

## IN MEMORIAM

# Habib Ladjevardi, 1938–2021

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Habib Ladjevardi, a one-time business leader and public policy expert, and later a scholar of Iranian social history and politics, died on July 24, 2021 (3 Mordad 1400) in Washington, DC, at the end of a long illness. He was 83. Although he is likely to be remembered primarily for two of his pioneering professional accomplishments—founding the Iran Center for Management Studies in Tehran and directing the Iranian Oral History Project at Harvard University—his career was marked by numerous other endeavors related to building institutions and promoting civic engagement and philanthropy.

Habib Ladjevardi was born in Tehran on May 28, 1938 (4 Farvardin 1317) into a prominent business family with sizable holdings in dozens of industries and private firms with tens of thousands of employees. After completing his primary school in Tehran, he was sent to New York in the early 1950s to continue his education. He attended Scarsdale High School, where he excelled academically, was a member of the school's soccer and wrestling teams, and was chosen as the president of his graduating class in 1957. He then continued his undergraduate studies at Yale University, receiving a BS in 1961, followed by an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1963.

Ladjevardi returned to Iran in 1963 and began working in his family's sprawling business network, the Behshahr Industrial Group, in various managerial positions, including personnel director, marketing manager, president of one of the network's subsidiaries, and finally as the chair of its board of directors. By the late 1960s, he realized, I believe, that his real calling in life was not to be an entrepreneur or business executive, but rather someone who could help train a new generation of Iranian business managers in modern managerial practices—training similar to what he himself had received at the Harvard Business School (HBS). He reached out to several members of the HBS faculty and invited them to consider



**Figure 1.** Iran Center for Management Studies, Tehran. Photo courtesy of Nader Ardalan.

taking part in building an affiliate branch of their business school in Tehran. At the same time, he carried out a fundraising campaign among Iranian businessmen and solicited official recognition and support from the Ministry of Higher Education for creating a graduate-level school of business administration to be called the Iran Center for Management Studies (ICMS; see Fig. 1). He commissioned the noted Iranian architect and architectural historian, Nader Ardalan, to prepare the plans for the center's campus on a barren hilltop between Tehran and Shemiran that had been acquired as the future site for the center. Inspired by the Bagh-e Fin paradise garden of Kashan, Ardalan designed what became one of the most attractive and functional centers of higher education in the country. Reflecting on his work on the ICMS project, Ardalan wrote to me recently, "the project allowed me to apply some of the perennial Iranian architectural traditions that I had presented in my coauthored book with Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago, 1973) in the Center's design."

What made ICMS pedagogically distinctive was its adoption of the HBS "case-study" teaching method. The presence of several Harvard faculty members on the center's teaching staff, working closely with their Iranian colleagues, ensured that this pioneering approach to graduate-level management studies, at least for Iran, would be carefully adapted to the country's needs and applied effectively. Ladjevardi himself served as the vice president of ICMS and taught courses on public policy. The center trained dozens of students over the six years (1972–78) that it was in operation, many of whom were hired in mid-level managerial positions upon graduation. Shortly after the revolution, ICMS was dissolved. Its campus and facilities were expropriated by the new regime and subsequently granted to a newly formed elite institution, the Emam Sadegh University, which had a heavily Islamic curriculum and was led by prominent members of the clergy.

At the onset of the Islamic Revolution, Ladjevardi left Iran, this time to pursue a doctorate in Middle Eastern studies at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, focusing on Iran's political and economic history. He wrote his dissertation on the rise and decline of Iran's labor movement, from the onset of the Constitutional Revolution to the early 1960s.

Using extensive primary sources drawn mainly from British public records and the US national archives, he sought to demonstrate that the breakdowns and failures of workers unions in Iran were *not* due to the lack of capable labor leaders or, in many cases, public-spirited officials who recognized the legitimacy of their demands, but a result of autocratic and repressive measures taken by those at the pinnacle of power, malign foreign influence and interventions, and the complicity of the privileged classes. With remarkable honesty and courage, he admitted that “as a member of Iran’s privileged class, I too benefitted from some of the policies and practices that I deplore,” but, he added, “silence or selective choice of materials will deny my children and their children the opportunity of learning from our mistakes.” He received his PhD from Oxford in 1981 and, after some revisions and additions, published his dissertation under the title of *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (1985).

I met Habib for the first time in 1980, after he moved to the United States and was appointed a research associate at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies. In the fall of that year, he was asked by Edward Keenan, a historian of Russia and then dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, to consider organizing an oral history project. According to Habib, “Keenan saw certain similarities between the Russian and the Iranian revolutions and considered the immigration to the West of hundreds of former Iranian officials to be an exceptional opportunity to collect and preserve valuable historical data.” Habib welcomed the suggestion, explored the means, methods, and required resources for such a project, and invited several of us to serve on an advisory committee to oversee the design and execution of what started in September 1981 as the “Iranian Oral History Project.” The committee members included Ervand Abrahamian, Shaul Bakhash, Ali Banuazizi, James Bill, Farhad Kazemi, Roy Mottahedeh, and Marvin Zonis. The project received generous financial support from the Iranian diaspora community and the Ford Foundation, and a major award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Over the course of the following decade, in-person interviews, one to forty-four hours in duration, were conducted by the small staff of the project with 134 individuals who had played major roles in the political, economic, and social life of the country or had closely witnessed events between the early 1920s and the fall of the Pahlavi regime. The interviewees included former prime ministers, key cabinet members, senators, judges, military commanders, tribal leaders, opposition figures, foreign diplomats, and a small number of scholars and public intellectuals. Ladjevardi oversaw the project closely, carried out nearly half of the interviews himself, and later provided a detailed description of the goals and the methodology of the project in this journal (*Iranian Studies*, 18, no. 1, 1985) and later in a monograph titled *Reference Guide to the Iranian Oral History Collection* (1987; 2nd ed., 1993). He also published the full texts of a dozen or so of the interviews with brief biographies of the interviewees. The entire collection of the Iranian Oral History Project, including 896 hours of audiotapes of the actual interviews, as well as transcribed versions of most, comprising over 18,000 pages, have been made publicly available by the Middle East Division of the Widener Library at Harvard University and accessible at <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/iranian-oral-history-project>. More recently, a searchable digitized version of the interviews has been created and made available on a site in Iran (<https://iranhistory.net>). Without a doubt, the Iranian Oral History Collection is an indispensable primary source of information for students and scholars of 20th-century Iranian politics and a lasting tribute to its creator, Habib Ladjevardi.

Habib’s professional activities in the 1980s and 1990s were by no means limited to directing the oral history project. He played an active role in promoting scholarly and cultural events at Harvard’s Middle East Center. He served as the executive director of the International Society for Iranian Studies (now the Association for Iranian Studies) from 1982 to 1987. And, in the civic realm, he was one of the founders and the first president (1988–91) of the Iranian Association of Boston (IAB), a nonreligious and nonpolitical community organization that has continued to function as a cultural center for the Iranian community in the greater Boston area for the past three decades.

In the last decade or so of his life, Habib suffered a number of tragedies. He lost his daughter, Mariam, suddenly in 2008, and his wife, Farah Ebrahimi to cancer two years later. The

onset of forgetfulness and the increasing difficulty managing his personal affairs and communicating with those close to him made his final five or six years at a care facility in Washington difficult to bear. He is survived by his two children, Leila Ladjevardi Arsanjani and Mahmoud Ladjevardi, who remained by his side until the end.