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## Review Essay—Past and Present in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps: "The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards," "Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic"

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## REVIEW ESSAY

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### PAST AND PRESENT IN THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

*Heidi Elizabeth Lane*

*The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, by Annie Tracy Samuel. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2021. 302 pages. \$99.  
*Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, by Narges Bajoghli. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2019. 176 pages. \$22.

Although the body of scholarship about the past, present, and future of the Islamic Republic has grown exponentially in recent years, substantive work that examines the historical, political, and cultural trends within the Iranian security apparatus itself has been sorely missing. Two recent monographs begin to fill this void. *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, by historian Annie Tracy Samuel, and *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, by anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Narges Bajoghli, introduce us to important inner debates, historical and contemporary, that have shaped and continue to shape the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) organization and its members.

While each author applies different disciplinary tools and methodological frameworks, these monographs share two important commonalities. First, both authors rely almost exclusively on previously untapped primary sources in Persian.

Second, both Samuel and Bajoghli begin with the premise that understanding Iran's past and present and predicting its future are impossible without understanding the diverse perspectives of those who make up the vast bureaucracy that is the IRGC.

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Samuel's *Unfinished History* is based on thousands of pages of source material that the author obtained from the Holy Defense Research and Documentation Center (HDRDC), which serves as the IRGC's official historical archive. The documentation center contains dozens of volumes that were written (and continue to be revised) by multiple authors (to whom Samuel refers as "historians") and that cover a range of topics. Her focus is on the way in which the IRGC has understood and told the story of its role in the calamitous Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). Through her meticulous curation and translation of these sources, Samuel introduces us to numerous unresolved internal debates within the IRGC. These include what the IRGC believes about Iraq's invasion of Iran, what prompted the timing of the war, and how the organization documented its own evolution within the emerging postrevolutionary state. As Samuel explains in her introduction, the massive project undertaken by the HDRDC is about the past, but it provides insights into the future of the organization and, by extension, that of the Islamic Republic itself.

Samuel has undertaken a colossal task in trying to make sense of such a large and complex trove of primary sources. Subject-matter experts will be delighted by the listing of the sources alone, meticulously annotated in the book's extensive bibliography. In a modest twelve chapters, Samuel introduces internal controversies within the organization that remain unresolved among different generations of guards. Her objective is to give voice to these previously unknown IRGC "historians" who fought the war while simultaneously attempting to document its causes, battles, and political implications. Some of the personalities in the book are well-known, such as Mohsen Rezaee, who is not only an academic but a decorated veteran and former IRGC commander. Readers with a military background might conclude that these unique primary sources are akin to U.S. official unit and organizational "lessons learned" collections, but Samuel's analysis proves that the gargantuan mandate of the HDRDC and its decades-long project of documentation is in part to provide a justification for and exploration of the IRGC's existence and subsequent evolution.

Regarding some of the formative events during the war, throughout the book Samuel carefully explains several points of divergence from existing Western scholarship, contrasting such treatments with how those events are depicted in the documents themselves. While she does not accept all the historical arguments the IRGC historians make, she gently reminds the reader that her objective is to allow the sources (and their individual authors) to speak for themselves.

Some of the events the IRGC historians cover pertain to the period of the aftermath of the revolution, while other writers deal strictly with how Iranian soldiers fought on various battlefronts against Iraq. In chapter 3 ("Striking While the Revolution Is Hot"), Samuel discusses how the IRGC views the causes of the

Iran-Iraq War. According to the sources, the initial reason for the war was fear of the revolutionary spirit sparked by the Islamic Revolution; only subsequently was it about access to the Shatt al Arab or territorial control in Iran's Arab-majority Khuzistan Province (pp. 68–71).

We also learn about how the guards viewed their relationship with the Artesh (the regular Iranian forces) on the eve of the war (pp. 39–40). According to Samuel, from the very first days of the Islamic Republic the nascent IRGC constitution (or founding principles) had built into it cooperation with the Artesh. The objective of the IRGC, as a much weaker force, was to preserve the integrity of the Artesh, to preclude the complete disintegration of the state. Samuel also refers to the IRGC's attempts to mitigate violence between members of the Artesh and other revolutionary groups that grew out of the revolution (p. 69). According to HDRDC sources, members of the IRGC viewed themselves as reformers of the Artesh and arbiters among some of the most violent groups during the revolutionary transition.

Readers who take the time to digest *Unfinished History* will increase immeasurably their understanding of the IRGC and the unresolved historical questions that have prompted ongoing soul-searching within the organization.

*Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*, by Narges Bajoghli, is a short (162 text pages) but powerful monograph based on nearly a decade of on-the-ground research with current IRGC and Basij (Popular Mobilization Units) members in Iran. Ironically, Bajoghli encountered more roadblocks on the U.S. side than on the Iranian. Because her research involved “specially designated nationals,” she underwent a lengthy (more than a year) bureaucratic and legal process (aided by a legal team provided by New York University) to obtain U.S. government permission for her project (p. 19).

Ultimately, Bajoghli gained rare access to official Iranian media-production and -distribution institutions such as the Howzeh Honari (Cultural Center) and its publishing house, Sureh, where IRGC and Basij media producers churn out films, videos, and other forms of state propaganda. Many of Bajoghli's research subjects were Iran-Iraq War veterans who shared their unvarnished views about their role in the production of state propaganda, but they also included the youngest generation of members from the Basij. The Basij, whose volunteer and salaried members now number as high as 350,000, was originally an informal volunteer organization that grew out of the Iranian Revolution and now plays a formal role within the IRGC in matters of internal security.

Bajoghli's chapters flow like an essay. In an engaging first-person narrative, Bajoghli describes her personal interactions with prominent Iranian media producers of different generations. Even though Bajoghli was born and raised in Iran, she nonetheless is considered a *gheyr-e khodi* (outsider) in these circles.

The media producers (to whom the author refers by pseudonyms) share their frustrations, frank political views, and fears about the future of Iran. We learn about the dynamics among three different generations of media producers and how they view the impact of their cultural and intellectual property. In chapter 1, titled “Generational Changes,” Bajoghli cites conversations among older members of the IRGC media conglomerate, who openly admit that the media they produced, particularly during the calamitous Iran-Iraq War, were slanted deliberately to hide dissent and protest—an act that many now seem to question. Older-generation media producers have inoculated themselves against imbibing their own propaganda, but they have been so successful that the youngest members of the organization cannot distinguish between the *rasmi* (the “official” story) and the *vaq’-ey* (the real one) (p. 53). Bajoghli argues that, far from merely peddling propaganda, the media producers have devised a three-pronged solution; they attempt to obscure the origin of their product, while simultaneously attempting to create new ways to present their messages, to reach a more unifying form of nationalism that goes beyond political ideology (p. 7). The dialogue and cooperation between those who make the media—a category that includes ordinary Iranians, whose films are censored heavily—and those who attempt to shape it for regime purposes are part of the dynamic interaction among Iranians that Bajoghli brings to life.

In total, Bajoghli interviewed two hundred regime media producers, 150 of whom are Iran-Iraq veterans. The remaining fifty belong to what Bajoghli terms the “third generation” of media producers: young Basij members who do not remember the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Their older counterparts, on the basis of conversations with them, believe they also lack self-awareness and often are more conservative and rigid than their more-senior—and more-jaded—counterparts.

Bajoghli’s final chapters offer some key conclusions that easily could be overlooked by those who tend to view the Iranian state in monolithic terms. Her research makes clear that regime producers are themselves involved in an internal reset and are aware that their products have lost credibility with average Iranians, but that they nonetheless straddle the middle ground between the *nezam* (ideals of the regime) and Iranians’ growing discontent.

Despite the inclusion of Persian transliterations, which may not be familiar, neither Samuel nor Bajoghli overcomplicates her subject. Both books are accessible and will be engaging even for readers who possess little background on the IRGC. For those who are subject-matter experts, each author has included a rich bibliography. Samuel’s bibliography is broken into subsections that include full bibliographical citations of IRGC publications (all in Persian) by subject. Bajoghli also introduces an impressive array of primary sources, many of which also are explained in her footnotes. In addition to the printed sources she provides,

Bajoghli includes a trove of Persian-language films and documentaries that introduce readers to the basis for Iran's international reputation as a film powerhouse. Whether the reader is a media practitioner, a member of the military, or an interested civilian, Bajoghli's short book is a must-read, if only to understand better the complexity of the political space within which these media producers operate.

Together, these two books illuminate adaptive and agile strategies that the IRGC has used to sustain itself during internal and external periods of strain. Their timely publication shortly before the most recent wave of protests that have upended Iran over the past year will shred misperceptions about the IRGC and its historical past and present and offer new insights into how the larger Iranian security establishment may deal with imminent changes in Iranian society. Most importantly, Samuel and Bajoghli provide new insights into how such changes have altered and will continue to shape the IRGC itself.