

Iran on the Move

ANNA ENAYAT &
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The Iran conference brought together a multidisciplinary group of social scientists, including demographers, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists, all specialized on contemporary Iranian studies. Convened by Asef Bayat, Anna Enayat, Soraya Tremayne, and Abbas Vali, the conference was sponsored by ISIM, Leiden University, the Iran Heritage Foundation, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK, and the University of Wales.

The point of departure for the conference was the exceptionally rapid change, which Iranian society has undergone over the past quarter or a century, especially in the social and cultural realm. A revolution, several years of war with Iraq, rapid population growth, and the growing impact of globalization (Iran, although dominated by an authoritarian and Islamist ruling establishment, is not a closed society) have all left their mark, contributing to the emergence of new social formations and new values. The result is a dynamic society whose constant and rapid changes have taken specialists—and the ruling establishment—by surprise.

Some aspects of the social, political, and cultural changes that are taking place in contemporary Iran—most notably politics and the position of women—have been covered extensively by scholars both inside and outside the country. Other, equally important dimensions, have either been overlooked, or have been dealt with in isolated pieces of research, which do not locate them in the broader context. There has been only paltry attention (beyond the very general, and often very ideological writings) of how monopolistic, and in many respects archaic political, economic, and juridical structures are attempting, or failing, to deal with the challenges posed by these changes. The aim of the conference, therefore, was to take a modest step towards filling this vacuum by drawing together some of the work on these various

The ISIM, on the occasion of the inaugural lecture of Professor Asef Bayat, and in collaboration with Leiden University, University of Oxford, and University of Wales (Swansea), organized a conference, Iran on the Move: Social Transformations in the Islamic Republic. The conference took place in Leiden from 27–28 April 2005.

strands of change and trying to make sense of it in an overall context.

The keynote lecture provided a sociological overview of the past 70 years emphasizing that social change has been shaped by long-term as well as post-Revolutionary trends. It pointed to the modification of social strata, the

emergence of new social classes, new social actors—particularly women, youth and new intellectuals—and new discourses. All of these transformations have created a basis for new thinking about the evolution of Iranian society, including political and philosophical discourses about the relationship between state and religion, development and democracy, the need for a re-interpretation of Islam among religious thinkers, and new reflection among secular intellectuals and some religious thinkers about the path to modernity.

The papers covered four main themes—demography and family, changing urban society, centre and periphery, and social classes and groups.

The session on demography and the family began with an analysis of the dramatic changes that have taken place in population structure and went on to explore topics such as changing family structure, marriage patterns, and divorce. The interface between religious ideology and women and youth, and the closing gap between rural and urban areas in practices such as the use of contraception and education for women were discussed. The role of the Iranian diaspora and its influence on the shift towards a child-centred model of family was raised. Micro studies of various parts of the country provided insights into the complexities of change and the need for an in-depth understanding of the processes, which ultimately dictate people's choices in matters such as reproduction, marriage, and family relations. The papers also highlighted the way paradoxes in official policies clash with customary practices and give rise to tension and vulnerability.

PARTICIPANTS

- **Djamchid Behnam** (formerly Professor at the Universities of Tehran and Paris)
Keynote Speech: "Introduction to Social Transformations in Post-Revolutionary Iran"
- **Amri Mehryar and Shirin Ahmad-Nia** (Population Studies & Research Centre, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology)
"Social Transformation, Women, and Demographic Change"
- **Vida Nassehi** (Freelance researcher, Paris)
"Changing Pattern of Iranian Family Home and Diaspora"
- **Soraya Tremayne** (University of Oxford)
"Health Politics: Global Demands and Local Realities"
- **Masserat Amir Ebrahimi** (Tehran University)
"Evolution of Public Spaces in Tehran"
- **Soheila Shahshahani** (Shahid Beheshti University)
"Music as an Arena of Social Expression and Dissent"
- **Nilufar Ashtari** (Brussels)
"Marmulak in the Iranian Cinema, and a Display of Photographs of Tehran from Iran"
- **Eric Hooglund** (Institute of Palestine Studies, Washington DC)
"Changing Rural Social Structure"
- **Kaveh Ehsani** (University of Chicago)
"The Nation and Its Periphery: Revolution, War and Provincial Urban Change in Iran"
- **Abbas Vali** (University of Wales at Swansea)
"Kurds and Power in Post-Revolutionary Iran"
- **Touraj Atabaki** (University of Amsterdam)
"Ethnicity and Pluralism in Post-Revolutionary Iran"
- **Arang Keshavarzian** (Concordia University)
"Out from Under the Shadow of Shamsol-Emareh: The Tehran Bazaar Since the Islamic Revolution"



Professor Asef Bayat (far right) at his inaugural lecture escorted by Rector Magnificus Prof. D.D. Breimer and the Pedel of Leiden University, 26 April 2005.

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The three papers on urban society focused on the use of space in public places as a forum for social expression and the social and political significance of cultural activity, particularly music and cinema. The evolution of public spaces in Tehran such as parks to create one's private space in public, mountains which are the sites of hiking groups on the weekends, football stadiums, cemeteries, and street celebrations reflected a move from the private home to the private public space. Cinema has emerged as a vehicle of social criticism and an effective medium for exploring the strategies people adopt in their daily negotiations to make sense of the myriad paradoxes in society. Music gives the public a voice for social expression and acts as a marker of change.

A third set of papers looked at centre-periphery relationships beginning with a theoretical exploration of the nation state, concepts of sovereignty, the power structures of the centre, and the problems they pose for the preservation of minority rights. Viewing the issue from a historical and comparative perspective, a second contribution drew attention to the relative absence of grass-roots ethnic tension in Iranian society arguing that this has been a factor that has helped the country maintain its territorial integrity. Nonetheless, tensions between ethnic communities and the state in post-Revolutionary Iran have meant that the call by ethnic minorities for equal social and political opportunities and equal cultural status has continued and has now become a part of the discourse of reform. The focus then shifted to rural-urban relationships and social dynamics in provincial cities. The rapid change that has been triggered by state policy in the structure of rural communities, the blurring of lines between the rural and the urban, and the impact of rural values in urban life were discussed. A debate on questions of approach and definition together with a plea rooted in a study of provincial towns in Khuzistan, for a consideration of concrete structures, and entrenched and contested interests at the local and the national levels, brought this session to a lively close.

The attention shifted to the analysis of a key structure of the urban mercantile classes, the Bazaar. At issue was how space has structured social relations in the Tehran Bazaar. Due primarily to state policies over the last quarter century the space of the Tehran Bazaar has become less conducive to producing long-term, crosscutting, and multifaceted interpersonal relations that were constitutive of its organization in the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, the transformation of space and social networks has undermined the historically significant mobilization capacity of the Tehran Bazaar.

The multidisciplinary conference testified to the value of working across disciplines and narrowly focused interests. Yet, at the same time, it brought to the fore how greater effort is required for practitioners of different disciplines to adjust to the language and concepts of others. The quality of reflection and analysis evident in the papers and discussion brought optimism for the future of social sciences in and on Iran.

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ISIM Cooperates in New Islam in Africa Project

KARIN WILLEMSE

The project Islam in Africa: Globalization and Moving Frontiers has been awarded funding from the NWO Programme "The Future of the Religious Past" (2006-2009). The project's main applicant was Prof. Dr Peter Geschiere (Amsterdam School for Social Science Research), with Prof. Dr Abdulkader Tayob (ISIM) and Dr Karin Willemse (Erasmus University Rotterdam) as co-applicants. Together with the latter, the research team exists of Dr. Guèye (Université Anta Diop, Senegal), Dr. Shamil Jeppie (University of Cape Town, South Africa), and Dr. José van Santen (Leiden University). The outline of this project was formulated during a three-month ISIM Atelier, which culminated in the international seminar Muslim Communities, Globalization, and Identities in Africa held in 2001 (see ISIM Newsletter 8, p.5). These meetings were followed up by the workshop on Islam and Public Life in Africa, held in September 2004 (see ISIM Review 15, p.55).

The new project focuses on the ways in which Muslims are engaged in the reconstruction of their identities in the context of different forms of glo-

balization and modernization. In Cameroon, Senegal, Sudan, and South Africa, which are taken as case studies in this project, these dynamics are most tangible in the struggles between nation states and—in particular—young Muslim citizens over the redefinition of the public sphere. The authority of religious institutions and the nation state to decide on how to interpret "Muslimhood" in relation to modernity is, in particular, highly contested, while the search for alternative identities is facilitated by access to the new media. The growing engagement of local Islamic communities in transnational networks circumventing the control of the nation state also impacts upon the way in which the public sphere is redefined. Flows of goods, information, and migrants influence local ideas about "tradition" and "modernity", while the state tries to influence processes that are increasingly outside their control.

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- **Ali Asghar Saeidi**
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- **Cristina Maria de Castro (CAPES Fellow)**
The Brazilian Muslim Community: A Study of its Identity Towards the New World
15 June – 1 October 2005

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- **Eric Roose**
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