

**NO CONQUEST, NO DEFEAT:  
IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

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**Ariane M. Tabatabai.** No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy. New York, Oxford University Press & Hurst Publishers, 2020. pp. 390.

One of the lasting outcomes of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 is the rising regional influence of Iran across the Middle East, which has been amplified by the dynamics of the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Since then, there are many academic and journalistic attempts to explain and understand Iran's policies towards the region. Tabatabai's *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* is an attempt to explain Iran's foreign and security policies, particularly towards the Middle East, by putting them into a historical and cultural context. A frequent contributor to the leading US think-tanks and recently appointed as a senior advisor position at the US Department of State, Tabatabai considered her study to 'sit at the intersection' of Iran's military history and its politics (p.6).

Contrary to a common assumption that security policies of Iran were fundamentally changed subsequent to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Tabatabai contends that in terms of security and defense policies, there are striking similarities and continuity, rather than rupture, between Islamic Republic and its predecessors. She argues that there has been a continuous 'national security thinking' prevailed among Iranian people that determined threat perceptions, national interests and security policies independent of the ruling elite and regimes. That security thinking is shaped by 'collective memory' of the Iranians throughout history.

The book consists seven chapters. In the first three chapters, the author bids to investigate principal historical events under the Qajars, and the Pahlavis that are supposed to shape Iranian security thinking. The remaining four chapters review foreign and security policies of Iran after the revolution and trace continuity of some key ideas and elements prevailed in the security thinking under the Islamic Republic and the previous regimes.

Tabatabai underlines three resilient and key ideas in the Iranian strategic thinking. First is 'a deep distrust of world powers and international order.' Frequent

and brutal interferences of great powers, particularly Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States in the Iranian affairs led to the 'distrust that exists and plagues Iranian collective memory' (p.298). For that reason, 'Iranians wished to undermine or eliminate foreign influence in their country' for centuries (p.299). Even Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was widely regarded as a loyal ally of the United States, was suspicious of Washington and sought 'strategic autonomy' in order to minimize foreign influence in his country (p.142), the author claims. Secondly, 'Iranians hold a deep belief in the need for self-reliance' (p.299). The suspicion with foreign powers led Iranians 'to stand on their own two feet.' The third idea of Iranian security thinking, according to Tabatabai, is 'constant defense.' Main argument of the book, as the title suggest, is that Iran do not seek conquest, but strives to avoid defeat, in the context of 'constant defense.' Accordingly, surrounded by an instable neighborhood and faced with continuous meddling of foreign powers, Iran should engage in constant defense and deterrence. Against this background, balancing great powers, building a deterrent capacity through military preparedness, including development of an indigenous arms industry, and cultivating non-state clients emerge as key elements of Iranian security policies.

In this regard, the author especially draws parallels between the Islamic Republic and the Pahlavi regime in terms of cultivating non-state actors, and projecting power outside the borders. Recalling Iranian policy in leveraging ties with the Iraqi Kurds and the Lebanese Shiites in the 1970s, Tabatabai, claims continuity in Iranian policy of cultivating non-state allies beyond its borders. She quotes Mojtaba Pashai, head of SAVAK's Middle East branch, 'we should combat and arrest the danger on the beaches of the Mediterranean so we do not have to shed blood on Iranian soil' (p.121), which is very reminiscent of the current Iranian leaders' words in terms of justifying Iranian interferences beyond its territories. The author argues that the more regime institutionalized the more it returned to continuing elements with regard to the security thinking (p.221). In this respect the Islamic regime built robust security organizations, restarted nuclear program, missile program and cultivated ties with non-state clients.

The book is well-documented but there are many repetitions, and chronological back and forth. Likewise, some elements are highlighted and discussed in detail, whereas some other continual elements, such as corruption and mismanagement, domestic vulnerabilities, the monopolization of decision-making, and the quest for regional power status are understudied.

What the author called 'Iranian security thinking' is actually an embodiment of the realist understanding of international affairs. Ultimately, 'Iran's strategic culture shapes its view of itself as striving for survival in a deeply anarchic international system' (p.21). Tabatabai comes to conclusion that strategic thinking will not change in the foreseeable future, and will continue explain major directions of Iranian foreign and security policies. Apparent changes in Iran's security policies, however, are explained either by pragmatism or the consideration of the exigencies of the theater. That realist understanding underpinned with pragmatism lead the reader to question, what is exclusively Iranian in the so-called Iranian security thinking.

Finally, having acknowledged 'disinformation and propaganda campaigns' as important parts of the toolkit of Khomeini's followers (p.153), Tabatabai warns

the reader not to take the regime's rhetoric at face value (p.13). However, she has not critiqued the idea of 'constant defense' and regional effects of Iranian security policies, which actually amplified the security dilemma in the Middle East and ended up with a 'constant warfare.'