History of Political Thought in Iran: Safavids to the Present
Instructor: Nura Hossainzadeh
Course Meeting Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:00-3:00 p.m.
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5:20-6:20 p.m.
hossainzadeh@berkeley.edu

Course Overview:

This course is a graduate-level seminar in the history of political thought in Shi’a Iran; that is, from the Safavid Era to the present. Since it is designed for graduate students, the course will focus on primary sources—reading the original works of scholars, activists, ideologues, and government officials, to the extent that the availability of English translations allows—rather than on secondary material. We study these authors not simply out of historical interest, but because understanding the questions, concerns, theoretical perspectives, and philosophical and religious influences that have shaped discussion on government in Shi’a Iran can help us to understand the debates on the character of just government that continue in Iran today.

Throughout the period we study, writers are preoccupied with questions about Islam and government, democracy and freedom, national identity, and socioeconomic justice. The place of Islam and the Shi’a clergy in Iranian government and society are often central concerns to political thinkers, whether these thinkers seek to minimize or increase the influence and authority of the clergy. We begin by drawing a comparison between the political roles of religious scholars in the Safavid vs. the Qajar eras. First, we study formulations of and objections to the official state ideology of the Safavid era, which gave scholars a limited role in government, and then we move to the Qajar era, where the clergy had developed an authority that was independent, and increasingly subversive, of state authority. After our discussion of Safavid and Qajar Iran, we study the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, in which Iranians sought to end centuries of absolutist rule by the Safavids and Qajars. To familiarize ourselves with political thought in this era, we examine the writings of clerics and Islamic scholars who both supported and opposed the Revolution, all of them grappling with the question of whether Islam sanctioned parliamentary government.

As we move through the 20th century, we first study different types of Iranian nationalisms, whether authoritarian, anti-Islamic, anti-imperial, and/or critical of Western cultural influence. These include the nationalisms of Reza Shah, Ahmad Kasravi, Mohammad Musaddiq, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad. While for these authors, national identity and strength were crucially important, for Iranian leftists, it was socioeconomic justice. We read about Iranian leftist groups, such as the Tudeh party, as well as the writings of Mahmoud Taleqani, a scholar of Islamic economics, and Ali-Shari’ati, a thinker with leftist sympathies but who was more broadly concerned with creating, as Foucault called it, an Islamic political spirituality among Iranians. Then, parallel to one another, we learn about the monarchism of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Ruhollah Khomeini’s theory of Islamic government. Finally, we end in contemporary Iran, where we analyze conflicting interpretations of Khomeini’s thought, conflicting visions of the role of clerics in government, conflicting perspectives on political freedom, and conflicting perceptions of national identity—debates, as will have learned, that are centuries-old.
Course Objectives:

By the end of this course, you are expected to:

- Identify the broad questions that have animated the history of political thought in Iran, and defend and criticize various responses to these questions.
- Gain knowledge of the ideologies and philosophies of influential political thinkers, ideologues, activists, and government officials in Iran since the Safavid era.
- Narrate the evolution of the major institutions of Iranian government since the Safavid era.
- Acquire a familiarity with diverse political ideologies and philosophies in contemporary Iran.

Course Requirements:

Participation and attendance (25%)

Four memos (25%): Your reflections on the thought of an author we read in a given week (due in class on the day we discuss that author).

Final research paper (50%)

Required Texts:

The following texts are recommended for purchase. I will also have copies on reserve at the campus library.


Syllabus Key

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are printed in the course reader. All other readings are either posted on the course website (as indicated) or in the texts available at the campus bookstore.

Schedule of Seminars

- **Week 1: September 26, 28: Introduction and Safavid, Qajar Iran**
  


- **Week 2: October 3, 5: Constitutionalism**


• **Week 3: October 10, 12: Nationalism 1: Reza Shah, Ahmad Kasravi**


• **Week 4: October 17, 19: Nationalism II: Musaddiq**


• **Week 5: October 24, 26: Westoxication, Jalal Al-e Ahmad**


• **Week 7: October 31, November 2: Leftism and Islamic Leftism, Taleqani**


• **Week 7: November 7, 9: Ali Shari’ati**


• **Week 8: November 14, 16: Ruhollah Khomeini**


• **Week 9: November 21, 23: Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**


• **Week 10: November 28, 30: Conservatism in Contemporary Iran**


  “Political Thought in Contemporary Iran: Ayatollah Javadi Amoli’s Theory of Guardianship,” In Proceedings from Afro-Middle East Centre Conference, “Political Islam: Conceptualising Power between Islamic States and Muslim Social Movements,” January 2015; Pretoria, South Africa. (Course Website)

• **Week 11: December 5, 7: Reformism in Contemporary Iran**


