

Iran-Americans: The bridge between two nations

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In general, immigration has throughout history played a big role in joining, founding, growing and expanding civilizations. Immigration is a very valuable human development and one should not look at this development in a derogatory manner...

- President Mohammad Khatami, during his September 1998 address to Iranians abroad in New York

Introduction

Twenty years ago a group of radical Iranian students stormed the American Embassy and took over the compound. That event, which was the start of the 444 day hostage crisis, was arguably what made many Americans realize that there is an Iran – or at least an “Eye-Ran” – on the world map.

Prior to the hostage crisis, it may have been harder to explain to the average Joe American where Iran was. It would often take a game of name associations to provoke any sort of recognition of the Iranian nation. Ask any Iranian who lived or visited the US back then, and they will readily reveal the list of magic terms that may have had an impact: oil, the Shah, carpets, caviar, Persia, fluffy cats, etc. While the hostage taking may have finally made “Iran” a household name in Anywhere, America, the image that was conjured was far from an desirable or constructive. The new magic vocabulary now included: terrorists, Ayatollah, hostage takers, and the like.

The aim here is not to poke fun at the American ignorance of Iran. The record is not much better on the Iranian side. Perhaps Hollywood has been able to give some more information about the American people and the way the American systems works to a nation such as Iran, but often an Iranian’s knowledge of the US is as sophisticated as a Hollywood thriller. Add to that the effects of various political tirades, such as the regular Friday prayer sermon, combined with Madonna clips from MTV, and the level of distortion becomes clearer.

Having said that, the Iranian revolution did have a tremendous impact on raising the understanding between the Iranian and American nations, albeit unintentionally. The emigration of Iranians has generated a substantial, if often unnoticed wealth for both nations: a large group of people who have a good understanding of the two countries.

Iranian-Americans have had an irreversible impact on the people of Iran and America already. They continue to grow in importance as the bridge between two civilizations during troubled times. Today, there is a good chance that if Joe American is young, his first affiliation to the word “Iran” will not be the hostage crisis, Ayatollahs or the Shah. He may very well tell you that he has or had an Iranian-American school mate, co-worker, or neighbor. A similar process is seen on the Iranian side. Iranian-Americans who return to their motherland to visit often report of all the silly notions of America their cousins back home had – silly notions they helped dispel. At a time when few Americans have been able to travel to Iran, it has been the Iranian-Americans who fulfilled the role of cultural ambassadors to Iran. Given their knowledge of both cultures, they are perhaps best suited for this position.

The following paper is dedicated to discussing the role of Iranian-Americans as a formidable force in mending the differences and misperceptions between Iran and the United States. It will be argued that this group has not fulfilled its full potential as a bridge between the said nations for a number of reasons. We will further show that a number of factors are making Iranian-Americans increasingly active as a positive force in reconciling the two civilizations they belong to. A discussion of the potentials of this group that are yet to be fully realized and appreciated is complimented by recommended actions that would help in better developing and harnessing this group's positive role.

About Iranians in America

Presenting accurate demographic information on Iranians abroad in general is a challenging task. There is a huge discrepancy among the various studies done on this, with various reasons.

For example, the US Census estimates Iranian-Americans to be just over 300 thousand, while folklore estimates widespread among the group itself go up to 4 million and sometimes beyond. In the case of the Census, an issue of definition comes to mind, beyond possible flaws in survey methodology: Who is an Iranian-American? Iran considers nationality to pass by blood¹. Thus, a child born of at least one Iranian parent in America is considered Iranian by Iran, and American by the United States. Estimates on the high end are also most probably very far from reality. They are based on pure word of mouth figures, and are sometimes exaggerated with ulterior purpose. For example, a number of opposition groups used inflated figures for the number of Iranians who left the country to make the point that the Iranian population is fleeing the clerical establishment. On the other side of the scale, Iranians abroad themselves sometimes use the higher estimates to say that they are representative of a more powerful group in a democratic society where numbers of potential votes matter greatly.

The government of Iran estimates the number of Iranian expatriates at close to 3 million². According to the same source, this population is spread in over 50 countries, but is more concentrated in 20 of them. The predominant majority of Iranians abroad left after the 1979 Revolution.

More specifically, in the case of Iranians in the US, the estimates that the authors feel are most reliable are those calculated by the Iranian Interest Section in Washington, DC. It is that body that has been issuing passports and other official documents for the Iranians in the US, and in terms of sampling has had more access than any other organization to data. Faramarz Fathnezhad, who up to very recently headed the Iranian interest section in Washington for over a decade, was interviewed in Tehran by one of the authors. According to that source, there has been an ongoing study to come up with accurate demographic information for years now. Fathnezhad claims that there are over 200,000 files in the DC interest section. It should be noted that the section maintains one file per family, and so the above number is not of individuals. The estimated average family size for the said files is 3 persons. That means that there are at least 600,000 thousands Iranians residing in the United States.

¹ One can obtain Iranian nationality by being born of an Iranian parent or by marrying an Iranian.

² Estimates from the Office for Cultural Affairs of Iranians Abroad, Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance, Tehran, Iran.

But even these numbers underestimate reality. As Fathnezhad pointed out, not all Iranians in the US have referred to the interest section. Using a trend analysis based on the number of people who have come for the first time, the former head of Iran's interest section in the US believes that there are close to 800,000 Iranians in that country. Adding second generation Americans of Iranian decent, he believes the number could reach up to 1 million.

While no studies were found with exact information on the demographic spread of Iranians in the United States, it is known that the majority of this group is clustered in southern California (Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County in particular). Other cluster areas include New York, the District of Columbia, Austin and Houston. It is also known that on average, Iranians abroad are more educated and wealthier than the society where they have immigrated.

The Early Years

Above we describe a very well educated and wealthy immigrant group that is close to a million strong. The immediate question that comes to mind is why such a group is not very visible in the American political landscape? Two trends in particular may help unravel this mystery.

First, it took years for Iranians to accept that they had immigrated to the United States. Most Iranians who left the country after the revolution simply did not believe, at least initially, that this migration was a permanent one. For years many thought that after some time, as the era of revolutionary fervor goes by, they would return to Iran. As such, they treated their host society as a temporary setting and did not start looking at America as permanent home until much later.

Second, a good portion of the Iranians who had left their motherland were not on good terms with the Islamic Republic. Among the very first groups that parted Iran, in fact, were those who had some sort of strong affiliation with the ancien regime or were involved in the active opposition to the current establishment during the early revolutionary period. Others left because they could not tolerate the social, political or cultural atmosphere of the country after the revolution. Yet another group departed Iran because of the war conditions after the Iraqi invasion that resulted in an 8-year war. The point is, the said group was not about to form a lobby group that would benefit the establishment in Tehran, or benefit the Iranian-Americans themselves as a community, nor was it for the most part interested in forming a pressure group against the Islamic Republic.

Nonetheless, we now see a changing pattern whereby Iranian-Americans are becoming increasingly involved and heard in American politics.

The Politicization Process

Immigration is difficult. Like any new emigrant group, Iranians in the United States needed some time to adjust to their new surroundings, to adapt to a new language and system, to get over a sense of loneliness and estrangement, and to basically build a new home in a foreign land. Thus, with time we see this group get increasingly involved in America's Main Street

politics, particularly the new generation that actually grew up in the US and is fully adapted to that environment.

Three sets of factors in particular acted as a catalyst in making Iranians in America more active in political affairs, a process that is currently gaining in speed and momentum.

The first of these can be broadly lumped into a “**Natural Factors**” category, basically factors that change with the passage of time. This point has been touched on already, but deserves more attention. It took close to twenty years after the first large exodus from Iran – i.e., following the Revolution – for many Iranians abroad to finally accept that they are not in transit awaiting return to their homeland. With time, they began to accept that they are indeed an immigrant population concerned with integrating and succeeding in their new setting. Maturing as an émigré group and learning the political ropes of their host country, Iranians abroad are slowly learning that they can influence policy. After all, two decades had past since they had come to the United States, and most are now naturalized citizens with the power to brandish their voting power in a democratic society. Perhaps more important than the large number of newly naturalized American citizens is the new generation of Iranians born and raised in the United States. Arguably, this new generation of Iranians abroad does not harbor the barriers that handicapped their parents. Unlike their parents, they are not immigrants and do not carry the same emotional burdens that stand in the way of fully adapting to a new country and culture. They have a much better understanding of America than their parents did.

The second broad category revolves around an “**Increase in Communications**” as follows:

a) Increased communications between Iranian-Americans and the IRI.

When discussing Iran after the revolution, historians often refer to a radical period of revolutionary zeal. This zeal and radicalism was in no way limited to the way the Islamic Republic was in its policy towards foreign states. In the words of one government official:

The turbulent and crisis-filled years that immediately followed the success of the revolution is regarded as one of the exceptional periods in contemporary world history. Exceptional for several reasons: First of all, the very occurrence of a revolution in the end of the twentieth century is remarkable in itself – and indicative of the depth and magnitude of the cultural, economic and political rift in a society, such that it lead to explosion in this way as a means to reform and balance. Second, until eight years after this event, and during a period when the economic, social and political foundations of the country were influenced by this change, a foreign element, that is a massive military attack, threatened the survival of the nation and the existence of the country. In such exceptional circumstances, there was no opportunity left for attending to anything but defending the territorial integrity and existence of the country. In this complicated situation, which influenced all other matters, naturally there was no opportunity for instituting proper policies that are correct and desirable in relation to Iranians abroad³.

³ This is an excerpt from a letter written by Seyyed Mohamad Reza Darbandi, Director General of the Cultural Affairs of Iranians Abroad, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, to Siamak Namazi in response to an article Namazi had written in CIRA Bulletin criticizing the Iranian government’s policy towards its expatriate population.

Regardless of the reasons, relations between the government in Tehran and Iranian expatriates were extremely bad, if not outright hostile in the early periods of post-revolutionary Iran. Iranians abroad were often treated as either traitors affiliated with the Shah's regime or cowards who fled the Iran-Iraq war. An atmosphere of fear and mistrust was created between Iranians abroad and the rulers of their motherland.

However, revolutions mature and so do their policies. Over time, especially after the end of the war with Iraq, as Iran stepped into its "reconstruction" era, there was a noticeable shift in Tehran's attitude and behavior towards its expatriate population. For the Iranian away from home, obtaining necessary paper work from Iran's interest sections and embassies throughout the world became much easier and less frightful of an experience. Under the government of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a number of new solutions allowed greater numbers of Iranians abroad to return to Iran to visit after years of exile. These include a *de facto* acceptance of dual nationality⁴, and a provision that allowed expatriate men to buy their national service instead of serving in the armed forces for two years at a price tag of \$16,600.

Things have been changing even more during the administration of Mohammad Khatami. For example, Iranians abroad would often have to pay close to \$600 to obtain an Iranian passport. It was in 1998 when this absurd practice was changed and the price for an Iranian passport became \$48. Moreover, a temporary waiver from the national service has been extended for any Iranian man abroad. Under this new regulation, one can go to Iran and return to his country of residence within 3-months, once per year, without worrying about being subject to the draft laws.

But Khatami's charm offensive against the Iranian expatriate population did not end there. He dedicated a full morning of his time during his landmark visit to New York on occasion of the United Nation's General Assembly session in September 1997 to addressing some 800 Iranian expatriates. One of the more impressive features of this session was the question and answer period which followed the president's speech: the event was broadcast live over the Internet and Iranian expatriates from all around the world were given the opportunity to email in questions and comments live.

Two offices in Tehran are now dedicated to dealing with matters related to Iranians abroad: one in the foreign ministry and the other in the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance. Talking to the officials within these establishments one clearly gets a sense of the new attitude Tehran displays towards its expatriate population. "The policy of the Iranian government is that an Iranian, no matter where s/he is, is Iranian and possesses all the rights of an Iranian citizen," affirms Mr. Mousavi, head of the office of expatriate affairs at the foreign ministry⁵. Mousavi continues to add that this has always been the government's policy, "though perhaps this has not always been reflected in actions by the government's representatives." He admits that over the past three years in particular there is a notable difference in the way Tehran treats its expatriates. Apparently, the government has launched a training program to ensure that its embassies and interest sections have positive dealings with Iranians abroad.

⁴ Iran does not recognize dual nationality. An Iranian citizen is considered Iranian unless that citizen sets forth a very complicated motion to revoke his or her nationality, something that is in reality not possible. In recent years, given the sheer number of Iranians with two passports, the government has adopted a blind-eye policy, though legally dual nationality is still not recognized as valid.

⁵ Interview with Siamak Namazi, November 1999.

The comments by the highest official in the Iranian political system prove just how serious Tehran is in respect to this new drive. During a meeting with various Iranian ambassadors to Europe, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei instructs:

You must show the necessary sensitivities in regards to Iranians abroad. You must think and plan in this regards. Do not concern yourselves with whether or not the individual is revolutionary or not, it makes no difference, s/he is Iranian. In your field of work, whenever you see an Iranian has a problem, employ your best efforts in resolving his/her problem.

While the evolution of the Islamic Republic's attitude and actions towards Iranians abroad has many more intricacies that deserve due attention, the focus of this paper does not allow for that discussion. Regardless, what is important here is the net result of Tehran's charm offensive and improving political image: more and more Iranian-American have been going back to Iran to visit. Increasingly, we see young Iranians who left their motherland at an early age, or were even born in the United States, return to Iran for a rather long period to rediscover their roots and better understand the country and its people.

The impact of the travel back and forth during a time when few other Americans spend time in Iran should not be underestimated. Iranian-Americans are the only real cultural ambassadors that the two nations currently have. They are the ones that answer the complicated questions Iranian people have about the Americans and the Americans have about the Iranians. They are the ones that throughout the years have been quietly bridging the two civilizations.

Moreover, with increasing numbers of Iranian-Americans traveling to Iran, and learning more about the new realities in their motherland, they have shown a greater tendency for engaging in the debate regarding Iran-US relations. Certainly the general euphoria over the recent reform movement in Iran has had a tremendous impact on this process as well.

b) *Increased communications between Iranian-Americans and the USG*

The Iranians expatriates' improved political standing is not limited to Tehran. Slowly we are witnessing a strong will from Capitol Hill to hear the views of the Iranian-American community. During the past two decades, the only organized Iranian lobbying efforts have been those of Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO), a militant opposition group that the State Department has now recognized as terrorists. Due to the lack of Iranian-Americans' participation and engagement in these processes, many Congressmen have been under the impression that this organization, despite its terrorist listing, was the true representative of the Iranian-American community at times the entire Iranian nation. Certainly increased political participation by Iranian-Americans in a democracy such as the United States could do a lot in the way of ostracizing the MKO; in other words, the MKO capitalized from the fact that up until recently Iranian-Americans were not interested in playing Capital Hill's political game.

Nonetheless, with the recent developments in Iran, an increasing number of Senators and House representatives have become aware of the possibilities of a thaw with Iran and the dissatisfaction of Iranian-Americans with past US policies towards Iran. For instance, quite a few Congressmen have declared their willingness to travel to Tehran and hold talks with the clergy. Yet, mindful of the political strength of anti-Iranian forces in Congress, they feel that they need stronger support from the Iranian-American community, not only as a political

force and ally, but also as an expert group with unique knowledge about Iran, its customs and cultural traits. Unfortunately, Congressmen are not in the habit of initiating contacts with unorganized and timid communities, and Iranian-Americans are not in the habit of contacting their political representatives.

Iranian-Americans' participation in the Iran debate would be highly welcomed by Capitol Hill and Iranian-Americans should capitalize on this unique opportunity to declare their views and preferences. It should be added that there have been some success stories already. For example, prior to the recent listing of the MKO and all its affiliate organizations on the terrorist list, a group of Iranian-Americans had initiated a petition calling for such an act. The petition gathered several hundred signatures in a couple of weeks. Senator Boxer also got a taste of the recent upsurge in the political activity of Iranian-Americans after her offices was flooded with emails, calls and letters following an insensitive comment regarding Iranians.

We can only expect such a trend to grow exponentially at this point and for Iranians in the United States to claim a larger share of that country's mainstream politics. A good manifestation of this pattern is that at least one Iranian-American in running for the next Senate⁶ and another for the House⁷.

c) Public Choice & the Politicization of Iranian-Americans

It should also be recognized that the new approach to the Persian Gulf region taken by the Clinton Administration might have caused Iranian-Americans to ascend from their anti-political position. The Clinton Administration has conducted a very tough and at times anti-Iranian policy, increasing rather than decreasing tensions with Iran. Whereas President Bush had been somewhat successful in his dealings with the Iranians, resulting in the release of all American hostages taken by the Hezbollah in Lebanon, through the promise of "Goodwill begets Goodwill", Clinton and his Advisor Martin Indyk chose the path of confrontation and economic sanctions.

The level of aggressive rhetoric between the nations reached top levels, with the State department's vocabulary on Iran being dominated by the terms "pariah", "outlaw", "rouge" and "evil terrorist nation". Former State Department spokesperson Nicholas Burns even referred to Iran as a "perverted place" during a press conference. After a few years of relative calm, Iranian-Americans found themselves back on square one: Iranians and Iran were once again pointed out as America's number one enemy and the most evil nation of the world. Those thinking that with the passing away of Ayatollah Khomeini, being Iranian in the US would become a less arduous task were proven wrong.

With the imposition of sanctions things got worse. In 1991, Iran-US trade stood as high as \$760 billion, with imports from Iran constituting one third of the trade. Two years later, imports from Iran had decreased to \$0.2 billion, while exports to Iran had increased slightly. With Executive orders 12957 and 12959, Iran-US trade was entirely wiped out. This affected many Iranian-Americans who were engaged in the trade between the two nations.

⁶ Sohrab (Rob) Sobhani.

⁷ Maziar Mafi.

Traveling was also made more difficult due to the sanctions, as the Immigration and Naturalization Services' (INS) procedures were toughened. Iranian residing in America were subject to being fingerprinted and have their luggage frisked upon returning from a trip to London, Buenos Aires or Mexico City. Needless to say, many Iranian-Americans felt humiliated and discriminated by the new procedures which affected some of their friends who were not naturalized yet, or their visiting relatives, including respected elderly, arguing that their own government was treating them as terrorists due to their Iranian ancestry. The imposition of sanctions on Iran and the increased level of confrontation between the US and Iran made many Iranian-Americans cognizant of the fact that in the eyes of US law, often no distinction was made between Iranians and the Iranian regime.⁸

Political economists Kaempfer and Lowenberg have studied the creation and activities of interest groups from a public choice perspective. They argue that the ability of individuals to group together for purposes of collective action is determined by the degree to which these groups can overcome free-riding incentives, i.e., there is a threshold. In this context, one could argue that while the emergence of Khatami and the reformist alternative increased incentives for collective action, US sanctions and the hostile position taken by the US government vis-à-vis Iran and Iranian-Americans lowered the threshold.

Iranian-Americans & the Internet

Another phenomenon, that may not have *caused* Iranian-Americans to get vocal, but certainly has helped in this regard, is the Internet. This innovation has put millions of Iranian-Americans and Iranians in contact with each other and the non-personal and often "identity-less" nature of the Internet has challenged some of the Iranian-American culture's semi-taboo.

For instance, to be labeled "*siyaasi*" (political) may have devastating effects on an Iranian-American's social life and well being. As the political history of Iran has not always been peaceful and characterized as amicable and consensus seeking, Iranians and Iranian-Americans may have bitter memories of politics in general, and political debates in particular. Agreeing to disagree is a concept that has not rooted all to well in the Iranian culture.

Nevertheless, with the Internet, topics that previously were repressed found a way to be aired. The often politically disillusioned Iranian-Americans now tend to discuss politics more than anything else at forums such as soc.culture.iranian. In this sense, the Internet has provided the Iranian-American community with a forum in which they can discuss issues such as their own role in the American society, the importance of their ties with Iran, their feelings regarding the developments in Iran, how they can play a role in the future of Iran, etc., without being ostracized by their peers.

However, the Internet has done much more than just providing the Iranian-American community with a non-personal discussion forum. Due to the spread of the Internet in Iran, Iranian-Americans can today enjoy much closer ties with friends and relatives in their motherland.

Furthermore, the Internet has enabled people outside Iran to get a better understanding of what is going on in the country. News on what is happening in Iran is now easily available on the Internet. This has been no small help in keeping the Iranian-American community politically aware. In addition, the feelings and views of the people in Iran are far better understood now than before, as they can express them themselves directly via the Internet.

This last point should not be underestimated. It goes to underscore the importance of breaking Iran out of its isolation in order to facilitate the democratization process of the country. During the recent demonstrations in Iran, the Internet arguably played a more important role than mainstream media in portraying the student's side of the story, as few Western journalists reported directly from Tehran. The students broadcasted their eyewitness accounts, *with scanned pictures*, directly on the Net, enabling millions of Iranians outside Iran to get a clear picture of what was going on. Forums such as the soc.culture.Iranian and the on-line "webzine", *The Iranian* (www.iranian.com) – and its associated mailing list, *The Iranian Times* – helped distribute these accounts and very soon, websites were set up in which pictures and stories of local Tehrani's were published. The fact that many journalists browse these newsgroups and websites in order to find a scoop stresses the significance of the Internet.

The direct contacts between Iranian-Americans and Iranians in Iran via the Internet have also had some other consequences. The needs, views and thoughts of the people on "the other side" is better understood and communicated without any censorship. Outsiders can today better grasp the *choices* and *alternatives* of the Iranians in Iran. As such, Iranians abroad now have a better ability to monitor what their counterparts back home feel about various issues. This is an important point. One of the psychological factors that stymied the politicization of expatriate community is a fear that their actions would not reflect the wants and needs of the Iranian people. In that sense, the ability to communicate directly and without censor, even in a limited way, does a lot in raising an Iranian-American activist's confidence and "mandate."

The Internet has played an even more important role: it has put active Iranian-Americans in touch by providing them with a forum to "meet," educate, and exchange ideas with another. In fact, the "virtual" Iranian-American community is the most politically active. We have already alluded to the petition to blacklist the MKO and the objection to Senator Baxton's comments, both of which were disseminated via the Internet. But things reach far beyond that and there are numerous activist organizations that owe their nascence and management ability to cyber space. Perhaps one of the best examples is Iranians for International Cooperation (IIC),⁹ a US and Web-based advocacy group pursuing improved relations between Iran and the US and the lifting of American sanctions on Iran. Most of IIC's 800 members learned of this organization on-line. Moreover, IIC is able to coordinate the activities of its many chapters throughout the world using the Internet. The group further relies on the Internet to reach out to the media and to policy-makers in Washington.

The potential of the Internet for political advocacy is hard to assess, and any assessment will most likely fail to grasp the entire capacity of this innovation. Perhaps the 80-20 initiative of the Asian-American community goes to underscore this last point, as this group has succeeded in acquiring a membership of over 50,000 Asian-Americans in just a few months. The goal of the 80-20 initiative is similar to that of IIC – to organize its community via the Internet into a political force to be reckoned with.

⁹ www.iic.org

Conclusions & Actions

To recap, this paper has so far made the following assertions: Iranian-Americans are a formidable force in helping mend the bridge between Iran and the United States. However, this group role has not been utilized anywhere close to its potential, however, for several reasons: (1) The I-A's themselves did not accept that they had actually immigrated, up until very recently, and treated their new home like a temporary base (2) A good portion of them were against the IRI, therefore would not do anything to help.

Nonetheless, all that is changing. We see the Iranian-American community increasingly involved and heard in US political scene.

Like any new emigrant group, it takes time to adjust to the new surroundings and to learn the ropes of the host country. With time, as the Iranian immigrants stayed on in the United States, and a new generation actually grew up under the American system, we see this group get increasingly involved in political matters.

Several factors helped this process along, acting as catalysts expediting the politicization process. These include increase in communications, both, between Iranian-Americans and Iran (the government and people), and also between Iranian-Americans and the US government. In addition, in line with the public choice studies by political economists Kaempfer and Lowenberg, the emergence of Khatami and the reformist alternative increased incentives for collective action, as did US sanctions and the hostile position taken by the US government vis-à-vis Iran and Iranian-Americans. Meanwhile, the Internet served as an ideal forum for the furthering this process.

It is important to underline a point here: the increased politicization of this group is to the benefit of both nations they belong to. It will facilitate the bridging of the differences of the two sides. For example, while Iranian-Americans use their influence in the United States to curb discriminatory and derogatory behavior towards Iranians, they also pressure the Iranian government on issues such as developing a freer, more democratic society.

With that in mind, it is appropriate to conclude this paper with a list of recommended actions that would help along this process:

1. Seminars in lobbying for Iranian-American youth and intern opportunities in Washington DC.

Despite having spent between 20-30 years in the United States, it is apparently still not a sufficiently long period for a community such as the Iranian-American to comprehend the function and role of lobbying at Capitol Hill. In the eyes of many Iranian-Americans, lobbying is not much different from nepotism or "*party-bazi*", and hardly a legitimate and democratic way of exerting influence.

While the new generation of Iranian-Americans has a greater understanding of the American political culture, they still have much to learn. It is important to further this group's understanding of the American political system and the concept of lobbying. The question is how? We suggest that there is no need to re-invent the wheel and that there is much to be learned from the best in the business.

Every year, thousands of college and university students flock to Washington DC to intern at different policy institutions, from the White House, to Capitol Hill, to lobby groups, to CSIS and other actors in the political field.

Established communities such as that of the Jewish-Americans have taken advantage of these floods of future American leaders and politicians. The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), one of the most powerful lobbies in the US¹⁰, does not only provide Jewish-American youth with numerous intern opportunities, it also facilitates internships for members at other institutions and uses the influx of young political talents to export its pro-Israeli views and values. Numerous seminars are organized by AIPAC for these students, with high-ranking speakers such as US Diplomat Dennis Ross and Congressman Gene Ackerman¹¹. The topics of these speeches may vary between "the Middle East process" to "How to succeed as a Jew in a non-Jewish environment".

Most impressive and educational is AIPAC's "Youth Leadership Seminars," which are held annually and offered at highly subsidized rates. They train AIPAC members not only in essential public policy skills such as lobbying, monitoring and responding to the media, etc., but also use the forum to guide members in how to succeed in the American society at large. For example, a prominent Jewish-American teacher tells her fellows just how she got to her position, sharing her knowledge and foresight with the young members of AIPAC.

These seminars serve several purposes. First, it enables AIPAC to meet the best future minds of the Jewish-American community, of whom many may be hired by AIPAC later in their careers. Second, the bonds between the US and Israel, and between the Jewish American community and Israel is strengthened through these events. The students on the other hand get to network, learn more about the political mechanisms of the US, and strengthen their bonds to Israel and its future. In many of these seminars, the lobbying process and its importance is explained to the students, who often through role-play get to put their newly acquired lobbying skills to a test.

Creating similar types of seminars and intern opportunities to Iranian-American youth may not improve Iran-US relations in the short run, but it will help integrate the Iranian-American community into the political life of America. In the long run, a strong and active Iranian-American lobby, partly established through these seminars and by the participants of these programs, may serve to ensure that the US and Iran never find themselves in violent opposition to each other again. Arguably an Iranian-American lobby (which is different from a lobby group purely pursuing the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran) is needed in order to create a balance between the competing Middle Eastern lobbies. Without it, Iran-bashing may become popular in Congress again.

2. Increased awareness amongst Iranian-Americans and Americans about the effects of sanctions, both at home and in Iran.

As with many other regimes with poor Human Rights records, concerned citizens in other nations, including Iranian-Americans, have often opted for the sanctions tool to voice their

¹⁰ AIPAC was ranked second most influential interest group by Fortune Magazine both in 1997 and 1998. *FORTUNE Magazine*, November 23, 1998.

¹¹ Gene Ackerman is mostly known to the Iranian-American community for his undivided support to the Mujahedin.

opposition to the objectionable activities of the Iranian regime. Unfortunately, the general view on sanctions is that it is a “one size fit all” solution – that is, sanctions work essentially the same way in Yugoslavia, Cuba, Myanmar and Iran.

Naturally, things are not this simple. Economic sanctions operate by redistributing resources and influence between competing groups within the target nation, resources that are necessary for these groups to exert political influence. In order for sanctions to be effective, they must hit where it hurts, i.e. reduce the abilities of those advocating the objectionable policy while leaving other groups unaffected at a minimum. However, formulating sanctions with such precision is an arduous task, and more often than not, sanctions hit the target nations blindly and reduce the influence and resources of domestic forces working *against* the objectionable policy.

Whether sanctions can or cannot be effective is thus depending on how precise the sanctions can be constructed and the political situation in the target nation. Paradoxically, sanctions are more effective when imposed on other democracies, as these nations have functioning political systems that enables public opinion to influence policies and respond to demands from the international community. Sanctioning nations such as Iraq and Cuba, on the other hand, usually leaves the peoples of these nations in a worse situation while the political elite hardly is affected at all. Yet, sanctions are often utilized as they do give the impression that one is "doing something".

Iran’s political system is of course not comparable to that of Iraq’s. The problem with sanctioning Iran is that it is hard to see how increased hostility from the US can work to help the forces within Iran seeking improved relations with the international community, the rule of law and civil society. Most analysts agree that while conservative forces have been seeking to isolate Iran from within, the US’s efforts to isolate Iran from the outside, via sanctions, have only worked to the benefit of these forces.

Yet, at a first glance, many Iranian-Americans may still believe that confrontation with the Iranian regime as a whole is positive, perhaps even necessary. Since one of the primary functions Iranian-Americans can play in improving relations between Iran and the US is to constitute a political force favoring a constructive approach vis-à-vis Iran, increased awareness regarding the counterproductive aspects of a confrontational sanctions policy is necessary.

3. The taboo of working for a new approach on Iran must be further legitimized.

The fear of coming across as a lackey of the Iranian regime is still prohibiting many Iranian-Americans from fully engaging in the debate on the future of Iran-US relations. There continues to be a wall of suspicion between the Iranian-American community and the regime in Iran – and vice versa – although many bricks have been knocked down during the past three years. While this process must continue, it is important to clarify that support for a *rational* approach to Iran is not the same thing as support for the regime in Iran.

In this sense, although the Iranian-American community must be utilized for improving relations between Iran and the US, it is essential that Americans of non-Iranian background also play a highly visible role in these efforts. The presence of these groups will further legitimize this process in the eyes of many Iranian-Americans and make them more inclined to participate in this process.