

Persian Miniatures:

Two kinds of dialogues in Iran

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PERSIAN MINIATURE 1: *BAHS* (DEBATE) IN QUM – MAY 31, 2004

AYATULLAH ELAHI, the Rector of Mofid University posed the following hypothesis for discussion: that there is collusion between the Iranian conservatives and the U.S. government to reject Ayatullah Seistani's suggestion for a referendum or election, on the grounds (from the Iranian side) that a progressive Shi'ite state in Iraq would put pressure on the Iranian state, and show it to not be the most progressive Shi'ite state, and on the American side of course to continue the occupation.

Mofid University, established in 1989 by Ayatullah Musavi-Ardabili, the former head of the Judicial Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is dedicated to researching the fit or conflict between the value systems of Western humanism (the human as the measure value) and of Islam (God and social justice as the measure of value). Mofid, one of three modern religious universities is focused on research, while Bagher Ulum University, also in Qum, trains missionaries and preachers, and Imam Sadeq University in Tehran trains civil servants (in a caravanserai style building designed by Nader Ardalan originally for the Harvard Business School). Mofid has held annual international conferences on Human Rights and the Dialogue of Civilizations; on Theoretical Principles of Human Rights and Cultural Diversity; and in spring 2005 it will be on Identity and Women's Rights. Conferences have also been held on the after-effects of September 11, and on Musa Sadr, the Qum-born leader of the Shi'ites of Lebanon who mysteriously disappeared during a visit to Libya in 1978.

We were led into Mofid's new, barely finished building, to an elegant conference room fitted with plush swivel seats, each with its own microphone, around two descending tiers of polished wood ellipsoidal tables. Once Elahi, a genial man in turban and clerical robes, was seated, the public relations officer gave us a power-point history of the school. Almost a thousand

students, 873 men and 78 women, are now enrolled: 62% for the BA, 37% for the MA, and 1% for PhD, in faculties of law, philosophy, political science, and economics. Six percent are foreign students, including one woman from the U.S., a convert to Islam. Of the forty or so faculty, 60% have PhDs, 26% have MAs, and 58% are PhD students (including Elahi who is a PhD candidate in economics at Tehran University). The heads of the four faculties were present and participated in the discussions.

The University tries to have relations with other institutions, such as the Islamic Development Bank and the School of International Relations (SIR). The recent visit of students from Amsterdam to SIR included a visit to Mofid, and we are a second such connection. They are developing their computer-assisted research capabilities. When I asked what that meant, Elahi said a first project was the development of a CD-ROM directed toward the validation

of texts. When I explained to the Tufts students that this probably had to do with the evaluation of chains of transmission (strong, weak, etc.), Elahi quickly concurred, “yes, exactly!”

A quick note on this, and why the Islamic debate (*bahs*) tradition is a profoundly ethical struggle, and not a simple dogmatic one: The *Qur'an* is a profoundly enigmatic text, divine in its meanings and language, infinite and beyond human capacity for definitive exegesis. To teach its exegesis (*tafsir*) is inevitably to tread on dangerous theological grounds, to court the hubris and heresy of claiming to know God's intent. Viz. Khomeini said: “The *Qur'an* is not a book that someone can interpret comprehensively and exhaustively, for its sciences are unique and ultimately beyond our understanding.” Though it is a text generative of a scholastic tradition of interpretation, the *Qur'an* insists on its orality and musicality, and warns against writing: it is a *qur'an* (oral recitation), not merely a *mus-haf* (written transcript). Memorization/preservation (*hifz*) is obligatory for each Muslim

Would you have guessed that in the heart of Qum, Iran's seminary town, a group of American students, a group of Iran's foreign service students, and a group of clerical faculty and students would be openly debating foreign policy and the possibility of collusion between Iranian hardliners and American neo-conservatives?

¹ See his exegesis of Sureh Fatiha, translated by Hamid Algar in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. Berkeley, Ca.: Mizan Press, 1981: 365.

community (*wajib al-kifa'*) and may not be left to pen and ink. Muslims pride themselves on the fact that their “book” resides not on paper but in their chests. The *Qur'an* is allusive, constantly calling upon knowledge that must be brought to the text. It alludes to stories from the bible and to the historical circumstances of its own production. This allusiveness historically generated a discourse about references and meanings, and produced analyses of grammar, phonetics, poetics, law, theology, and hermeneutics—disciplines that were developed in interaction with both Greek philosophy and Talmudic hermeneutics. Exegesis requires controls on interpretation and the first puzzle is which verses are to be taken in their plain meaning (*muhkam*) and which as allegorical (*mutashabih*). There are contradictions in the commands of the *Qur'an* if one does not know the context of their revelations. The *Qur'an* calls itself “the best of the *hadith*” (39:32). Most

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hadith are sayings of the Prophet: some, like the *Qur'an*, are regarded as divine sayings (*ahadith qudsi*), the rest are divinely inspired. The *hadith* and *sunnat* (practices) of the Prophet are considered the basis for Muslim law. In the two centuries after the death of Mohammad, the *Qur'an* was collected in one canonic written form. Other collections of *hadith* were also compiled, and these require evaluation. To properly use *hadith* for important legal, political, or ideological outcomes involves gaining consensus on the degree of strength of their chains (*isnad*) of transmission. If experts agree that all links are reliable, the *hadith* is graded *sahih* (correct); several independent reliable chains for the same *hadith* make it *mutawatir* (confirmed), the highest grade. Below these grades, *hadith* may be *maqbul* (“acceptable” only because some *mujtahed*, a person learned enough to make independent religious judgments, has issued a *fatwa*, a religious opinion, based upon it), *hasan* (good, but not fully reliable), *mursal* (lacking connected chains), *za'if* (weak), or *maj'ul* (fabricated). The culling of fabrications reflects the development of both critical judgment and sectarian canons.¹¹

But that is all just background. The opening questions from the Tufts students were about the current state of politics in Iran, and from the Mofid

¹¹ For more, see Fischer, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1986: chapter 2, “Qur'anic Dialogics”.

faculty the questions began with what the Americans knew about Iran before they had come and what they had learned while in Iran, reflecting perhaps student eagerness to try to formulate pointed questions despite little on-the-ground knowledge, and genial professorial attempts to frame some context. The Mofid faculty described the current political landscape as a debate between the “political Islam” faction which opposes any relations with the U.S., and the reformists and neoconservatives who argue that Iran can play a positive role in engaging the U.S. There was also a reminder that diplomacy has a *batin* (interior, hidden) side that is different from the open to the public (*zاهر*) side.

After several rounds of discussion, Ayatullah Elahi posed his hypothesis. Joe Jaffe and a faculty member from Mofid responded that such collusion was implausible. Professor Ulfat, Head of the Law Faculty, suggested that Elahi was joking: if we don’t consider ourselves a progressive Shi’ite government, then what are we? Even if Iran opposed the referendum, it has little influence to hinder such a development. A female SIR student countered that she thought Elahi’s question was no joke but had a serious core, an important and brave question which put into question the dogmatic framework of Iran’s government; and that a progressive Shi’ite government need not mean a model like Turkey where there is no freedom of religion.

Elahi let the argument flow vigorously, then intervened: “You are missing the point. We have a saying in Persian: one crazy man throws a stone into a well; but not even a hundred people can get it out (*divuni-yi yek sang tu chakh mianduzeh, sad aql nemitunand daresh birarand*). Since there are likely to be many stones in a well, each brought up can be said not to be the one, the stone may splinter—it is a conundrum without solution.”

Dr. Elahi had just demonstrated, I immediately complemented him, perhaps a bit didactically for the benefit of the Tufts students, that this showed why he was the *rais* (rector, head) of the university: To pose a paradox in order to engender a discussion of all sides of a question was the technique of a great teacher. I said I had not enjoyed a *bahs* (debate) so thoroughly since I had been in Qum 30 years earlier. But I also gently responded to a characterization Elahi had made earlier about my book, *Iran: From Religious Dispute (bahs) to Revolution (eng-elab)*. In response to a question about what the Tufts students thought about Iran before they came, Jason Dettori suggested that they mainly thought of Iran as mysterious. Elahi had commented jocularly that even *Ostad-e* (Professor) Fisher who had written a book about Iran had dedicated it to the complicated (*pichideh*) people of Iran. My dedication, I protested, was not that Iranians were *pichideh* (tangled, complicated), but on the contrary that their culture not

be taken as simplistic (*sadeh nist*), that it was civilizationally deep, layered, and rich.

I paid for that by being asked by one of the political scientists what I thought the future held for Iran, and whether there could be reconciliation between republican ideals and Shi'ism. I said I saw no problem in such reconciliation. Shi'ite identity was embedded in everyday consciousness. At the same time Iran had struggled for over a hundred years for republican constitutionalism, and the clergy had always been part of that struggle. The internet and new communications media would facilitate this struggle for the new generations. Questions now became more probing if also rhetorical. The Mofid faculty asked about the media: acknowledging that Iran has a closed society with TV and radio controlled by the government, the question is whether the U.S. really has much better access to information. Another question was about the torture in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by the American forces: Jason spoke eloquently of a feeling of dismay among Americans; to which one of the Iranian faculty responded that torture is a sign of failure, of things out of control, of poor planning.

As we left one of our new faculty friends told one of the innumerable mullah jokes: an *akhund* (mullah) falls into the water. A man walks by and says, "Give me your hand, and I'll pull you out." The *akhund* refuses, "No, I won't (*Na, nemidanam*)". "Come on, give you your hand, and I'll save your life." "*Na, akhundha nemidan, migirand*" (No, *akhunds* don't give, they take).

It is a political joke, not unlike the satirical movie, *The Lizard* (*Marmulak*) by Kamal Tabrizi, that had everyone talking while we were in Iran. A criminal escapes jail by being hospitalized, stealing the clothes of his cleric roommate, and just walking out, everyone *salaaming* him as he passes. Fleeing to a border town, things go awry and he is forced to return to his mullah's garb and pretends to be the imam sent for the local mosque. His nocturnal trips to the poor parts of town to get his counterfeit passport are taken by the mosque congregation to be saintly forays to bring food and money to the poor in mufti so as not to embarrass them. It is a satire on the mullahs that had most of Tehran, including President Khatami and Ayatullah Montazeri, in stitches. Conservatives took offense. The film was withdrawn after a brief release, but was not banned. It was just like everything else in Iran, said one of my new acquaintances, just like the old folklore formula, *yeki bud, yeki nabud, hich kas gheir az khoda nabud* (there was one, there was not one...), or rather everything is an ethical struggle, a struggle of bringing interpretive debate and material contexts into line.

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PERSIAN MINIATURE 2: SIMULATION IN TEHRAN – JUNE 2, 2004

To get to Iran's foreign service school, the School for International Relations, you go to the Tajrish bazaar in North Tehran, and along Avenue Barhonar, named after one of the clerical leaders of the Islamic revolution, although everyone still calls it Avenue Niavaran (after the former shah's Niavaran Palace). Next to a gas station nestled under shade trees, there is a little *kuche* (alleyway) winding sharply down hill past walled properties. SIR is gated, but welcoming—up a few stairs, it is open around a courtyard, and behind is a manicured park.

The School is 105 years old, gives only MA degrees, and is accredited both to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education. In the past three years, the school has been particularly focused on European Studies as relations with the EU develop. There is also a strong focus on North America, and on diplomacy and international organizations. For mid-career diplomats, the School holds language classes and training programs; for foreign diplomats short courses on the Iranian government; as well as short courses designed for special needs of the various ministries. There are some foreign students and international exchange programs. Just this past week there was a simulation program with students from Amsterdam on Iran-EU relations; we are to be a second such group. We received a particularly warm welcome from Dr. Masoud Islami, the SIR director, who is a graduate of The Fletcher School at Tufts University, and his assistant, Behzad Sabery-Ansari, who is doing his national service at the school and training for the diplomatic corps; as well as by Associate Dean, Dr. Ala V. Gharavi, a graduate of Leeds University in England and of the well-known conflict mediation program in international relations at Bradford University, and who warmly remembered reading my first book on Iran twenty years ago while in England. At the original meeting we also met three women and two men students, some of whom would accompany us throughout the week in Tehran.

The simulation exercise, modeled on a UN style meeting, was set up in a conference room around a rectangular table so everyone could face everyone else.

Ambassador Bagher Asadi, was asked to preside. SIR students, having

to speak in English, had written preparations. The Tufts students had the language advantage, but had not known ahead about the exact format and so had to be fast on their feet. Ambassador Asadi role-played as he would at the UN, framing and reframing interventions. For the Iranian students this could help clarify and sharpen points. For the Tufts students, it often felt like a heavy-handed constraint on the free flow of ideas and the ability to engage directly with their counterparts. I arrived just after the first break (having had to go to the visa office earlier in the morning), and was effusively greeted by Ambassador Asadi, clearly desperate for some help in mediating and rebalancing the format, but also genuinely and warmly curious to meet me.

The Iranian side included four male and five female students, plus Behzad, Dr. Islami and Dr. Gharavi, and a young Tufts graduate, Siamak Nemazee, who works in Washington as a consultant. The awkwardness of the original format became clear within minutes. Ambassador Asadi attempted to invite quieter Tufts students to speak, even joking that by asking them for an intervention he hoped he was not being intimidating. That gesture falling flat, he turned back to Nemazee who presented as an agenda for discussion a list of Iran's interests and of U.S. violations (from the Iranian point of view) of the Algiers Accords (not to interfere in Iran's domestic affairs): President George W. Bush's public statements supporting protestors in Tehran is a clear interference in Iran's domestic politics. The United States has harmed Iran's legitimate ambitions by: (1) blocking the gas-oil pipeline route across the Iranian side of the Caspian; (2) building up the military strength of the Gulf Cooperative Council; (3) imposing export sanctions and intellectual property restrictions on software to Iran (which is why, he said, cell phones sometimes do not work as well as they should, referring to Tufts student complaints, because the Ericson grid uses American software); (4) semi-public contingent planning to attack Iran, especially (a) after the 1996: Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia (plans to attack Iran now publicly revealed in Richard A. Clarke's book, *Against All Enemies*), and (b) during the early stages of the invasion of Iraq, there were public musings from the Washington policy establishment of next attacking Syria or Iran. By and large, Nemazee, concluded, the instinct of the Iranian Foreign Ministry is to be a regional force for stability, as publicly stated in General Reza'i's proposal for regional security arrangements to be openly negotiated, and by the support for the "Road Map" (for peace between Palestine and Israel) published in the *Financial Times* on March 11, 2003.

Ambassador Asadi then recapped Nemazee's points adding with regard to the use of propaganda and miscommunication that Nemazee had also

mentioned, that there was an important sociological and demographic consideration on both sides: the disappearance of policy professionals with real experience in the other country. The generation of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers who had lived in Iran in the 1970s is retiring. There are no longer any Iran specialists in the State Department. Only one member of Congress speaks Persian (Representative Bob May, R-Mo.), and only one American diplomat (in Dubai) speaks Persian. There is a parallel problem in Iran. The generation educated in the U.S. and with experience of living among Americans, will be fewer and fewer. Asadi himself was educated at the University of Colorado at Boulder and has been working at the UN on multinational issues. (Indeed it was Asadi who gave Kamal Kharazai, then Iran's Ambassador to the UN and now Iran's Foreign Minister, a translation of James Bill's book *The Eagle and the Lion*, an important interpretation of U.S.-Iran relations by one of America's leading political scientists on Iran). Asadi smoothly shifted back to the floor saying that without such experiential understanding, governments increasingly engage in mere "positional bargaining," but we need to get to the real interests at stake.

Negar Razavi of Tufts picked up the ball: the interests of the U.S. are already on the table from this morning's discussion: liberalism, capitalism, democracy, but, citing Robert J. Art's *A Grand Strategy for America*, three more security and international policy interests need to be added in counter-balance to Nemazee's points on behalf of Iran's policy claims: stability in Eurasia, ensuring the flow of oil, and the war on terror.

Ambassador Asadi attempted to integrate Negar's intervention and move the discussion forward with a comment on the role of international agreements as mechanisms for disciplining, co-opting, or moving the parties from original positions and interests to new ones. Example: Iran's application to the World Trade Organization has been opposed by the U.S. for the last eight or nine years. It comes up each year, but because decision is by consensus, any opposition blocks it. The U.S. undermines its own policy interests: the process of becoming a member of the WTO would force enactment of liberal trade policies by Iran. (Later, Richard Lyons, the head of the United Nations Development Program, would tell us that it is not just the United States. There is little likelihood that the WTO would begin negotiations with Iran for membership until its economic rules were considerably further along. Still, there is a chicken-and-egg dimension: Iran's autarchy is due partly to the revolution's goal of gaining more autonomy from the first world over its own political economy, but also from the strains of the eight year Iran-Iraq war which forced economic planning into more state centralization than was anticipated in the early days of the revolution.)

Abbas, an SIR student, responded to Asadi's move towards the common interests of Iran and the U.S., by listing the following: investment, intelligence sharing about the Taliban, control of narcotics and organized crime, energy projects, weakening fundamentalist networks in the region, and resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

This led to an exchange between the two sides over terrorism. An Iranian student said that the war on terror is a common interest: after all, Iran has been a victim of terrorism by the Mujaheddin-e Khalq (National Resistance Council, based in Iraq). Rachel and Tom pointed out Iran's state-sponsored support of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Abbas countered: we say Hezbollah is a liberation movement. This difference of perspective was pursued only long enough to show that on this point there was a sharp difference of opinion. (Later as we drove through Tehran, Behzad gently pointed out another reminder: Ahmad Qassir, the assassin of Egyptian Prime Minister Anwar Sadat, is honored publicly in Tehran by having one of the segments of a main boulevard, the former Khiaban-e Shah Reza, named after him.)

The Tufts students now raised the questions of rights and civil society, noting that when the Iranian Majles (Parliament) proposed measures supporting civil society, the "Supreme Leader" (*rahbar; vali faqi*) Ali Khamene'i effectively quashed these initiatives by saying, not now, now is the time to focus on poverty. If not now, the Tufts students wanted to know, "when?" Infinite deferral is refusal.

Dean Gharavi brought the morning sessions to a close by reflecting upon the long history of U.S.-Iran relations back to the 1850s. He particularly recalled the story of W. Morgan Shuster, the American who at the time of the Constitutional Revolution was charged with putting Iran's customs and financial system in order, and who wrote a powerful memoir, *The Strangling of Persia* (by Russia and Britain). Although Iran asked the U.S. for help, Shuster was not seconded as an American official, but was suggested as a private person with expertise (running the customs in Cuba and the Philippines). Gharavi's point was that while Iran has often looked to America as a safely distant friend, which could be used as a balance against closer imperialist powers, America has always acted in its own interest. There is, in the tale of Shuster, both a warmth of affection, and a caution against confusing affect and interest.

As a format the morning simulation had both worked and failed. The Tufts students found it off-putting, albeit in retrospect many stakes and interests had been put on the table in forms approximating international discussions. The Tufts students worried that the format was preventing free discussion and experiential exchange between the two sets of students. The

mimicking of the UN process by which the chair repeats and reformulates each intervention in an effort to keep the discussion moving and not getting stuck in particular repetitions was using up a lot of time. Ambassador Asadi himself recognized the awkwardness of the format in these circumstances, and he formally ended the morning by asking me to help set up the terms of the afternoon's meeting. I promised the students to help change the format, and we arrived at an afternoon format of break-out sessions of two small groups of students, each led by a representative of each country, to report back at the end of the day. Meanwhile, Asadi, Gharavi, and I led a small group of faculty in a parallel discussion of how further exchanges might be fostered. SIR is eager to have such exchanges, and to make them possible, be they student delegations, individual students coming to study for a term, or American faculty coming to teach. Whether the American government will be as ready to issue visas in the reverse direction remains to be seen, given the Bush

Administration's efforts to harass, inconvenience, and block even our best friends in Iran, such as film directors and artists who have come to the States many times, but whose visas are still often denied on the grounds that "we need to look into your background." This is self-defeating and needs to be reversed.

Affectively the lunch break and afternoon breakout sessions were a success in building bridges and exchanging experiences among the students. Such sessions perhaps should have been held first, before attempting a simulation. Indeed one could even envision a simulation in which the two sides would be composed of mixed teams of Iranians and Americans. Role-playing the other country's interests might encourage trying on different points of view; and players representing their own country could provide insider perspective and factual knowledge to the foreign players. Mixed teams might help articulate each country's interests in terms that could have both national and international traction.

As a simulation of reality, the SIR-Tufts exercise was perhaps not a bad approximation of the partial knowledge with which negotiators work,

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and the unexpected intractable differences of perspective that emerge in the process of trying to work on things that seem self-evident values (peace, trade, terrorism, cultural exchange).

For myself, it was a rewarding experience, providing a peek into Iran's foreign service training (impressive command of treaties, conventions, and the like, but also a wonderful affirmation of the diversity of kinds of people in the next generation of Iranian diplomats), and an opportunity to get to know some genuinely interesting academics and professional diplomats. It was fun exchanging stories with Ambassador Asadi about people and places we know in common Stateside, especially in New York, as well as the pleasures and frustrations of travel in international circuits; and with Dean Gharavi about his experiences in England, and his brother in New York (a former governor of Azerbaijan) who turns out to be a friend of one of my former students. We will see if the exchanges begun can be continued. So far, at least, Gharavi, Asadi, and Sabery-Ansari have remained in regular, periodic, e-mail contact, Gharavi even recently sending me a petition to the UN to sign asking all leverage be exerted to persuade the U.S. to not attack Iran. I am happy to join that endeavor, though I fervently hope it is a much-exaggerated fear.