

HOW ISLAM RULES IN IRAN: THEOLOGY AND THEOCRACY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC, BY MEHRAN KAMRAVA, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024, 354 pp.

Review By:

SUREN TADEVOSYAN*  

*PhD Candidate in Political Sciences, Lecturer, Faculty of International Relations,
Yerevan State University, Armenia*

When Iranian drones painted fiery trails above Tel Aviv in June 2025, what appeared at first glance as mere geopolitical brinkmanship was ultimately a performance scripted by the theological logic deeply embedded within Tehran's ruling apparatus. Mehran Kamrava's incisive work, *How Islam Rules in Iran*¹, deciphers precisely this theological coding underpinning Iran's often enigmatic political behavior. As Kamrava compellingly argues, Iranian statecraft is inseparable from the ideological foundations meticulously developed by the Shi'i clerical establishment. At a time when American and Israeli policymakers signal intentions for regime change and a forceful termination of Iran's nuclear ambitions, Kamrava's book becomes a critical intellectual toolkit, probing how theological doctrines shape and constrain Tehran's strategic calculations. This review contends that Kamrava's analysis is indeed a tour de force, illuminating with exceptional clarity the labyrinthine corridors of Iranian political theology. Yet, paradoxically, his very brilliance compels us to confront a disquieting puzzle: can theological doctrine alone unravel the tangled web of Iran's state behavior, especially under the relentless strain of existential external threats?

* Suren Tadevosyan's research interests include regional international relations, political theory, and geopolitics. His research covers topics such as foreign policy, regional security, and political systems, with an emphasis on the Middle East and South Caucasus. His academic interests also include critical geopolitics, political psychology, and the role of political mythology in international affairs.

Email: suren.tadevosyan@ysu.am Orcid iD: 0009-0005-8092-2359



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¹ Mehran Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Charting the Path to ‘Khameneism’

Kamrava structures his study chronologically and thematically, charting the transformation of Iranian Shi’ism from a source of revolutionary mobilization into a rigid framework for authoritarian consolidation. The book begins by outlining the institutional setting, examining the clerical establishment and the Qom seminary (*howzeh*) as the crucibles of the state’s ruling ideology. From there, it delves into the foundational jurisprudential debates, tracing the evolution of Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary conceptualization of the guardianship of the jurist (*velāyat-e faqīh*), which radically expanded the notion from a limited social trusteeship into a mandate for absolute political rule. Kamrava skillfully explains the process of interaction between complicated theological principles, such as governmental injunctions (*ahkam-e hokumatī*) and pragmatic expediency (*maslahat*). Through his analysis, it is clear that these complex theological principles acted not only as doctrinaire but adaptable tools to deal with the volatile requirements of political consolidation and governance.

The book’s central chapters chronicle the intellectually charged yet ultimately thwarted reformist upheaval of the 1990s. Here, Kamrava delves into the courageous and inventive efforts by religious intellectuals (*no-andishān*), including Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabā Shabestari, and Mohsen Kadivar, who endeavored to dismantle orthodox interpretive frameworks, champion dynamic *ijtihād* (independent jurisprudential reasoning), and articulate a compelling vision of “Islamic democracy.” The final section details the decisive triumph of the conservative orthodoxy, which Kamrava compellingly frames as “Khameneism”. He incisively defines Khameneism as “authoritarian in politics, and is paranoid about matters of security and therefore intolerant of any indication of dissent.”² Drawing extensively on Persian sources often absent from English-language scholarship, Kamrava delivers a uniquely rich portrayal of Iran’s theological and political landscape.

The scholarly contributions of *How Islam Rules in Iran* are substantial, and it specifically thrives through three conspicuous scholarly virtues. Its first major strength is its exceptional conceptual precision. Kamrava masterfully unpacks the dense theological architecture of the regime, clarifying for a wider audience the subtle yet momentous shifts in terms like *velāyat-e faqīh*. His analysis of its evolution from Khomeini’s initial formulation to Khamenei’s institutionalized “absolute” guardianship is the most lucid and rigorous available, revealing how jurisprudential adjustments have consistently served to expand and centralize state power.

² Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, 2.

He contends, with characteristic precision, that ideas are the regime's most indispensable strategic asset. This argument starkly challenges traditional realist orthodoxies that render Iranian policy as mere Machiavellianism draped in religious garb. Second, Kamrava provides an exceptional empirical basis by drawing on massive Persian publications and original translations of discussions within the clerical establishment in Iran. Its third and perhaps most significant contribution is the formulation of "Khameneism" as a distinct political-theological project. A particularly illuminating aspect of Kamrava's work is his incisive reflection on the dynamic and multifaceted role of religious legitimacy. He notably asserts:

"Starting with the second term of the Ahmadinejad presidency in 2009, "Khameneism" became politically and ideologically dominant in Iran. Today, whatever this Khameneism is meant to signify is far from uncontested. But its political, ideological, and jurisprudential dimensions rule over the country. The absolute velayat-e faqih, a position devised and first occupied by Khomeini, has found its full expression during Khamenei's long tenure as Iran's leader."³

Beyond the Seminary: Unsettled Questions

While Kamrava's granular focus on the theological intricacies of elite discourse is a significant scholarly achievement, it also opens avenues for further inquiry. Even though his account is eloquent in the manner in which religious doctrines explain and justify political power, we gain some insight when we look at a more general reflection of the interaction between doctrinal thinking and geopolitical requirements in a broader sense. The recent geopolitical conflict between Iran and Israel is a clear image of how external strategic pressure can influence and subtly affect the interpretation of doctrines. Here, there is a fine but vital analytical tension: is theology the primary determinant of the political practice, or is it a clever, rhetorical device of decisions that have strategic imperatives?

Additionally, while Kamrava's treatment of theological discourse is insightful and thorough, one wonders if further engagement with broader societal dynamics might enrich the work even more substantially. An example is the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests that amount to a daunting grassroots challenge to the theological legitimacy of the state and underscore an essential dialectic between top-down power and potential bottom-up opposition. The incorporation of a greater depth of analysis of these interactions could perhaps provide an interesting extra layer, shedding more light on the finer dialectic between authority and dissent in modern Iran.

³ Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, 296.

Lastly, further comparative speculation on theological systems of governance beyond the Iranian borders might be used to give the book greater theoretical impact. Juxtaposing Iran's theological-political mechanisms with other forms of ideological authoritarianism can illuminate instructive parallels and contrasts. It would also deepen our understanding of how ideology functions universally as both a justification and a limitation of state power.

Conclusion

The arguments by Kamrava are especially urgent given the recent events, especially the increasing geopolitical tension between Iran and Israel. Tehran's responses to external threats, including the missile exchanges of June 2025, lend profound credibility to Kamrava's portrayal of doctrinal reasoning as integral to state decision-making processes. Yet, these crises simultaneously pose complex questions about the adaptability and elasticity of Iran's doctrinal frameworks under severe international pressure. Can theological justifications, firmly embedded within Kamrava's meticulously documented intellectual landscape, continuously sustain political legitimacy amid rising existential threats and mounting international isolation?

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.