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**Book review:**  
**Abdolmohammadi, P., & Cama, G. (2020).**  
**Contemporary Domestic and Foreign Policies of Iran.**  
**London, Denver: Palgrave Macmillan, 251 p.**

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The book “Contemporary Domestic and Foreign Policies of Iran” is significant in the modern context of transformations of international relations in Greater Middle East region (South-West Asia), and the socio-political and civilizational shifts taking place there. The focus of the authors’ attention is Iran, whose potential as a regional leader is revealed through an analysis of the main features of its political and economic system, and the foreign policy pursued by Tehran. The nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), which is central to this book, and the creation of the IRI is studied within the theory of political regimes, particularly within the subcategory of hybrid regimes. This monograph

has adopted a multidisciplinary approach, combining comparative politics, and intellectual and modern history with international relations. The indisputable value of the work lies in the balanced view it presents of the domestic and foreign policy of Iran during various historical periods, which are assessed in the framework of retrospective analysis through the 20th century and the 40-year history of the Islamic Republic.

The aim of this book is “to examine the domestic and the foreign politics of Iran, highlighting its strategic role in the Middle East and its complex and contradictory identity between tradition and modernity” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 1].

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The monograph under review consists of 7 chapters: five main chapters, Introduction and Conclusions, supplemented by an Index section. Chapters 2 and 4 are written by Pejman Abdolmohammadi, and Chapter 5 is Giampiero Cama's contribution. Chapters 1, 3, 6 and 7 are the results of collaborations between the authors.

In Chapter 1 it is shown that Iran remained the only country in the Middle East in which three dimensions of modernization — political pluralism (political dimension), secularisation (cultural dimension), and socio-economic development (socio-economic dimension) — were simultaneously affirmed in the early twentieth century. Under the leadership of Colonel Reza Khan (1923—1941) we find an authoritarian top-down modernization model that was also implemented in other countries such as Turkey, Japan, and Germany [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 19—21]. The Pahlavi monarchy supported the renewal of a political project based primarily on economic and social modernization, and secularisation, mixed with nationalistic trends, but which rejected political pluralism. An Islamic version of the same project was enacted by Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, who “used mass politics, socio-economic development and a welfare state to promote a non-secular and non-pluralist political system in the form of the Islamic Republic” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 14].

Chapter 2 examines modern Iran between the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, after which the modernist forces were partially dominant, and the consequent 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the traditionalist forces prevailed. The tensions and conflicts among the traditionalist and progressive camps are in focus, and are considered from religious, political, economic, and social perspectives. The theoretical framework set out in Chapter 2 is based on an original interpretation of the theory of modernisation, highlighting both the traditionalist and the modernist forces which have contributed to the socio-economic development of the country throughout the last century [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 4].

Chapter 3 provides a concise illustration of Iran's institutional framework to facilitate the understanding of the peculiarities which define

the Iranian political system as a hybrid regime. As it is shown in the book, the hybrid nature of the Islamic Republic's political system “was mainly the result of compromises made between all the revolutionary forces — Islamist, leftist, nationalist and secular — in 1979” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 34].

However, it seems that this argument is contestable because the crystallization of this structure took place on the basis of the denial of the proposals of the leftist and secular forces in favour of the Islamisation of everything and everyone in Iran. The authors probably should have paid more attention to the analysis of the participation of such anti-Shah opposition forces as the Mojahedin-e Khalq, known as the “second line” in the revolution movement (*hatt-e dovvom*) and Fedayan-e Khalq — “third line” (*hatt-e sevvom*) — in the 1979 Iranian revolution.

In Chapter 3 the authors correctly point out that there were two main wings in the Islamic forces opposing the Shah. First — the strategy of Ayatollah Khomeini — who proposed an alternative model of the state in Iran within the framework of the concept of “Governance of the Jurist” (*Velayat-e Faqih*). Second — the Islamist power bloc — made up of the middle class and students, who called for a modern and reformist idea of Islam, the precursor of what is today known as “Islamic democracy” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 36]. In the authors' opinion, both secular and religious political forces were protagonists in the 1979 Revolution: “The traditionalist and progressive political forces, despite their different ideologies, have adopted some elements of modernization”. The authors concluded that the Islamic Republic exemplifies the coexistence between aspects of authoritarianism and political competition, partially regulated by democratic procedures [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 40—41].

Chapter 4 analyses the main political and social players in the Islamic Republic (military and paramilitary forces, economic and financial actors such as foundations, banks, bazari, etc.), which constitute the main social pillars of the Islamic Republic. All the main political alignments and groupings, including the opposition, both inside the country and abroad,

are presented in the chapter. The focus of Chapter 4 is on an “Iranian Renaissance” — “[the] ongoing ideological phenomenon which is influencing sections of the new Iranian generation and which is based on a combination of nationalism and secularism, aiming at promoting a modern and progressive Iran”. In the last two decades, young Iranians have often referred to acronyms and names related to ancient Persian civilisation [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 115—116, 118—119].

Chapter 5 examines the politics and the dynamics of the Islamic Republic. This chapter follows the hypothesis that the hybrid nature of the Islamic Republic produces a peculiar structure of political opportunities both for the pro-system players and opposition forces. The authors show a cyclical trend of political coalitions enabled by the hybrid nature of the Islamic Republic. Based on this book’s hypothesis, this peculiarity determines regular political cycles characterized by a certain alternation between conservative, pragmatic, and reformist groups. It also gives rise to significant shifts in both the internal and foreign policies of the country [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 130].

The focus of Chapter 6 is a set of issues related to Iran’s foreign policy and its positioning in the system of international relations, highlighting two particular aspects: the role of political ideology in shaping macro changes in Iran’s foreign policy following the 1979 Revolution, and the role of domestic politics in the tactical choices of the Islamic Republic in the international arena. This chapter also examines the regional context and Iran’s relationships with the main regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Central Asian countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Israel. The same analysis is applied in a global context, examining the key issues influencing the relationship of Iran with the main global players — the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China.

Summarising the peculiarities of the Shah’s foreign policy and the problem of the symbolic dimension, the authors note “the rediscovery of Iran’s Persian identity from a nationalist perspective”. Consequently — “the growth of nationalism challenged the long-established

alliance with the Western bloc”. The Shah had been perceived to be ‘the great ally’ of the US administration, but from 1973 it was clear that “Iran aimed to become an independent regional power” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 32].

In turn, the Islamic Republic based its foreign policy mainly on the Islamic ideology, adopting an anti-Western stance with closer ties to the East (especially Russia and China). Thus, both regimes overlooked a part of their potential sphere of influence due to ideological limitations [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 169—170].

Although the 1979 Revolution overturned Iran’s foreign policy, Tehran’s attitude towards the United States remains the general indicator of Iran’s policy direction. In fact, relations with other countries, at both regional and global levels, on a cascading scale, depend on Iran’s attitude towards the United States [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 216]. The hybrid nature of the Iranian political process allows the actors to play a two-tier game in the field of foreign policy, which proceeds completely openly within the framework of an authoritarian system, although these have always been contained strictly within the ideological code of the regime and the red lines drawn by the Supreme Leader [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 196].

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran’s geopolitical role in the Middle East changed radically. Ideologically, the new Islamic Republic started to build its international relations based on a new political identity characterised by two key elements: the unity of Islamic forces and anti-imperialism. Both were put forward by the leader of the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. One of the key characteristics of Iranian foreign policy is its duality, it has both a temporal and a territorial nature. Territorially, it is defined in terms of the so-called Shi’a Triangle, Central Asia, and the relevant global actors. Temporally, it is contingent on the sensitivity and choices of the various leaders and coalitions occupying the main political positions. The authors argue that from this point of view, “it is to be expected that phases marked by pragmatism were followed by phases characterized by a more ideological and

conservative approach” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 171—172].

Assessing the situation in the Middle East at the beginning of the 21st century, the authors came to the conclusion that “From 2003 to 2010, before the beginning of the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis, Tehran, as the leader of the Shi’a coalitions, played a key role in the balance of power in the Middle East”. This presented risks for the Sunni rulers currently in power there. This situation has changed since 2016; the weakening of Al-Assad caused by the civil war in Syria, the fall of the pro-Iranian government of al-Maliki in Baghdad, the reinforcement of the Kurdish component in the region and the internal splintering of the Shi’a front into pro-Iranian and pro-Arab factions have all affected the political stability of the Shi’a [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 186]. The authors noted that the assassination of General Ghassem Soleimani in January 2020 in Iraq by the American forces represents a relevant example of the ‘roll back’ strategy of Trump against the Islamic Republic [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 205].

Ergo, “The Islamic Republic is now faced with a strategic dilemma, where it has to deal with the question of whether to maintain the status quo and continue to invest in the project of the Shi’a Triangle, including support for Al-Assad, Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shi’a front against Riyadh, or whether it has to reposition itself strategically and reduce its support to the Shi’a components” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 186—187].

A valuable and pragmatically significant conclusion refers to fundamental elements of the code of the political discourse of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: “As shown, we can identify certain cardinal elements of this code and this political discourse. One principal element is the idea of Iran’s responsibility to the Muslim world and the country’s specific mission to defend the Islamic community’s interests and values. A second element concerns the anti-hegemonic direction that has led Iran to side with non-allied countries, such as its alliances with Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua, under an anti-imperialist agenda. The third important element is the principle of self-sufficiency (*khodkafaei*) and

independence. Iran’s nuclear ambitions fall into this category, as they highlight the desire not to depend on foreign technologies and economic resources. A fourth important element... emphasises the ongoing existence of a serious and severe external threat, which feeds a sense of insecurity. This perception tends to divide other countries into two distinct categories, friends or radical foes, in a rather Manichean manner. The final element making up the country’s identity is its particular propensity for the theory and practice of political martyrdom (*Shahadat*)... This identity code has had a strong influence on the country’s foreign policy in the last 40 years” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 199—200].

In the reviewer’s opinion, this identity code of Shi’ite Iran should be referred to as the “Culture of Ashura” (*Farhang-e Ashura*) [Yurtaev 2018: 21].

Above all, the Supreme Leader has acted as the custodian of these principles. The “non-elected state actors such as the Supreme Leader and the Pasdaran provide a parallel diplomatic route addressed mainly to non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Hashd al-Sha’abi, the Houthi, and various Islamic — mostly Shi’a — militia in the Middle East and Central Asia. This differentiation grants the Islamic Republic an indisputable operational flexibility, allowing it to act on an articulated and differentiated tactical and strategic level” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 199—200].

Assessing the importance of the development of relations with Russia and China for Iran, the authors stressed, that in modern times “Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the new Russian regime under Lenin changed its foreign policy with respect to Iran”. After 1990, and even more so after 2000, relations between the two countries entered a new, more positive phase: “Since Putin took power, Russia has supported Iran in the international community against the pressures exercised by the West, particularly regarding the nuclear issue. In the Middle East, the two countries see Syria under Al-Assad as a common strategic ally”. Political and commercial relations between Iran and China “have solid historical origins” (the Silk Road, maritime links, and trade exchanges with the port of Canton). In modern

times, “[the] closeness between Iran and China reached its zenith during the Ahmadinejad administration (2005—2013). During the first mandate of Rouhani (2013—2017) Iran take timid steps towards Europe. However, Tehran’s general line, indicated by the Supreme Leader, remained staunchly both pro-Russian and pro-Chinese. Iran—China relations are experiencing an interesting new phase regarding China’s readiness to reduce its trade and financial ties to Iran as a result of the reimposition of US sanctions in 2018” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 193, 195].

It is important to note the conclusion of the authors, according to which the ranking of Iran (by population, economic, and territorial metrics) gives the country the opportunity to claim a role as an important regional actor in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, as well as in parts of Central Asia. “The aim, from this point of view, could be — at a minimum — to play the role of the leading country for the Shi’a populations residing in these three areas... This geographical position grants Iran the potential to step into the role of Eurasian mediator” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 169].

Chapter 7 concludes with some final remarks on Iranian domestic and foreign policy in relation to the new paradigm shift that began in 2017 following the election of the US President Donald Trump, and its consequences for Iranian domestic and foreign policy. These remarks aim to shed light on questions of whether the Islamic Republic can successfully sail through the turmoil and pressure coming from both Washington, and

opposition forces outside and inside the country: “The historical experiences in the modernization process of Iranians are pertinent: if, on the social level, the forces of modernity — combining secularism and progressive nationalism — manage to take advantage of the representative spaces provided by the hybrid political system of the Islamic Republic by promoting greater economic openness, this could lead to a process of democratisation in Iran. For a constructive democratisation transition, the presence of well-organised leadership in the opposition will be vital... If, on the contrary, the forces of tradition succeed in riding the waves of nationalism by combining it with populism and authoritarianism, using the existing authoritarian institutions in the Islamic Republic, this might create grounds for a period of military dictatorship resulting from a coup or populist authoritarianism in Iran” [Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2020: 217—218].

An obvious advantage of the monograph is the extensive source materials and the historiographic basis of the study. The primary sources consist of a set of official statements by leaders of the state and members of the government, speeches, addresses and interviews with politicians, government regulations, state and political parties’ programmes, numerous statistical reports, and more. One should also note the indubitable merit of the work in terms of the clarity and persuasiveness of the presentation, which is achieved, *inter alia*, by expounding upon the basic concepts and terms in both English and Persian.

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