

The Eighth Biennial Conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies

The Eighth Biennial Conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS), the largest international gathering of scholars in the field, was held in Santa Monica, CA, on 27-30 May 2010. There were sixty-four panels, each with three to four presenters addressing topics ranging from literature, Shi'ism and Sufism, to modernity, politics, women and gender. Among the ones that I found most interesting were "Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran," "Engagements with Reason: Shi'ism and Iran's Intellectual Culture," "Persian Literary and Cinematic Representations of a Society in Transition," "Shi'i Modernity, Constitutionalism, Elections, and Factional Politics," "Reconstructing the Forgotten Female: Women in the Realm of the *Shah-nama*," "Zones of Exploration: Society, Literature, and Film," "Re-Reading Iranian Shi'ism: International and Transnational Connections and Influence," "The Politics of the Possible in Iran," "Women's Issues in Modern Iran (in Persian)," "Discourses on Self And Other," and "Sufism: Poetry and Practice."

Also featured were classical Persian music presentations and additional roundtable discussions. One telling example of often overlooked aspects of Iranian society was "Waking Up the Colours: Candour and Allegory in Women's Rap Texts," a paper on Iranian women's rap music. Presenter Gai Bray, an ethnomusicologist, argued that unlike the common conception of rap as direct language, Iranian female rappers often use allegory to deal with difficult subject matters, such as rape and prostitution. In another memorable paper Babak Rahimi (University of California, San Diego) argued that Bushehr's commemoration of Ashura serves to solidify communal identity. The ritual ends by burning the stage upon which the performances took place, signifying a communal act of creative destruction through which new identities are reconstructed via building new ritual sites.

The recent film "The Queen and I" (2009), portraying the encounters of Farah Diba, former Queen of Iran, and Nahid Persson, a former member of communist opposition group during the 1979 Iranian revolution, was the subject of Nima Naghibi's (Ryerson University, Toronto) paper. Naghibi argued that both the filmmaker and the former queen (who still considers herself the queen) engage in two different forms of nostalgia that eventu-

ally merge into “a type of defanging that marks the exilic condition.” The filmmaker’s nostalgia is of a “reflective” kind, characterized by an indulgence in loss and reflection on broken dreams; the Queen’s nostalgia is better characterized as a “restorative” one. Naghibi’s use of nostalgia and memory as categories of analysis was quite refreshing.

This conference was marked by a controversy over the submission of a paper by an Israeli scholar. Israeli scholars have presented papers at past conferences, but this time it was different: he was from Ariel University of Samaria, which is in the Occupied Territories. Dozens of academics affiliated with academic institutions in North America, Europe, and Israel, including well-known names such as Noam Chomsky, signed petitions urging ISIS to disinvite the scholar or at least have him present as independent scholar and not as affiliated with Ariel University. One of the widely circulated web petitions notes that this university is built on illegally confiscated Palestinian land and is not recognized under international law. Therefore its existence is in violation of numerous United Nations resolutions and the Geneva Convention. By hosting this scholar, it is argued, ISIS “shows disregard for international law” and “effectively lends legitimacy to the brutal military occupation of a people’s homeland. By recognizing this ‘university,’ ISIS is endorsing the illegal and immoral occupation of Palestine.”

In a public statement (available on <http://iranian-studies.com>) on “Scholarly Autonomy and Academic Civility,” ISIS president Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi emphasizes the diversity of scholarly participation in ISIS and the deep concern of the society’s current council for the Palestinians: “While respecting the ethical position of colleagues who have called for the exclusion from our conference of a scholar teaching at an institution illegally established on confiscated Palestinian land, as an academic society ISIS does not regulate the institutional affiliations of its members.” He adds that submitted papers pass through a “blind” screening process and impartial peer-review and that accepted papers are selected based on their scholarly merit alone. The selection of this paper, therefore, should not imply the recognition of that institution’s legitimacy. The statement concludes: “Scholarship is not politics by other means, and scholarly societies cannot be substituted for political parties and political campaigns.”

The panel in which this paper was presented was well attended, although inclusion of three non-scholarly papers seemed odd. The session featured “Owning the Story of Our Persecution: The Role of Human Rights Efforts in Helping the Baha’is of Iran to Claim Real Victory,” “Zoroastrian

Religion and Modernity,” and “Carving a Dialogue between Muslims and Jews.”

The conference also included a plenary session entitled “Boundaries between Scholarship and Activism” to discuss the rift among ISIS membership over this controversial issue. This session was a frank discussion on the intertwining of politics and scholarship. Those participants who objected to including a paper from an illegally built institution of higher learning clearly stated their points, while ISIS president and council members defended their decision. The conclusive consensus seemed to be that there cannot be any agreement on this controversial issue. Just raising this issue, however, helped clarify some of ISIS’ constitutional issues and allow it a greater growth and maturity. It seems, perhaps, this could be a successful model for future international conferences with similar concerns.

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