

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Middle East Studies Conference at UCSB Focuses on Central Asia

Scholars from around the world will gather at UC Santa Barbara for a two-day conference examining issues related to Central Asia. The conference, titled "Centering Central Asia: Gender, State, and Nation," is sponsored by UCSB's Center for Middle East Studies. It begins on Friday, April 24, in the campus's MultiCultural Theater. It is free and the public is invited to attend.

"When we think of Afghanistan and its neighbors, we usually consider it to be a meeting point of several different regions -- the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia," said Dwight Reynolds, professor of religious studies and director of the Center for Middle East Studies. "But recent events have demonstrated very clearly that we must come to understand how these countries interact as a region among themselves. One clear signal of the difficulty here is that we do not even have a term in English for the region."

One of the reasons for the lack of clear designation is that national borders do not coincide with languages, ethnicities, and religions. Persian, for example, is the national language of Iran, but it is also the main language of western Afghanistan; on the other hand, Pashto, which is considered the national language of Afghanistan, is also the language of many of the neighboring mountain regions in Pakistan. "The national boundaries as we know them don't correspond to the distribution of languages, ethnic groups, or religious communities," Reynolds said.

The focus of the conference will be threefold, according to Reynolds. It will address the issue of the nation state, which interacts with concerns regarding security; it will examine gender, which is a major topic throughout the region; and it will explore religion and the transformation of Islam in the region.

Among the conference participants are plenary speakers Janet Afary and Olivier Roy. Afary, currently a distinguished professor of history and women's studies at Purdue University, will be the first holder of UCSB's Duncan and Suzanne Mellichamp Chair in Global Religions and Modernisms in the Department of Religious Studies. A specialist in modern Iran, she will speak on "The Sexual Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran" at 11:30 a.m. on Saturday, April 25, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building.

Roy is the research director of the French National Center for Scientific Research and a lecturer at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris. He will give a talk titled "Imposing Emancipation: What Is the West Doing There?" at 4:30 p.m., also in the McCune Conference Room. One of the leading experts on political Islam, Roy is currently a visiting professor in the political science department at UC Berkeley.

Other events include a screening of "View From a Grain of Sand," in which three Afghan women describe how international interventions, war, and the rise of political Islam has stripped Afghan women of basic rights. Director Meena Nanji will introduce the film. The screening will be preceded by a presentation by Nancy Gallagher, professor of history at UCSB, who will share her experience visiting non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan.

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draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.