The Center for Middle Eastern Studies Hosts “Iran Today” Conference

The Center for Middle Eastern Studies hosted a one-day conference on the theme of “Iran Today” on April 26, 2008. The conference was funded by a UISFL grant awarded by the Department of Education to Rutgers CMES for the promotion of Iranian Studies. It featured some of the most prominent scholars of Iran working on the areas of Iranian identity, Iranian visual and dramatic arts, human rights, and international relations.

The panelists were:
Ahmad Ashraf (Columbia University), Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet (University of Pennsylvania), Shouleh Vatanabadi (New York University), Majid Mohammadi (Princeton University), Mahmood Karimi Hakak (Siena College), Peter Chelkowski (New York University), Mehrangiz Kar (Wellesley College), Farhad Khosrokhavar (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris), Trita Parsi (President of the National Iranian American Council), and Hamid Zangeneh (Widener University).

The panel on Iranian identity began with Ahmad Ashraf’s clear and insightful analysis of the different perspectives on Iranian national identity, which he classified into three types: romantic, post-modernist, and historical perspectives. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet demonstrated emphatically how the notion of national identity has been affected by the changes in the borders of Iran during recent centuries. Shouleh Vatanabadi analyzed the issue of Iranian identity in the literature of the Iranian diaspora by means of a comparative review of three cultural texts by female authors.

The panel on Iranian visual and dramatic arts began with Majid Mohammadi’s account of the politics of censorship in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and how this may have determined the genres of films that have been produced. If there could have been a danger that the attention given
to state control might downplay the creative contributions of Iranian artists, this was dispelled by Mahmood Karimi Hakak’s personal account of his experience of returning to teach and direct drama students in Iran in the face of state censorship. Karimi Hakak gave a very moving account of the commitment and determination of Iranian drama students in the face of such challenges. Peter Chelkowski demonstrated with the use of his extensive slide collection the changing images of the revolution as seen in posters and large-scale murals in Tehran.

The panel on human rights began with Mehrangiz Kar’s review of the issue of Women’s rights in Iran during the twentieth century, focusing on the situation of activists in the face of the pressure and limitations imposed by the legal system. Farhad Khosrokhavar examined the changing culture among the youth in post-revolutionary Iran, with a focus on the most traditional city in Iran, the seminary city of Qom.

The panel on international relations was memorable in particular because of a tour de force analysis by Trita Parsi of the surprisingly complex relationship between Iran and Israel and its impact on Iran-US relations in the context of recent geopolitical shifts in the Middle East. Hamid Zangeneh presented an overview of the history of Iran-US relations during the past thirty years, and offered his view of what the future might bring under an administration led by Barack Obama, who is known in Persian as “U-ba-ma”, meaning “He is with us”.

The large and diverse audience included Darius Shahnifar, who is running for the 21st Congressional District seat in Albany, New York, in November. Shahnifar observed the conference from early morning and enjoyed the dinner and the entertainment following the day’s activities which was provided by the Chakavak Ensemble.

**Human Rights**
Panelists (Left to Right):
Dr. Kar
Dr. Khosrokhavar

**International Relations**
Panelists (Left to Right):
Dr. Parsi
Dr. Zangeneh

Sylver Gregory-McGriff, a student who had just traveled to Iran, was also one of the many guests who enthusiastically engaged the panelists with her questions. Matt Kaelin, a photographer who has been putting together a collection of pictures called the “Iranian Diaspora,” was present to take part in the lectures, both as an artist and as a scholar in pursuit of his project. Also present were members of a reconciliation group who were on their way to Iran for meetings designed to promote better mutual understanding between Americans and Iranians, as well as faculty and graduate students from Princeton University, The College of New Jersey, and Montclair State University among others.
Message from the Director, Dr. Jawid Mojaddedi

Summer is always the time for changes at academic institutions, and there have been a number of significant changes at CMES which I am proud to announce to you. Following the interim period after the end of Dr Amirahmadi’s tenure as Director and exit from Rutgers CMES activities last Fall, I started my term as Director on July 1st, 2008. We have been extremely fortunate that this has coincided with a change in Administrator for the Center, with the arrival of the highly accomplished Ms Aretha Oliver Crayton, whose presence has already made a tremendous impact. Among many other things, her arrival has facilitated the effective coordination of administrative activities with our very talented staff members Ms Shehnaz Abdeljaber and Ms Bahareh Sehatzadeh (who designed this newsletter).

Beyond the Center, there have been many positive developments in Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers thanks to the unprecedented level of support received from Acting Executive Dean Ziva Gallili and Dean of International Programs Joanna Regulska. The interview with my colleague Professor Peter Golden in this issue of the newsletter details the creation of the Department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures, which will be chaired by Professor Richard Serrano, a long-term member of the MES faculty at Rutgers. The university is also proud to welcome Professors Zakia Salime and Tarek Kahlaoui to the Departments of Sociology and Art History respectively, following on from the recruitment last year of History professor Toby Jones. We look forward to welcoming at the Center in the coming months all new faculty at Rutgers working on the Middle East.

Regarding the activities of the Center, the highlight last year was the conference on contemporary Iran, which was funded by a UISFL grant for Iranian Studies received from the Department of Education (a report about the conference is included in this newsletter).

In the coming months, we look forward to holding many more events, including a major public lecture series on Islamic and contemporary Arab Studies, as well as cultural events. It is through the continued support of our generous donors that we will be able to organize such events next year. A new initiative related to these activities is the Committee for Community Supporters of CMES which plans to meet on a regular basis, beginning August 12th. This initiative has been made possible by the energetic efforts of our community liaison Mr Hany Mawla, Counselor at Law, who continues to volunteer selflessly a great deal of his time in his efforts to help CMES flourish. In addition to the lecture series and cultural events, we will be holding a second conference funded by the Department of Education grant for Iranian Studies, to examine the Iranian revolution on its 30th anniversary and the impact it has had both on Iran and the wider Middle East. At the Center, our Outreach Coordinator, Ms Shehnaz Abdeljaber, is working energetically to organize these meetings and events, and would be happy to receive further proposals.

The next year promises to be a period of revitalization for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, as we work collectively to enable it to achieve its full potential at Rutgers. We hope that you will join us in our various endeavors.

The Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers University is pleased to announce the conference

“THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: THIRTY YEARS”

FEBRUARY 7- 8, 2009
New Brunswick, New Jersey

CALL FOR PAPERS DEADLINE: OCTOBER 15, 2008
Interview with Dr. Peter Golden, Academic Director of CMES

You were set to retire in 2008. Why did you choose to accept the position?

After 38 years as a professor in the History Department at Rutgers-Newark, where I introduced courses on Central Asia, the History of Islamic Civilization, the Ottoman Empire, the Modern Middle East, the History of Iran, among others, I had planned to retire at the end of the Spring/2008 semester. Having been involved for many years with the Program and then Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the New Brunswick campus and having served most recently on a committee that reviewed the workings of the center, when Dean Ziva Galili asked me to become the Academic Director of the Center, it was very hard to say no.

President McCormick had earlier highlighted International Studies as one of the critical areas of development for Rutgers. Clearly, this would be a very promising time for Area Studies and in particular Middle Eastern Studies and I have put off retirement for a few years. The immediate reasons for the interest in the Middle East, of course, are self-explanatory. One has only to look at the daily newspapers. However, as one who largely works in the medieval period, although my teaching has covered both medieval and modern, I know that one has to view any region holistically. In our scholarly work we cannot be driven by today’s headlines. We should not ignore them, but we cannot let them dictate our research. The Modern Middle East is the sum of all of its past parts (this is my historian’s bias speaking), not its prisoner — I might add — but we should seek an understanding of this very complex region from all aspects.

The Center, with its multidisciplinary major, is a perfect place to do this. Moreover, with outstanding recent hires in Middle Eastern Studies, such as Toby Jones in History and Tarek Kahlouli who will teach courses in the Art History and History departments, Rutgers has made a serious commitment to further develop a national voice in this area. This has already found expression in the US Department of Education grant to enhance Iranian Studies that the Center was awarded in 2007. As part of that grant, the Center hosted in April of this year, what by all accounts was a hugely successful one-day conference on “Iran Today” that brought together some of the leading scholars of Modern Iran. Next year, in connection with the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the Center plans to host an even larger conference on this theme. We are also exploring the creation of an Institute devoted to Iranian Studies and are working to build up our library holdings in Persian/Farsi.

What is your vision for further expansion of the Center’s main programs?

Iran, of course, is not the only focus of the Center’s activities and plans. We intend to equally expand our Contemporary Arab Society Program and Islam in the Contemporary World Program and to further develop Turkish Studies. A first step in the latter direction has been the introduction of a new course in Intermediate Turkish. The support of the New Jersey Turkish community has been crucial here. We hope to go further and eventually provide courses in Advanced Modern Turkish and Ottoman Turkish. The programs in Modern Arabic and Persian have been growing steadily, one could even say dramatically.

Why was the Department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures created and what sort of relationship will this department have with the CMES?

The demand for Arabic is particularly high and new sections had to be created this spring to meet it. With language instruction in these areas well-established, the development of the full range of literature and — more broadly speaking — culture courses is next on the agenda. This will be the work of the new department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures (AMESALL), which was just created this spring. The Center and its faculty, a number of whom will also be members of the new department, will be working
on this. New hires in these fields are also planned. There is always room for improvement; the Center and the new department will be working to bring the study of these critical languages to the very highest level. As almost half of the requirements for the Middle Eastern Studies major are language study — and rightly so — there will be continual interaction between the Center and new department. Personally, I am delighted with the creation of the new department. I have been advocating this for years. There is nationally a growing interest in what has been termed “the Less Commonly Taught Languages.” This is a good time for Rutgers to move forward here.

**How will the academic restructuring effect curriculum development?**

The Center, unlike most centers at Rutgers, also functions in essence as a department. We have a major and minor. Because of that, we have to periodically review what it is we are doing and how we can do it better. As a consequence, one of the first things that I plan to do next fall, together with our new Director of the Center, Jawid Mojadedi and with our newly established Executive Committee, is to conduct a review of the requirements of the major and minor to determine what improvements or refinements can be made and what areas need further development. Departments periodically do this and we should as well. Since the Center oversees an interdisciplinary major, we will be in constant interaction with representatives of disciplines that contribute to our ever-growing list of cross-listed courses. The new Executive Committee that has been formed reflects that. Its members come from related departments and programs (African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures, Jewish Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, South Asian Studies, Religion, Comparative Literature and History). This will provide ongoing dialogue with traditional “allies” of Middle Eastern Studies. Needless to say, we will also be regularly consulting with other key departments in our area of interest: Political Science, Sociology and other social sciences.

**What is immediately over the horizon for the CMES?**

More immediately, as Academic Director, I have certain oversight functions that are directed to guaranteeing the quality of courses we offer and to constantly seek to improve on what we do. The role of the Center has also always involved coordination within Rutgers as well as outreach to the larger communities, local and national, that are interested in the Middle East. Next year, we will also be hosting visiting scholars from other institutions in the Middle East. We are working closely with the Study Abroad Program so that our students can have “on the ground” experience in the region. Personally, I can attest to how important this is. I am still benefiting from the time I spent as a graduate student at the Dil ve Tarih-Cografya Fakültesi in Ankara, Turkey, more than forty years ago. I was the only American graduate student in Turkey at that time studying at a Turkish university (at least that is what I was told). A few other graduate students (now all well known figures in Ottoman studies), as well already established scholars were doing research in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul. When I have worked in Turkish manuscript collections, the fact that personnel in these libraries and I had studied with the same professors and shared a common bond opened more than one door for me. More importantly, I made life-long friends there.

We have also been having a series of planning meetings aiming at the creation of a Center or Institute for the study of Contemporary Islam. This is in no way a competitor with our Center, but rather it will complement one very important aspect of what we study and teach as well as provide an opportunity to widen our International Studies horizons. Personally speaking, I can say that my two-semester course on the History of Islamic Civilization, one that I taught every year at Newark since I first introduced it in 1989, was always one of my favorites. It gave me the opportunity to read beyond my immediate field of Middle Eastern and Central Asian studies and explore with my students Islamic Civilization as a global phenomenon. I learned much from teaching the course. It provided essential comparative material and hence greater depth and understanding in my own immediate research.

The former Acting Director, Afshin Razani, has brought us through a complicated time. We are in a period of transition; one that I think offers many opportunities and will lead to many positive new developments in the Center and in the CMES Program. We are building on established structures, hoping to deepen these, giving our program a national reputation. These are exciting times and we are looking forward to the challenges.
Special Thanks to our Donors

We at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies would like to thank all of our supporters during the last two years for their donations and pledges, acknowledging in particular the following major supporters:

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