation and loss of territory and sovereignty in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The three critiques of the book raised here, and the answers to them, raise doubts regarding the ability of regime media producers to successfully reframe the political system in Iran for a new generation amidst the profound foreign and domestic challenges the country faces. Nonetheless, *Iran Reframed* is a valuable lens for reading events in the Islamic Republic during a sensitive moment of crisis and transition.

Dr. Farzan Sabet is a researcher at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research and a research associate at the Global Governance Centre at the Graduate Institute, Geneva.



5. Iran's Media Producers and the Open Lie

Michael Rubin

Prior to the shah of Iran's 1979 ouster, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini presided over a revolutionary coalition united more by opposition to the existing order than by any common allegiance to what should come next. The forces that pushed the shah from power were ideologically diverse and there was no consensus regarding the idea of an "Islamic government." Khomeini repeatedly assured Western officials and more liberal revolutionary groups that he did not seek personal power; he only wanted a democracy in which the government would respect religious sensitivities.⁷¹

This was, of course, a ruse. Khomeini ushered in an Islamic Republic in which he was not only head of state and supreme leader but also *Nayeb-e Imam* ("Deputy of the Hidden Imam"). This necessitated a cultural revolution in Iran, a country which just months earlier had aspired to be a First World power in the West's cultural orbit. Khomeini wasted no time launching such a revolution. Curriculum changed quickly but they reached only students. The media was a far more important tool with which to saturate and re-educate the population, only half of whom were literate.

While a few studies of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Islamic Republic pay passing lip service to revolutionary media, most simply ignore the extensive media networks that the Islamic Republic cultivated and developed. This gap has now been filled. In *Iran Reframed*, Narges Bajoghli, an assistant professor of Middle East Studies at

⁷¹ Jalal Matini, "Rastgutarin Ansan dar Tarikh-e Mu'asar" [The Most Truthful Individual in Recent History], *Iranshenasi* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 862-864, <http://fis-iran.org/sites/fis/files/2003%20VOL%2014%20NO%204.pdf>.

Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, does a masterful job of illuminating the revolutionary media networks and journalists who revolutionary authorities entrusted to shape society and sell a hardline narrative. In the aftermath of the 2009 post-election unrest and the so-called Green Movement, Bajoghli interviewed many of Iran's most prominent pro-regime filmmakers and propagandists in order to explore a fundamental question: how regime media producers sought "to transmit the commitment to their revolutionary project from one generation to the next."⁷²

Television and radio have long played an important role in Iranian society. When I took my first university Persian language class more than a quarter century ago, the teacher was eager to expose us to Iranian culture through classic poetry, contemporary literature, and film. Iran possesses a historically robust cinema culture. Abdolhossein Sepanta made the first Iranian talking movies in the 1930s. In 1970, *Aghaye Halou* ("Mr. Simpleton") produced a biting commentary on corruption and social dislocation in Iranian society that presaged life after the Islamic Revolution. The first post-revolutionary Iranian film I saw was *Bashu, Gharibeye Koochak* ("Bashu, the Little Stranger"), the story of a young boy who flees an Iraqi bombardment of his village and is adopted by a woman running a lush farm along the Caspian coast. Bashu has dark skin and speaks mostly Arabic; Na'i, the farm woman, is fair-skinned and speaks Gilaki. However, they both discover they can read Persian. The lesson? No matter what our skin color or the language we speak, we are all Iranian. That *Bashu* was produced against the backdrop of the ethnic separatist movements instigated by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War added to its resonance. Film and media can carry powerful messages.

⁷² Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 5.

Bajoghli explores how the Islamic Republic's cultural establishment helped craft official stories to shape a war culture. The War Group Team at the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting churned out documentaries and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (whose minister through much of the war was future president Mohammad Khatami) created a War Films Bureau designed to depict the "sacred defense" against Iraq as not only military but also spiritual in nature. During the war, the ministry helped produce 56 feature films to bolster the war effort and its accompanying revolutionary mythology.

Most Westerners and those outside Iran never see these films, although I was fortunate to see some when I first went to Iran as a young Ph.D. student. I saw firsthand that the popular cinema Iranians queued for or watched on state television was quite different from the Iranian films which were popular abroad. Waiting for a delayed airplane in Shiraz in 1996, for example, I took in *Lobnan Eshghi Man* ("Lebanon, My Love"), a reverse Rambo-type film that depicted glorious Hezbollah commandos battling the Israelis. Sitting amongst Iranian soldiers on leave, I tried to look invisible as they chanted "Kill the Jew" while watching the film's protagonist sneak up on an Israeli position. In 1999, Iranian friends took me to see *Ghermez* ("Crimson"). They used the presence of an American as an excuse to jump the line for Iran's latest thriller, the tale of a woman who must fight for herself as her abusive husband becomes increasingly paranoid.

That same year, on Iranian television, I watched *Tufanshan* ("Sandstorm"), a low-budget drama about the 1980 U.S. hostage rescue attempt told from a revolutionary perspective. American soldiers operating in secret inside Iran intercept a school bus in order to preserve their cover and proceed to harass the children. As the Americans depart, the children pray for the Americans' downfall, at which point the dust storm causes the helicopters to crash. Regime producers may have liked the message — villainizing

Americans and promoting the divine righteousness of Shi'ism — but the film showed to half-empty theaters. Government approval and promotion of films did not necessarily equate to their resonance with the broader population.

Regime Propaganda and the Open Lie

There is of course a different Iranian cinema, one that is not the focus of Bajoghli's study. Iranian arthouse films have opened in the West to broad critical acclaim. In 1998, for example, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated *Bacheha-ye Aseman* ("Children of Heaven") for best foreign film. In 2012, Asghar Farhadi's *Jodai-ye Nadir az Simin* ("The Separation of Nadir from Simin") won the Academy Award for best foreign language film. Five years later, Farhadi's film *Forushandeh* ("The Salesman") took the Oscar again.

For those unfamiliar with Iran or who have never had the opportunity to travel there, it is easy to imagine that the idealized vision of arthouse cinema represents Iranian cinema or society more broadly. In reality, however, their success shows both the power of film and the schizophrenic reaction among regime officials, who are torn between embracing the films as emblems of Iran's global cultural prestige and denouncing them as counter-revolutionary. Many prize winners like Mohammad Rasoulof, whose film *Shaitan Vojud Nadarad* ("There is no Evil") won the Berlin Film Festival's top prize in 2020, face domestic censorship, travel restrictions, and even imprisonment for straying from revolutionary messages. At the same time, there is some cross-pollination: Bajoghli's interviews show how Iran's domestic filmmakers collect behind-the-scenes clips from the films and televised and audio interviews with their directors in order to glean tips to improve their own work.

Iran is not alone in this — the same pattern repeats in many authoritarian states — but seldom has any work shown such light on the paradox as *Iran Reframed*. Bajoghli is at her best when she explores how the Islamic Republic’s current media gurus confront generational change. “These kids don’t care about the revolutionary stories we’ve told them the past thirty years, and it’s our own fault,” she quotes Reza Hosseini, a former Revolutionary Guardsmen-turned-media propagandist observing.⁷³ The problem is broad: For the Islamic Republic’s leaders, the revolution continues, but a growing number of Iran’s young disagree.

Media shapes perceptions. Bajoghli’s unprecedented access to regime influencers and media strategists explores how political and social realities force producers to embrace regime propaganda. She describes how constant exposure to media narratives leads interviewees to embrace themes publicly. They say what they believe the regime expects, even if their private remarks are more nuanced. They are cogs in a machine who seek to feed their families by delivering what the government desires. The lie is an open secret. State network producers often do not believe the stories they broadcast, but do so anyway for job security. “Don’t judge me by what you saw me doing today,” one director tells Bajoghli privately, adding, “I have a family to support.”⁷⁴ He offered to send her his private work in which he felt particular pride, despite the fact that the work was not meant for the state audience. In effect, the entire media apparatus churns ahead even as most involved recognize they perpetuate an open lie.

Bajoghli describes the media menu available to most Iranians, not only the official outlets, but expatriate satellite channels offering very popular alternatives to state propaganda,

⁷³ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 2.

⁷⁴ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 54.

such as Turkish and Latin American soap operas dubbed into Persian. An interesting side note is Bajoghli's observation that many regime media producers are avid consumers of Iran's diaspora media such as Voice of America's Persian Service and BBC Persian. They hold Radio Farda, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Persian service, in high regard and do not see it as "pure Western propaganda."⁷⁵ This raises other questions regarding the objectivity of Western outlets like Radio Farda, which is often criticized by conservative American commentators and some Iranian Americans for its lenient stance toward the regime in Tehran. Given how Radio Farda has now been embraced by regime propagandists, those criticisms may have additional validity. Bajoghli's book raises interesting questions on the current state of media both within Iran and abroad.

Purity vs. Practicality

The Islamic Republic's media grew out of the turmoil of the revolution's first decade and the Iran-Iraq War. At 85 million people, Iran's population is more than twice what it was at the time of the revolution. More than 40 percent of Iranians were born after the Iran-Iraq War ended. The first revolutionary generation has retired, and some of the young believers who proved their fervency in the trenches of the Iran-Iraq War are now parents of college-aged children, some of whom have different aspirations than their parents.

The proper reaction to this generational shift has become the subject of a fierce debate inside revolutionary circles, which Bajoghli describes in her book. Can the revolution loosen social restrictions or enforcement? Or would doing so eviscerate any meaning from the revolutionary sacrifices of decades past? While commentators often talk about a generational divide among the Iranian populace on one hand and speak about a division

⁷⁵ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 41.

among politicians between hardliners and reformists on the other, Bajoghli's interviewees bring up the intriguing possibility that such divisions also permeate the security forces, although not necessarily along generational lines.

Bajoghli relates, for example, a debate that erupts between regime producer Hosseini and young Basij artists at a weekly "Art Circle."⁷⁶ The fervent *basijis* challenge Hosseini's efforts to develop new media strategies, regarding them as a betrayal of revolutionary ideology. Hosseini counters that they must recognize the dwindling results on the regime's investment in internal propaganda and embrace new strategies. Bajoghli sheds light onto the internal debates among regime loyalists as they sought quietly to shift debates and tactics, if not always values represented in regime propaganda.

In one compelling example, Bajoghli takes her audience inside the private screening for hardline editors and regime influencers of *Ashghal-ha-ye Dust-dahstani* ("Desirable Garbage"), a film that depicts a family debate against the backdrop of the 2009 protests.⁷⁷ The film acknowledges the dark side of the post-revolutionary history — combat deaths, executions, beatings, and unrealized social ambitions. The reaction to the film among journalists from Iran's most hardline media outlets is anger. Played out before Bajoghli's eyes is a debate that goes to the heart of the regime's paradox: An older generation of revolutionary elites refuses efforts by a new generation to acknowledge societal problems for fear that any admission of guilt would undermine the revolution. A younger generation, however, fears that failure to address problems head-on undercuts the media's credibility among a broader audience whom they wish to sway toward an embrace of revolutionary values. In detailing such disputes, Bajoghli emphasizes the

⁷⁶ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 9-13.

⁷⁷ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 68.

contest waged over the revolution's future among different generations of regime media producers.

Societal Schisms

Bajoghli exposes other divisions and debates to which Western analysts are often blind. While revolutionary leaders cloaked their agenda in terms of social justice, Bajoghli talks about class differences, a topic often whispered about but seldom addressed openly in Iran. One prominent Revolutionary Guardsman, for example, could recall only one “rich kid” at the frontline of the Iran-Iraq War; wealthier families instead sought to send their children abroad.⁷⁸ According to Bajoghli, even 30 years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the social divisions between those who fled the fighting and those who volunteered loom large.

But the new social pedigree achieved through voluntary revolutionary service at a time when many made the ultimate sacrifice does not necessarily mean adherence to revolutionary values. Bajoghli observes, for example, that many first and second generation Basij members allowed their children to join the organization in order to gain social standing. Those who volunteered traded their status into plum jobs and privilege and had higher ambitions for their children. Conversely, old time veterans complain that new *basijis* — even those parroting the most hardline rhetoric — seemed motivated more by material opportunism than ideology. Careerism had supplanted revolutionary fervor. Other generational divisions exist. For example, Bajoghli explains how parenting has softened even the most hardline *basijis* who fear the impact of societal restrictions on their daughters' ambitions.

⁷⁸ Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*, 45.

While Bajoghli's interviews date back just a decade, *Iran Reframed*'s strength lies in the ways in which she also traces the evolution of the organizations which form the basis of the regime's efforts to influence art, television, and culture. She is also an increasing rarity among academics because she writes fluidly and compellingly. Her narrative is non-stop substance but flows unobstructed by theoretical terms or academic jargon. It is what academic research should be — illuminating and communicated in a way which a multitude of audiences can digest.

Iran Reframed should be required reading for students of Iran — this may be the freshest and most insightful work since Roy Mottahedeh's *Mantle of the Prophet* in 1985 — but it should also be mandatory for American policymakers working on Iran, regardless of their partisan perspectives. I certainly disagree with some of Bajoghli's policy prescriptions voiced outside *Iran Reframed* but that does not diminish the importance of her work nor the nuance it provides. Forty years of official enmity has meant that Iran remains inaccessible to most Americans, and Washington is too often deaf to the debates which consume the regime behind closed doors. To remain aloof from those debates is to ensure that any American outreach to broader Iranian society — beyond the intellectual class or the professional dialoguer — will miss the mark.

Michael Rubin is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute

