

FACT-FINDING MISSION:
IRAN

Iran Unveiled¹

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THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN has been identified as a member of the so-called “Axis of Evil” by the President of the United States, as a radical Shi’ite state, and as a rogue “terrorist-sponsoring” nation, allegedly harboring dangerous nuclear weapons. For many Americans, Iran is further defined by memories of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 444 day hostage crisis that followed.

In May 2004, 11 students from Tufts University and The Fletcher School were given the opportunity to see this “rogue nation” first-hand, in order to critically examine Iran in all its complexities and contradictions. These students spent two weeks in Iran, becoming the first official American student delegation to visit the country since the 1979 revolution.

Organized by two Iranian students at Tufts, the trip was the first undertaking of the Iran Dialogue Initiative (IDI), an arm of the New Initiative for Middle East Peace (NIMEP). Professor Michael J. Fischer, an MIT anthropology professor and renowned Iran expert, and Saeed Razavi, an Iranian engineer, joined the student delegation on the two-week dialogue exchange with Iranian students from the School of International Relations (SIR) in Tehran.

The IDI delegation visited many cultural and historic sites during their stay in the cities of Shiraz, Isfahan, Abyaneh, Kashan, and Natanz. Among the sites were the palaces of the Safavid Shahs in Isfahan, the famous gardens in Kashan, remote villages in central Iran, and Persepolis, the famous palace of Darius I, built in 518 BCE and later destroyed by Alexander the Great. These sites helped the group develop a cultural and historical context for many of the political discussions in which they would soon engage with their Iranian counterparts at SIR, the foreign service school of Iran. The delegation was also able to meet with a diverse group of Iranians who provided

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unique perspectives on Iranian culture, economic policies, and politics. Among the interviewees were Oscar-nominated director Majid Majidi, world-famous composer Mohammad Sarir, Tehran-based artist Minoo Emami, and sociology professor Mohammad Fazelly. The delegation also met with a representative from the United Nations Development Program, who discussed economic challenges in Iran, the head of the United Nations Population Fund, who discussed family planning in the Islamic Republic, and the head of the International Office of Migration, who discussed the plight of the over two million Afghani refugees in Iran.

One of the group's most unique experiences was a day-trip to Qom, the third holiest city for Shi'ite Muslims, to meet with religious clerics at Mofid University. World-renowned Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Elahi led the discussion, during which students debated issues including human rights, the war in Iraq, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. According to senior Joe Jaffe,

Our visit to Mofid University was probably the most amazing experience I have ever had in a learning environment. The perspective offered by the Vice President [Ayatollah] and his faculty was something that will serve as a foundation for my understanding of Iranian culture indefinitely. These were not only academics, but religious scholars as well who were being self-critical and modern-thinking in their efforts to integrate Islam into today's world of globalization and global conflict. As much as I may have expected to witness another anachronistic display of Muslim values by any of the Mullahs with whom we spoke, I didn't hear any of it. Instead, we discussed real issues of the faults of American foreign policy and what the Islamic Republic of Iran thinks of the current geopolitical situation.

While the experience in Qom represented the pinnacle of Islamic scholarship and theology, the group's visit to the Yousef Abd Synagogue in downtown Tehran provided the group with an opportunity to interact with one of Iran's oldest religious groups. The delegation conversed with Jewish Iranians about their status as minorities in the Islamic Republic, their long history in Iran, their struggles to keep the younger generations from leaving, and their views of Zionism. The ability to interact with the Jewish community had special meaning for Rachel Brandenburg, a senior majoring in International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies at Tufts. "Before the trip I did not realize that there still existed a significant Jewish community in Iran. I was incredibly moved by the opportunity to be able to freely attend Shabbat services in a synagogue in the Islamic Republic of Iran. I hope to begin some form of an exchange between the Tufts Jewish community and

the Tehran Jewish community in order to make American Jews aware of the fact that there is still a vibrant community in Iran and in order to connect Jewish students in Tehran to Jews outside Iran,” she said.

Perhaps the most important part of the trip was the dialogue exchange between the Iranian and American students. During their two formal dialogue sessions, the students discussed the future of U.S.-Iran relations, Israel, media portrayals in both countries, and worldwide terrorism. In addition to these exchanges, many of the SIR students traveled and interacted with the Tufts delegation outside of the discussion sessions. The Tufts students also met with engineering and MBA students from Tehran University, who discussed their frustrations with Iran’s technological and economic barriers.

The delegation also enjoyed informal exchanges with Iranians, whether it was by joining Iranian families in Tehran for dinner, climbing the *Kooh* (mountain) with the Tehran Mountain Climbing Society, or playing soccer with young Iranians. “These moments when we could just be ourselves and put away for a time our roles as IR students or policy analysts...these moments allowed us to connect with each other in meaningful ways,” said Jason Dettori, a dual-degree student of The Fletcher School and the Tufts Medical School.

The IDI group, comprised of students diverse in age, gender, ethnicity and religion, came away from Iran with new perspectives and opinions about this “rogue nation”. For second-year Fletcher student Devon Ysaguirre, “One point that immediately struck me was Iranians’ ability to view Americans as individuals as opposed to a whole. We would drive through Shiraz, Tehran, Isfahan and other cities and see strident anti-American propaganda posted around the cities. However, the vast majority of the people we met—whether in meetings, on the street or in the parks—were amicable with us.” Junior Meena Bhasin, whose mother is Iranian, was struck by her seemingly second-class status as a woman in Iran. “I know Iranian women are very strong, all very highly educated and seemingly not very happy with their status.” She said that it was difficult feeling pressure from conservative men to assume a submissive role in public.

For Harout Semerdjian, a Fletcher student and an Armenian-American, meeting with the Armenian community of Iran was a very unique and personal experience. “While an integral part of Iranian society, the Armenians have been allowed to maintain their unique Christian faith, traditions and language in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. I was fascinated to witness the deep-rooted Armenian community alive, and proud to have prayed in the magnificent churches built by our ancestors hundreds of years ago. The experience was very fulfilling.”

Other students, such as Tom Wyler, gained a new understanding of the role that religion can play in government. “It’s overly simplistic to assume that those who oppose this government necessarily oppose a close relationship between church and state. I believe that it’s critical for Americans who are interested in Iran, and particularly those hoping to see internal reforms take place, to understand that those reforms may actually bring about a democratically-elected Islamic government of sorts.”

This trip is just the beginning of a larger dialogue initiative between the SIR in Tehran and the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts University. Campus programs and discussions are currently being designed and the group is working to bring Iranian students to the United States for a similar two-week exchange. This student and faculty exchange between the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts, MIT, and SIR will further enhance the dialogue and communication, which is essential to this initiative.

While the American and Iranian governments maintain a hostile relationship, the people of both countries have shown sympathy and understanding towards one another. On September 11, 2001, Iranian students held candlelight vigils for the victims of the terror attacks. After the earthquake in Bam, which killed 26,000 people last year, Americans sent aid and supplies to Iranians. The Iran Dialogue Initiative was created in this spirit of public discourse and mutual understanding between the people. During this trip, a group of American and Iranian students and faculty, who on the surface seem to have little in common, were able to find shared interests, values, and a respect for one other that transcended national boundaries.

Professor Fischer, who had spent a considerable amount of time in Iran prior to the revolution, found this experience to be enormously fulfilling:

For myself, this was a wonderful way to make my first return visit to Iran since the revolution. It provided me a reason beyond curiosity and nostalgia to return. I felt I might be part again of a positive development between two countries that I love and that are part of my being, and that I might perhaps help members of a new generation of Americans experience the civilizational richness, old world diversity, and geopolitical challenges of Iran.