

[McClure on Tabaar, 'Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran'](#)

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Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar. *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran*. Columbia Studies in Middle East Politics Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 392 pp. \$60.00 (cloth),

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Reviewed by Nathan McClure (Air University, Air War College) **Published on** H-War (March, 2021)
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In *Religious Statecraft*, Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar makes the bold claim that Iranian politics and ideology are not driven by a bedrock of unchanging Islamic principles within the Shi'a tradition. Instead, Tabaar argues that the opposite has been true spanning the four decades since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The central figures in Iran driving the ideological narrative have been Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While being explicit not to attack their personal religious sincerity or beliefs, Tabaar describes in detail how these leaders crafted the narrative of Islam to stay in power and meet the political end of regime survival by weaponizing it to disarm their domestic adversaries. Scholars searching for a superior example of the constructivist international relations model, studying the role of religion in politics, or searching for a comprehensive historical look at the shifting ideologies that continue to guide modern-day Iran will benefit from reading this book.

Tabaar begins his book with a background of Iranian Shi'a Islam and follows with a chronological depiction of modern Iranian history from the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini through President Hassan Rouhani's 2017 reelection. Contrary to what an outsider may assume about a political theocracy, Iran's leaders have handcrafted their own interpretations of Islamic law and governance to fit their political agendas, to secure the support of the masses, and to isolate dissenters. Tabaar's work also illuminates how elites vying for power shape the competitive domestic political environment within Iran by adapting their messages and tactics because of threats to their own political survival.

Tabaar's compelling narrative begins with a description of the powerful and charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini whose support for the shah soured as the monarchy increasingly incorporated aspects of liberal Western culture. This inspired the conservative Khomeini to argue in favor of clerical political participation including a proclamation of the *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) concept prescribing clerical authority as supreme over all matters of state. Since this countered a thousand-year-plus doctrine within Shi'a Islam prohibiting clerical political leadership, his vision angered the most powerful religious clerics within Iraq and Iran. Khomeini successfully outmaneuvered the clerics and gained popular support by branding his version of Islam as "peaceful, democratic, anti-communist, and human rights-friendly" (p. 55). Eventually, this narrative won out over Mohammad Reza Shah's repressive crackdowns on student demonstrations. During the revolution, Iran's

government transitioned peacefully but precariously from a nationalist government favorable to the United States to a staunch Islamist government with strong anti-American undertones. Khomeini was able to harness power in this dynamic environment by capturing public sentiment, isolating nationalists, and calling into question the clerics' faith if they challenged him publicly. As a result, the Islamists successfully adopted *Velayat-e Faqih* into the constitution with Khomeini as chief jurist, commander in chief, and head of all branches of government. However, the fledgling Islamic government's most significant threat was a leftist movement gaining strength across college campuses across the country.

Tabaar's strongest historical contribution is his finding, based on newly available primary source documents, that the threat from the communist left was the real driver for the capture of the American embassy. After gaining power, Khomeini's Islamist government sought to normalize relations with the United States but "anti-Americanism became a commodity to be appropriated for political gain" (p. 113). In this view, the decision by the Islamist students to overtake the US embassy was a deliberate and successful domestic power move to steal revolutionary zeal from the communists' hands. In fact, Khomeini was not even briefed on the plan for the embassy assault before its initiation, but due to its popularity, he capitalized on the opportunity to bring anti-American rhetoric into his narrative. Since the students' bold action effectively subdued the communist left, the next domestic adversaries to weaken were nationalist institutions including the army.

By a twist of good fortune for their cause, Saddam Hussein gave the Islamists a prime opportunity to consolidate power by invading Iran in September 1980. Indeed, Tabaar notes that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders at the time were "gleeful with the [Iranian] army's initial failures, calling those defeats 'divine' measures" (p. 148). With its internal rivals suppressed, Khomeini united the country by constructing Islamic messages encouraging national sacrifice and volunteers to become martyrs on the frontlines. After Iran had successfully ejected the Iraqi forces two years later, it had an opportunity to end the war in a favorable position. However, Khomeini decided instead to escalate the war by invading Iraq, explaining that this action was needed as a step toward ultimately liberating the Palestinian people once Baghdad was conquered. The fateful war was only concluded after the powerful speaker of the Majlis (parliament) and Khomeini protégé, Akbar Rafsanjani, took responsibility to oversee the war. While being careful to avoid accountability for lost battles as well as to place growing IRGC power in check, Rafsanjani shrewdly asked for a list of requirements from the IRGC commanders needed to win the war with Iraq. After successfully demonstrating to Khomeini the impossibility of fulfilling those requirements given Iran's weak economic position, Khomeini drank the figurative "cup of poison" by accepting a ceasefire. However, he "quickly found a parallel religious precedent to explain the decision" in a treaty signed by the Prophet Mohammad in 628 (p. 184). Yet again the religious ideological narrative justified the Supreme Leader's decisions amid heartbreaking loss.

Shortly following the war, Khomeini's death resulted in predictable factional battles. To preempt chaos, Rafsanjani called a secret Assembly of Experts meeting and Khamenei was pronounced as the new Supreme Leader. Although Khamenei set out upon an anti-American path, a new wave of moderate views began to spread throughout the elite mindset that desired a relationship with Western nations. While Khamenei consolidated the powers of the conservative parallel state mechanisms, the newly elected popular President Rafsanjani chose a reformist path seeking to patch Iran's relationship with the United States. Interestingly, former leftists and itinerant students who

participated in the embassy hostage crisis joined the reform movement, further illustrating political malleability within Iran. This split within the Islamist establishment resulted in the reformist Mohammad Khatami winning the presidency in 1997 but reverting to an ultraconservative government when the combative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidency in the 2005 election.

In the lead-up to the 2009 presidential elections, Khamenei had a high degree of confidence in Ahmadinejad's reelection. However, a well-organized reformist movement with support from Rafsanjani and other influential actors resulted in a contested outcome. The resultant Green movement brought millions of peaceful protesters into the streets of Iran questioning election results and tactics of the parallel state organizations. Khamenei's harsh crackdown on these protests shocked the international community when videos emerged of the state brutality. Nevertheless, the regime stood fast and President Ahmadinejad was reelected. Despite this setback, the Green movement demonstrates the critical role that media has played in shaping values and ideology within Iran along with the strong presence of dissenting views that could operate freely until the parallel state establishment learned how to suppress them.

Tabaar's last chapter describes the contentious domestic environment resulting from the international effort to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran. Despite the P5+1 team producing a draft agreement agreed upon by President Ahmadinejad in 2009, Khamenei refused to accept it because he perceived the United States would gain recognition while he lost domestic influence. In the aftermath of this disappointment leading to a desire for change, Rouhani won the 2013 presidential election as a protégé of Rafsanjani. His efforts to revive the nuclear agreement along with centrist policies showed a strong ability to counter the far-right Khamenei as evidenced by Rouhani's landslide reelection in 2017. Tabaar notes that the future of Iranian ideology is uncertain due to emergent moderate and nationalist political strongholds exerting pressure on Khomeini's original central governance concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*.

While Tabaar's book focuses most heavily on Khomeini's influence on Iranian religious ideology throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran's forty-year lifespan, it provides tremendous insight into the successful religious adaptation of Islam for political ends. As historians and foreign policy scholars continue to study Iran's recent modern era especially since the Green movement, Tabaar's groundbreaking work describing internal factional conflicts and religious narrative creation will come into an even clearer view. Furthermore, while Tabaar's book focuses largely on internal Iranian dynamics, its insights within the context of politics, religion, and ideology are applicable across many academic disciplines.

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