



## U.S.-Iran Cultural Diplomacy: A Historical Perspective

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### WHAT IS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY?

In his seminal review of modern American cultural diplomacy, *The First Resort of Kings, American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (2005), Dr. Richard Arndt explored the full breadth of this important element of American international statecraft. Arndt defined cultural diplomacy by first considering how it contrasted with “cultural relations, or “relations between national cultures, those aspects of intellect and education lodged in any society that tend to cross borders and connect with foreign institutions.” Cultural diplomacy, he stated, “can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests.”<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the current Iranian perspective on what cultural diplomacy entails appears to encompass a broader sense of cultural diplomacy:

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The major responsibility in cultural diplomacy is supposed to be undertaken by diplomats. . . [C]ultural diplomacy is not excluded to foreign diplomacy handlers. All people, including artists, traders, athletes, journalists, clerics etc. can be representatives of the Iranian culture and inform other societies on the cultural and civilizational richness of Iran<sup>2</sup>

There are differing views, however, as to the necessity of diplomats to the practice of cultural diplomacy. The Berlin-based Institute for Cultural Diplomacy notes that Cultural Diplomacy as a practice has existed for centuries: “Explorers, travelers, teachers, and artists, for example, can be considered as informal ambassadors, or early cultural diplomats. Cultural diplomats also include any individual that has spent time abroad and has interacted with local people, as this is an important form of cultural exchange.” Indeed, as Arndt himself pointed out, the U.S. government played a limited role in cultural diplomacy until the 1930s, when it “permitted, facilitated, tolerated and occasionally abetted cultural diplomatic interventions, but rarely funded them.” As late as 1938, he pointed out, the State Department foresaw handling no more than five percent of the total work of

cultural diplomacy, focusing only on coordinating, supplementing, and facilitating natural private flows of people and knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Whether diplomats are involved is an important point, as it means issues of national interest and security enter the calculus. As a result, there arises a tension between viewing cultural diplomacy primarily as an instrument of national security statecraft rather than as primarily a means for increasing mutual understanding between people. While ideally mutual understanding can foster improved national security, there are times when application of these concepts concurrently can be problematic. The development of cultural diplomacy in America has witnessed several periods where cultural diplomacy became primarily an element of national security statecraft. Reviewing multiple reports on the role of cultural diplomacy within U.S. foreign policy, the Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy, an independent advisory body which helps to guide State Department public diplomacy policy-making noted the tension in the United States of sustained public diplomacy during peaceful times.

Cummings also notes this and other patterns in his 2007 survey of nearly 70 years of cultural diplomacy efforts by the United States government (2007, Cummings).

Active involvement in – and funding for – cultural diplomacy programs by the federal government has most often been stimulated by a perceived foreign threat or crisis. The Nazi threat really got the United States started in the business of cultural diplomacy. World War II expanded American involvement still further, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union enlarged many of these activities...New concerns with global terrorism... may be the primary factor shaping the development of American cultural diplomacy throughout the first part of the 21st century.<sup>5</sup>

The Advisory Council report, rather than stating any conclusive position regarding this tension, pointed it out and noted that perhaps the current emphasis on cultural diplomacy during the War on Terror will “create enduring structures within which to practice effective cultural diplomacy and articulate a sustaining vision of the role that culture can play in enhancing the security of this country.”

With these parameters and dilemmas in mind, I now will turn to the main theme of this paper, a historical account of US-Iran cultural diplomacy.

### THE EARLY PERIOD- 1834-1906

Official ties between the United States and Persia began in 1856 when the Qajar Nasseredin Shah dispatched Persia’s first Ambassador, Mirza Abolhasan Shirazi to Washington, D.C. The United States dispatched diplomatic envoy Samuel Benjamin to Persia in 1883. Relations were upgraded to the Ambassadorial level in 1944.<sup>7</sup> In the 19th century, Iran’s relations with great powers focused on largely one-sided, but never quite colonial ties with Great Britain and Russia. Both powers dominated Iran well into the twentieth century. During this period, Iranian leaders sought a third country to help Iran resist the power of Russia and Great Britain, and looked favorably upon the United States. Early cultural ties - preceding official ties by decades - helped to enhance American standing in the Iranian popular imagination.

Cultural ties between the US and Persia began in 1834, with the arrival of Protestant missionary Justin Perkins and Dr. Asahel Grant, a physician. Sent by the Protestant Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to administer to the Assyrian/Nestorian Christians of Iran, Perkins and Grant were the first Americans to live in Iran, and settled with their wives to live in Urmia in Northwestern Iran. Soon after in 1848, Joseph Cochran also settled in Urmia as a missionary along with his large family. One of Cochran’s sons, (Joseph Jr.), returned with his wife to Urmia in 1878 after completing medical school. In 1879, Dr. Cochran founded,

through support from the Board of Assyrian Missions, Iran's first modern medical school, the Medical College of Urmia.<sup>8</sup>

During this same period American Presbyterian missionaries established the American College (later called Alborz College) in the Armenian quarter of Tehran. Beginning as a grade school in 1873, the school soon attracted many Moslem students and adopted Persian as its language of instruction. In 1898, Rev. Samuel Jordan arrived to assume leadership of the school, and championed the school's growth into a junior college (1924) and finally into a US-accredited liberal arts college (1928). Reverend Jordan's legacy with Alborz College included the transmission of the best of American values such as the dignity of work, the virtue of community service, democracy and equality, equality of women, and love of country. Even though the Russians, British, French, and Germans opened schools in Iran, it was to the American school that the leaders of the country, including the royal family, sent their sons and daughters.

Perhaps an even more poignant figure, the American Howard Baskerville, taught at the American Memorial School of Tabriz until his fateful decision to join the Constitutional revolutionaries of Tabriz. Baskerville's heroic stand with the Iranian Constitutionalists occurred during the next phase in Iran's political development and transition to modernity - a phase in which Americans were intimately and comprehensively involved.

#### THE CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENT AND THE AMERICAN THIRD OPTION: 1906-1945

United States-Iran cultural diplomacy during the first half of the twentieth century was advanced primarily through the interaction of prominent elites from both countries. American missionaries, scholars, and financial advisors played a prominent role in Iranian development during this period. Geostrategically, the British Empire still dominated Iran and the region, while first Czarist and then Soviet Russia menaced Iran from the north. America, and to a lesser extent Germany, were perceived as neutral and without

the regional colonial baggage of the other great powers of the day. The stifling impact of the British-Russian rivalry was documented for a Western audience by American Morgan Shuster, who served as Treasurer General to Iran in 1911. Shuster's efforts to help Iran assert its financial independence led to his ouster under intense British and Russian Pressure, which he documented in his book *The Strangling of Persia*.

Despite the negative influence of outside powers, there are many legendary figures that played prominently in the growth of US-Iran cultural affairs during this period, and while some may have played a greater role, there is perhaps no more romantic figure punctuating this phase of US-Iran cultural relations than a young Kansan schoolteacher named Howard Baskerville.

Howard C. Baskerville, a graduate of Princeton University (B.A., 1907), arrived in 1908 to teach science and English under a two-year contract at the Memorial School of the American Presbyterian Mission in Tabriz shortly before the

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Constitutionalist-Royalist battle for the city began. Through Mirza Hosayn Sharifzadeh, a leading constitutionalist and a fellow teacher at the Memorial School he got acquainted with the Constitutional movement and many of its adherents. His sympathy for the Constitutionalists led him to

enlist in their ranks and become an ardent supporter of the popular cause, which focused immediately on breaking the Royalist siege of Tabriz, which had led many to starvation. After resigning from his post he started drilling Persian volunteers together with W. A. Moore, an Irishman and representative of several British papers in Persia. Baskerville's group, Fawj-e Najat (Detachment of Salvation) used to be trained in the courtyards of the Tabriz citadel.

With the danger of famine growing day by day, the two "Europeans" advised sorties and carried out reconnaissance operations through the Royalist lines, mapping their positions. Lacking military experience but not courage, Baskerville led his forces on an assault on the Royalist

garrison on April 19, 1908 where he was killed during the assault. The funeral at the American cemetery of Tabriz on the following day turned into a great rally; Baskerville's men, groups of *fedayis*, Armenians, Georgians, American residents of Tabriz, and a great number of the inhabitants paid him the last honors. He was buried with honors in the Armenian Cemetery in Tabriz. To this day, a statue of Baskerville stands in the Tabriz Constitution House. Though other prominent Americans, such as Arthur Pope, have arguably had a much greater impact on Iranian culture and architecture, none had as poignant a story as Howard Baskerville.

### THE COLD WAR AND THE SHAH: 1946-1979

After WWII, the Cold War came to Iran almost immediately. Only firm US pressure on the Soviet Union forced Stalin to retreat from his occupation of large sections of Northern Iran. Without this American involvement, the remainder of Iranian Azerbaijan and the southern Caspian coastal provinces would have stayed in Soviet hands, perhaps permanently.

In 1949, with the Cold War in full swing, the US established the Voice of America (VOA). The Voice of America in Iran began operations that year, broadcasting a message of "liberal developmentalism" to Iranians that centered on modernization, improved technical capacity, and political pluralism, along with a fine selection of classical and modern American music. Soon, however, with perceptions of renewed Soviet designs on Iran - this time through a powerful Iranian Communist Party - the Tudeh - shifted VOA's emphasis to heavily anti-Soviet content.<sup>13</sup> In this climate of intense suspicion of Soviet aims, Prime Minister Mossadeq rose to power, marginalized the young Shah, and proceeded to nationalize the Iranian oil industry. Coming as it did during the peak of Cold War rivalry between the US and USSR, Mossadegh's tenure was buffeted by this conflict and soon ended with the return to absolute rule by the Shah.

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Even during this period when Cold War exigencies impacted Iran, sometimes harshly, America still enjoyed considerable goodwill and influence within Iran, and in the 1950s began to again actively work to engage Iranians in cultural diplomacy. A key institution in this process was the Iran-America Society, which was formally established in Tehran in the mid-1950s as a non-profit organization. It served as the venue for U.S. cultural programs in Iran through the work of the United States Information Service (USIS) and was mandated to "foster among Americans and Iranians a greater knowledge of the arts, literature, science, folkways, social customs, economic and political patterns of the United States and Iran, and to develop a deeper understanding of the similarities and diversities of the Iranian and American ways of life."<sup>14</sup> In a message commemorating the Iran America Society (IAS) on May 27, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson noted that "[t]he United States prizes the

fullest possible exchange of culture and ideas between nations in the belief that the understanding so engendered between peoples is an important asset to peace."<sup>15</sup> Through vibrant student advising and an active Fulbright Binational Commission, USIS and the IAS were able to maintain a steady flow of Iranian students and scholars to the United States, and many

American scholars traveled to Iran. This hugely successful program led to Iranians becoming the most prolific foreign student population in the US by the 1970s, with over 30,000 enrolled by the mid-1970s.

### ILLNESS/INVASION BROUGHT BY "THE WEST"- "GHARBZADEGI" AND "THE MONGOLS"

Despite the success of American cultural programming and outward signs of Iranian modernization and prosperity, beginning in the 1960s, a strain of Marxist-inspired anti-Western, anti-modern thought began gaining influence among both Iranian intellectuals and the burgeoning middle class. Perhaps due primarily

to the rapid pace of modernization in what was still a traditional, largely rural, and only semi-literate society, certain Iranian secular and religious intellectuals began developing an anti-Western ideology in reaction to the strong influence of “the West” and America in particular. Among the first and probably the most important was Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Al-e Ahmad’s 1962 essay, *Gharbzadegi* or “Westoxication” has been described as “perhaps the single most important essay published in modern Iranian history.” In describing what Al-e Ahmad meant by Westoxication, Dabashi notes”

By this term he meant the excessive and rather awkward preoccupation of certain influential segments of Iranian society with manner and matters “Western” in origin. He considered this preoccupation a major malady that had gradually but incessantly weakened the Iranian national character, the major component of which he considered to be Shi’a ethos.<sup>26</sup>

Dabashi further noted that “the term *Gharbzadegi* became so deeply entrenched in the Iranian political vocabulary of the 1960s and beyond that even Ayatollah Khomeini used it when he delivered his letters and wrote his proclamations in Iraq (where he was in exile in Najaf).<sup>27</sup> Al-e Ahmad’s popularity was so lasting and pervasive that the Islamic Republic issued a stamp in his honor in 1981. Oddly Al-e Ahmad, a former Tudeh party member, took pride in his knowledge of Western philosophy and languages, translated several major Western literary works into Farsi, and even visited the US in 1965 on a three-month exchange program with Harvard at Henry Kissinger’s invitation.<sup>28</sup> He also visited several European countries, Canada, and Israel, heaping effusive praise on the enlightened leadership and society

of this last “Western” destination.<sup>29</sup> Despite being “infected” with the malady he so vehemently denounced, his ideology laid the foundation for Islamist ideologues like Ali Shariati and Rohollah Khomeini to create a militant, populist strain of Shi’a Islam which swept to power in the Iranian revolution. Perhaps this paradox can help explain much more about the Iranian attitude towards Western cultural influence and certainly affords much grist for further reflection on this aspect of our subject.

In a similar vein, the filmmaker Parviz Kamiavi also attacked the perceived Western cultural onslaught with his 1973 film *Mogholha* (The Mongols) in which he likened the spread of television in Iran to the devastating medieval Mongol invasions of Iran.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the Iranian historical experience with foreign invaders – Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Mongols, Russians, and others retains a potent influence on Iranian perceptions of foreign encroachment – whether political, military, or cultural.

#### REVOLUTION AND ESTRANGEMENT:1979-2006

With the Islamic Revolution’s strident anti-Americanism as a driving force, the many institutions of American cultural engagement within Iran were destroyed, nationalized, or Islamized. The IAS’ main offices in Tehran were bombed in 1978 as part of the uprising against the Shah. The Cultural Centers in Tehran and Isfahan were closed in 1979. The last IAS director in Tehran, Kathryn Koob, was held hostage at the US Embassy for 444 days.<sup>31</sup> With the seizure of the US Embassy in 1979, any prospect for official cultural engagements were foreclosed. The embassy seizure, and later the Iran-Iraq war, radicalized Iran’s politics and helped propel anti-Americanism to new heights.

Following from foundations established by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and other intellectual founders of Iranian anti-Westernism, the Islamic

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Republic blended a strong strain of anti-imperialist Marxist discourse with the new doctrines of politicized Shiism formalized through the works of Khomeini, Shariati and others. Their view of outside cultural influences as “a disease” or “an invasion” still shapes Iranian thinking about the outside world today. As noted by Buchta (2006), these appeals are tailored to hold sway with mass domestic audiences and sustain the spirit of Al-e Ahmad.

The [anti-Western] discourse features virulent anti-American emotions, embodied in the slogan “cultural invasion through the West” (tahajjom-e farhangi-ye gharb), which is primarily used by leading advocates of the conservative wing of Iran’s power elite. They believe Iran is in mortal danger from the West, especially the United States, and its effort to spread Western cultural influences in the media, fashion, music, the Internet, consumption habits, and social behavior.

This anxiety over cultural domination by the “enemies of Islam” is certainly a root theme of the Iranian revolutionary discourse, but the generalized fear of malign outside influence is nothing new and is partially understood within the context of Iran’s actual experience with British and Russian imperial activities in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. This experience has contributed to what Abrahamian (1993) calls the “paranoid style in Iranian politics.”

Amirahmadi (1991) refers to this paranoia as an element of Iran’s “obsolete political culture” and adds that “[t]he paranoia associated with this conspiratorial view of politics is largely cross-class and cross-ideological. It is however, widespread among Iranian political elites and intelligentsia who continue to use it as a weapon against political enemies or for the manipulation of their followers.”<sup>3</sup> This paranoia over malign foreign intentions severely limited cultural engagement between the US and Iran during the

postrevolutionary period, and increased Iran’s isolation from much of the rest of the world.

## KHATAMI AND THE DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS

With the election of reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami in 1997, the Iranian government tentatively moved to overcome this paranoid approach. Khatami swept into office with an overwhelming majority of the popular vote, and sought to expand domestic cultural freedoms while simultaneously reaching out beyond Iran through the “Dialogue of Civilizations”. The “Dialogue of Civilizations” was intended as a direct rebuttal to the “Clash of Civilizations” doctrine outlined by Harvard’s Samuel Huntington - first in an essay in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 and then in greater detail in a book length “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order” in 1996.<sup>36</sup> Huntington drew the term “Clash of Civilizations” from a September 1990 Bernard Lewis essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage”.<sup>37</sup> Huntington summarized his theory as follows:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural...The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis noted in his article that “Muslim rage” represents “no less than a *clash of civilizations*—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.”<sup>39</sup>

During this early post-Cold War period, these scholars, perhaps missing the bracing clarity of the Cold War’s Manichean intellectual and strategic environment were casting around for some equivalently stark dualist doctrine. In

response, the Dialogue of Civilizations theory arose, and was soon embraced by a large worldwide audience that, exhausted and riven by the Cold War's long shadow, rejected the Clash of Civilizations theory and its implications.

Khatami first outlined this doctrine in the Tehran Declaration communiqué of the Organization of Islamic Conference summit in Tehran in 1998, and quickly gained adherents across the world's many cultures. The United Nations formalized this theory in 1998 by declaring 2001 the "Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations", noting that "[d]ialogue among civilizations is a process between and within civilizations, founded on inclusion, and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values and integrate multiple perspectives through dialogue."<sup>40</sup>

Acting on this theory, Khatami attempted to apply its aspirations to Iran's repressive cultural environment and to the continued conflict between the US and Iran. In both cases, despite significant early successes, reverses eventually left Khatami with little lasting impact after eight years in office. Ultimately, he was unable to overcome the deeply ingrained "paranoid style" of Iranian politics, but it should also be pointed out that paranoia and fear of engagement was not limited to Iran. After the tragedy of 9/11, the United States was perhaps not in the best frame of mind to undertake the daunting task of initiating a long-term global dialogue based upon a doctrine introduced by one of its staunchest modern adversaries. Departing the Presidency in 2005, Khatami remained involved in the "Dialogue of Civilizations", which had spawned several institutions working to realize its goals, including his own, the International Institute for Dialogue among Cultures & Civilizations.<sup>41</sup>

With the arrival of Ahmadinejad in 2005, paranoia has continued to deter those Iranians seeking engagement with the outside world, including those seeking cultural ties with Americans. As a recent example indicates, even those predisposed towards forging cultural ties remain sensitive to insidious foreign influence. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, the current director

of the University of Tehran's Department of North American and European Studies followed this line of thinking.

Paranoia has created a chilling effect on all cultural activities with America as even the most open and positive exchanges are perceived and/or portrayed as elements of an enemy plot. But to be fair, paranoia and xenophobia are hardly unique to Iranians or Iran. As Abrahamian points out, the title of his essay on the paranoid style of Iranian politics was drawn from Richard Hofstadter's article "The Paranoid Style of American Politics" (1965).<sup>43</sup> Hofstadter described that throughout American history nativistic groups have claimed Washington was being subverted by foreign conspirators - at times Freemasons, at others Catholics or Jews, and later by International Communism. The McCarthy hearings of the early 1950s showed a stunned America exactly how all-consuming the damage from such paranoia could be. After 9/11 the fear of Muslim terrorism exercised a similar, but thankfully dissipating hold over American views of engagement with the outside world, most particularly the countries of the Muslim Middle East. One important vehicle for helping both sides overcome those elements of their legacies that inhibit engagement is the many first and second generation immigrants from the region. Of most importance to our current inquiry, Iranian-Americans have played a vital role in this capacity.

Iranian-American individuals and institutions are perhaps in the best position of all to assist with cultural engagement between the US and Iran. Unfortunately, most have had their enthusiasm dampened by formidable obstacles including the aforementioned fears of the other by both America and Iran, logistical hurdles, visa difficulties, legal and regulatory limitations, sanctions, and a host of other daunting challenges. Perhaps most debilitating however, is that many first generation Iranian-Americans

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retain a healthy dose of Iranian paranoia and have assimilated a fresh infusion of American paranoia as well. Thankfully, the new generation of Iranian-Americans appears to have at least shed the Iranian “Uncle Napoleon” complex of seeing conspiracies within every human interaction. The Iranian-American role in maintaining a cultural bridge during the post-Revolutionary period has been laudable. Joining their capacity with like-minded supporters of cultural relations in the US and Iran, they were key to sustaining - albeit at a relatively modest level - cultural ties that would have otherwise atrophied and eventually dissolved.

In addition to the continuing work of organizations like the American Institute of Iranian Studies and the International Society for Iranian Studies, several new organizations were formed during this period of estrangement which also helped maintain US-Iran cultural ties. The Foundation for Iranian Studies was established in 1981 as a non-profit educational and research institution to preserve, study, and transmit Iran's cultural heritage; to study contemporary issues in Iranian government and society; and to point to the probable social, economic, political, and military directions Iran might take in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Foundation aims to serve as an information center for the study of Iran's past, present and future. Non-partisan and non-political, the Foundation believes authentic, objective scholarship can and should encompass a multiplicity of intellectual contributions and a diversity of opinions.<sup>44</sup>

While these active organizations helped to maintain scholarly ties despite manifold obstacles, other organizations helped to preserve, albeit tenuously at times, cultural connections via other forms of exchange programming. A leader in this area was the Search for Common Ground (SFCG), founded in 1982, whose stated mission is “to work to transform the way the world deals with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving. [SFCG] works with local partners to find

culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively: to understand the differences and act on the commonalities.”

**While official bilateral ties remain strained, the goodwill generated through such engagement may gradually help create an environment more conducive to improving even these intractable issues.**

Given our current focus on cultural diplomacy, and the large scope of SFCG's US-Iran program, we will only consider the citizen-to-citizen exchanges here. That said, there is no doubt that there is a place for “Track Two” diplomacy in facilitating cultural engagement. The historic work of SFCG and other organizations committed to sustaining US-Iran people-to-people engagement in the absence of diplomatic relations have somewhat helped bridge the gulf between these countries during

this period. These fragile ties were crucial in establishing the foundation for the next phase in the history of US-Iran cultural diplomacy.

#### TOWARDS A RENAISSANCE: 2006-2008

On May 31, 2006, Secretary Rice spoke on the US-Iran relationship, suggesting a new direction was possible. In relation to our subject, she stated:

President Bush wants a new and positive relationship between the American people and the people of Iran -- a beneficial relationship of increased contacts in education, cultural exchange, sports, travel, trade, and investment.<sup>46</sup>

The key to fully realizing the full scope of this new relationship was tied to resolving the nuclear issue and beginning to address a number of other areas of conflict between the two countries. Nonetheless, the effort to reach out to the Iranian people via cultural diplomacy began immediately. Key to these efforts was the establishment of the Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) in Dubai in August of 2006. Through IRPO, the US began the first official US-Iran cultural diplomacy programming since 1979. I was fortunate to be



## Steps for Improving US-Iran Relations

Measure	% of Americans who favor	% of Iranians who favor
Direct Talks on Issues of Mutual Concern	82	57
Greater cultural, educational, and sporting exchanges	63	63
Greater trade	55	64
Provide more access for each others' journalists	70	70
Have more Americans and Iranians visit as tourists	43	71

**Source:** *Public Opinion in Iran with Comparisons to American Public Opinion, April 7, 2008*

selected to lead these efforts beginning in August 2006 as the IRPO Public Affairs Officer.

The International Information Programs Bureau (IIP) and the Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau (ECA) of the US Department of State led the Washington component of cultural diplomacy programming. The IIP Bureau established a Farsi-language website, began a program of publications in Farsi called the AVA project, and arranged for private American speakers from the world of academia and beyond to travel to Dubai and other cities with large Iranian populations. The ECA Bureau worked closely with the IRPO to establish a framework for renewed cultural, education, and sports exchanges with Iran. In addition, ECA began plans for an educational advising service for prospective Iranian students seeking higher education opportunities in the US.

### IRAN-FOCUSED CULTURAL OUTREACH PROJECTS IN THE UAE

Our ongoing efforts spearheaded through our regional presence in UAE build upon the foundation established over the last century and a half of US-Iran cultural diplomacy. As we have seen, this engagement started with private institutions, later gained support from official channels, went through a period of official estrangement during which private institutions again took the lead and enjoyed support from the vibrant Iranian-American community, and now finally is enjoying a period of renewed growth.

A WorldPublicOpinion.org Poll conducted in partnership with Search for Common Ground and Knowledge Networks.

While official bilateral ties remain strained, the goodwill generated through such engagement may gradually help create an environment more conducive to improving even these intractable issues. In a recent poll by SFCG and University of Maryland, two elements of cultural diplomacy were strongly advocated as means to improve bilateral relations by both Americans and Iranians (see chart).

### CONCLUSION

Cynics throughout recent history have always challenged the value of cultural diplomacy and cultural engagement. Results are difficult to quantify, as such programs generally lack a natural supporting constituency, and within the US-Iran context mutual paranoia often derails even the best designed programs. In addition, in the US case, such programs have fallen victim to changes in policy direction and structures.

The official US institutions of cultural diplomacy have undergone no fewer than 14 restructurings since the Buenos Aires Agreement of 1936 began America's involvement in comprehensive cultural diplomatic programming. American skepticism over the value of cultural engagement even led to such surprising outcomes as the US' temporary withdrawal from UNESCO in 1984 - an entity it helped to found in 1946. Meanwhile, the intensity of Iranian anxiety about foreign cultural domination has complicated and

at times virtually eclipsed even the most transparently apolitical and beneficial cultural engagement.

Despite all these obstacles, the history of US-Iran cultural diplomacy is overwhelmingly positive and its impact on many thousands of Americans and Iranians has endured regardless of political differences between our two nations. As we look forward, the prospect of a new foundation for better relations between the American and Iranian peoples has been at least partially rebuilt. Much work lies ahead, and a diminution of mutual suspicions would advance such noble efforts considerably.

While there is no doubt the lingering reality of US-Iran political differences will influence this process, the reverse may well also be true. As this historical review of US-

Iran cultural diplomacy shows, people and private institutions operating in the spirit of good will can make a major difference in building mutual understanding, even within a context of political and diplomatic tensions. That said, official cultural diplomacy facilitated through professional diplomats has and can continue to greatly expand the scope and depth of such engagement. To all those who envision a future where Americans and Iranians are no longer separated by their differences but united by their many similarities, support for US-Iran cultural diplomacy may be among their best vehicles to help advance this goal.

#### POSTSCRIPT-2009-2010 DREAMS DEFERRED

I left day-to-day oversight of our cultural diplomacy programming at IRPO in June 2008 to begin a year as the director of the overall IRPO operation. Soon the fragile but resilient structures which supported the exchanges of the past two years began to falter. First, the State Department, for reasons I never learned, decided in advance of

the Fiscal Year 2009 budget against requesting any further funds to support US-Iran cultural diplomacy.

Second, the conflicting motives behind U.S. public diplomacy outreach to Iran essentially collapsed under the weight of their inherent contradictions.

Finally, powerful circles within the Iranian government began peddling the line that our cultural diplomacy outreach was merely a façade to lay the groundwork for a “velvet revolution”. Exchange programming continued on a dramatically reduced basis in 2009, and was eventually suspended in mid-2009.

Looking back over the past 166 years of U.S.- Iran cultural diplomacy, the picture remains bright overall. In 2010, such relations remain at a nadir, but at some point in the relatively near future – perhaps under a more

enlightened government in Iran and a less conflicted policy environment in Washington – these programs may resume. At present, the unfortunate recent trend in U.S.- Iran relations towards mutual hostility and recriminations has resumed. Despite the current impasse, the glorious legacy of Alborz College, Howard Baskerville, Hugh Pope, the Iran-America Society, the Franklin Book Program, the Dialogue of Civilizations, wrestling diplomacy, and the brilliant efflorescence of U.S.-Iran cultural interaction from 2006-2008 offer ample hope that a new season of cultural interaction may eventually break the chill.

*The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.*

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- <sup>17</sup> Arndt, 372.
- <sup>18</sup> Arndt, 409.
- <sup>19</sup> Arndt, 409.
- <sup>20</sup> Arndt, 159.
- <sup>21</sup> Arndt, 191-193.
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- <sup>24</sup> American Institute of Iranian Studies, <http://www.simorgh-aiis.org>.
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