About the talk

This lecture focuses on one of the most serious cases of famine in the Middle East in the nineteenth century. Reading through a wide range of contemporary documents, Kazemi uses this episode as a case study to talk about the larger problem of subsistence crises and natural disasters in Iran and the Middle East. He contends that the causes of the 1860–61 famine were a series of interlocking issues that had affected the political economy of the Qajar state in Iran. The longer-term economic and political developments in the run-up to the crisis, had an important role in setting up a broad context in which subsistence crises of this kind could occur frequently. Loss of transcontinental trade and territories, the decline of local industries, worsening trade deficits, the devaluation and scarcity of currency, and chronic imperial and state-building warfare in an increasingly globalized economy had led to the worsening fiscal crisis of the Iranian state and the rise of what was essentially new and predatory capital in the Qajar grain market. In such an atmosphere, people had become vulnerable more than ever before to natural and manmade disasters. Many, if not all, of the processes explained here were central in the making of disasters elsewhere in the Middle East. The factors that brought about these unfortunate episodes in the region were interconnected and had local, regional, and above all global dimensions.

Ranin Kazemi

Ranin Kazemi is an Associate Professor of History at San Diego State University. He holds a PhD in History from Yale University and a Master’s degree in History from the Ohio State University. Kazemi published several lengthy, monographic articles in major scholarly journals such as Iranian Studies, The Historian, Middle Eastern Studies, Modern Asian Studies, the Journal of Persianate Studies, and Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Kazemi is currently working on a series of articles about the history of food, famine, drugs, and protest in early modern and modern Iran, and a book manuscript entitled The Ecology of Conflict: Privation, Protest, and Populism in Iran, 1850-1892.