

A Report on "Iran in the New Millennium: Opportunities and Challenges" Conference

By Badi Badiozamani

On Saturday, May 6, 2000, a one-day conference entitled "Iran in the New Millennium: Opportunities and Challenges" was held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. This conference was organized by the [American Iranian Council \(AIC\)](#), in association with the Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, the Asia Society and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley. The following is a summary of some observations on the conference:

There was a sharp contrast between this event and the one held on April 1, 1999 in Orange County. Unlike the previous one, where hundreds of dissidents and members of the various opposition groups were present, this time there were only four or five people outside the building carrying placards about women's rights, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. They were picketing against the conference because they said the re-establishment of the Iran-US relations would only benefit those who are suppressing Iranians. They were also distributing letters containing an urgent appeal for support of attorney Mehrangiz Kar, publisher Shahla Lahiji, and students representative Ali Afshari who have been detained in Iran.

The room capacity was much lower (maximum 187) than the one in Orange County, and there were no dissidents showing video tapes of imprisonment, torture and executions in Iran.

The conference was scheduled to start at 9 a.m., but like any other Iranian event, it began with a traditional delay! It started at 9:26 sharp! The nice lady who inaugurated the session had to keep talking with the hope that Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations would arrive. Once he arrived at 9:43, he went directly to the panelists' table and sat there by himself. The poor lady, who had noticed the arrival of the Ambassador's security entourage but did not know him, asked the organizers to call the envoy to the hall!

It was somehow interesting to feel the presence of the representatives of Iran and the U.S. (State Department's Iran Desk Officer) in the same hall although they did not speak to one another.

Mr. Hadi Nejad Hosseini's speech, rendered with a heavy accent without much improvement from last year from a prepared text, contained a laundry list of nice and politically correct terms such as tolerance, national consensus, democratic participation, women's role, a system of checks and balances, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and the role of the media and a lot of rhetoric! In the area of the challenges facing Iran, he spoke of the curtailment of State monopoly of the market, attracting foreign investment in Iran, job creation, expansion of agriculture and manufacturing, reforming the monetary system and stabilization of Rial, and tax reform.

As soon as he uttered the last word of the prepared text, he hurriedly left the hall, exactly the same way he had done in Orange County. Those who had found nothing new in his speech and were hoping to get something through question and answer, were given the lame excuse that the Ambassador was extremely busy! I, along with the reporter from Voice of America followed him into the elevator asking for a short interview. He politely declined stating that he would talk to us later in the day. His actions reminded some people of the Iranian ambassador's behavior during the Shah's time.

The next speaker was Senator Gordon Harold Smith, R-Oregon, who shared his thoughts on Iran and the world with the audience. He opened his remarks by stating that the "People of Iran are good people". He stated the Senate's optimism toward Iran because of the recent elections and added that Iran is on its way to democracy, rule of law, and participation in global economy.

The young Senator freely admitted many mistakes that the U.S. has committed throughout the years. While Senator Smith tried to put his best face forward and hope for better relations, he could not resist to say comments like: "We speak soft, but carry a big stick" or "What US wants for the world is best for the world."

The Senator, who had no notes, answered many questions and engaged in a refreshing exchange of thoughts with the audience. An American woman who had lived in Iran for many years, went over some of the "best for the world" things that US has done (including the coup against Dr. Mosaddegh) and expressed her disagreement with the Senator.

Later on, I had a long talk with Senator Smith and expressed my concern over the humiliating fingerprinting of Iranian nationals upon their arrival in the U.S. He listened carefully, and asked for some information to be sent to his office. The Senator who is acquainted with many Iranians asked me to send him a copy of my upcoming book, *Iran & America: Rekindling A Love Lost*.

The morning panel was dedicated to "Commerce, Technology and Scholarship in Iran-US Relations" and was chaired by Dr. Najmeddin Meshkati, Professor, University of Southern California. Distinguished people such as Dr. Fereidoun Fesharaki, Mr. Mohsen Moazami, Managing Director of the Internet and Business Solutions Group at Cisco Systems, shared their expert opinions with the audience.

The afternoon session was on the "Prospects for Iran-US Relations" chaired by Dr. Ahmad Ghoreishi of Naval Postgraduate School.

An issue that was touched several times was the hostilities between Iran-Israel. Most every one was of the opinion that the Iranian Jews love Iran. People from Los Angeles talked about how dear Iran is for the Iranian Jews living in Tehrangeles, and that Iran has always been a great place for Jews to live in. It was even mentioned that there has been a proposal by some people in Israel to erect a statue of Cyrus the Great there in recognition of the fact that he saved the Jews from annihilation! And they talked about how Israel provided arms to Iran during the war with Iraq and so on. So, there wasn't a clear explanation for the hostilities and they thought this is mostly superficial. Also, as someone put it, Iran and Israel will be able to resolve their differences much better if they move their issues outside of the Iran-US issues and deal directly instead. And this will also make it easier for Iran and US to address their issues.

Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi, president of American Iranian Council, touched on the Iran-US relations. He later praised Don Blome, Iran Desk Officer at US Department of State, and gave him most, if not all, of the credit for the recent relaxation of US sanctions and the change in US tone towards Iran.

Dr. Amirahmadi also said that some important announcement was coming soon.

Don Blome, like Hadi Nejad Hosseinian, presented the standard response from the American side. He said: US is ready to talk to authoritative representatives of Iran. But he also repeated US demands that Iran should cease support for terrorism and stop developing weapons of mass destruction, etc. During the Q & A, there was chance for the audience to raise their frustrations with the visa situation, the humiliating finger-printings at the US airports, etc. His response was until Iran is on the US State Department list of nations supporting terrorism, their hands are tied by the law that requires the fingerprinting of citizens of those nations. But on the visa issue there has been some improvements. He said they had recently organized a 2-day seminar in Washington for US consuls that deal with Iranian visa applicants (those from Istanbul, Dubai, Frankfurt...) in order to better familiarize them with the Iranian situation. A web site is also being created to provide information to Iranians regarding visa applications.

Yasushi Fujii, Japan's Consul to the United States and former Second Secretary at the Japanese Embassy in Iran from 1985 to 1992, was the speaker who received the warmest applause. He talked more as a human and less as a diplomat. Mr. Fujii, who had been on assignment in Iran in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war, talked about the sufferings, the food shortages, and the 1-million dead. Occasionally sweetening his speech by using Persian words, he brilliantly argued that if the Iran-US relations hadn't broken off, the war with Iraq wouldn't have happened, and that Iraq wouldn't have invaded Kuwait. He expressed his government's determination to provide assistance in the resumption of the relations between Iran and America.

A somewhat entertaining speaker was Dr. Gerrold D. Green, Director of International Development, Director of the Center for Middle East Public Policy, Professor of International Studies at the RAND Graduate School and a Senior Political Scientist at RAND in Santa Monica. He spoke in a candid, knowledgeable and funny fashion. The gist of his talk may be summarized as: Americans don't know much about Iran. And he partly attributed this to lack of diplomatic relations in the past 20 years. He was highly critical of the Americans for not educating themselves about Iran. He talked about the necessity of knowing about all the intricacies of the Iranian system and culture including such things as the Bonyads (economic foundations) that control a substantial part of the economy. An astute observation on his part was that when Iranians and Americans sit together in meetings, the Iranian side knows a lot about US, since many of them have actually received their education in American universities. The American side on the other hand knows very little about Iran.

The sole speaker from Iran was Mr. Hossein Ghazian, Journalist & Researcher of Ayandeh Group in Tehran. He was the one-man-panel of "Views from Tehran." I had heard the name of Ayandeh before. He talked about the recent developments and mass closing of the newspapers, and added that this is not a cause for disappointment. As he put it, the other side just scored a goal, but they did that after taking few goals and that the game is not over yet! Then he went into the foundations of the reform and democracy movement. He stated several factors have been contributing to the weakening of the regime (hokoomat) and shifting

of the power to the people within the last decade. According to Mr. Ghazian, previously oil was the main source of income, and the regime had more power by virtue of its control of oil and economy. With the decline of Iran's oil revenue and with the reliance of the people on other sources of income, the power of the regime has also shifted to the people. Among other factors, he mentioned the active participation of women in the society, and the emergence of a younger generation. The point that Ghazian tried to get across was that the shift of power to the people has a strong underlying foundation (and it's not due to some superficial things) and that the reform and democracy movement will continue.

The official conference brochure listed the following as the financial sponsors of the event:

Mobil Exxon
AmeriSearch
Naftex Operating Company, LLC
Cyrus Travel
Sunset Development Company