

IRAN TASK FORCE

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SOUTH ASIA CENTER

US-Iran Cultural Engagement: A Cost Effective Boon to US National Security

US policy toward Iran has understandably focused on preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and curtailing its support for terrorist groups. However, the lessons of the Cold War suggest that more resources should be devoted to cultural dialogue and exchanges, promoting the positive aspects of American culture, and cultivating the good will of the Iranian people toward the United States. While US cultural diplomacy programming and other types of exchanges are intended to influence foreigners to have a more favorable view of the United States over the long term, they are not information warfare and must be designed to be open, apolitical, and of clear practical benefit to participants in order to be sustainable. Such programs helped lay the ground work for improved US relations with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union/Russia and can have a similar impact on US ties with Iran.

This issue brief will outline the 179-year history of these contacts with Iran, which have experienced periods of breakdown but currently are continuing at a low level despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties. It will also recommend actions to advance these exchanges as a national security imperative—especially as the nuclear dispute with the Iranian government could well persist.

Among our recommendations is to establish a non-official or quasi-official bilateral coordinating body to help develop and support US-Iran exchange programs. Such a US-Iran Cultural Exchanges Working Group—comprised of

Atlantic Council Iran Task Force

The Iran Task Force, launched in 2010 and chaired by Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, seeks to perform a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape, as well as its role in the region and globally, to answer the question of whether there are elements within the country and region that can build the basis for an improved relationship with the West and how these elements, if they exist, could be utilized by US policymakers.

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bilateral representatives from academia, the arts, athletics, the professions, and science and technology—could help both governments develop, coordinate and administer these programs.

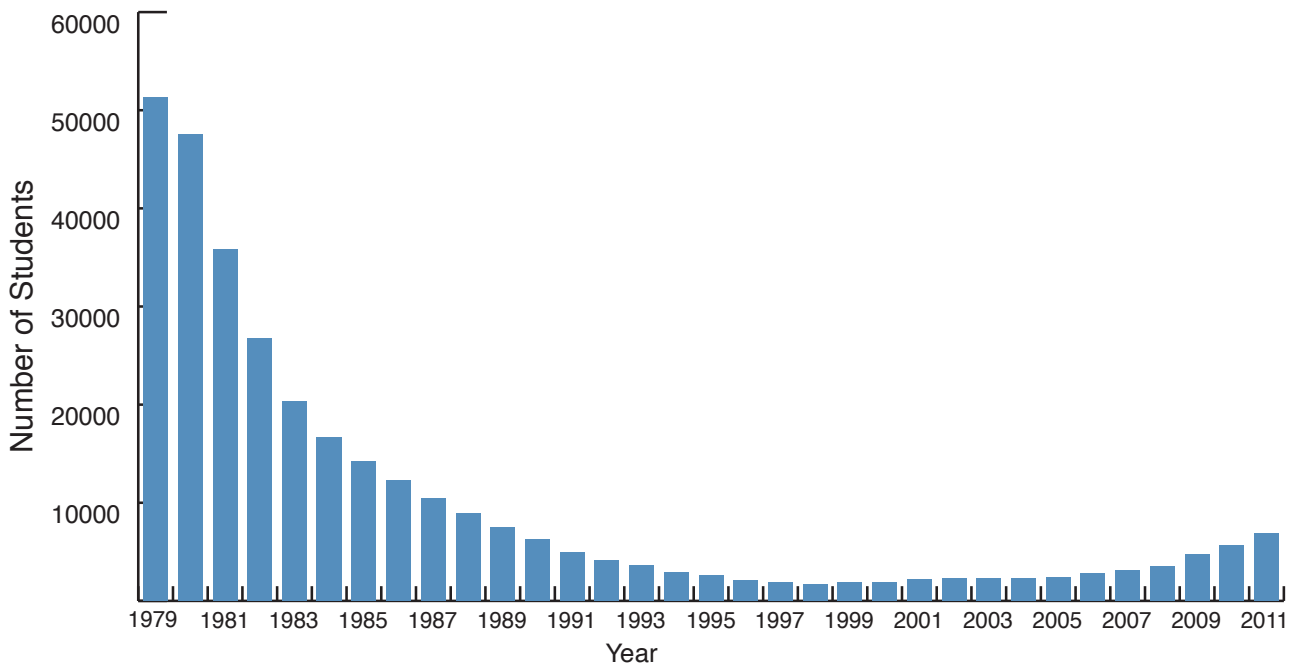
We also want to call attention to and reiterate several recommendations in a previous report by the Atlantic Council Iran Task Force.¹ Among them: creating a modified Fulbright program with Iran and twinning selected American and Iranian universities for research into apolitical fields of mutual benefit. The US government

¹ "Time to Move From Tactics to Strategy on Iran," Atlantic Council Iran Task Force, April, 2013 (http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/itf_report_final.pdf).

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Students from Iran in the United States



Source: *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange*, published annually by IIE with support from the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

should also ask to station American diplomats at a US Interest Section in Tehran, which would facilitate selecting participants for exchanges and would issue visas for them. Even if the Iranian government rejects this step, more US personnel should be assigned to overcoming logistical hurdles so that more Iranians can come to the United States to participate in exchange programs and more Americans can go to Iran.

Historical legacy

Cultural ties between the US and Persia (Iran's official name prior to 1935) began in 1834, preceding the establishment of diplomatic relations by two decades. US Christian missionaries helped found and direct Iran's first modern medical school, the Medical College of Urmia, as well as the American College in Tehran (Alborz College) and the American Memorial School of Tabriz. Alborz College brought many educational firsts to Iran, including coeducational instruction, a college library, modern laboratory classrooms, and a student newspaper. American missionaries, scholars, and financial advisors played a prominent role in Iran's development into the twentieth century. America was perceived as neutral and

without the colonial baggage of the other great powers of the day—the British Empire, which dominated the region, and Czarist, later Soviet Russia, which menaced Iran from the north.

After World War II, the US enhanced its image in Iran by pressuring Stalin to retreat from wartime occupation of large sections of northern Iran. In 1949, the Voice of America began operations in Iran, broadcasting a message of "liberal developmentalism" which centered on modernization and political pluralism, along with a fine selection of classical and modern American music. A key institution was the Iran-America Society (IAS), established in Tehran in the mid-1950s. It served as the venue for US programs 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."²

² Lyndon B. Johnson, "Message to the President of the Iran-America Society," May 27, 1964. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26275>).

The IAS office in Washington worked with the Iran-based IAS offices to set up exchange programs. Through student advising and an active Fulbright Binational Commission, the United States Information Service and the IAS maintained 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 largest foreign student population in the US by the 1970s, with over 30,000 enrolled by the middle of that decade and over 50,000 by 1979. The IAS also made major contributions to Iranian appreciation of American culture and American appreciation of Iranian culture. American jazz musicians, visual artists, theater performers and filmmakers visited Iran throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

These close cultural ties were not enough to save Iran's Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, from the wrath of Iranians angered by his authoritarian rule, and the institutions of American cultural engagement were destroyed, nationalized or 'Islamized' during and after the 1978-79 revolution. However, the contacts nurtured for over a century had left a reservoir of attachment that helped programs to resume in the 1990s.

Exchanges Revive Under Khatami

After reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami became president in 1997, the Iranian government tentatively moved to ease Iran's isolation. Khatami's efforts were aided by organizations that worked to maintain ties during the long period of US-Iran estrangement, such as the American Institute of Iranian Studies, the International Society for Iranian Studies, and later the Foundation for Iranian Studies. A leader in the area of exchange programs was Search for Common Ground (SFCG), which initiated its Iran program in 1996.

John Marks, head of SFCG, said that a series of meetings between Iranian academics and former officials and former US diplomats led to a proposal for US-Iran rapprochement that "neither side could sell back home." So one of the Iranians came up with the idea of facilitating participation by American wrestlers in the Takhti Cup, a

major international competition in Iran.³ The wrestlers—the first Americans officially representing the US to go to Iran since 1979—were understandably nervous but met with a rapturous reception. An audience of more than 12,000 at Tehran's Freedom stadium cheered and applauded more for the Americans than for their Iranian competitors. The American flag hung prominently in the stadium—the first time it had been properly displayed in Iran since the revolution.⁴ Afterwards, the wrestlers were received at the White House by President Bill Clinton. That sent a signal, Marks said, that Clinton wanted better relations with Iran. The visit of the wrestlers, in tandem with Khatami's call for a "civilizational dialogue," led to reciprocal visits by Iranian athletic teams to the US, as well as a range of other exchanges between 1998 and 2004 focused on apolitical areas such as education, health, astronomy, philosophy and theology, the environment, and film. SCG's programming dwindled, however, as relations grew strained following the US invasion of Iraq and especially after Khatami was replaced by an ideological hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in 2005. The Iranians started to deny visas after the Americans had bought non-refundable tickets. "We ate a lot of tickets and we stopped," Marks said.⁵

Despite these setbacks, exchanges quickly revived in the second term of President George W. Bush. Central to these efforts was the establishment of the Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) in Dubai in August 2006. Through IRPO, the US began the first official US-Iran cultural diplomacy programming since 1979. The International Information Programs Bureau (IIP) and the Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau (ECA) of the State Department led the Washington component. The IIP Bureau established a Persian-language website, began a program of publications in Persian and arranged for American speakers to travel to Dubai and other cities with large Iranian expatriate populations. Programming during this period included:

3 Coauthor interview with John Marks, March 15, 2013.

4 Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 185.

5 Interview with Marks.

- **Speakers program.** IRPO Dubai hosted six official speakers, including Iranian American entrepreneur and space tourist Anousheh Ansari, in December 2006. Other speakers discussed elections, Islam in America and the region, journalism, American society, and documentary filmmaking.
- **Exchanges.** ECA began including Iranians in long-standing exchange programs. IRPO helped select topics, suggested intermediary organizations and assisted in recruitment and communication with participants. From 2006 to 2009, over 250 Iranians, including artists, athletes, medical professionals, and teachers of Persian, participated in exchange programs in the United States. A smaller number of Americans traveled to Iran.
- **International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).** Starting in November 2006, IRPO helped recruit, inform, and process hundreds of Iranian arts, cultural, athletic, and professional figures for the IVLP, the flagship of US government exchange programs. Topics included public health, education, disaster relief, rule of law, English language teaching, documentary film, music, visual arts, women's entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture and substance abuse. These exchanges overcame many hurdles, including Iranian government suspicion, participant anxieties, logistical issues and complex visa application procedures. In its first year, ECA/IRPO's Iran IVLP program became the largest in the region and among the largest in the world.
- **Language instructors.** IRPO assisted with ECA's Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program in FY2006 which brought seven Iranians to teach Persian language at American universities. IRPO assisted in bringing 18 more teachers for the 2007-2008 academic year.
- **Educational Advising and Visa Extension.** ECA supported educational advising of Iranian students. Young Iranians could access comprehensive information about higher education in the US via the

Education USA on-line portal. This facilitated a rise in their numbers to nearly 7,000 in 2012, a 24 percent increase from the previous year.⁶ Another important development came with the decision in May 2011 to offer two-year, multiple entry visas to Iranian students, exchange, and vocational training applicants coming to the US for non-sensitive fields of study and research. This was a major change from the three-month, single entry visas available previously, and signaled a concrete commitment to educational exchange.

- **Sports.** Working with US athletic federations and the US Olympic Committee, the ECA Office of Sports Diplomacy facilitated visits by US and Iranian wrestlers, weightlifters, Paralympic athletes, an Iranian table tennis team, and the Iranian Olympic basketball team, which trained with the NBA summer league in 2008. Recently, the US and Iranian Olympic Wrestling Teams joined forces, competing in exhibition matches in the United States, to help keep wrestling in the 2020 Olympics.

Other forms of US outreach include:

- **Broadcasting.** One of the central planks of communication with Iran is the Voice of America, based in Washington, for satellite television programming, and Radio Farda, based in Prague, for satellite radio. Over the past decade, Iran has placed obstacles in the way of these broadcasts, including jamming satellite transmissions, intimidating journalists, and cyber attacks on the VOA and Farda websites. Meanwhile, Iran has dramatically expanded its own international satellite broadcasting, running channels in languages including English, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu. This battle of the airwaves demonstrates the importance Iran places on cultural communication, although its obstructive practices belie the open communications domain satellite broadcasting was designed to foster.

⁶ Open Doors Data, Institute for International Education (<http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Country/2012>).



American and Iranian wrestlers celebrate victory together at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Photo credit: Reuters.

- **Persian language spokesman.** In 2011, the State Department appointed the gifted diplomat and linguist Alan Eyre as official Persian language spokesman. Eyre has appeared on VOA Persian, BBC Persian, and many other media outlets, maintains a blog—“Ask Alan”—and has done masterful work helping explain US policies and programs to the Persian-speaking world.
- **Virtual Embassy Tehran.** Virtual Embassy Tehran (<http://iran.usembassy.gov>) was established in 2011 as part of State’s effort to communicate more effectively with the Iranian people. The site features multiple social media links, speeches by US policymakers, links on American culture and society, e-journals, profiles of prominent Iranian Americans, visa application instructions, interactive content such as political cartoon contests, and other information and announcements. Just as with satellite broadcasting, the Iranian government has often blocked access

within Iran of the Virtual Embassy Tehran website.⁷ Despite this, many Iranians use filter-breaking technologies to access this medium.

- **Science Exchanges.** Scientific engagement has historically helped bridge the divide between the United States and its adversaries and has sometimes resulted in accomplishments with worldwide significance. During the Cold War, for example, American Albert Sabin and Russian Mikhail Chumakov worked together to create a vaccine for polio.⁸ In the past decade and a half, scientists from Iran and the United States have worked together and through international organizations to address problems of global importance such as preservation of biological resources, rapid evaporation of lakes in arid regions, treatments for various types of cancer,

7 Barbara Slavin, “Year-Old Virtual US Embassy in Iran Tallies Its Hits and Misses,” *Al-Monitor*, January 24, 2013 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/embassy-us-iran-khamenei.html>)

8 Irene Anne Jillson, “The United States and Iran: Gaining and Sharing Scientific Knowledge through Collaboration,” *Science & Diplomacy*, March, 2013 (<http://www.sciencediplomacy.org/article/2013/united-states-and-iran>).

and science education. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the National Institutes of Health helped organize exchanges and promote collaborative research. Over the past decade, there have been seventeen workshops on issues including food-borne diseases, earthquake science and engineering. More than 800 scientists from 100 Iranian and American institutions took part in an NAS pilot project on food-borne disease, while thousands attended lectures in person or via the web.⁹ Meanwhile, the AAAS brought five American Nobel laureates to Iran, where they met with extremely warm welcomes. Over the past year, despite an increase in tensions over the nuclear program, there have been ten scientific engagement events in Iran, the United States, and third countries.¹⁰ In addition, most of the Iranian students currently in the United States are pursuing science or engineering degrees. While some of these activities overlap at times with cultural diplomacy and are supported by the same government offices, they have different political implications and constituencies. For example, most of the IVLP programs during the past several years have been oriented to science and technology topics such as solar energy and wildlife conservation. This article does not attempt to catalogue the many programs that at times intersect with cultural diplomacy. However, some of the recommendations that are offered to promote cultural diplomacy may help in the implementation of other programs. Nevertheless, care must be taken to ensure that these other programs do not become entangled in debates over the objectives of cultural diplomacy, which may be viewed as more closely aligned with efforts to achieve political objectives.

Film as Cultural Intermediary

While not an official element of US cultural diplomacy, the American film industry has long been a major global transmission channel of American popular culture, and its impact in Iran has been significant. Meanwhile, the Iranian film industry, aided by the Iran America Society early on,

has itself developed into a world-class medium. Over the past two years, two films have entered the popular imagination in both countries—“A Separation” (2011) by Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi and “Argo” (2012) by the American actor and filmmaker Ben Affleck. Farhadi’s film, containing universal themes of family problems and social class, received massive international praise and awards, culminating in the 2011 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film—the first time an Iranian film has received this honor. Meanwhile, “Argo,” a film about US diplomats trapped in Tehran in 1979 who eventually escape with the aid of the Canadian ambassador and a CIA official, received the 2012 Academy Award for Best Picture. By bringing the lives of everyday Iranians into American theaters, “A Separation” humanized Iranians for Americans, while “Argo,” which did not go out of its way to demonize the Iranians involved and provided historical context, may help to put the lingering rancor of the hostage crisis behind us.

Cultural Diplomacy is Not Information Warfare

Despite occasional setbacks, US-Iran exchange programs have registered important successes. But even with a positive track record and broad support in both countries, conducting such programs between nations without bilateral diplomatic relations is challenging.

First, there is the policy component. Some who support cultural diplomacy with Iran consider such activities a form of subversion or propaganda. The thinking goes that exchanges are so beneficial to the Iranian people, and the interest in them so high, that they are worth promoting whatever happens. If the Iranian government allows them, then the seeds of the regime’s demise will be planted through the cultivation of exchange alumni and other cultural diplomacy outcomes. If the Iranian government stops or inhibits them, then it will be blamed by its own people for keeping Iran isolated. Some among the Iranian security establishment also ascribe to this “Trojan Horse” view and can readily inhibit such activities by branding them a threat to national security.

It is useful here to look back at the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which codified most of the pillars of US cultural

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Time to Move From Tactics to Strategy on Iran.”

diplomacy. The act states that these programs were intended to build “mutual understanding” between the people of the United States and foreign populations, not to undermine host governments.

There is no doubt that US cultural diplomacy programming is intended to influence foreigners to have a more favorable view of the United States. This positive orientation may well lead to changes within foreign societies, as exchange alumni and well-informed populations resist their own governments’ efforts to demonize or distort American policies and culture. Nonetheless, overemphasis on this potential impact does not practically benefit the execution of such programs. Foreign governments, organizations, audiences and exchange participants will not find it easy to support a purported dialogue that is being packaged in Washington as a thinly disguised form of subversion or information warfare.

Selling such programming as a means to drive a wedge between the Iranian government and people makes any successful execution problematic. In the case of the IRPO exchange programs outlined above, the Iranian government initially responded cautiously but favorably to the programs, particularly the IVLP which began in relation to Iran in November 2006. After a few years, however, in the absence of bilateral coordination regarding the background and aims of these programs, the Iranian security establishment, with heightened concerns about “velvet revolution” and “soft war,” pressured the Iranian government to curtail these valuable programs. Events in Iran also had an impact, particularly the protest demonstrations that erupted in Iran after disputed 2009 presidential elections. For a time, those in the Iranian government and key institutions that supported cultural exchanges were pushed to the sidelines by hardliners who viewed any foreign – especially US government-supported – activity with suspicion and even hostility. However, exchanges have picked up again in the past year, suggesting that Iranian officials have recognized the benefits of continuing these ties despite continuing political friction.

Next, there is the consular and logistical component. Long delays and even occasional refusals of US visas

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.

have discouraged some Iranian applicants. Without any dedicated US staff in Iran to support exchanges, Iranians inside Iran who supported the aims of cultural exchange helped lead the way in facilitating these programs. Because of their central role in facilitating recruitment and visa processing, these individuals attracted close scrutiny by the Iranian government. Several were called in for questioning, and some faced loss of work opportunities, and in a few cases, imprisonment.

The absence of any US diplomatic presence in Iran also makes it harder to produce programs for VOA and Radio Farda. Without direct access to the country, it is difficult to obtain video or photos – even of mundane subjects—in a timely fashion and to convey an accurate feel for the Iranian street. The Iranian government has also made reaching Iranians more difficult through jamming international TV and radio satellite broadcasts, blocking and filtering the Internet and mobile communications, and harassing Iranian journalists and bloggers for criticism of government policies.

Recommendations

As the Cold War experience demonstrates, maintaining active people-to-people linkages during periods of strained bilateral relations has many benefits for US national security, particularly over the long term. The costs of such programming are modest and represent a tremendous value in terms of national security impact per dollar in these days of tight federal budgets. To be successful, however, such programs need policy and programmatic support from both the US government and private institutions. To foster

these important programs, the authors recommend:

- Creating a non-official or quasi-official US-Iran Cultural Exchanges Working Group comprised of bilateral representatives from academia, the arts, athletics, the professions, and science and technology. Convening semi-annually in person and regularly through electronic media, this group could help both governments develop, coordinate, and process exchange programs.
- Developing a broad policy consensus that US cultural diplomacy programs are intended to build mutual understanding and trust between the American and the Iranian people and that these programs should remain open, apolitical and of clear mutual benefit to participants. Creating this consensus can begin with the publication of this paper, as well as building partnerships with foundations, academic institutions and other organizations that support cultural exchanges, and continue through engagement with key policymakers in the executive and legislative branches.
- Creating a modified Fulbright program for Iranians and twinning several US universities with strong departments in science, engineering, public administration and economics with Iranian universities. As mentioned in an earlier Task Force report[1], joint projects could be launched on topics including wildlife conservation, forestry management, ground water management, transportation, and renewable energy.
- As the primary existing communications channels between the US and Iran, the status and capacity of Voice of America Persian and Radio Farda should be considered a national security priority. While both do solid work in communicating original news and American perspectives, they face large bureaucratic, budgetary, political, and logistical obstacles in achieving their mission. A serious bipartisan-led Congressional effort, incorporating the input of the State Department, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (the US government agency overseeing official international broadcasting), and experts

on media, telecommunications, and Iran should commence as soon as possible to determine the best means to maximize the performance of our Persian language international broadcasters in their important mission.

- If and when a US Interests Section is established in Tehran—as was recommended by an Iran Task Force report in April 2013—one of its core missions should be to support US public diplomacy programming, particularly exchanges. A public affairs officer, with experience in cultural diplomacy, should be assigned to the Interests Section.

Conclusion

Cultural and academic exchanges between the US and Iran are a low-cost, high-yield investment in a future normal relationship between the two countries. As hard as it may be to foresee normalization in the near future, the current situation is a historical anomaly that is bound to be rectified sooner or later. It is vital that in US efforts to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state, the relationship between the peoples of the two countries is not forgotten. The goodwill of the Iranian people is ultimately the biggest US asset in changing the direction of the Islamic Republic. We should do all we can to safeguard and enhance it.

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