



What is Iran? Domestic Politics and International Relations in Five Musical Pieces, by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 225 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1108844703

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In his book *What is Iran? Domestic Politics and International Relations in Five Musical Pieces*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2021, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam sets out to portray a picture of Iran that he hopes appreciates the complexity of Iran more than most depictions hitherto offered. To that end, he employs an aesthetic tool: a “playlist” of five musical pieces. The addition of that non-verbal emotive aspect, which he hopes would better convey the perhaps frustratingly layered nature of the country, is an auspicious innovation, not least because it can appeal not just to the logical but also to the aesthetic instinct of the reader with an interest in Iran and in pursuit of new insights.

The book comes in five main chapters, each starting with one song, as well as a prologue and an epilogue. He discusses the general contours of Iran as a state in the first chapter, the country’s

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domestic politics in the second, its major foreign relations in the third, and the hostilities between Iran and the US and Israel in the fourth. The fifth chapter is allocated to Iran's policy in the region, where the country is perceived to exert the most influence.

Each of the main chapters proceeds from one song (not all of which are Iranian, or have lyrics, by the way) into deeply personal insights into the country. But the choice of the musical pieces to convey socio-political insights is for the most part arbitrary. His particular arguments are in no way advanced by music in general, or his chosen pieces in particular. Also arbitrary is the arrangement of facts and insights about Iran and the Iranian government. Sometimes, Adib-Moghaddam's arguments seem to have been steered more by the musical pieces than by some topical or otherwise logical through line. There are, as well, so many snippets of thought and insight about Iran that the book becomes impossibly dense, the lack of an organizational structure only making it worse.

The book does not parse the Iranian people and politics in the straightforward fashion that the prospective reader may anticipate from the question in the title. Here are only two instance of recurring argumentation. To make a case for his pronouncement about the route that he says Iranian intellectuals have been taking, Adib-Moghaddam offers little evidence beyond a handful of references to books published in Iran (including, oddly, a translation of Michel Foucault's *The Will to Know*.) And he seems to be playing fast and loose with political terminology when he calls that trajectory a "libertarian" one. Also, he is not immune from the kind of "venom" that he says has afflicted some perceptions of Iran: "Revolutions intoxicate. They are mind-altering like drugs or an aged bottle of Glenmorangie single malt whisky"—his words.

Sometimes, the author himself seems to be taking precisely the “libertarian” view that he almost wishfully claims Iranian intellectuals have been adopting in more recent years. When he does take that view, Adib-Moghaddam fails to be particularly capable of explaining Iran. In spite of the author’s professions that an Islamic Shia perception of Iran is “biased,” the country continues to be dominated by a population that largely follows Shia Islam (to varying degrees) and that includes many who, even if not strictly practicing Shia Islam, revere its most important tenets. Precisely because Iran is complex, a fact that the author acknowledges more broadly, it would be misleading to adopt a particular view of the country, libertarian or otherwise, to explain it in its entirety, or to see its intellectuals as moving in one particular direction or another.

It suffices for the prospective reader to know as much that *What Is Iran?* is not a clear-cut introduction to the country in the classic sense of the word. It must have been already established that the book is not classic. As already mentioned, Adib-Moghaddam intends to deconstruct the very notion that Iran can be explained neatly. That general purpose may be served well by his unlikely choice of music, with the many impulses that melody and lyrics invoke in the listener. And that may be Adib-Moghaddam’s single success. More than once, Adib-Moghaddam mentions the term “critical Iranian studies,” to which he says he aspires. But, if anyone can possibly write a book about politics and be apolitical, Adib-Moghaddam is certainly not that person.

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At the same time, Adib-Moghaddam runs the risk of overstressing the complexity of the meaning (or meanings) of Iran. Iran is a vast country of 88 million people, of numerous ethnicities

and social and political inclinations; attempting to picture it analytically in its entirety may be beyond the opportunity that a single volume offers, and it may well be beyond the attention span of a reader even with the acutest interest in Iran.

The book too often veers too close to becoming—to use Adib-Moghaddam’s own wording—merely “a nod to the infinity of meanings that... [Iran] deserves.” At other times, he seems to be only paying lip service to the appreciation of that very infinity when he offers such reductive explanations about Iran as this one about the global significance of the 1979 revolution: “Against all odds, the Iranian revolution became one of the central events of contemporary global history [...] exactly because the utopian and romantic yearnings of the revolutionary generation in Iran were intermingled with a global zeitgeist prevalent among the combative ‘’68 generation’ everywhere”. But the author speaks without hubris (For the most part, anyway. At one instance he says we live at a time when “[t]he reality of our surrounding world can only be sufficiently accessed in some harassed pockets of society, such as universities”). Often, he takes on an amiable, conversational tone: “I have started with these personalities [Farabi, Avicena, others] to show how high the stakes are when we speak about Iran. Emperors, philosophers, poets, saints, prophets, even God are enmeshed in the Iranian narrative and in the inventions about the meaning of the country” (p. 25). Yet, his choice of words, political vantage point, and personal descriptions apart, Adib-Moghaddam manages in spite of all to advocate for a panoramic picture of Iran, even if he draws it in overly thick brushstrokes. The question though is: did it require 280 pages of facts and insight about Iran to paint just that picture?