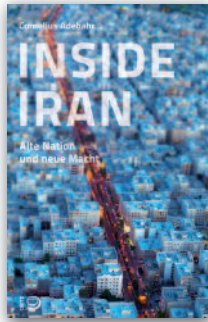


Cornelius Adebahr

Inside Iran. Alte Nation und neue Macht



Adebahr, Cornelius: *Inside Iran. Alte Nation und neue Macht*, Dietz Verlag, 2018, ISBN: 978-3-8012-0523-2, 248 pp.

The author of *Inside Iran* analyses from within an international framework the pressing social, political, cultural, historical and economic narratives that the country and its people are exposed to. However, Adebahr takes a unique angle by examining Iran by means of twelve frequently posed questions to him by European contemporaries. The questions – rather broad ones – deal with political, social, economic and historical aspects of the nation-state, for instance why the country is called Iran and not Persia, whether the political system resembles a democracy or a dictatorship, and what Iranian relations are like with other countries. He goes as far as to answer the question as to whether the country is a suitable tourist destination.

The author consistently stresses the Iranian idiom that nothing is ever white or black in Iran and makes it his central task to illustrate the contrasting viewpoints of the international community – foremost the E3 (Germany, Great Britain and France), the US and Israel – and Iranians. In essence, the book revolves around the central question first asked in the title: *Inside Iran: old nation, new power?* This question is closely related to topics concerning Iranian hegemonic and geostrategic ambitions, and the threat – or perceived threat – to regional and international security, such as the technological advancement made by Iran in the fields of nuclear sciences, which eventually led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the P5+1, or the construction of Iranian medium-range missiles.

Adebahr is not the first author to analyse the sociopolitical and economic developments of Iran with respect to other state actors, nor will he be the last one to do so. The relevance of the book lies in its topicality; the author goes to great lengths to incorporate the current nuclear deal developments, particularly the uncertainties caused by the retreat of the US. *Inside Iran* is to be regarded as an introduction to Iran and its sociopolitical context. The author manages to summarise complex questions, such as whether Iran is a democracy or a dictatorship, and to what extent Islamic principles are an essential part of the political system. Unsurprisingly, the author refers to his earlier idiom, noting that nothing is white or black in Iran and that the political system is a dynamic one that entails both authoritarian and democratic principles; and that the integral, national sovereignty of Iran is of higher importance than theological principles, meaning that Iran is foremost governed through pragmatic decisions. The incorporation of contemporary issues, such as Iran's regional role in Yemen and Syria, in combination with timeless cultural claims raised by the Iranian people makes it a mandatory read for all who are unfamiliar with the Iranian nation.

For readers who are academically familiarised with the country and its people, the aforementioned will, at best, result in a refreshing of one's knowledge; for all other readers it will amount to an insightful introduction to the nation, one that does not attempt to impose a black or white – if I may borrow the author's metaphor – narrative of Iran, but approaches the different fields of interest from the viewpoint of different state actors and international organisations. To name but one example, the diplomatic relationships of the various nation-states are analysed from within each state. Here, the author also incorporates the public sentiments in the countries of interest. Adebahr successfully presents both sides of the argument and thereby attempts to remain

objective and unbiased. While the twelve frequently posed questions are often expressed colloquially, the answers are a precise and in-depth illustration of the 'colourfulness' and diversity of Iran; Iran is neither democratic nor totalitarian, neither victim nor predator, neither east nor west.

Another strength of the book is the placement of contemporary topics in their respective sociohistorical contexts. Every conflict has roots and causes and the author makes it his task to illustrate the various potential sources of these conflicts and their development. Added value comes with the author not shying away from subjective remarks, notably the experience gathered while living for a number of years in Iran. The mixture between personal experience and academic facts make a stimulating read, even more so considering the politically sobering nature of some of the book's topics.

The book is written from a Western perspective for a Western audience, namely an audience that is ignorant of Iran but interested in acquiring more knowledge. Although the author attempts to familiarise the reader

with Iran without falling into the trap of 'Orientalism' as coined by Edward Said by normalising Iran and its inhabitants, the text is characterised by the differences between the so-called 'Western Camp' represented by the E3 and the US, including their allies such as Israel or recently Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

As prior mentioned, the author painstakingly attempts to remain unbiased; nonetheless the text is subject to framing. The author rightly points out that the 1979 revolution was not per se an Islamic revolution, since it enjoyed support from a whole range of political parties and ideologies, such as from the communist Tudeh-Party and the nationalists, who all contributed their part to the fall of the monarchy. Only after the revolution did the clergy under Ayatollah Khomeini fill the power vacuum left by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This raises the question as to whether the author is aware of this, and since he explicitly states that the revolution was not per se an Islamic Revolution, why does he continue to only use the term 'Islamic Revolution' rather than the holistic definition of the 'Iranian Revolution'?

*Keyhan Hatami*

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