

The Development of Iranian Studies Programs in the United States: From Philological to a Contemporary Approach

Zeinab Ghasemi Tari*

Abstract

In the early twentieth century Iranian Studies began part of the classical academic model of Orientalism in the United States with a philological approach. Prominent universities and institutions in the US such as Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, Yale and UC Berkeley established departments of Iranian or Persian Studies. In the early programs more emphasis was given to the ancient Iranian civilization and language. A new approach emerged after the WWII and as a part of Middle Eastern Studies programs that attempted to study Iran from more modern and international academic perspective. Though Iranian studies became an independent field of study, it was the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution that changed Iranian Studies programs in the US drastically and gave it a political significance. The present paper offers a brief descriptive overview of the developments and evolutions of Iranian Studies programs in the United States and its different approaches in knowledge production toward Iran since its early years of establishment till the present time.

Keywords: Iran, Iranian studies, United States, academia, the Iranian Revolution.

* PhD in American Studies, University of Tehran. ghasemitari@ut.ac.ir
(Received: 10 February 2015 Accepted: 25 May 2015)

Introduction

In his book *Orientalism* Edward Said discusses the nature of Western scholarship with regard to the Orient (esp. the Muslim Orient) within the context of the wider discourse of Orientalism. According to Said American Middle Eastern studies, “retains, in most of its general as well as its detailed functioning, the traditional orientalist outlook which had been developed in Europe” (Said, 1978: 295). Though, he argues, the social scientist and the new expert had been replaced with the old philological tradition but “the core of the Orientalist dogma” remained intact (Said, 1978: 302).

It is maintained that Middle East Studies is an American invention (Hajjar, 1997; Kramer, 2001), though the study of the Middle East had a long history in Europe, under the broad field of Oriental studies. Middle Eastern Studies as well as Iranian Studies in the United States should be perceived in the wider scope of Area Studies programs which gained increased popularity after the Second World War as a response to threats from the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, the decolonization of Africa and Asia, and the emergence of China. As a major source of neo-colonial power, the United States began crash programs to educate area experts to help the US to compete with the Soviet Union during the cold war (Schaar as cited in Macfie, 2000: 186). Middle East area studies in the US began in 1946 with the establishment of a training program in international administration at Columbia University, and Army Specialized Training Programs for languages at Princeton and Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania universities. In 1947, Princeton

founded the first interdisciplinary program specializing in the modern and contemporary Middle East. By 1961, courses on the Middle East were being offered at 180 colleges and universities in the United States (Hajjar, 1997).

Martin Kramer maintains that American Middle East Studies left the philological and textual analysis to Europe, “American academics would be social scientists; they would master the theories and paradigms of the new disciplines, supplemented by a working, practical knowledge of history and language” (Kramer, 2001: 7-8). Meanwhile, Schaar contends that the US Middle East studies had “all the faults of the Orientalists of the past” (Kramer, 2001: 8) even worse due to their superficiality, “the experts turned out to be only reflections of the shadows of the great classical Orientalism” (Schaar as cited in Macfie, 2000: 186). Moreover, many Oriental scholars of the “old world” moved to the US and began teaching in prominent universities in the US. Gibb (the famous expert at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London) went to Harvard and became the head of the Center for Middle East Studies. Bernard Lewis joined Princeton’s Oriental Studies Program and Gustave Von Grunebaum (the Austrian Arabist and orientalist) contributed to establishment of a center for Middle East studies in Los Angeles.

Edward Said makes a comparison between American Middle East Studies and its European-British and French- counterparts, arguing that the latter is even more hegemonic. According to Said while the British Orientalist scholars were called on for advice and participation by the colonial departments but, “they do not seem to have created an independent structure of their own, sustained and even maintained by the private business sector or directly by foundations and the government” (Said, 1981: 144). Beside, Said maintained that Middle Eastern studies in America was tightly linked and had close associations with political and security agendas :

There is of course a Middle East studies establishment, a pool of interests, “old boy” or “expert” networks linking corporate

business, the foundations, the oil companies, the missions, the military, the Foreign Service, the intelligence community together with academic world. There are institutes, centers, faculties, departments, all devoted to legitimizing and maintaining the authority of a handful of basic, basically unchanging ideas about Islam, the Orient, and the Arabs (Said, 1981: 301-302).

The idea that scholarly studies of “the non-Western world” has close relation with economic and political power, is argued by Bruce Cumings when he discusses the state/intelligence/foundation nexus which has as orchestrated the production of area expertise (Cumings, 1997: 12).

In 1958 Middle East studies started to attract a significant amount of financial aid through the National Defense Education Act and the US government's special funding donation to the Middle East studies programs¹, which continues to present day. With the US significant interest in the region's oil resources and its “political stability”, very few publicly challenged the powerful links between the academy and national security interests (Hajjar, 1997: 3).

Said's stance toward the Middle East studies programs caused harsh criticisms from many scholars of the field. Malcolm Kerr, a political scientist criticized Said's arguments by saying that the Americans quoted by Said were “not a particularly representative sample of Near Eastern studies in the United States today; and if Said had looked further afield he would have got quite different results” (Said, 1980: 544).

The UCLA historian Nikki Keddie mentions what she considers as “some unfortunate consequences” of Said's Orientalism with regard to Middle East Studies, “there has been a tendency in the Middle East field to adopt the word “orientalism” as a generalized swear-word essentially referring to people who take the “wrong” position on the Arab-Israeli dispute or to people who are judged too “conservative.” (Keddie, 2007: 341).

P. J. Vatikiotis blamed Said for introducing, “McCarthyism into Middle Eastern studies—at least in the United States.” (1991, p. 105) and Maxime Rodinson, maintained that despite positive aspects of *Orientalism*, the book is “a polemic against orientalism written in a style that was a bit Stalinistic (Vatikiotis, 1980: 22). Despite criticisms it is believed (yet open to question) that Said’s book along with other incidents has a profound and long-lasting impact on Middle East studies and consequently Iranian Studies programs in the United States. Before Said’s book and by the late 1960s, domestic sociopolitical unrest in the US, which was the result of civil rights and antiwar movements, had an impact on academia. Leftist approaches that used anti-imperialist rhetoric were becoming more and more fashionable. The emergence of postmodernism and post-structuralism in academia and their related arguments such as relativity of knowledge and subjectivity had a significant influence on humanities and social sciences (Hajjar, 1997, Mirsepasi, 1995, Kramer, 2001). The late 1970’s third world revolutions and more specifically the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the proliferation of Islamic movements across the region (which took many Middle East academicians and experts by surprise) raised further doubts over the competency of the scholarship .

While in 1971 only 3.2 percent of specialists on Middle East studies program had been born in the Middle East region and only 16.7 percent had the language competency and foreign-residence profiles (Lambert, 1973: 47), in 1992 MESA’s president announced that its membership had changed over the years and “possibly half is now of Middle Eastern heritage” (Aswad, 1993: 16). The 1994 MESA annual meeting program indicates that at least 256 of 560 scheduled presenters were of Middle Eastern origin (Pipe, 1996).

In 1993, Said wrote of “the extraordinary change in studies of the Middle East, which when I wrote *Orientalism* were still dominated by an aggressively masculine and condescending ethos” (Said, 1993: xxvii). Said asserts that “during the 1980s the formerly

conservative Middle East Studies Association underwent an important ideological transformation [...] What happened in the Middle East Studies Association therefore was a metropolitan story of cultural opposition to Western domination” (Said, 1993: 314). Kenneth Stein wrote on the “widespread” indigenization of MESA during 1980’s and how “an ethnic last name” could guarantee gaining position in modern Middle Eastern departments (Stein, 1988: 58).

Despite some changes the academic misunderstanding was and is still persistence. Some of the critics of Middle East studies programs began to argue that the U.S. is ill served by the ways these areas are studied and presented in academic publications and centers (Kramer, 2001: ix). The concern with “understanding” the Middle East and the “politics of Islam” grew more intense since 9/11, 2001 and more currently the political unrests in the Middle East. Fred Holiday maintains that US intelligence and political failure in the Middle East, is the result of academic failure in Middle Eastern studies after 9/11 (Holiday, 2004: 954) and Kramer argues that,

Time and again, academics have been taken by surprise by their subjects; time and again, their paradigms have been swept away by events. Repeated failures have depleted the credibility of scholarship among influential publics. In Washington, the mere mention of academic Middle Eastern studies often causes eyes to roll (Kramer, 2001: 2).

The long debate and controversy among the experts of Middle East studies about what went wrong with the programs that resulted into such failure is not the concern of this paper and needs a detailed elaboration. Many critics consider the failure as a result of dominant Orientalist discourse. They argue that the academic understanding is not shaped by realities of the region but by misunderstandings and political biases among the academicians. Consequently there seems to be a distorted understanding and perception of Middle Eastern societies, people, their priorities and concerns which has roots in the traditional Orientalist approach of the experts.

Meanwhile much of the critic comes from a right-wing and pro-Israeli voices in academia (Nonneman cited in Holliday, 2004) like Martin Kramer, a well-known Israeli scholars in the field of contemporary Middle Eastern politics and the former director of the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University; or Daniel Pipes, a staunch supporter of Likud and its policies, and a harsh critic of Islam and Islamic societies.

I- Iranian Studies Programs

The 1979 Iranian Revolution took Western academicians and Middle East experts by surprise. In fact the Iranian Revolution, along with the unexpected 1975 Lebanese civil war, was the two incidents that shocked US Middle East experts. Both countries were places American academicians claimed to know best. Even when signs of the revolution in Iran were quite visible in 1978, the Hoover Institution at Stanford published a collected volume on Iran, that praised, "Iran's modernizing monarchy and its stability" (Lenczowski, 1978: 475), adding that "Thanks to Iran's reverence for monarchy, the country possessed an advantage over some newer nations, which could not point to the same remarkable legacy" (Lenczowski, 1978: 475).

Two famous Iran experts, Marvin Zonis of the University of Chicago and James A. Bill of the University of Texas were also among those who "typified post-war Iranian studies in the US" (Scharr as cited in Mcfie, 2000: 187). In 1971 Zonis, who as an "Iran expert" should had been aware of corruption and atrocities of the Shah wrote on the "Imperial Majesty" kindly grace (Zonis, 1971: ix). James Bill too wrote on shah and his wife concerns for the Iranian well-being and that "After a decade of championing humanitarian causes, the empress now addresses herself to social and political problems of Iran" (Lenczowski, 1975: 24). Similarly both Zonis and Bill emphasized on the stability of Iran's economic, social and political status under the Shah's regime and the Shah commitment to

“meaningful change and reform”. Significantly, the systemic use of torture, the role of SAVAK and the mass killings that were taking place at the time was not mentioned by the scholars.

Misrepresentation or underrepresentation of Iranian people and their inability to take a meaningful action against the Shah was another mistake by academicians that led to the misreading Iran and consequently the Iranian revolution. For instance, Professor Leonard Binder, while critical of the Shah’s regime, maintained that the present system should be kept (Binder, 1962: 394), as Iran is incapable of self-governance:

Here is a nation of Iran that has not ruled itself in historical times, that has had an alien religion imposed upon it, that has twisted that religion in order to cheat its Arab tormenters, that can boast no military hero, that is best by the superstitions of its dervishes, that has been deprived by its poets and mystics of all will to change its fates, a nation where no patriot is untainted by self-seeking, where every public figure is identified by the foreign power he is said to serve, and here no one speaks the truth (Binder, 1962: 61-62).

A review of the literature following the Iranian revolution displays how Iran’s experts were taken by surprise with the 1979 Iranian revolution and As Nikki Keddie, professor of the Iran history at UCLA puts it, “US scholars of modern Iran, who were doing research there in large numbers in the 1970s, did not predict anything like a revolution that occurred. [...] (Keddie, 1983: 13)

In Salem’s view the Iranian revolution had a greater effect on the Middle East studies than the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 (Salem, 1992). Interestingly, the Revolution created a hype in the field and as Yvonne Haddad, a MESA president has stated that since 1979 many members of MESA have had a meteoric rise in their careers, and how one of her colleagues had told her about the importance of the Iranian Revolution in the Middle East studies “that if someone were tracking his achievements he should have a stamp engraved on his forehead reading ‘Made by Khomeini’” (Salem,

1992:1-2).

Iranian studies programs in the US (or Europe) are neither internally homogeneous, nor are they similar to each other. A close examination reflects some distinctive approaches in their political, institutional, and intellectual histories, and in their relationships with the disciplines. In general, Iranian Studies programs in the US can be categorized into two distinct types: (1) Iranian Studies programs (2) Persian Studies programs. While the former is broader and often has an interdisciplinary approach and deals with the study of history, literature, art and culture, contemporary politics and sociology of Iran, Persian Studies, is more focused on the study of the modern Persian language (Farsi) and literature. Likewise, Middle Eastern centers, institutes, or programs also study Iran as a part of area studies programs. Many programs, centers and institutions do not grant degrees but sponsor a number of courses as Iranian/Persian studies. They attract many undergraduate and graduate students from different disciplines such as the social sciences, humanities, and history. Such programs organize or support multi-disciplinary lectures, workshops, conferences, research and projects as well as a wide variety of public activities.

The pattern of growth for Persian and Iranian studies in the United States can be classified in three branches which might be reflective of the changing political relations between Iran and the US: 1. An early approach, which was more concerned with philology/archeology of Iran; 2. As a part of Middle Eastern Studies programs that attempted to study Iran from more modern and international academic perspective (after WWII). 3. An independent field of study which studies history, culture, society and politics as well as the Persian language (after the 1979 Iranian Revolution).

Following will offer a brief overview of changes and evolution in Iranian Studies in the United States. Iranian/Persian Studies began in the early twentieth century as part of the classical academic model of Orientalism in the United States. The program first began as a

philological endeavor and had an archeological approach with more emphasis on ancient Iranian civilization and language. According to Hossein Ziai, director of Iranian studies at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Persian was defined as “an ancient or dead culture. [...] Persian was never looked at from the perspective of a living language and culture, but seen only as Old Persian, as a classical but dead language, like Sumerian” (Cincotta, 2009, para.7).

The establishment of the *American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology* in 1925 may be considered as the outset for Iranian Studies as an independent field of learning in the United States as well as internal development within the field. The institute was founded by Arthur Pope and his wife, Phyllis Ackerman, both of whom were art historians. The institute later became the *Asia Institute* in New York and was regarded as a center that expanded Western understanding of Persian and Iranian civilization (Devos & Werner, 2013). Pope also developed a close friendship with the Pahlavi family, and along with his wife and served as advisor and dealer of Iranian art for many museums and private collections (Abdi, 2001, pp.61-62).

After WWII, Iranian Studies as a part of area studies programs began to expand. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, founding director of the *Roshan Center for Persian Studies* at the University of Maryland, believes that Iranian Studies in the US started in earnest after the Second World War when the United States emerged as a world power (Cincotta, 2009). Ziai too maintains that, in the late 1950s and early 1960s Iranian Studies gained a distinctive significance, “scholars began looking at modern Persian as distinct from its identity as an ancient language. It evolved into a separate discipline as a modern, living, international language and culture” (Cincotta, 2009, para.13). Richard Nelson Frye, Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies at Harvard University is believed to have had a major role in expanding Iranian Studies in the United States. He contributed to foundation of the *Center for Middle Eastern Studies* at Harvard University in 1954,

which launched the first modern Iranian studies program in the United States. He served as director of the *Asia Institute in Shiraz* from 1970 to 1975 (Frye, 2005). A. V. Williams Jackson is another scholar who contributed to development of Iranian Studies by establishing a center for grammar of the Avestan language in Columbia University (Jackson, 1906). Other programs were founded at UCLA in 1963 with focus on ancient and medieval Iran. In 1967 the *Society for Iranian Studies* (now the International Society for Iranian Studies) was founded by a group of Iranian graduate students and began producing the *Journal of Iranian Studies*.

A few institutions and centers for Iranian studies were founded during this era and they continue their work to present. The *International Society for Iranian Studies* (ISIS), was founded in 1967 in the US as an academic society to support and promote Iranian Studies at the international level. ISIS is also an affiliated member of the international Middle East Studies Association (MESA). Among the centers that were established during this era (1967) and that continues its activities to the present is the *American Institute of Iranian Studies* (AIrS) which aims to promote an interdisciplinary study of Iranian civilization with Iranian studies scholars; AIrS maintained a Center in Tehran from 1969 and with the 1979 Iranian revolution its activities in Iran were suspended. In February 1988 relations were renewed by Iran's cultural ambassador to the U.N. Presently the center is involved with academic exchanges, and other activities such as language training, research grants for pre-doctoral students and for senior American and Iranian scholars, and conference support. The declared aim is to create and maintain expertise on an important geographical region and maintain interest in bi-national cooperation. The program has been supported by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Education (Hamilton, Congressional Record, 1998).

It is believed that during the 1970s the field expanded significantly, when a number of Americans who had served in the

Peace Corps in Iran took up academic positions related to Iranian studies. Consequently, the close ties between Iran and the US increased the number of academic programs as well exchanges between Iranian and American scholars. Despite such efforts before the revolution there was very little published about Iranians in the U.S. (Bozorgmehr, 1998, p. 14). Bozorgmehr maintains that research and writings on Iranians in the U.S. can be divided into pre- and post-revolutionary phases (1998, p.12). With the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, Iranian studies gained more political significance than before, yet ironically it initially reversed the trend for expansion of the Iranian studies. The Iranian hostage crisis of 1980-81 had further negative effects on research about Iran (Bozorgmehr, 1998, p.15).

According to Abbas Milani, the director for Iranian Studies at the University of Stanford:

The interesting point about America and Iranian Studies is that after the revolution and particularly after the hostage crisis instead of the number for Iranian studies increasing they began to decrease. This is completely against the pattern that America has had about any other country. When America was worried about the Soviet Union, there was a massive amount of funding available for people to study Russian language, literature, economy. In the case of Iran, as Iran became more of a problem, the places that studies Iran were diminishing. Till September 11. So as the need for knowledge was increasing the capacity for producing knowledge was decreasing. There was a true gap (A. Milani, personal interview, November 16, 2014).

A number of reasons may explain the reversed trend: with the Revolution the relationship between the two countries deteriorated and consequently the programs as well as exchanges between the two governments came to a halt; financial assets were seized by the US as well. On the other hand with the “Hostage Crisis” many Iranians did not want to disclose their nationality for fear of losing jobs, deportation, etc. (Bozorgmehr, 1998). Interestingly, instead of encouraging research the “Iranian hostage crisis” of 1980-81

discouraged research on the topic as Iranians were subjected to prejudice and discrimination and “given their vulnerable legal status they were concerned about making statements that would lead to their deportation” (Bozorgmeher, 1998: 15). It is claimed that researchers at that time were also concerned with allegations of collecting information on behalf of either US government agencies or spying for the Iranian revolutionary government. Moreover, it took a few years for the Iranian-American community to form and shape an academic approach toward post-revolutionary Iran. In addition, the educational and social formation of the Iranian community changed after 1979: before the revolution most of the students were majoring in engineering (Askari et al, 1997: 30), afterwards, “more Iranian students turned to humanities and social sciences to grapple with what had happened in their homeland” (Bozorgmehr, 1998: 12). Hoshang Amirahmadi maintains that the post-revolutionary Iranian Studies has taken two approaches toward the study of contemporary Iran. He believes that initially and in the early years after the revolution, “scholars focused on the driving forces of the 1979 Revolution, Islam in particular. By the mid-1980s, attention shifted toward an understanding of the Islamic Republic in place, notably is theocratic nature and probable teleology” (Amirahmadi, 1995: para.1).

Milani maintains that this pattern began to change by September 11, 2001, “By September 11 a number of rich and successful Iranians began to get involved in these programs” (personal interview, November 16, 2014). Milani refers to the Iranian Studies program at the University of Stanford and UCLA as examples that were supported financially by Iranian-Americans (personal communication, November 16, 2014). Karimi-Hakak too believes that after September 11, 2001 many universities in the US became aware of their critical shortage of Persian speakers along with Arabic and Urdu speakers (Podcast on University of Maryland, 2008). As a result, private individuals and institutional donors as well as the US government increased support for Iranian Studies programs financially.

The Iranian-American community plays a significant role in the expansion of Iranian Studies programs in the US. Under the circumstances, “Iranian exiles and immigrants in the U.S. presented themselves as viable alternative subjects, especially since they were virtually unstudied at the time” (Bozorgmehr, 1998: 12). The contribution of the Iranian diaspora in Iranian studies programs comes in different forms: by providing financial supports as well as being involved in teaching. For instance, the *Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute* provides the largest financial contribution establishing centers, and offering grants and fellowships to major American universities. Among the universities which receive grants from the *Roshan institute* are: Berkeley, Harvard, UCLA, Irvine, University of Cambridge, University of Chicago, Colombia, Georgetown University, University of Maryland, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northeastern University, San José State University, and Yale University (Roshan, Grants and Programs, n.d). Large numbers of Iranian Americans continue to support conferences and lecture series, fund undergraduate and graduate scholarships, and endow professorial chairs for Persian programs at universities across the country (Cincotta, 2009).

II- US Government Programs on Iran

Since the 1980s, the United States government has provided funding for designated languages under Title VI, as Persian- similar to Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu and Korean- is regarded as a critical or “strategic” language for the United States. According to Kamran Talattof, “The resources provided by Title VI have been indispensable in the quality and quantity of Persian instruction” (Cincotta, 2009: para.16).

According to statistics of a quadrennial survey last conducted in 2009 by the *Modern Language Association* (MLA) which looked at 2,802 U.S. colleges and universities, Persian continues to be the second

most popular language in the United States after Arabic for student enrollment (Furman, Goldberg & Lusin, 2010). According to the *MLA*, from 2002 to 2006 Persian language enrollment jumped more than 90 percent in the United States, from roughly 1,200 to almost 2,300 (Furman, Goldberg et al, 2010: 9). According to a report by the US State Department in 2009, in recent years state universities have rapidly expanded their Persian/Iranian studies programs (Cincotta, 2009). Accordingly, the traditional centers for programs of Persian and Middle Eastern studies such as Columbia, Princeton, Harvard and the University of Chicago, have grown less rapidly than newer programs at state universities. Ziai argues that the current growth in Persian and Iranian studies has been taking place almost exclusively at large state universities across the country (Cincotta, 2009).²

Several universities and institution with Iranian or Persian studies programs receive funds from the US government. Among them are the *National Security Education Program Flagship Graduate Programs* that offers a master degree at Maryland University for The Persian Flagship Program at the University of Maryland, Collage Park (National Foreign Language Center, 2014). *The Undergraduate Internship Program Open Source Officer (CLA)* is another program that offers internship to both undergraduate and graduate students. Farsi/Persian is one of the languages that are included in this program beside Kurdish, Arabic, Urdu and Pashtu. The program requires relevant area knowledge beside language proficiency (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007). *National Security Agency Summer Language Program (NAS)* is an intensive 12-week intern program with the purpose of improving language skills of high-potential collage upperclassmen and graduate students. The program is currently hiring students that are studying Persian-Farsi (National Security Agency, 2014). It is also offered to students that are studying Arabic, Urdu, Russians, Chinese, Korean and Pashto. National Security Education Program Scholarships, US Department of Defense is another program that is offered to both graduates and undergraduates for

studying abroad in areas of the world that are considered critical to US interests. It is funded by the *National Security Education Program* (NSEP). Iran is also among the countries that are listed as emphasized countries for the Boren Awards (which is a part of NSEP program) (NSEP annual review, 2009: 4).

III- Post-Revolutionary Iranian Studies

A Significant amount of information about post-revolutionary Iran is produced by Iranian diaspora and expatriates in the United States. Diasporas play a significant role on the international scene. A recent study by the World Bank shows that:

by far the strongest effect of war on the risk of subsequent war works through diasporas. After five years of post-conflict peace, the risk of renewed conflict is around six times higher in societies with the largest diasporas in America than those without American diasporas (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000: 5).

Expatriates and diaspora community are able to influence political affairs of their country in numerous ways; they can play passive or active, constructive or destructive roles toward their homeland (Shain & Barth, 2003: 449). Diasporas are involved in a complex of shifting power relations. Change in relations of power within diasporas, and the “way these changes intersect with external configurations of power” (Smith & Stares, 2007: 5) are influential in production of knowledge of diasporas toward their homelands

It is believed that the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution is the most significant factor that contributed to the growth of the Iranian diaspora (Bozorgmehr, 1998: 5). Karimi Hakak mentions the importance of the Iranian-American community in expansion of Iranian Studies programs in the United States, “I mentioned to the university that the capacity for growth [Iranian/ Persian Studies] was tremendous because Iranian-American community was highly educated professionals, etc. and so I insisted that if the university put in the resources at the beginning, the community will then contribute

and we'll see phenomenal growth. That exactly has happened" (Podcast on University of Maryland, 2008).

Iranians became increasingly influential in Middle Eastern and more particularly Iranian Studies programs and Iranian academic journals in the US. There was very little published about Iranians in the US before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. According to the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) membership list, none of the 21 PhDs in sociology were Iranians before the 1980's while during the 1980s 11 of the 19 who received their degrees were Iranians (Sabagh, 1992: 87). Furthermore a survey of publications of sociologist members of MESA in Sociological Abstracts for the 1985-90 period showed that the three most frequently addressed areas were the Iranian revolution, historical sociology of Iran, and Iranian immigrants in the U.S., in that order (Lorentz & Wertime, cited in Bozorgmehr).

Kamran Talattof, a professor of Persian studies at the University of Arizona, recalls that during his teaching period at Princeton University in the mid-1990s, there were no graduate students in Persian courses and fewer than 10 students taking Persian for their language requirement (Cincotta, 2009). Today, Arizona has eight doctoral students alone in Persian and Iranian studies. "In the last 10 years, we have witnessed an increase in the enrollment in our Persian classes every year" (Cincotta, 2009).

By the mid-1990s, many Iranians established themselves in the US; the community then was comprised by a generation of Iranian Americans who had been born or raised in the US. For this generation of Iranian Americans who came "of age in the post-exile, post-revolution period, literature became a vehicle by which to wrestle with their origins and the landscape of their American identity" (Karimi & Rahimieh, 2008: 11).

Post-revolutionary Iranian studies programs in the US suffer from three major problems. The problems have often led to a partial and sometimes distorted image of the Iranian society: First, the



political affiliations of Iranian Studies researchers and academicians should be taken into consideration. Almost all of the Iranian Studies programs in the US are directed by Iranians who left Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Usually their personal backgrounds illustrate their unsympathetic and in some cases hostile views toward the present Iranian political order. Therefore the migration of significant numbers of Iranians to the US during this period and the formation of exile academics is of significance and the produced texts of many “exile” Iranians should be viewed in this context. Second, the perception of the Iranian academics in exile differs significantly from people in homeland. One can argue that the perception of Iran among numerous Iranian Studies “experts” in exile is substantially different from Iran’s social reality. That is partly due to the fact that most of the Iranian experts left Iran over 30 years ago and have limited contact with Iranians inside Iran and if there is any contact it is usually limited to likeminded people. This makes their understanding of Iranian society very partial and in many cases distorted.

The third problem is an absence of significant alternative voices and intellectuals who might narrate a different perspective about different aspects of the Iranian Revolution. A significant problem with the produced references on the 1979 Revolution which are widely circulated and studied in courses of Iranian studies in these universities is its mode of narration and how the history of the 1979 Islamic Revolution is constructed through the exclusive narrative of exile Iranians who are as previously stated mostly unsympathetic if not hostile towards the Revolution.

Conclusion

Iranian Studies programs in the US were established in the early 20th century with a philological approach and as part of the classical academic model of Orientalism. It soon developed into an interdisciplinary field of study. The 1979 Iranian Revolution gave a

political significance to an academic field.

While the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 took many American academics by surprise it brought about a deep skepticism about the plans and programs as well as the continued production of knowledge in Iranian Studies in the West. As Nikki Keddie, professor of Iranian history at UCLA puts it:

US scholars of modern Iran, who were doing research there in large numbers in the 1970s, did not predict anything like a revolution that occurred. [...] These scholars, who were inclined to be critical of the Shah's regime and not to echo official U.S. support for it, should, if anyone could, have provided predictions of serious trouble, but they did not (1993, -13).

Meanwhile it can be argued that the produced knowledge by the Iranian Studies program in the US is still partial and in some cases distorted. What may explain this gap is the political affiliation of many academics who are presently active in the Iranian Studies program in the US as mostly left Iran after the Revolution. Another major problem is the limited contact and access of many of the Iranian Studies experts with Iran and Iranian society in general. This is partly due to the fact that many experts have left Iran before the revolution or in the early years after revolution and many one them have never returned to country. The third reason, is the absence of strong alternative voices and narratives among Iranian studies academics in the US that is usually voices that are sympathetic toward the 1979 Iranian Revolution or the Islamic Republic are often dismissed or ignored as propaganda or apologists of the Islamic Republic.

Hence, Iranian Studies like other Area Studies programs should be continuously reconsidered in order to meet the changing reality of contemporary Iran. This requires an more mutual contact, and unbiased, impersonal and an academic approach which goes a step further from the dominant political discourse surrounding post-revolutionary Iran in the West.

Note

1. As an example it can be referred to the United States Department of Education donation to the "Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships", (FLAS) program.
2. Including Ohio State University and the universities of Maryland, Texas, Arizona, Utah, Washington, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Fullerton and Irvine. Among the state universities that are supported by the US government it can be referred to Ohio State University and the Universities of Maryland, Texas, Arizona, Utah and Washington are some such schools. In California, Persian studies programs are offered at state university campuses in Berkeley, Los Angeles, Fullerton and Irvine.

References

- Abdi, Kamyar. 2001. Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran. *American Journal of Archaeology*.
- Amirahmadi, H. 1995. The Civil Society Approach to Iranian Studies, *Iranian.com*. Retrieved from <http://iranian.com/Sep95/Amirah.html>.
- Aswad, Barbara C. 1993. "Arab Americans: Those Who Followed Columbus (1992 Presidential Address)". *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*. 27 (1): 5-22.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi. 1998. "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States". *Iranian Studies*. 31 (1): 5-30.
- Cincotta, H. 2009. Persian Studies in United States Reflects Dynamism and Growth: Thriving academic program grew from 19th-century roots. *IIP Digital US Department of State*. Retrieved from, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2009/07/20090724160330isilaroon0.6650507.html#ixzz3WbeYeZnJ>
- Hajjar, Lisa, and Steve Niva. 1997. "(Re)Made in the USA: Middle East Studies in the Global Era". *Middle East Report*. 27 (4): 2.
- Ḥakkākiyān, R. 2004. *Journey from the land of no: A girlhood caught in revolutionary Iran*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Karim P and Rahimieh, N. 2008. Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon. *MELUS*. 33 (2). 7-16.
- Karim, Persis M., and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami. 1999. *A world between: poems, short stories, and essays by Iranian Americans*. New York: George Braziller.
- Karim, P & Rahimieh, N . 2008. "Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon". *MELUS*. 33 (2). 7-16.
- Keddie, Nikki R. 1983. Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective. *The American Historical Review*. 88 (3): 579-598.
- Keddie, Nikki R. 2007. *Women in the Middle East: past and present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kramer, Martin. 2001. *Ivory towers on sand: the failure of Middle Eastern studies in America*. Washington, DC: The Washington Inst. for Near East Policy.
- Ladjevardi, H. (n.d.) Iranian Oral History Project, *Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies*. Available at: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iohp/details/>, accessed May 15, 2012.

- Lenczowski, G. 1978. *Iran under the Pahlavis*. Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press.
- Sabagh, G., Bozorgmehr, M., & University of California, Los Angeles. 1986. *Are the characteristics of exiles different from immigrants? The case of Iranians in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles, Calif: University of California Los Angeles, Institute for Social Science Research.
- Said, E. W. 1981. *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sick, G. 1996. "The United States and Iran: Truth and Consequences." *Contention -Bloomington-*. 5 (2): 59-80.
- United States. 2010. *2009 yearbook of immigration statistics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, Office of Policy, Office of Immigration Statistics. Available at: http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2009/ois_yb_2009.pdf, accessed June 7, 2012.
- Vatikiotis, P.J. 1978. "Middle Eastern Studies in America: A memorandum". *Washington Review*. 1(1): 92.