

Dr. Pardis Mahdavi

Author · Educator · Keynote Speaker · Anthropologist

“Revolutions Start in Culture.”

THE POSITIONING

We are living through a moment when everything is changing at once. The people who will define the next decade are not the ones bracing against it, they are the ones who can turn disruption into direction. **Pardis Mahdavi is the rare voice who shows them how.** A former university president, Columbia-trained anthropologist, and member of the Young Presidents’ Organization and Council on Foreign Relations, she has spent twenty-five years on the ground, from Tehran’s underground to the frontlines of AI-era education, studying how people and cultures reinvent themselves when the old maps stop working. She turns that hard-won field wisdom into a charge anyone can act on tomorrow.

AT A GLANCE

Columbia PhD Medical Anthropology	2x TEDx Speaker 2012 · 2022
Former University President University of La Verne	UC Berkeley Director, Executive Leadership Academy
8 Books Published Stanford · Duke · Hachette · Bloomsbury	CFR Lifetime Member Council on Foreign Relations
YPO Member Young Presidents’ Organization	25+ Years in the Field Fieldwork across five continents

ABOUT DR. PARDIS MAHDAVI

Dr. Pardis Mahdavi is an Iranian-American scholar, author, and keynote speaker whose work sits at the intersection of the forces reshaping our world: global power, the future of learning and work in the AI era, and the human capacity to reinvent under pressure. For all audiences, she connects the geopolitics in the headlines to the choices individuals have in front of them.

Born in the United States to parents who fled Iran in 1978, she has built her career around a single question: how do people and cultures resist, adapt, and remake themselves when the systems around them break down? She holds a PhD and multiple master's degrees from Columbia University, and is a lifetime member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a member of the Young Presidents' Organization.

She is a former university president (University of La Verne), provost (University of Montana), and dean (Arizona State University), and currently serves as Director of the Executive Leadership Academy at UC Berkeley and the Founder of MyUni Education. She is the author of eight books, including *Passionate Uprisings* (Stanford), *Hyphen* (Bloomsbury), *Book of Queens* (Hachette), and *Riding* (Duke, 2025). Her commentary has appeared in TIME, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Foreign Affairs, NPR, and the Los Angeles Times.

Her fieldwork in Iran, which includes a documented run-in with the morality police in Tehran, has made her one of the only American scholars able to speak with both academic rigor and lived experience about life, power, and resistance under authoritarianism. On stage, she turns that rare vantage point into something an audience can use: a clear-eyed, high-energy account of how to lead, build, and find your footing when everything is in motion.

WHY AUDIENCES BOOK PARDIS

- Cross-sector authority across global power, the future of work, and human reinvention, a category most speakers cannot claim.
- Lived experience plus executive leadership: ground-truth fieldwork paired with running an institution at the highest level.
- Built for founder and executive rooms. She speaks the language of leaders navigating disruption, AI, and reinvention, and never talks over a room or under it.
- Turns complex, high-stakes ideas into clear, usable insight, with a takeaway people act on the next morning.
- High-energy, story-driven delivery, equally compelling on a corporate main stage, a peer-forum retreat, or an intimate fireside.

SIGNATURE THEMES

Four category-defining themes. Each is independently bookable, and they are even more powerful woven together.

1. Creativity as Power

- Reframes creativity from a soft skill into the engine of resilience, reinvention, and growth, drawn from twenty-five years studying how people and movements remake themselves under pressure.
- Introduces “Chaosmosis,” a framework for leading through the churn when everything changes at once, and why a creative practice is what keeps disruption from curdling into dysfunction.
- Field-tested stories from Tehran to Dubai to New York that land hard with founders and executives living through constant change.
- **Why now:** AI is commoditizing execution. The leaders who win the next decade are the ones who can make, not merely manage.

2. Mapping the Journey: Finding Path, Passion & Purpose

- A wayfinding framework for leaders and teams crossing terrain with no visible far side: locate where you stand, read the descent, and lead through the fog instead of around it.
- Built on her own arc, from exile in the Middle East to the university presidency to walking off that summit to build a new model of education, plus two decades of fieldwork on how people navigate transition.
- Sends every audience out with tools they can use immediately, and language for reinvention that no one ever gave them.
- **Why now:** In a moment of constant reinvention, adaptability and purpose are the most durable currency a leader or an organization owns.

3. Iran & Global Power: What the headlines miss about power, resistance, and the world your business operates in.

- First scholar to produce a book-length ethnographic account of post-revolution Iranian social movements (*Passionate Uprisings*, Stanford 2008).
- Direct, lived experience, including a documented run-in with the morality police, navigating systems connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.
- Op-eds in TIME and The Boston Globe; commentary on NPR, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Aspen Institute stage.
- **Why now:** Iran is constantly in the news and almost no one can speak with both scholarly rigor and lived experience. Essential context for any leader managing global risk.

4. The Future of Education & Work in the AI Era: The view from inside the system.

- Former University President, Provost, Dean, and Professor across four major institutions.
- Founder of MyUni, a next-generation learning ecosystem built for the AI era.
- Director of the UC Berkeley Executive Leadership Academy, advising leaders on disruption, the enrollment cliff, and workforce realignment.
- **Why now:** AI is rewriting how organizations learn, hire, and grow. Leaders need clear strategy, not theory.

SIGNATURE CROSSOVER KEYNOTE

“What Happens When Everything Changes at Once?”

A flagship keynote weaving global power, the AI revolution, and the human capacity for creative reinvention into a single narrative about how leaders, institutions, and people adapt when systems break down. Customizable from 20 to 60 minutes; available as keynote, fireside, or workshop.

TALK TITLES & FORMATS

Creativity & Leadership

- Creativity as Power
- Making, Not Managing: Leadership for an Age of Disruption
- Chaosmosis: How to Lead When Everything Changes at Once

Path, Passion & Purpose

- Mapping the Journey: Finding Your Path, Passion, and Purpose
- You Are Not Lost, You Are Between Maps
- Wayfinding: Leading Yourself and Your People Through the Fog

Iran & Global Power

- Inside Iran: What the Headlines Miss About Life, Power, and Resistance
- Beyond the Regime: The Human Story of Iran’s Social Movements
- Who Fills the Leadership Vacuum in Iran?
- Regime Change ≠ Liberation: Lessons from Post-Conflict Societies

Education, AI & the Future of Work

- The End of College as We Know It
- AI Is Rewriting How We Work and Learn: What Leaders Must Do Now
- From Degrees to Skills: The New Architecture of Talent
- Democratizing Learning in a Post-Institutional Era

Crossover / Signature Keynotes

- What Happens When Everything Changes at Once?
- Revolutions Start in Culture

FORMATS: Keynote · Fireside Chat · Panel · Workshop · Podcast · Custom Executive Briefing

Available for in-person and remote engagements. Producer and discovery calls available before commitment.

RECENT TRACTION

Major Stages (Recent)

- Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) Greenwich Chapter · 2025, Miami 2026
- ASU GSV · San Diego · 2026
- Council on Foreign Relations · 2022
- Aspen Ideas · 2019
- Copenhagen Democracy Summit · 2018
- TEDx · 2012 and 2022 (2x TEDx Speaker)

Recent Op-Eds & Commentary

- The Boston Globe · “A ‘Koorsoo’ Moment for Iran” · Jan 2026
- The Washington Post · Featured commentary on Iran and women's movements
- NPR / PRX (Snap Judgment) · “Free Reign,” Episode 1704 · Jan 2026
- Foreign Affairs · Los Angeles Times · Ms. Magazine · Times Literary Supplement

Recent Keynotes

- “Koorsoo” Opening Keynote · Live Stream · Jan 2026
- “The Underground Women” · Featured Talk, Jaipur Literature Festival · Sep 2025
- “Women, Life, Freedom: Inside Iran's New Revolution” · Keynote · Sep 2024
- “The Creative Spark That Ignited a Revolution” · TEDx Main Stage · Feb 2023

BOOKS

Eight published works spanning Stanford University Press, Duke University Press, Hachette, Bloomsbury, and Routledge, plus two forthcoming titles.

<i>Riding</i>	Duke University Press	2025
<i>Book of Queens</i>	Hachette Books	2023
<i>Hyphen</i>	Bloomsbury Academic	2021
<i>Crossing the Gulf</i>	Stanford University Press	2016
<i>From Trafficking to Terror</i>	Routledge	2013
<i>Gridlock</i>	Stanford University Press	2011
<i>Passionate Uprisings</i>	Stanford University Press	2008

Forthcoming: *HorsePower* (YA novel) · *Switch* (literary fiction)

AUDIENCES

Founders & Entrepreneurs. Peer forums and member networks such as YPO and EO, and founder communities building through disruption and reinvention.

Corporate Leadership. Fortune 500 executives and leadership teams navigating AI transformation, organizational change, and geopolitical risk.

Universities & Boards. Trustees, presidents, provosts, and CHROs facing existential change in higher education and the workforce.

Policy & Government. Foreign-policy forums, think tanks, and government bodies on Iran, women's movements, and migration.

Investors & Family Offices. VC firms, family offices, and capital allocators reading global change and frontier markets in education.

PRESS HOOKS & ANGLES

PULL QUOTES

"They can take your home, your belongings, even your country. But no one can take your education."

"You are not lost. You are between maps. And creativity is not a soft skill, it is the engine."

The Underground Insider. Born in the U.S. after her parents fled Iran in 1978; returned decades later to document the underground and survived a run-in with the morality police.

The Prophet. The cultural anthropologist who predicted Iran's current moment in her 2008 book *Passionate Uprisings*.

The Wayfinder. The former university president who walked off the summit to build a new model of education, and now teaches leaders how to find their footing in constant change.

The Bridge. The rare voice who connects global power, AI-era learning, and the human capacity for creative reinvention into a single narrative about the future.

BOOKING & CONTACT

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Press Assets: High-resolution photos, B-roll, official bio variants, and a longer speaker reel available on request.