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.

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.

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 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.
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 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 political and social 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.

ISIM Cooperates in New Islam in Africa Project

Karin Willemse

The project Islam in Africa: Globalization and Mov- ing 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. Gueye (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 globalization 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 surrounding the control of the national 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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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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- Kamran Asdar Ali
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- Armando Salvatore
  Approaches to Religion and Politics from Axial Age Theory to Multiple Modernities
  1 June – 31 July 2005

- Ali Asghar Saedi
  The Development of Islamic Charities in Modern Iran
  15 August – 15 October 2005

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

Affiliated Fellows:
- Anwar Alam
  Accommodating Religion in Social Transformations
  1 – 15 September 2005

- Eric Roose
  Mosque Design and Identity in The Netherlands
  From 1 July 2005