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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE: THE POLITICS OF HEALTH AND CRISIS IN IRAN: STORIES OF MEMORY AND TRAUMA**

**PROPONENT/s:**

DR. M. STELLA MORGANA (UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM);

DR. RASSA GHAFARI (UNIVERSITY OF MILANO BICOCCA)

This panel aims to promote a transdisciplinary space of dialogue and debate in which the relationships between crisis and health, bodily issues and (bio)politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran can be explored. Words such as 'crisis' usually dominate mainstream media headlines regarding Iran. These terms are often associated with geopolitical analyses, critiques of authoritarian politics or pro-regime language and activities. Yet, the word *bohran*, crisis, mobilises different political, cultural and intimate imageries connecting the public and the private spheres under the Islamic Republic. At the crossroads where politics meets health, stories of memory, trauma, class, family, depression, mismanagement and solitude emerge.

Starting from these arguments and urging different theoretical approaches and scientific-disciplinary perspectives, the panel intends to reflect on the several dimensions and interrelations of the concept of crisis, involving both collective and individual aspects, and to call into question the gaze through which to acknowledge social change and responses to crisis in Iran.

**ABSTRACTS:**

**DISCUSSANT:**

- Dr. Maziyar Ghiabi (University of Exeter)

**PANELISTS:**

**1. Dr. Mohadese Jazaei & Morteza Hafezi (Ferdowsi University of Mashhad)**

***Politicize suffering: The analysis of the country from Pahlavi discipline to power Panopticon the Islamic Republic of Iran***

The use of "normalization" tools and institutions was considered as a result of awareness of new methods of politics in the Islamic Republic period. Centered on the Guardianship of jurist consult in politics; It was the Faqih power, the Faqih view, and the Faqih interpretation of things that ruled over all forces, relying on a kind of "Panopticon power." In this era, rule over subjects began with developing special techniques based on "disciplinary power." In this transformation, the notion of "body" as one of the main components of the functioning of power relations is important because all these actions are applied to the body of the subject. Based on such an assumption, the question of this article is: how has the suffering imposed on the bodies of the subjects become a political tool and through it, political technology been used in the service of Panopticon politics? In response to the research question, this hypothesis is raised with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, in addition to the bodies of the people, the gates of the souls of the citizens to political power were opened. The all-powerful power of the government of the Islamic Republic, made possible by the technologies of power; it paved the way for a dramatic contradiction, a hidden loneliness and a mental openness to boundless domination. This research has been done by using the research method of the genealogy of memoirs and government orders and stakeholders and historical narratives in the field of governance in this period and Emphasizing on "politicizing suffering", Called for the approach of the Islamic Republic and, by addressing this issue, explain how to turn "subjects" into obedient and subservient objects.

## **2. Dr. Rassa Ghaffari (University of Milano Bicocca)**

### ***Iranian younger generations' mental health and transition to adulthood in the public discourse and everyday life***

Discourses about 'crisis', 'anomia' and 'depression' usually dominate mainstream media headlines regarding Iran and its youth. Both inside and outside the country, Iranian youth born after the 1979 revolution are often referred to as a generation suffering from a crisis of values, devoid of ideologies and social involvement (Azadarmaki 2010; Khosravi 2017), stalled in its transition to adulthood (Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon, 2008).

As argued by Behrouzian (2016), yet, one way of telling the story of a generation is to investigate the ways in which they tell their own stories. In this contribution, based on more than one year of field research in Tehran and fifty narrative interviews, I approach the issue from a two-dimensional conceptual frame: first, I expose the public discourses and storytelling about the post-revolutionary youths' anomia (Feizi, Nayebi & Moidfar, 2019; Yazdanpanah, 2007); secondly, I explore the cultural sensibilities of a particular cohort, youths who self-identify as the 1990s generation, and the ways they perceive and narrate their own positioning within the society and everyday life.

Indeed, as scholars show (Honarbin-Holliday, 2013; Leccardi 2005; Sadeghi & Moruzzi, 2006), in a time characterized by a chronic sense of insecurity and precariousness, these youths have settled unprecedented strategies of resilience and elaboration of their identities and new approaches to the job market and family creation (Hashemi, 2015, 2020).

## **3. Dr. Olmo Goelz and Dr. Kevin Schwartz (University of Freiburg)**

### ***Framing Crisis in Iran: Covid-19 and the Quest for Ideological Coherence***

After an initially haphazard response to the covid-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020, the Iranian government evoked a crisis paradigm in order to establish control over how the crisis should be narrated, framed and ultimately settled. The Office of the Supreme Leader, regime friendly news organizations, parastatal organizations, provincial governorates, and media outlets associated with the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) presented unified messaging around certain themes and behaviors, such as a healthy family life and national sacrifice, crucial to both combating the virus and bolstering ideological cohesiveness. This strategy points to a framing of the coronavirus crisis that reveals two important features of the Islamic Republic's ideological programming. First, the Iranian government utilized the coronavirus crisis as a "legitimation device" to solidify several of its core ideological elements. Second, the Islamic Republic uses the concept of crisis itself—and the prescribed values and behaviors needed to resolve it—as a lodestar for life and experience in the Islamic Republic in an attempt to produce a coherent and uncontested ideology. So long as the Islamic Republic can reasonably promote the idea of a society in crisis, it can continue to present the state as the sole proprietor of offered solutions. This paper discusses, how the state's reliance on the crisis paradigm has been challenged by the dynamics of the pandemic and how the regime struggled in its quest for ideological coherence since its unfolding in early 2020.

## **4. Dr. M. Stella Morgana (University of Amsterdam)**

### ***Nurses as Covid-19 pandemic heroines. Discourses of health, labor and crisis in Iran***

What can the Covid-19 crisis tell about labor politics in Iran? How have top-down and bottom-up discourses over nurses contributed to reproducing gender and class stereotypes? This paper, drawing from the critical discourse analysis of both written and visual materials, addresses these questions through the lens of the social history of labor in Iran. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed to the public the fundamental role of nurses in coping with the health crisis in Iranian hospitals. The extra strain on nurses working in the frontline of Covid-19 outbreak has been projected, portrayed, and visualized in discourses of heroism, fatigue, and dedication. From official speeches to national newspapers, from social media private accounts to public posters and billboards, nurses' commitment has become part of both top-down and bottom-up narratives as another example of the equation women as protective mothers and caring sisters. As their role tends to be filled mostly – but not exclusively – by women in Iran, nurses have become national Covid-19 heroines.

Despite this rhetoric, themes such as heavy workloads, exhausting work shifts, low salaries, and scarce recognition compared to their male counterparts have been excluded from the debate. This paper will argue that the combination of denial of structural factors and praising discourses on working women

represented a systematic pattern in history of labor politics in post-revolutionary Iran. In particular, it will discuss the continuities, ruptures and transformations that occurred from Khomeini's May Day speeches in the early years of the Islamic Republic to present-day celebrations for National Teachers Day, from the pictures in the 1990s' newspapers celebrating technological progress to the images of the nurses during the Covid-19 crisis.

##### 5. Maysam Behraves (Lund University), Dr Amir Chahaki (Iran Khodro Industrial Group)

###### ***Bare Lives, Geopolitical Bodies: The Banal Geopolitics of Iran's "Jihadi" Population Management***

Iran's population deficit has grown over the past two decades in important part due to an almost consistent drop in national economic prosperity, confronting the Islamic Republic (IRI) with an exacerbating population crisis of long term national security and geopolitical implications. This "super crisis," as occasionally described by local observers, has more recently acquired such political-security dimensions as to prompt the ruling elite to securitize expert interventions in population policymaking — in the name of "populational infiltration" — on the one hand and to adopt a "Jihadi" approach to population management that prioritizes quantity over quality and encourages growth and reproduction almost at any cost on the other. This article is a theoretically informed attempt to investigate Iran's population crisis from a human-national security perspective and problematize the IRI's response strategy. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's theorization of "bare life" as the de jure unprotected and de facto dispensable life of a "homo sacer," the piece contends that Iran's population growth policy — which, among other things, subsidizes population-boosting practices like child marriage in impoverished areas — treats "fertile" women as human incubators, thus rendering their lives "bare" in its struggle to salvage the nation-state from strategic diminution and decline over time. The outcome is what this research undertakes to conceptualize as "geopolitical bodies" or "cannon fodder": human bodies born into structural stasis, often caused by economic adversity, and primarily purposed to serve geopolitical ends and grand state interests. Iranians' evidently collective reluctance for reproduction is empirical proof of the theory as it is this unwillingness in the first place that persuades the state to pursue a coercive population increase policy. Having problematized the crisis response strategy, the article concludes by proposing a policy framework informed by the scarcity-security nexus and based on the primacy of quality over quantity, a policy that not only guarantees greater sustainability but also actively seeks to ensure geopolitical state interests.

##### SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

**M. Stella Morgana** is Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on the politics of participation, labour, hegemonic versus counter-hegemonic discourses in Iran and the Middle East. Her academic articles have been published in International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, International Labor and Working-Class History, Iranian Studies, IRAN – Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies, Middle East Institute. Stella is currently working on her monograph on workers' precarization in Iran.

**Rassa Ghaffari** holds a MA in African and Asian Studies and a PhD in Applied Sociology and Methodology of Social Research. Her research focuses on intergenerational representations of gender roles, sexuality and familiar relationships in Iran, where she has conducted extensive fieldwork. She currently works at the University of Milano-Bicocca as adjunct faculty of Sociology of Family. Her research has been published on The Anthropology of Middle East, Participation and Conflict, and the Public Arts Journal.

##### INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:

**M. Stella Morgana:** m.s.morgana@uva.nl

**Rassa Ghaffari:** rassa.ghaffari@unimib.it