



Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic, by Amin Saikal. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 326 pp. ISBN: 9780691175478

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(Received: Apr. 15, 2020 Revised: May 13, 2020 Accepted: Jun. 6, 2020)

Distinguished Professor Amin Saikal is a prominent Australian Middle Eastern politics scholar and media commentator, so his views on the Islamic Republic of Iran reach a wide audience. His view of Iran is one of an outsider, which entails certain limitations in terms of lived experience and cultural knowledge, but he is a native Persian speaker as well as an experienced researcher with first-hand experience of Iran. Saikal's writing style and choice of content bridges his academic specialisation and extensive media and political commentary experience. *Iran Rising* thus has less theoretically sophisticated aims and a wider scope than a purely academic work, but seeks to offer a credible and well-informed portrait of the last four decades of Iranian politics, especially foreign policy.



In line with Saikal's blended approach, as well as his choice of the realist paradigm, *Iran Rising* recounts the main Iranian political headlines since the Islamic Revolution, molded into his *jihadi-ijtihadi* framework and illustrated by statistics and figures. The book is comprised of two parts, bookended by an introduction (chapter 1) and conclusion (chapter 8). The first part of the book is shaped by the interplays set out in chapter 1 between what he calls Iranian leaders' *jihadi* and *ijtihadi* approaches—equivalent to Principlist- and Reformist-leaning policies respectively—domestic and foreign policies, and regional and international relations. Chapter 2 recounts the main reasons behind the shah's fall, the key events on the path towards the revolution, and how Khomeini emerged as revolutionary leader. In chapter 3, Saikal describes Khomeini's political endeavours after coming to power, and divides them into the two categories of *jihadi* and *ijtihadi*. The fourth chapter conceptualises Khamenei's constant approach as leader as *jihadi*, and describes the fluctuating policies of the first four presidents serving under him, whom he classifies as pragmatic (Rafsanjani), *ijtihadi* (Khatami), *jihadi* (Ahmadinejad), and an “*ijtihadi-inclined*” (120) pragmatist (Rouhani).

The second part of the book is thematically rather than chronologically organised, and applies Saikal's *jihadi/ijtihadi* conceptualisation to foreign policy. Chapter 5 offers a critical assessment of the Iranian economy in light of liberal capitalist trends, Iran's hard power capacity in view of its experience and status as a middle power, and the nation's soft power efforts to promote its unique Islamic government system in opposition to Western hegemony. In chapter 6, Saikal considers Iran's utilization of these resources in the region, tracking its combination of defensive, conciliatory and assertive measures towards its neighbours one by one. Chapter 7 follows a similar approach but discusses Iran's relations with the big powers, giving particular

focus to US-Iran interactions and the nuclear negotiations. The conclusion presents the writer's assessment of the Islamic Republic's key successes and challenges to date, predicting continued oscillations and friction between the *jihadi* and *ijtihadi* approaches rather than any system collapse in the foreseeable future.

As the scope suggests, Saikal's book is not designed to analyse the ins and outs of four decades of Iranian politics comprehensively; indeed, some key personalities and events are mentioned briefly or not at all. There is significant overlap between *Iran Rising* and Saikal's earlier *Iran at the Crossroads* (2016), especially in part one. However, Saikal's more recent work offers more details of the last four decades and adds a discussion of Iran's capacities and interactions with the wider world in addition to the high-profile nuclear negotiations featured in *Iran at the Crossroads*. This means that readers with an interest in Iran-US interactions, particularly during the Rouhani-Obama era, may find *Iran at the Crossroads* more useful. On the other hand, part two of *Iran Rising* will assist readers wanting to gain a broader picture of Iran's capacities and its interactions with nations in the region and the world in addition to the nuclear issue and the US. Saikal's approach, style and choice of content also distinguishes his book from those of other authors. Whereas Axworthy (2009) chooses vignettes and portraits of episodes of Iranian-Shia history since Karbala, Saikal restricts himself to the headlines of the last forty years. While Adib-Moghaddam (2009; see also Adib-Moghaddam 2021) mounts probing theoretical arguments drawing on the critical studies tradition, Saikal makes a realist case. Despite Pargoo and Akbarzadeh (2021, 4) problematizing the "polarised image" of Iranian political factions in their study of presidential campaign discourses, Saikal divides Iranian politics into *jihadi* and *ijtihadi*.

Compared to often unsuccessful attempts to apply Western-origin labels such as “right” and “left” to Iranian politics (Dowlatabadi, 2021), one advantage of the *jihadi/ijtihadi* categorization is that both words come from the world of Islam. Each term has a connection to Shia jurists in the sense that both the declaration of a defensive *jihad* and *ijtihad* ruling derivation are duties that only a *faqih* is qualified to undertake. In using these terms, Saikal recognizes the Islamic nature of the Republic, and can be said to acknowledge tangentially its system of the guardianship of the jurist. At the same time, Saikal’s categorization, like any attempt to divide Iran or Iranian politics into two, glosses over the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the world we, and indeed Iranians, live in. While a politician’s faction may certainly affect their policy preferences at particular times and under particular circumstances, dualizing Iranian politics risks producing simplifying assumptions and thus simplified conclusions about what, to borrow from Mir-Hossein Mousavi, is someone else’s “family dispute.”

In *Iran Rising*, Saikal navigates a large volume of material relevant to four decades of Iranian political history in just over 300 pages. His *jihadi/ijtihadi* framework has some limitations, for example in terms of its tendency to pigeonhole Iranian politicians, but overall his narrative is less polarised than much of the material a Western audience is likely to have been exposed to. Its straightforward language and realist approach make *Iran Rising* highly appropriate as a media resource or undergraduate textbook for Western students, and the book achieves its goals in this context.