



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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## A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF IRAN 1979-2022

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Mehran Kamrava, *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic*, London: Hurst and Co., 2022, 304 pp. (ISBN 978-1-78-738803-1).

A prolific writer and scholar of the Persian Gulf studies, Mehran Kamrava publishes his latest book *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic* at an intense time as the Iranian regime faces yet another unprecedented challenge to its legitimacy. Massive protests spearheaded by women sparked by the killing of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, by the state's morality police over immodest clothing on 16 September 2022 has spread across the country and beyond its borders. The author, who is a Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar and director of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies of the same university, explains that the primary purpose of his book was to give a detailed picture of political developments spanning from the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran in 1979 until four decades later, focusing on its key milestones. The book has ten chapters that chronologically explores broad themes including political institutionalization, consolidation, reformation, authoritarianism, political economy, threat perceptions and policymaking, state-society relations and identity. Throughout the book lies the key theme of triumph and despair in the Islamic Republic under various leaderships with an omnipresent *velayat e faqih* (guardian of the jurist) in the regime's political mosaic holding reins of its people's destiny. Largely focussing on its internal dynamics alone, the author's scholarship, expertise and incisiveness provides an exhaustive work on Iran's modern political history.

The author narrates a brief revolutionary story and its aftermath which he argues has parallels with other post-revolutionary states like France, Russia, China or Cuba (2). However, what was unique about Iranian revolution is that it revolved around Islamist politics along with its dire need for democracy and economic justice (4). The author chronicles a number of developments towards political institutionalisation and consolidation in chapters two and three. Here Kamrava contends that it was not mere personification of Ayatollah Khomeini as an embodiment of anti-monarchist authoritarianism that elevated the clergy to leadership. Rather, it was the chain of political events along with the establishment of the new constitution and supporting institutions that synchronously helped consolidate the clerical rule. This book relevantly explains the creation and rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as an institutionalized and independent



military organization: it leaves no stone unturned as the author recounts its «reign of terror» (73) as it becomes one of the most important pillars of the Islamic Republic. It also provides an in-depth account of internal threats to the clergy power-bloc from groups such as the Mujahedeen, the Fadaiyan and the communists. The author lays bare accounts of arbitrary imprisonments, wrongful executions and perpetual human rights abuses during and post revolution. He shows that the state has successfully recalibrated the revolution's ideals of the Khomeinists and established a «religious brand of clientelist populism» (85), a process that included the redefinition of the role of clergy in Iranian history as the champions of the poor against foreign powers.

Chapters four and five detail a brief phase of reformist interregnum of the Islamic democracy followed by despotic leadership which was committed to «deny, dismiss, repress and downgrade» any political culture (148). Both chapters convince the reader that, despite a period of reformation and readjustments in the late 1990s and early 2000s during which promises of liberty and democracy saw a glimmer of hope, the regime is here to stay. Not long ago one of the founding fathers of the Iranian revolution and a pragmatic conservative, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, addressed the Assembly of Experts stating that the «prisons and police are not the way to establish Islam in society» (107). Yet, in the constant clash between conservative traditionalism and reformism, the author argues that the latter has unquestionably failed due to lack of unity, internal contradictions and, above all, institutional opposition. The Green Movement of 2009-10, in which the Iranian public challenged the regime and its leadership, is a significant case in point. While the public's «cosmopolitanism struck homo Islamicus that the Republic aimed to create» (137), the apparently vulnerable regime got more repressive. The author encapsulates these cycles of triumph and despair claiming that «born out of and into crises, the Islamic Republic is immeasurably better at crisis management than it is at just management under normal circumstances» (149).

The book does a fine job in exploring the state's political economic history of both pre and post revolution and in analysing policies aimed at uplifting the lower classes but doing far below their potential. The author evaluates prolonged economic crises as a result of the regime's domestic policies and international sanctions while making no projections. To understand what makes Iran an important geopolitical player in the region despite the sanctions and the ongoing isolation, chapter seven provides a thorough analysis of its threat perceptions and policies in the region. These are in turn shaped by revolutionary policymaking as well as by significant events like the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's hostile relations with the United States especially during the hostage crisis, the clash between ideology and pragmatism as the country plays the role of a realist actor in the international arena (200) navigating through internal and external challenges. But in the



era of an emerging post-western world order in which countries like India and China are reclaiming their lost wealth, power and cultural hegemony, the fact that the book completely overlooks Iran's strategic Look East policy, despite its significant implications domestically and globally, appears as a glaring lacuna.

In the final chapters, *Belonging and Exclusion* and *A Question of Identity*, the author addresses the nature of state-society relations, which definitively changed with the Iranian revolution. In doing so, he discusses the question of Iran's diverse and cosmopolitan population, which has consistently faced repercussions with the regime oscillating between democracy impulses and authoritarian imperatives. Kamrava focuses on the regime's oppressive treatment of three particular groups, namely, women, youth and non-Persian communities. These chapters are useful for understanding why the regime's efforts in moulding Iranian culture into Khomeini's vision of Islam and hegemonizing post-revolutionary narratives are challenged by its people even four decades later. The country is home to different ethnic communities like the Azeris, Baluchs, Arabs among others, but the regime believes in the superiority of its Persian ethnicity. The author notes that there has been slow progress in the profile of Iranian women in terms of liberties and basic rights, but a brief review of the country's labour market or political arena confirms that these remain exclusively male domains (245). However, as per the author's admission, «no single volume could do justice» (7) to the complexities and nuances of an incredibly complex country like Iran. In fact, supplementary readings are needed to fully grasp particularly difficult topics like ethnic, religious and Sunni minorities' relations with the regime.

The author is hopeful that political change is bound to happen but is apprehensive about its scope and direction as the reader can infer from the analysis of the Islamic revolution of 1979 as a variation of authoritarianism, transforming the country from monarchy to Islamic republic but failing its initial promises of justice and liberty. Present-day Iranians are no longer the same as the postrevolutionary Iranians who faced the Iran-Iraq war. With its population increasingly becoming «democratically defiant» (301) and fond of the West, the Islamic Republic's survival solely depends on its ability to mutate, evolve, repress and navigate through challenges. Given its hybrid political system with deeply authoritarian features outweighing its accountability and representative nature (299), a meaningful political change in Iran has a long way to go.

The book represents a comprehensive study of the modern political history of Iran spanning four decades since 1979. While providing a detailed analysis based on primary sources as well as on well-known works of Iranian and non-Iranian scholars published both inside and outside Iran, the book has no clear theoretical framework. The author's not so optimistic tone and expository style reflects his concerns and emotions as someone deeply connected to the region. As the Persian Gulf region continues to

become an area of growing interest with its states struggling for power and influence, this book has a timely relevance for students, researchers, academics, policymakers, diplomats and for anyone interested in a rundown on the creation and survival of the Islamic Republic's regime in the past four decades.