



*Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* by Amin Saikal.

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Review by Robert L. Tignor, Princeton University (rltignor@princeton.edu).

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The American political decision-makers, led by President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, withdrew from the Iran nuclear arms deal in 2018 and ratcheted up the sanctions on Iran, in hopes of bringing about regime change. In his latest book, political scientist Amin Saikal (Australian National Univ.) describes this as a forlorn hope. Even a US invasion, seen as imminent at times, is unlikely to bring regime change. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard, while incapable of a conventional full-scale military offensive, is ready to ably conduct asymmetrical guerrilla warfare against an invading force of would-be occupiers.

*Iran Rising* appears on the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of its intentions is to explain how the regime has resisted powerful outside pressures and is now able to celebrate its durability. This in the face of determined US opposition, supported by the Israelis and to a lesser degree America's European allies, not to mention the exhausting Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the costliest conflict fought between Muslim countries.

A major reason for Iran's successes was the overthrow of the widely unpopular Mohammad Reza Shah, with his repressive policies and powerful secret police, Savak, bankrolled by the United States. As Saikal makes eminently clear, many groups wanted to be rid of the Shah, but it was the clerical establishment, led by the charismatic and learned Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in exile in Paris, that actually ousted him and created a theocratic republic. Although Khomeini at first claimed he did not want to rule, he quickly became the Supreme Leader (*vali-e faqih*), theoretically the one man able to represent the sovereignty of God and the will of the people. He was supported by an unelected, twelve-member Council of Guardians, comprised of experts in Islamic law, six appointed by the Supreme Leader and six by the Chief Justice, who was himself designated by the Supreme Leader. At the same time and in keeping with the goal of creating a republic, the Iranian clerics drafted a constitution stipulating an elected president and elected national assembly, whose members were, however, to be approved by the Council of Guardians.

Saikal maintains that these highly complicated arrangements were meant to accommodate Iran's fluctuations between reformism (*ijtihad*) and conservative militancy (*jihadi*), and that they account for the durability of the system. This wobbling between extremes has been evident in Iranian presidential elections. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a reformer, served as president from 1989 to 1997, assuming office just when Khomeini died (3 June 1989) at age eighty-seven. After serving the requisite two four-year terms, Rafsanjani was eventually replaced by the conservative *jihadi*, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), who was then succeeded in the regime's tenth presidential election by the reformer Hassan Rouhani (2013-present). Seeking an accommodation with the West and the outside world generally, Rouhani negotiated a nuclear accord with the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (14 July 2015). Pres. Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the plan in May 2018, calling it is the worst deal ever negotiated by the American government.

Ali Hossein Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader, was always a lesser light in the clerical establishment. He had only a limited education, though he studied at Qom under Khomeini; few had expected him to replace the Supreme Leader. Only after he assumed that position did he acquire the august title of Ayatollah. Though expected to share power with other high-ranking clerics, Khamenei, a *jihadi*, consolidated his power and continues to rule to this day. He has been able to do so because of the American invasion of Iraq and the rise of Shiism throughout the Arab world. Iran is the leading Shiite state in the world and, though it sometimes conceals its promotion of Shiism, it could not resist the tempting opportunities to back it in the Arab world after the American war in Iraq, where the Shiite majority came into power with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, Lebanon saw the rise of the Shiite party, Hezbollah, and Bashir Assad, a Shiite Alawite, continues to defend his presidency in Syria. Iran's support of such movements incurred the wrath of Saudi Arabia, which placed itself at the head of Arab Sunni movements. Iran has supported as well the radical Sunni party, Hamas, in Palestine, incurring the wrath of Israel.

*Iran Rising* is a welcome and discerning primer on the forces that have kept Iran's clerics in power for forty years, during which they have fostered conservative Shiism domestically and throughout the Arab/Muslim world. The book attests to Amin Saikal's decades of study and deep knowledge of primary sources and relevant secondary works. It should be studied carefully by all students of Middle Eastern politics and especially by diplomats, military leaders, and political decision-makers who wish to rectify or avoid repeating the current flawed policies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.