



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Iranian Studies Unit

Conference

Institutions and Politics in Iran

August 16-18, 2021

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Online Registration



zoom

About the Conference

The Iranian Studies of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will hold its annual conference from 16-18 August 2021. This year's conference will consider the topic of *Institutions and Politics in Iran*.

The establishment of the Islamic Republic and the adoption of a new constitution, amended in 1989, led to the creation of Iran's current political system that constitutes elected and non-elected institutions. Along with the three branches of government, namely the executive, legislative, and judicial, Islamic Republic's Constitution established new and innovative institutions such as the Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of Jurist), the Guardian Council, and the Expediency Council. Juxtaposed on these complex institutional arrangements are multiple informal and semiformal institutions, such as parastatals and foundations (*bonyads*) and factional networks ranging from those wishing to reform the system to those seeking to preserve the original principles of the revolution.

The three-day conference, featuring a selection of scholars of Iran, will examine the institutional makeup of the Islamic Republic and the power arrangements that characterize the Iranian political system. Placing the birth and evolution of the Islamic Republic within a broader context of Iranian history, the conference examines the changes and transformations that various Iranian political institutions have undergone since the state was first established more than forty years ago. Specific focus will be on changes to the institutions of the presidency, the Revolutionary Guards, the *Majles*, the judiciary, the office of the Velayat-e Faqih, and the foreign policy establishment. Conference participants include Shahram Akbarzadeh, Wilfried Buchta, Abdolrasool Divsallar, Hamideh Dorzadeh, Alireza Eshraghi, Shireen T. Hunter, Mehran Kamrava, Arang Keshavarzian, Amir Mahdavi, Mahmoud Pargoo, and Alireza Raisi.

Timetable

Day One

Monday, August 16, 2021

Register



ID: 832 2335 4552

<p>17:00-18:30 (Doha time)</p> <p>14:00-15:30 (GMT)</p> <p>10:00-11:30 (EDT)</p>	<p>Opening Remarks</p> <p>Chair: Mehran Kamrava</p> <p>Shireen Hunter</p> <p>The Islamic Republic of Iran in Historical and Institutional Perspectives: Ruptures and Continuities</p> <p>Arang Keshavarzian</p> <p>Protests, Participation, and Representation in an Improvisational Polity</p> <p>Alireza Eshraghi</p> <p>The Evolution of the Revolution Guards</p>
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Day Two

Tuesday, August 17, 2021

Register



ID: 895 4033 3841

17:00-18:30 (Doha time)

14:00-15:30 (GMT)

10:00-11:30 (EDT)

Chair: Mehran Kamrava

Wilfried Buchta

An Institution in Permanent Flux: Iran's Presidency from 1980 to 2021

Alireza Raisi

The Majles: Role, Composition, and Significance

Amir Mahdavi

The Role of the Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics

Day Three

Wednesday, August 18, 2021

Register



ID: 825 9269 5839

<p>10:00-11:30 (Doha time) 7:00-8:30 (GMT) 3:00-4:30 (EDT)</p>	<p>Chair: Mehran Kamrava</p> <p>Abdolrasool Divsallar: The Foreign Policy Establishment in Iran</p> <p>Shahram Akbarzadeh and Mahmoud Pargoo: Elections in Iran: Rewards and Risks for Authoritarian Rule</p> <p>Hamideh Dorzadeh: Islamic Republic's Judiciary in Transition</p>
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Participants

Abstracts



Shahram Akbarzadeh

Convenor of the Middle East Studies Forum at Alfred Deakin Institute (Deakin University).

Elections in Iran: Rewards and Risks for Authoritarian Rule

This paper looks at the rewards and risks that popular elections present for authoritarian rule in Iran. The rewards include providing the regime with domestic and international legitimacy, enabling it to shift the blame of its policy failures on the opposition, and serving as a safety valve by preventing the radicalization of the opposition. However, these benefits are intertwined with associated challenges such as the possibility of the cascading failure of the political institutions following the opposition's victory. In this paper, we suggest that elections are a mix of risks and rewards for the regime. As a result, the regime finds it necessary to navigate between these two poles and carefully curate elections to serve its authoritarian rule. Every election is a contest to maintain a balance in a continuum of benefits and challenges, and ultimately optimize the benefits. The paper examines the way the ruling regime seeks to maximise the public relations value of elections and extract political legitimacy from this exercise, while mitigating risks of political upheaval and disruptions to ensure regime continuity.



Wilfried Buchta

Berlin-based independent scholar specialized on Iran and Iraq. Author of the seminal study *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, he recently launched his bilingual website that includes extensive analysis of Iran and broader Middle East affairs in English and German.

An Institution in Permanent Flux: Iran's Presidency from 1980 to 2021

One year after the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979, the first presidential elections were held in March 1980. The resulting winner, Abolhassan Banisadr, assumed an office that the new constitution of Iran, drafted in November 1979, elevated to formally the second most important institution of the new revolutionary regime-after the revolutionary leader. And even more than the parliament, which was also elected by the people, the presidential office most strongly symbolized the republican element in Iran's system of power. Since the regime's leadership was always concerned to derive the legitimacy of the system as much from the will of God as from popular sovereignty, presidential elections were immensely important.

The office of the president had few powers during the Khomeini decade and remained largely a ceremonial office. This changed with Khomeini's death in 1989, when the duumvirate of Khamenei and Rafsanjani decided to expand his powers considerably. Since that time, the relationship between the two heads of state, the revolutionary leader, and the president, has been characterized by two poles: cooperation and competition. This presentation will show the responsibilities of the presidency, the transformations it has undergone since 1980, and the factors that determine the relationship between the revolutionary leader and the president, which is often fraught with tensions.



Abdolrasool Divsallar

Co-leads the Regional Security Initiative (RSI) at the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute (EUI). Divsallar is also an Adjunct Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate School of Università Cattolica (ASERI) in Milan. Prior to this, he was a Policy Leader Fellow at the EUI School of Transnational Governance, and Director of the National Resource and Development Program (2009-2015) in Tehran. Divsallar holds a PhD in political science from the University of Tehran. His main research interests include Iran's defense and foreign policy, Iran's relations with great powers, and regional security architecture in the Persian Gulf. He has published extensively on these topics including his latest edited book *Stepping Away from the Abyss: A Gradual Approach Towards a New Security System in the Persian Gulf* (2021).

Iran's Foreign Policy Establishments

The 1979 Islamic Revolution profoundly changed Iran's foreign policy direction while also overhauling its institutions and decision-making cycles. The Islamic Republic's foreign policy establishment is often explained as complex and opaque, where ambiguity governs the functioning of agents, structures, and processes. An uncommon institutional evolution that goes beyond constitutional settings, combined with challenges to access viable insider information, have made it difficult to investigate patterns of decision making in Islamic Republic. I argue that the privileged access of elites to resources, legal rights, and information, combined with the country's constant state of emergency due to its strategic environment, have influenced the evolution of foreign policy institutions in Iran. The paper continues by presenting a role-based analysis, which I believe serves better to break down the analytical complexity of foreign policy institutions. Such an approach also helps explain the principal role of institutional development in Iran's foreign policy establishment. Lastly, I explain decision/action channels among institutions and the ways they interact with one another. I show that contrary to common assumptions, in Iran bureaucratic factors can indeed serve as major constraints in implementing leadership decisions in the foreign policy arena.



Hamideh Dorzadeh

Coordinator of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research.

Islamic Republic's Judiciary in Transition

With the advent of the Islamic Republic, the judiciary became an important institution to enforce Khomeini's vision of an Islamic government. The 1979 Constitution established a judicial system based on sharia law to pursue its goal of Islamization. This paper discusses the transformations that the Islamic Republic's judiciary went through in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. It argues that the judiciary has been used as a political tool to repress any dissent within the system and that it has consistently worked to strengthen the position of the Supreme Leader instead of safeguarding the rights of the Iranian public. While efforts have been made by the different judiciary heads to respond to some of the public criticisms raised against the judiciary – namely corruption, inadequate performance, and a mounting number of cases – many of the reforms sought by the judiciary heads have not been implemented. The institution, which acts as the primary arm of the state in its legal suppression of dissent, continues to struggle with corruption and inefficiency.



Alireza Eshraghi

Director of projects for the Middle East/North Africa division of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and a Visiting Scholar at the University of North Carolina's Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies. His articles and essays have appeared in various international media such as *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Guardian*, *Al-Jazeera*, and *CNN* as well as Persian and Arabic media. He served in senior managing and editorial positions for some of the most progressive publications during Iran's Reform Era (1997-2003). Eshraghi is an alumnus of the Duke-UNC Rotary Center for International Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution. Formerly, he was a visiting scholar at the Institute of International Studies (IIS) and a research fellow at the Religion, Politics and Globalization Program at UC Berkeley.

The Evolution of the Revolution Guards

Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) has dominated almost every facet of Iran's government. The organization has grown from an agile task force, funded shortly after the 1979 revolution, to a multi-dimensional entity whose hands extend throughout the Middle East and every domestic sector of Iran. Unlike scholarships that offer a deterministic explanation for this rapid expansion, our argument is that the structural and functional advancement of the IRGC is associated with the circumstances that call the organization to step into new areas of government. Consistent with its constitutional mandate, the IRGC has been invited to intervene in the crisis perceived as a threat to the achievements of the Islamic Republic. This principle has been applied to a broad set of issues, ranging from warship in neighboring countries to food assistance to the poor during the pandemic. An analytical trajectory of this dynamic in the two areas of domestic politics and economy will be laid out in this presentation.



Shireen T. Hunter

An honorary fellow at the Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. From 2005 to 2007 she was a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Center. From 2007 to 2014 she was a Visiting Professor and from 2014 to July 2019 Research Professor. From 1998-2005 she was the director of Islam program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies CSIS (Washington, D.C.) 1998-2005 and from 1983-1993 the Deputy Director of its Middle East Program. 1983-1993. From 1994-to 1997 she was a Senior Visiting Fellow and Director of the Mediterranean Program at the Center for European Policy Studies (Brussels). From 1965 to 1979 she was a member of Iran's Foreign Service serving in London and in the United Nations European Office, Geneva. She is the author of 17 books and monographs and editor/contributor of 12 books and monographs. Her latest publications include: *Arab-Iranian Relations: Dynamics of Conflict and Accommodation* (2019), *The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution* (2017), *God On Our Side: Religion and International Affairs* (2017), *Iran Divided: The Historical Roots of Iranian Debates On Identity, Culture and Governance in the Twenty- first Century* (2014).

The Islamic Republic in Historical and Institutional perspective: Ruptures and Continuities

The establishment of the Islamic Republic marks a major break with Iran's historical and institutional political life. The IRI ended the tradition of monarchy, changed the basis of political legitimacy from the will of the people to God, and has tried to reshape Iran's identity according to strict and reductionist version of Islam, and has campaigned hard against Iranian nationalism and its ancient traditions. Moreover, unlike Iran's previous government, the IRI is an ideological political system based on an ideologized and politicized version of Islam. The IRI has established institutions dedicated to the revolutionary goals and safeguarding the revolutionary elite which competes with traditional institutions. It has thus given rise to a double headed government. In external affairs, the IRI has prioritized certain universalist and revolutionary goals, such as Muslim unity and anti-imperialist struggle, at the expense of Iran's national interest. Thus, the IRI marks a major departure from Iran's past. However, the IRI has not succeeded in achieving all its objectives. Iran's national sentiments have proven more resilient and for practical reasons the IRI has had to retain some of the old institutions such the parliament and various ministries.



Mehran Kamrava

Head of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research and is also Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar. He is the author of a number of journal articles and books, including, most recently, *A Concise History of Revolution* and *Inside the Arab State*.



Arang Keshavarzian

Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University. He is the author of *Bazaar and State in Iran: The Politics of the Tehran Marketplace* (Cambridge University Press) and co-editor with Ali Mirsepassi of *Global 1979: Histories and Geographies of the Iranian Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He has published articles on the political economy and history of Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the broader Middle East in journals including *Politics and Society*, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Geopolitics, Economy and Society*, and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. He is currently a member of the editorial committee of Middle East Report and MERIP.

Protests, Participation, and Representation in an Improvisational Polity

The standard when discussing protests in Iran is to focus on how likely it is that they will lead to the demise of the Islamic Republic. Given the regular occurrence of protests and the persistence of the Islamic Republic, this essay suggests that it is more productive to situate protests as part of the foundational qualities of the Islamic Republic and conceptualize them as extra-intuitional, rather than necessarily anti-regime. To develop this argument, I adopt a polity-centered approach that places state and society, or regime and citizens, in a dialogical interaction, the roots of which lie in mass revolution characterized by two key features of mass participation and elite factionalism. Participation and factionalism, along with the strategies to constrain them, are the immediate ingredients for the improvisational nature of Iran's polity. Rather than approach waves of protests as "reflecting" a crisis or the true attitudes of the state and society, this essay insists on recognizing protests as "responses" to deeper and a more specific crisis of representation. This is a crisis born out of the conundrum of rulers seeking to build control despite participation and factionalism in variegated but engaged citizenry.



Amir Mahdavi

PhD candidate in comparative politics at the University of Connecticut. In continuation of his 12-year experience as a journalist in Iran, his analyses about political and economic affairs of the country have appeared in *The Guardian*, *Al monitor*, *Newsweek*, Persian media and frequently in *The Washington Post*. Mahdavi holds two master's degrees in history and Middle Eastern Studies from Brandeis and Harvard University and has worked as scholar at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies and Harvard Institute for Quantitative Social Science.

The Role of the Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics

Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) has dominated almost every facet of Iran's government. The organization has grown from an agile task force, funded shortly after the 1979 revolution, to a multi-dimensional entity whose hands extend throughout the Middle East and every domestic sector of Iran. Unlike scholarships that offer a deterministic explanation for this rapid expansion, our argument is that the structural and functional advancement of the IRGC is associated with the circumstances that call the organization to step into new areas of government. Consistent with its constitutional mandate, the IRGC has been invited to intervene in the crisis perceived as a threat to the achievements of the Islamic Republic. This principle has been applied to a broad set of issues, ranging from warship in neighboring countries to food assistance to the poor during the pandemic. An analytical trajectory of this dynamic in the two areas of domestic politics and economy will be laid out in this presentation.



Mahmoud Pargoo

Research fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute (Deakin University) and the lead author of *Presidential Elections in Iran: Islamic Idealism since the Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Elections in Iran: Rewards and Risks for Authoritarian Rule

This paper looks at the rewards and risks that popular elections present for authoritarian rule in Iran. The rewards include providing the regime with domestic and international legitimacy, enabling it to shift the blame of its policy failures on the opposition, and serving as a safety valve by preventing the radicalization of the opposition. However, these benefits are intertwined with associated challenges such as the possibility of the cascading failure of the political institutions following the opposition's victory. In this paper, we suggest that elections are a mix of risks and rewards for the regime. As a result, the regime finds it necessary to navigate between these two poles and carefully curate elections to serve its authoritarian rule. Every election is a contest to maintain a balance in a continuum of benefits and challenges, and ultimately optimize the benefits. The paper examines the way the ruling regime seeks to maximise the public relations value of elections and extract political legitimacy from this exercise, while mitigating risks of political upheaval and disruptions to ensure regime continuity.



Alireza Raisi

Lecturer at Northeastern University. His research focuses on comparative political economy, public policy, religion and politics, and foreign policy analysis.

The Majles: Role, Composition, and Significance

The Iranian Parliament, *Majles Shurayeh Islami* (Islamic Consultative Assembly), is one of the key elected institutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to legislating laws, *Majles* channels factional shifts into Iran's political regimes. This paper explores the significance of the *Majles* in the post-Khomeini era. In doing so, the paper explains the ebbs and flows of a transformation in the role of the *Majles* in recent decades. It describes the chain of events to trace the process of this transformation. By doing so, the paper demonstrates how this chain of events motivated Iran's ruling elite to devise formal institutional channels and informal networks to constrain the *Majles* in exercising its role in legislation and oversight. It situates the evolution of the *Majles* role in a much broader power struggle over the future of the Islamic republic. The paper argues that this struggle is consolidating the power of the hardliner wing of the Iranian ruling elite and gradually undermining the *Majles*' constitutional authority over legislation and oversight.