Intelligence in Public Media

Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic

Narges Bajoghli (Stanford University Press, 2019), 176 pages, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Brian C. Dudley

In *Iran Reframed*, Narges Bajoghli provides a close look at the men who create propaganda for the Iranian regime and examines an issue all revolutionary regimes face: how to pass on revolutionary ideals to the next generation. She investigates the conflicts that arise as they argue over how best to reach contemporary youth, how much discussion of Iran's internal problems is allowable or desirable, and how best to deal with media (especially film) that could be construed as critical of the regime. Charting the change in Iranian regime messaging from 2009 to 2018, she shows how the regime's media managers "went from anxious meetings about their relationship with young audiences to celebrating their successes to becoming anxious again." (118)

Bajoghli, a professor at Johns Hopkins's SAIS, is an Iranian-American whose family participated in the 1979 revolution but then fled as Ayatollah Khomeini consolidated power. Her work for an Iranian NGO involved in disaster planning and her documentary about Iranian war veterans helped get her access to the regime's cultural centers. It also helped that she speaks Farsi like a native and understands subtle social cues, knowing exactly when to wear a brightly colored headscarf perched on the back of her head and when to wear a black one clamped down to her eyebrows. Even with this in her favor, it took her four years to secure the necessary introductions and another five years of regular visits to Iran to conduct her research. This slim volume, then, is the product of unprecedented access to those responsible for developing the Iranian regime's public messaging.

Bajoghli's focus is the Iranian regime's "cultural producers"—film directors, producers, managers, editors, journalists, and film school students. The older ones—the "first and second generation"—are all veterans of the Iran-Iraq War who have served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in various capacities and founded or work in media companies closely associated with that organization. The younger ones are all members of the Basij (an IRCG youth militia), but they have no direct experience of war. "Despite popular conceptions," Bajoghli writes, "confrontations with Green Movement protestors are not the only facet of the 'youth question' in Iran. A similar divide exists *among* those who identify as pro-regime, and it can often be a wide chasm."(15) Surprisingly, many of the older generation were participants in the Green Movement, including a legless veteran who was thrown from his wheelchair and beaten by the Basij during the 2009 protests.

How could this man return to working for the regime after such an experience? To understand this, one must understand the distinction in Bajoghli's subjects' minds between "the government" and "the regime" (*nazam*, elsewhere translated as "system"). When this man participated in the Green Movement, he was protesting against the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rather than against the constitutional order of the Islamic Republic itself. All of Bajoghli's sources identify as pro-regime, but her goal is to dissuade her readers from maintaining a simplistic idea of a clash between "reformists" and "hardliners." Reformists make use of their connections with the regime, adopt its formal language and dress, and act in a religiously conservative manner as necessary to advance their aims. As time progresses, changing circumstances lead some of them to become less interested in airing critiques of Iranian government policy and more intent on demonizing the regime's opponents. Similarly, some hardliners' views soften over time—at least concerning how the pro-regime message is packaged and communicated.

In chapters 1 through 3 the main conflict is between the older veterans and their twenty-something counterparts. Again contrary to what one might expect, it is the older ones who argue for a more flexible approach geared toward reaching a broader audience. But the younger Basijis vehemently disagree. "Your generation may be tired of confrontation, but not ours!" barks one. (11) With Ahmadinejad's reelection and the failure of the Green

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Movement, the young hotheads have the upper hand, at least temporarily.

Two of Bajoghli's reformist interlocutors ruefully attribute their opponents' hardline stance to the success of the propaganda campaigns they themselves helped devise in the 1980s. "They think we're a threat to the very culture *we* created!" fumes one. (50) However, Bajoghli shrewdly dissects the class differences that are operating as well. The older cultural producers are all from lower middle class or working class families. Their membership in the IRGC and their status as war veterans has provided them opportunities for and access to a more comfortable life. They view the third generation Basijis—who come from the same social strata as they—as opportunists who only joined the Basij in order to get ahead and see them, in Bajoghli's words, as "uncultured, incapable, blindly ideological, and uncouth." (47). None of the older generation allow their children to join the Basij because it would be a step down the social ladder. For their part, the younger Basijis think the older generation has lost its moral compass. Says one, "We appreciate their sacrifices during the war, but they've become corrupted with money and obsessed with making themselves like the secular elite." (47)

But the battle lines change abruptly at the beginning of chapter 4, when Bajoghli returns to Iran in 2013. She's eager to discuss a bootlegged film—a scathing indictment of Iran's treatment of its wounded veterans, a film that two of her sources, both older reformists, slipped to her at the end of her previous visit. However, the two men are no longer interested in airing the Islamic Republic's dirty laundry. Now their energies are focused on shoring up the regime and demonizing its opponents, especially the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK). They assure Bajoghli the MEK was behind the Green Movement protests of 2009. This statement is astounding coming from these men, who both participated in the Green Movement and suffered for it.

What accounts for this extraordinary shift? In Bajoghli's analysis, the first reason for the older generation's about-face was the growing amount of information available regarding the Stuxnet attacks in 2009–2010. The Iranian regime's supporters simply could not believe it was coincidental that the Israelis and Americans launched a cyberattack on Iran's nuclear facilities just as massive street protests were occurring. The second reason was the Syrian conflict: Iranians of all political leanings watched in horror as their seemingly unshakable ally dissolved in civil war. Syrian factions' foreign backing led Iranians to regard the MEK, with its Saudi and (the Iranians believe) American supporters,[a] with renewed dread. After 2013, fear of chaos trumped the older generation's desire for reform. This attitude—bolstered by an effective media campaign praising the IRGC's actions in Syria—was shared even by young Iranians who do not support the regime. "I don't necessarily like [the IRGC]," says one young film student, "but we are living in a secure country thanks to them." (111)

But the younger Basijis have changed too, as their fear of Syrian-style chaos pushes them to see the value in accommodating the expectations of ordinary Iranian youth culture. Toning down the religious language and dress, using popular music like rock and hip-hop, and broadcasting a message centered on Iranian patriotism, rather than Shi'ism, all help to conceal the government's hand. One music video, produced at the whopping cost of nearly $400,000, combined all these elements, depicting a multiethnic Iran uniting to repel a US invasion.

Her subjects deem this change in messaging to be largely successful but by the book's end, the regime's cultural producers are again on the defensive as the nation is rocked by violent protests in 2017 and 2018. Again, they produce media which is free of the standard hallmarks of official propaganda: on-the-street interviews conducted by outlets like AvaNet TV appear to be the work of independent journalism. However, instead of being directed at the MEK or external enemies, this time the target is President Rouhani, who had blamed Iran's economic crisis on government corruption, publicly attacked the IRGC's cultural institutions, and proposed drastic cuts to its budget. By publicizing dissatisfaction with Rouhani, the IRGC-linked media producers were simultaneously trying to protect their own interests and to direct the public's ire against his administration rather than against the system itself. Although Bajoghli doesn't say so explicitly, it is clear from this and from numerous other examples in the book that analysis of Iranian public messaging cannot assume the regime is monolithic but must be conducted with an eye toward competing elements within the regime's decisionmaking bodies.

a. The US State Department removed the MEK from its list of foreign terrorist organizations in 2012.

This book provides readers with extraordinary insight into the inner workings of the Islamic Republic's propaganda machine, and it does so both with an acute, skeptical, eye but also with the empathy necessary for truly great analysis. Anyone who is interested in Iran and in the future trajectory of the Iranian regime will find it more than worth their while.

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