List of Speakers, Affiliation, Paper Titles and Abstracts

1. **Kamran Scott Aghaie**, The University of Texas
   **Title**: “Why did the Qajars Become Such Enthusiastic Patrons of Ta’ziyeh? A Simple Question with a Complex Answer.”
   **Abstract**: It is well known that the Qajar period constituted the glory days of the Ta’ziyeh ritual. However, what has not yet been sufficiently answered is why the Qajar elites chose this particular ritual as one of the primary ways of promoting their legitimacy and their relationships with various segments of Iranian society, especially when there were many other options from which to choose. This paper explores answers to this question.

   **Title**: ”The Relationship of Shrine Architecture to Shi’i Ritual”
   **Abstract**: This paper explores the architecture and ritual of the Twelver Shi’i shrines. On the one hand, it argues that the rituals practiced in these shrines followed traditions associated with other mausolea in the Islamic Near East. On the other, it relates certain architectural features to rituals developed at the shrines, including prayers at and around the tomb of the deceased Imam, and commemoration of the death of the Imam Husain at the battle of Kerbala. It also highlights the growth of shrine cities around the mausolea of the Imams to cater for those who cared for the shrines, for the many pilgrims, and for the numerous sayyids who lived in its vicinity.

3. **Rose Aslan**, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
   **Title**: “Negotiating the Intersection of Text and Place at Ali’s Shrine in Najaf”
   **Abstract**: The location of Imam ‘Ali’s grave in Najaf and the popular tales surrounding its miraculous “discovery” and monumental commemoration by the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid have generated numerous narratives. This paper examine the medieval texts
and legends surrounding Ali’s grave in Najaf and considers opposing Shi’i and Sunni narratives that highlight scholars’ contestation over the legitimacy and power of the grave. Working with Shi’i hadiths as well as historical narratives and pilgrimage manuals, this paper traces the evolution of Ali’s grave and connects it to texts that shed light on the complex nature of the construction and perception of sacred space and ritual as well as sectarian identity. The paper examines the various ways in which Muslim scholars perceived Ali’s burial site and constructed rituals that would become part of the established Shi’i tradition of pilgrimage to the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt. It further argues that a close reading of these traditions and ritual practices provide a key for mapping out the processes of the sacralization of mortuary spaces and the resulting ritualization in Shi’i Islam.

4. **May Farhat**, American University of Beirut  
**Title**: “Redefining Political legitimacy: The Mashhad Shrine under Nadir Shah Afshar”  
**Abstract**: The abrupt collapse of the Safavid dynasty following the fall of Isfahan to Afghan tribal forces in 1722 brought a period of protracted political disarray and chaos to Iran. The swift rise of Nadir Shah Afshar (1736–47) to power placed Mashhad, his capital, at the center stage of events. This paper examines Nadir Shah’s paradoxical acts towards the Mashhad shrine—his gilding of the Iwan of Ali Shir Nava’i and the confiscation of the Shrine’s endowments—in light of his quest for political and religious legitimacy in Iran.

5. **Ingvild Flaskanud**, The University of Bergen  
**Title**: “Tashabih – The Shi’ite Religious Theatre in Western Migration”  
**Abstract**: The Shi’a religious theatre, ta’ziyeh, has been well documented and carefully discussed in scholarly literature. Less attention has been given to smaller theatrical events in Shi’a female commemorative rituals in which women perform for an all female audience. In recent years, these commemorative rituals have been transferred to some European countries, including Norway. In this paper I discuss theatrical performances, tashabih, during Muharram commemoration among Iraqi women in Norway, a recently introduced ritual organized by the young generation. To that end, the paper addresses the
following questions: What are the artistic and financial challenges encountered by the organizers and actors? Which events from the Battle of Karbala do they choose to represent? What characterizes the highly symbolic language in gesture, costumes, props, scenography, and libretto? How is the theatrical performance incorporated into the ritual structure and its thematic content? And finally, what is the purpose of performing the religious theatre in Western migrancy?

6. Robert Gleave, University of Exeter
Title: “Hawza and Haram: The Scholarly-Shrine relationship in Shi’i Islam”
Abstract: Seminaries and shrines seem to form a natural alliance within Shi’ism, bringing together popular religious expression and scholarly clerical activity in the same geographical space. The paper examines this relationship, delineating the dynamics between haram and hawza, and how the two elements of Shi’i religious identity feed off each other. It analyzes how the distinctive elements of the shrine and seminary display a certain interdependence, proposing that the distinctive ritual practices and theological significance of a shrine largely correspond to the disciplinary and doctrinal directions in the hawza of this shrine. For example, the particular and peculiar nature of the Karbala shrine creates the context in which the city's hawza can pursue particular scholarly activities that may be deemed somewhat eccentric without this context. Extending the same concept of interdependence of the hawza-shrine relationship to Damascus, Najaf, Qum or Mashhad, the paper concludes that although this concept does not entirely dictate the seminary's character, it does explain the promotion of certain types of scholarly activity and the devaluation of others.

7. Pedram Khosronejad, University of St-Andrews
Title: “Shrines and Sacred Memorials of Unknown Martyrs of Iran-Iraq War”
Abstract: A nation that goes to war unavoidably produces artifacts and establishes places that are often no longer usable when peace is achieved. Some of these war remains may be retrofitted for other practical uses, a process that often replaces commemorative essence by commercial value. In this paper I examine the creation, reception, and function of the memorial shrines of the “Un-known Martyrs” of the Iran-Iraq War, as
new saints and places of worship in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Encompassing war
memorials, shrines and tombs of war martyrs, and martyrdom museums, these
commemorative structures mark the places where the living and the dead encounter each
other every day.

8. **Khalid Sindawi**, The Max Stern Academic College of Emek Yezreel & Tel Aviv
University (Not attending; paper will be read)

**Title:** "Tell your Cousin to Place a Ring on his Right Hand and Set it with a Carnelian:
Notes on Wearing the Ring on the Right Hand among Shi'ites"

**Abstract:** This paper examines the Shi’ite habit of wearing a ring on the right hand and its
theological significance. Briefly surveying the ancient and modern writings on the rules
of conduct associated with wearing a ring, the paper moves on to discuss the reason why
Shi’ites wear the ring on their right hand; the material of which the ring is made; how it is
fashioned; the text which was engraved on the rings of the prophets and the Shi’ite
imams; the significance and merits of the gemstone set into the ring; the number of rings
worn by Shi’ites; the ring’s many uses; and the association between wearing a ring on the
right hand and Ta’wil.

9. **Sabrina Mervin**, CNRS/CEIFR (EHESS)

**Title:** “Najaf, Past and Present”

**Abstract:** The shrine Imam ‘Ali in Najaf, has attracted pilgrims as well as students in
quest of religious knowledge, settling around the shrine in search of baraka and
renowned masters. According to Imami historiography, the *Hawza* of Najaf  was first
founded by Shaykh Tūsī (11th c.) and has continued its mission of religious teaching in
the sacred threshold (*‘ataba*) to the present. This paper argues that in the second half of
the 19th c. Najaf enjoyed a new resurgence and a kind of re-foundation of its educational
mission. The books produced in this period, particularly in *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh*, became
standard textbooks that are still taught today. And the practice of teaching—including
method, classrooms, and the relation between master and disciple—underwent little
change in the so called *al-Hawza al-taqlīdiyya* (traditional). Utilizing texts, narratives,
and direct observation, the paper will further explore these teaching practices from the beginning of the 20th c. to the present.

10. Negar Mottahedeh, Duke University
Title: “The Ta’zieyh and Iranian Cinema”
Abstract: The ta’zieyh’s characteristic sense that embraces all time and that humans, in effect, know their end, configures Bahram Beyzaie’s narrative articulation in the film The Travelers (Mosaferan, 1992). As the character Mahtab Ma’arefi and her family board a vehicle that is to take them to her sister’s wedding in Tehran, she turns unexpectedly to the camera and directly addresses the audience that the car she is about to board will be in an accident that will prevent them from arriving at their destination. As if stating a known fact while, in fact, anticipating a future that is yet to be screened, she declares, “We will all die.” The family members and the driver then in turn address the camera directly to identify themselves, as if registering the necessary details for the imminent police report of the accident. These gestures of direct address reiterate the film’s intimate connection with the ta’zieyh tradition in which role-carriers at once identify with the heroes of the drama in a performative reenactment and simultaneously disassociate themselves from the heroes in reverence for the historical specificity of their lives and identities. As in the ta’zieyh, time collapses and space collides, providing temporal and spatial tropes for Beyzaie and other Iranian directors, including Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami.

11. Stephennie Mulder, The University of Texas
Title: “Sharing in Piety: Sunnis and Shi’is as Patrons of the ‘Alid Shrines in Damascus”
Abstract: The cemetery of Bab al-Saghir in Damascus holds well over thirty ‘Alid tombs, grouped in a cluster of ten shrines, forming as such one of the most important group of Shi’i ziyara-places outside of Iraq. Remarkably, despite the great historical and sectarian significance of these shrines, they have never before been studied. This paper reconstructs the histories of four of the most important shrines in the cemetery, from their first appearance in the eleventh century to the Ottoman period, using evidence drawn from the medieval Arabic sources, newly surveyed measured architectural drawings,
archaeological analysis, epigraphic evidence, and analysis of the spatial relationships within and between buildings. On the basis of this evidence, the paper proposes a far more harmonious relationship between Sunnis and Shi’is in medieval and early modern Damascus than is often supposed, amply illustrated by the perpetual interest of both Sunni and Shi’i patrons in the preservation and rebuilding of these shrines. This quite extensive architectural evidence tells a story of sectarian exchange and interaction that the textual sources alone cannot convey and helps us unravel the mixed of motivations and sectarian allegiances of the various patrons.

12. Kishwar Rizvi, Yale University
Title: “Iconography and Ideology: Commemorating the Cult of Shi’i imams in early Safavid Iran”
Abstract: The commemoration of the imams stands at the foundation of Shi’i core beliefs and ritual practices, such that their shrines serve as sites of mediation between devotees and the baraka of the imam. A less known aspect of Shi’i commemoration is the hagiographies of the imams commissioned by the Safavid elite, in which stories of their lives are narrated in cities, mosques, and cemeteries. This paper analyzes the manner in which the cult of Shi’i imams was resurrected in the sixteenth century, through an analysis of select paintings from a deluxe 1526 manuscript, the Tarikh-i ‘aima-yi ma’sumin (History of the Immaculate Imams), of Veramini, now at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. By studying the iconography of these paintings, the paper argues that the images are complex amalgams of contemporary history as well as sophisticated commentaries on the theological debates undertaken during the reigns of the first two rulers, namely Isma’il and Tahmasb.

13. Edith Szanto, American University of Iraq Sulaymaniyya
Title: “Affecting ‘Ashura: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Contemporary Syrian Twelver Shi’i Mourning Rituals”
Abstract: In the mid-90s, Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement and the Iranian Ayatollah Khamene’i both banned bloody forms of self-flagellation such as tatbir (cutting the skin on the top of the head with a sword) calling them backward and un-Islamic. Drawing on
various Shi‘i thinkers, they argued that Shi‘i Muslims ought to imitate Husayn by actively fighting against oppressors rather than passively mourning Husayn’s martyrdom. This prohibition has not been unanimously applied by all Muslim countries, including Syria, where such practices have persisted and in fact increased in popularity over the last two decades. By closely reading the linguistic, conceptual, and juridical discourses that were produced in Syria in order to justify this position, the paper argues that the performers of tatbīr in Syria actually conceived of these rituals in revolutionary, rather than reactionary, terms. Describing the performance and reception of these flagellation processions in terms of “influence, impression, arousal and excitement,” the paper opens up spaces for rethinking ‘revolution’ and ‘redemption’ in contemporary Twelver Shi‘ism. The paper examines in particular the weekly women’s mourning gatherings and men’s annual ‘Ashura processions at the Sayyida Zaynab south of Damascus.

14. Yasser Tabbaa, NYU Abu Dhabi

Title: “The Light Within: Radiant and Luminescent Ornament in Shi‘i Shrines”

Abstract: In an often cited hadith, al-Husayn describes the Imams as “silhouettes of light revolving around the throne of the All Merciful,” attesting to the firmly held belief in the blissful light (nur) that emanates from Muhammad, Fatima, and the 12 Imams. Does this essential quality of light resonate with the architectural ornament of Shi‘i shrines, which are believed to hold the living memory and radiant essence of the imams? Could we interpret the manifold varieties of ornament that developed within these shrines between the 10th and 20th centuries as manifestations of a cosmology of light? In order to answer these questions, the paper looks diachronically at pivotal examples of Shi‘i shrine ornament—including radiant niches, luster tiles, stellar domes, and late a’ineh kari ornament—tentatively interpreting these spectacular forms within the context of light. Whereas we are still far from affirming the existence of a Shi‘i iconography of light, this paper hopes to create a suitable climate for future interpretations.
Title: “Mediated Pilgrimage Among Shi’ite Muslims: A case study of Imam Reza Holy Shrine”

Abstract: This paper investigates the phenomenon of “mediated pilgrimage,” a novel and fast growing form of Shi’ite pilgrimage that situates itself at the intersection of ICT use and religious practice, creating possibilities for religious rituals that were previously impossible to pursue. Focusing on the practice of mediated pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, it argues that ICTs have opened up new opportunities for those unable to travel to the shrine—including many in the diaspora—to pay their respect to the Imam. Shiite Muslims embraced these modern technologies as tools to reinvigorate their core traditions, becoming as such pioneers in performing mediated pilgrimage while strengthening and reinstitutionalizing the fundamental core of their faith.