



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Special Report
A Look Back at the 2008 U.S.-Iran Higher Education Dialogue
September 2012

Relations between the United States and Iran are at historic lows. The crisis and sanctions over Tehran's nuclear program, the civil war in Syria and the uprisings across the Middle East have once again put Iran and the United States on opposite ends of the foreign policy table.

The current diplomatic tension makes it easy to forget the cautious optimism that characterized relations back in 2008. When President Obama took office in 2008, one of his foreign policy aims was re-engaging with Iran. Earlier that year, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had sent a signal to the United States that relations between the two countries could be restored in the future.

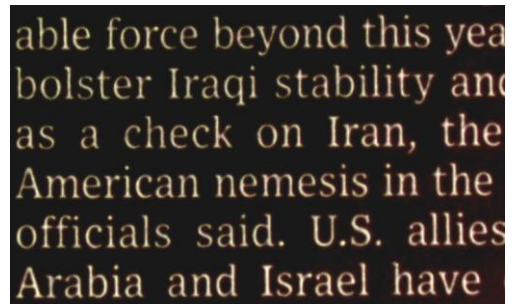


Photo: Iran coverage in a major newspaper.

It was in this period of cautious optimism that the Hollings Center, in cooperation with the University of Birmingham, organized a Higher Education Dialogue entitled, *American Studies and Iranian Studies: Bridging the Gaps between Nations and Disciplines*. Taking place at Birmingham in the United Kingdom, the dialogue brought together a group of Iranian and American citizens that included historians, social scientists, literature professors, religious scholars and former government officials.

This special report offers a glimpse into the discussions that took place in 2008. While the dialogue did not resolve any of the great dilemmas affecting U.S.-Iran relations, it did reveal a number of interesting points:

- Iranian citizens have strong memories of past foreign policy crises that Americans have long forgotten.
- Iranians are more interested in American history and culture than Americans think.
- Participants felt that direct contact between American and Iranian citizens at dialogue events may pay off in the event of a future rapprochement.

Anti-Americanism in Iran, Anti-Iran Sentiment in the United States

The dialogue began with tense debates about the history of U.S.-Iran relations: American support of the Shah, the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf War and the role of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq, which border Iran. It is notable that the experience of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), came up a number of times during the dialogue. Some Iranian participants, including those who fought in the war, noted the destruction the war brought to Iran and the support that the United States extended to Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the war. While this conflict is fresh in the minds of many Iranians, it is striking that much of the American public is unfamiliar with the war and U.S. policy during the conflict.

“When Iran helped the US overthrow Taliban in Afghanistan, it did not receive anything positive in return. In fact, it was named the ‘Axis of Evil’ after that! There is a historical sense of deprivation – Iran feels like the victim. For that reason Iran is now very determined to have its legitimate rights, like nuclear power.”

Iranian Professor of American Studies and Foreign Languages

In foreign policy discussions, while many Iranian participants did not defend the specific actions of Tehran's foreign policy--such as support to extremist groups in the Middle East—they were quick to explain its underpinnings. One participant from a major Iranian university argued that the United States has failed to understand that Iran's activism in its foreign policy has been a direct response to U.S. military strategy in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Tehran feels encircled by U.S. military forces and countries in strategic partnerships with the United States. Other participants attributed Iran's actions to a feeling of victimhood and argued that Iran's tough neighborhood causes it to act accordingly. An Iranian professor said, “If you move Denmark to Iran and put Iran in Denmark's place, then Denmark would announce a state of emergency within 24 hours.”

The discussion soon turned to the issue of anti-Americanism in Iran. An Iranian participant argued that U.S. policies both before and after the Islamic Revolution, such as sanctions, containment and isolation, have instilled anti-Americanism in Iranian public opinion – so much so that Iranians do not think that the US is a progressive nation. An Iranian professor of American Studies disagreed with the idea that anti-Americanism is rampant in Iran. The Iranian educated public does not demonize the United States. Many Iranians are aware that the United States, unlike European countries, did not create colonies and mandates in the Middle East.

Iranian participants acknowledged the problem of anti-Americanism in Iran but also pointed out that anti-Iran sentiment exists in the United States. One professor of international relations at an Iranian university argued that this is because American policymakers and the media repeatedly attribute Iran's policies to nefarious ideological or religious motives. An American participant responded that Iran does not help its own cause as it has routinely funneled arms and money to political proxies and extremist groups in the Middle East. It has fostered an image for itself in the United States that is difficult to alter.

The Perception Gap: Whose View of Iran?

A former Iranian diplomat claimed that there are two levels of misperception about Iran in the United States. The first is the public level, where there is a lack of information about Iran. The second is the political level where the problem is one of misinformation. American policymakers, the former diplomat argued, tend to judge Iran according to the values of American exceptionalism. For instance, Iran is often referred to as a “regime,” rather than a republic or democracy and this embitters Iranians. An Iranian professor agreed and asserted that for any relationship to yield fruitful results, the playing field has to be level, and neither side should assume it is exceptional.

While participants from Iran vociferously disagreed with the diaspora’s portrayal of Iran as politically repressive and closed, it is worthy of note that a number of Iranian citizens nearly pulled out of the dialogue fearing political repercussions back home for attending an event sponsored by an American NGO.

Iranian-American participants took issue with the idea expressed by some of their Iranian counterparts that Iran is beyond external criticism. They noted that Iran’s government has stifled political dissent and has generally suppressed the political, religious and ethnic diversity of the country. Iranian participants denied this, and argued that the Iranian diaspora—through literary works such as *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*—foster inaccurate and exaggerated images of Iran’s society and its political scene.

This line of debate cut across many sessions, including one on religion. Much disagreement surfaced among Iranian-Americans and Iranians living in Iran. Some Iranian-Americans stated that the very reason they left Iran was because of the regime’s intolerance towards religious diversity. Iranian participants from Iran were adamant that there is even more openness about religious differences after the Revolution. A participant stated that even inside traditional seminaries there are open discussions of major theological controversies and critical debates on Shi’ism.

While Iranian participants criticized their American counterparts for “looking at Iran from the outside, yet telling inside stories” about political repression, behind-the-scenes planning for the dialogue revealed that Iranian government policies weighed heavily on the minds of Iranian citizens. Indeed, a number of Iranian citizens invited to the dialogue nearly backed out, partly in fear of repercussions back home for attending a dialogue sponsored by an American NGO where Iranian-Americans would be present.

American Studies in Iran: The US Becomes “the Other”

It may surprise Americans to know that there are American Studies programs in Iran. Dialogue participants revealed that the main challenge for American studies programs in Iran is not government scrutiny or restrictions, but a lack of resources. The challenges these programs face include a limited pool of faculty who can teach well in English, restrictions on

travel to the US, and barriers to publishing in international academic journals that regard submissions from Iran with suspicion. Moreover, faculty of American studies in Iran complained that a lack of expertise in Spanish prevents them from engaging with American politics and history that revolve around Latino politics.

In better times these programs may foster greater understanding of the United States in Iran. Iranian scholars explained that the number of students who wish to pursue higher degrees in American Studies and study in the US is remarkable. An Iranian professor of American literature stated: “Perhaps it would come as a surprise to the majority of people in the West that Iranian students are often fascinated by the great works of American literature. The higher education system in Iran is supportive of cultural engagement.” He then went on to explain how American literary works have sparked controversial classroom debates on social and political issues.

“Hemingway, the great writer of America, had inspired a discussion [on abortion] through his art which would not have taken place in an Iranian classroom, had he not so delicately dealt with the complexities of human character – though in a distinctively ‘American’ style. Literature can provide the site for rich dialogue at all levels and we can benefit from it in immensely fruitful ways.”

Iranian Professor of American Literature

American and Iranian participants bridged the discussion by noting the challenges that the Iranian Studies field faces in the US. For instance, an Iranian-American professor pointed out that American students are apprehensive about going to Iran and students who wish to go to Iran face severe impediments. Professors of Iranian Studies in the US also explained that the dearth of digital interaction across American and Iranian scholars further discourages an exchange of ideas. One American participant proposed that Iranians and Americans may find it less difficult to engage over less politicized subjects such as micro-history, environment and ecology. Others raised the need for Iranian scholarship to acknowledge their society’s diversity and cultural heterogeneity. In that respect, Iranian Studies should not be limited to Iran, but should include Afghanistan, Tajikistan and diaspora communities.

Why Dialogue?

If this dialogue was difficult to convene in the hopeful international climate of 2008, it would be nearly impossible to organize in today’s atmosphere of deep crisis. Nonetheless, the participants at the dialogue found the discussions both frustrating and fruitful. While the Hollings Center is unable to convene a U.S.-Iran dialogue presently, it looks forward to an easing in crisis relations so that the Iranian and American participants can pick up where they left off, with an eye towards bridging the gap across the higher education sectors of the two countries.



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The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:

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