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**PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE:** *The Language of Resistance in Post-revolutionary Iran*

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**PANEL ABSTRACT:**

Scholars have generally assigned to 'resistance' a positive meaning, linking it to progressive or liberal political activities critical of authoritarian politics. In post-revolutionary Iran, however, the word 'resistance', or '*muqavemat*', is often associated with pro-regime language and activities. In particular, 'resistance' mobilises a cultural and political imaginary that refers to the official memory of the Iran-Iraq war, or Khamenei's 'resistant economy' under economic sanctions more recently. What language is then mobilised to inspire anti-state activities? Can 'resistance' serve both pro and anti-state projects?

This panel interrogates the language(s) and political imagination of 'resistance', broadening the analysis of what resistance entails in terms of political ideology and praxis.

**PAPER 1. The language of resistance: the Iranian revolution and its aftermath in workers' words**

In late 1978, the Common Syndicate for the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry (*Sandika-ye Moshtarak-e Karkonan-e Naft-e Iran*) joined the revolutionary body: "In unity with the fighting people of Iran, the purpose of our strike is to destroy despotism, eliminate the influence of foreigners in our country, and create an independent, free and progressive Iran." In their statements workers also described their determination to prevent oil exports. Particularly in the first stage of the revolution, laborers were closer to Marxists groups. Yet, in the last phase of the upheaval, part of them started openly supporting Khomeini, even though religion was not the primary detonator to demonstrate. Their rallying-cries were: "The dark night of the people will turn into day. Khomeini will eventually win," "Long live the champion workers," "We want Khomeini. He will take power from the rich and will give it to us." Therefore, under the banner of Khomeinism, a discourse against the perceived threat of the rich/ the capitalists permeated the uprising.

This paper – relying on primary sources – explores the path of workers' resistance to the Shah through their own slogan and statements. It also investigates the process of absorption that allowed the Khomeinist discourse to engulf and then depotentiate workers' resistance as an imaginary of the Left. Finally, gazing at the aftermath of the revolution, this paper traces which strategies were forged to inspire workers' collective actions beyond the Islamic Republic's narrative of resistance.

**Stella Morgana** is a PhD candidate at Leiden University (The Netherlands). Her research explores contemporary Iran's transformations, with a focus on identity and labour. Her articles appeared in "IRAN - Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies," "The Conversation/Huffington US," "EastWest."

### **PAPER 2. Arab Resistance, Iranian Exceptionalism**

Iran after 1979 anointed itself advocate and agent for the rescue and revival of the oppressed of the world, above all, the community of believers or *ummat al-Islamiyah*. As such, the boundaries of Iran's imagined community extended in the post-1979 era beyond the borders of the traditional "Guarded Domains" to include its Arab and Muslim neighbors, now conceived as participants and beneficiaries of the Islamic Revolution. Drawing upon 30 years of postrevolutionary textbook materials, this essay argues that this new internationalist aspiration was in fact the latest expression of an old nationalist project, fostered by the Pahlavi state and rooted in the traumas of the 19th century. In the new reverie on what it means to be "truly Iranian," stories of Arab and Palestinian resistance against occupation served as symbols and reminders of Iranian resilience, of the indispensability of preserving Iran's sovereignty against foreign encroachment, the dismemberment of Lebanon and Palestine less an inspiration for global struggle than they were contemporary reminders of the catastrophes of Turkmenchai and Golestan. Citizens in turn have applied these lessons in "foreign" resistance to domestic politics, the earnest participation of millions in annual elections comprising an ethical choice to preserve and "save" Iran from sanctions and possible war. Here resistance is a diagnostic of power, a way to understand the struggle against domination as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create. The moral agent in Iran is necessarily compromised as well as empowered by her circumstances, in this case an Islamic educational system committed to instilling Iranian exceptionalism in its students.

**Shervin Malekzadeh** is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Williams College where he is completing a book manuscript on post-revolutionary schooling in Iran from the perspective of ordinary families and local officials tasked with educating "the New Islamic Citizen." Prior to coming to Williams, he served as Visiting Professor of Comparative Politics at Swarthmore College.

### **PAPER 3. Spatializing resistance. The Museum of the Sacred Defence in Tehran**

This paper examines the use of space and time in the Museum of the Sacred Defence in Tehran. It disentangles how the notion of resistance, crucial the concept of the museum and the nationalist narrative that underpins it as an ideological artefact, is manifested through the organisation of space and time. Temporalities are important in the Museum, because it aims to transmit stories and data from a specific period of the revolutionary history, loaded with political meaning, into the current temporality investing them with a specific political function. Space is equally important, and the paper will look in particular to the use of empty spaces and the message they carry both inside the museum and outside, in the park. Technology deployed in the museum (both inside and in the park) also has an impact on the utilisation of space.

**Paola Rivetti** is an Assistant Professor in Middle East Politics and International Relations in the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University (Ireland).

### **PAPER 4. The Dialectic of Dance in Iran**

In early July 2018, Maedeh Hojabri was detained by Iranian authorities for posting photos and videos of herself dancing on Instagram. I posit that Hojabri was for embodying the malaise of 'Westoxication' - one of the discursive pillars of the Iranian revolution. The dialectic between Hojabri's dancing and the authorities' reaction is a form of harnessing the

revolutionary efforts of the past to combat the historical trauma of ‘Westoxification’ (Gharbzadegi). Defined as indiscriminate imitation of the West, joining the twin dangers of cultural imperialism and political domination, Gharbzadegi was the Iranian invocation of a language of revolt and of cultural protectionism. The legacy and trauma of Westoxication are inherent in the dialectic between revolutionary Iran and the West. Hojabri’s dancing amplified this pathology: her dance performances, her outfits, the urbanity of her style, her Instagram account, her followers – values, identities, concepts and indeed even technology – were all ‘Western’ markers, making Ms. Hojabri’s dance all the more discomfiting. How would the Iranian authorities have reacted if Hojabri had been dancing a traditional Japanese dance? Hence, it appears that it was not only the dancing that was controversial, but the dancing with all of its ‘Western trappings’. Hojabri’s dancing body can be designated as a site of resistance not for only Iranian women (at the intersection of gender politics, female empowerment and sexuality), but also for the Islamic Republic itself. The oppression of expression in the form of dance is the projection of the regime’s older and deeper grievances.

**Ghoncheh Tazmini** has a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent at Canterbury, and a MSc in Russian and Post-Soviet Studies from the London School of Economics. Author of *Khatami’s Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2009, 2013) and *Revolution and Reform in Russia and Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2012), Dr. Tazmini is Associate Member of the Centre for Iranian Studies at SOAS.

#### **CONVENORS’ ACADEMIC PROFILES:**

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