The Lens Inverts the Image: How Cultural Differences beyond Language Affect Dialog between the US and Iran.

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For Adam, my best friend, husband and hamrāh.
CONTENTS

Illustrations .......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................... iv

Pronunciation Guide ............................................................................................................ v

Definitions ............................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter

1 - First Impressions ........................................................................................................... 1

2 - A Brief history of US/Iran relations ............................................................................ 7

3 - Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 12

4 - A Comparison of Iranian and American Cultural Lenses .................................... 16

5 - The Need for Corrective Lenses ............................................................................... 37

6 - Envisioning a Way to Detente .................................................................................. 40

Works Cited ....................................................................................................................... 45
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: US Embassy Staff held hostage..............................................................1
Figure 2: Iranian Youth...........................................................................................2
Figure 3: Vacant Iranian Embassy in Washington, D.C. .........................................10
Figure 4: Young women push the boundaries of Islamic dress.............................23
Figure 5: Conservative dress for Iranian women...................................................23
Figure 6: George Bush holding hands with Saudi Prince......................................24
I would like to thank Pary, Fatemeh, and Sara for their many hours of patient
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To all my Iranian friends, many of whom I have never met face-to-face, my sincere
thanks for sharing your humor, hopes and fears and for putting up with my bad Persian.

_Dast-e shomā dard nakoneh._
This text will include several terms from the Persian language transliterated from its native script into the Latin alphabet. This guide is intended to outline the system used to transliterate vowel sounds and sounds that do not occur in English and to help the reader sound out the Persian words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin letter(s)</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Persian letter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>long “e” as in “seen” or “bean”</td>
<td>ي</td>
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<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>short “a” as in “cat”</td>
<td>َ</td>
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<td>aa</td>
<td>long a, as in “ball” or “car”</td>
<td>آ</td>
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<td>e</td>
<td>short “e” as in “let” or “bell”</td>
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<td>o</td>
<td>long “o” as in “bone” or “coat”</td>
<td>و</td>
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<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>long “u” as in “boot” or “sue”</td>
<td>و</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kh</td>
<td>an fricative formed at the back of the throat</td>
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<tr>
<td>q</td>
<td>a plosive formed with muscles at the back of the throat</td>
<td>ق</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gh</td>
<td>similar to q, but voiced and a bit more drawn out</td>
<td>غ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zh</td>
<td>like the “g” in “Gigi” or “z” in “azure”</td>
<td>ز</td>
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DEFINITIONS

Persian: The term “Persian” refers both to an ethnicity and to a language. Iran is one of several areas inhabited by ethnic Persians, who also populate parts of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. There are regional differences in the culture and language, but, historically speaking, the source is the same. In this study however, I will use the term “Persian” specifically to refer to the Persian culture and language of Iran. I have not studied Afghan and Tajik Persian and would not claim that the evidence and arguments presented below apply to any Persian peoples outside of Iran. One will often hear the term Fārsi used to describe Iranian Persian language, but this is the Persian name for the language. To call it “Fārsi” in this paper would be equivalent to using “Español” when discussing the Spanish language.

NPA: “Non-Persian American” This term will be used to describe U.S. citizens with no Persian heritage born and raised in the United States (with apologies to neighbors in North, Central and South America who technically share the “American” designation).

Non-verbal communication: Communication acts that do not involve spoken language (or an established, systematic sign language), such as gesture, facial expression, body posture, and affectivity (emotionalism). For the purpose of this paper it will also include style of dress and cosmetic appearance (make-up, hair style and/or facial hair, for example). All of these factors are affected to some degree by the context in which the
communication is taking place. Factors such as age, status, place, and relationship between actors can influence the patterns of speech.

**Non-semantic communication**: Verbal communication acts that do not have a directly encoded significance, such as tone of voice, strategic word choice, and speed of talking.

“**West-toxification**” (in Persian “qarb zadegi” (¢ردبگى قرب”)) ; Overly influenced by Western/European culture, to a point that one values Western culture above Iranian culture, heritage and traditions.
CHAPTER 1
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I was eight years old when radical Islamist students, angered that the United States was sheltering the recently deposed Shah of Iran, took over the United States Mission in Tehran. For the next 444 days, Americans were reminded of their compatriots in captivity on a nightly basis. No approach to negotiation for their release seemed possible. The average US citizen became aware of Iran’s existence through this context, and the image that was seared into the mind was that of a chaotic, violent nation ruled by irrational zealots. I remember thinking that being a child in Iran would be terrifying.

In September 2001, I was 31 years old when the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were brought down by a terrorist attack. Most news websites were jammed with traffic; the only site I could access was the BBC World News, which in the coming months and years became my go-to for a less frantic, more thoughtful approach to the tragedy. A daily call-in program, BBC World Have Your Say, introduced me to real people from around the world. I was particularly taken aback by the Iranian callers, who were almost without fail smart, well-informed, and often very funny. In the time between the hostage crisis and September 11, I had learned a little more about Iran. I knew that Iranians were ethnically different from their Arab neighbors, had a
separate language, and that Iran’s new generation of young people were pushing for more personal freedom under the Islamic regime. I was fascinated by their moxie – how bravely these young men and women thumbed their noses at a system that was far from free, far from fair and often brutal in its treatment of non-conformists.

Figure 2. Iranian Youth cooling off with water pistols.

When the University of Minnesota began offering classes in Persian language, I jumped at the opportunity to study it. The class was fun; I learned much more about the history, geography and customs of Iran. However, I discovered the hard way that many aspects of Iranian culture, critical to effective communication, were not being taught in class.

After studying Persian for two semesters, I struck up a friendship with an Iranian man, now a US citizen and graduate student at the University of Minnesota. This friendship quickly dissolved into the most confusing, hurtful and difficult interpersonal conflict I have ever experienced. Nothing between us went the way I would have expected. I couldn’t predict his reactions to anything I said or did; I couldn’t read his intentions or emotions. For example, no matter how often we met or how many personal anecdotes we shared, I never felt like we became any closer. I always felt like he was
being secretive and purposely keeping me at a distance. I became acutely aware of how much I rely on instinct to understand the full context of my relationships with others and the communication which takes place within them by unwittingly placing myself in a situation where my instincts were not helpful. His distance made me suspicious, but any attempt to address the issue directly was treated like a major offense. He would only talk about things obliquely, and I was expected to understand the deeper message that was only implied. At the same time, my friend was certainly dealing with my very American way of communicating in a context that put him at a disadvantage; the culture we physically live in gives greater approval to my way of communicating than to his. I could not understand this at the time; I had not been prepared for the great quantity of cultural differences in the more complicated behavioral aspects of communication.

When I encounter an unexpected barrier, I often become obsessed with figuring out a way around it rather than accepting it and moving on. This was true with the barriers to friendship I ran into with my Persian friend. In order to alleviate my confusion and frustration, I started reading everything about Iranian culture and communication that I could get my hands on. I continued to study Persian and sought out the company of Iranian nationals who would put up with my attempts to converse in their native tongue. I developed closer relationships with several of these conversation partners, but again encountered the barriers to communication imposed by a lack of understanding of the non-verbal and non-semantic modes of communication. For example, when I traveled with an Iranian friend and her sister to visit a good friend of mine in Chicago, they were deeply offended that he did not offer them food and drink upon their arrival. We came late and he had already eaten dinner. Even though we did quickly find a
solution to our hunger when his neighbor invited us over to share Thanksgiving dinner with her, the perceived slight was unforgivable in their eyes - but they said nothing. They remained silent again the next morning when we all went to breakfast together at a nearby restaurant, but paid on separate checks. The silent resentment grew further when we got on the metro and I chose the seat next to my friend’s sister, rather than next to my friend herself. On my own part, I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t take the lead in directing our activities. I was frustrated that we were in the downtown shopping district on Black Friday, but never said a word. The misunderstandings and uncommunicated frustrations multiplied until finally breaking down into a terrible argument that resulted in the two girls boarding a bus for home.

To this day, that conflict remains unresolved to either party’s satisfaction. I realized later that I had (correctly) assumed my friends wanted a truly American experience, but I had done little to prepare them for it. Iranian culture both demands and provides far less independence than Americans are used to, and its people have little experience jumping into a “sink or swim” situation. Iranian nationals in the US ameliorate the changes in expectation by hanging together, and thus insulating themselves from the unknown territory of American social life. The experience of traveling to an unfamiliar place and staying with complete strangers was too much, too soon - for all of us. I thought I knew enough about Iranian culture to foresee potential problems, but this was pure hubris on my part. I realize now that it would take more than one lifetime for me to fully grasp Persian culture and to move confidently within it.
The climax of this learning process came a few months later when the husband of an Iranian friend told me, unsolicited, that he was unable to “read” Americans. He said, “In Iran, when I see a person on the street, in a few seconds I can guess a lot about what sort of person he is. In America, no.” In his own words he had articulated exactly how I felt about Iranians, and it was a revelation to me that this feeling went both ways. I suddenly understood that learning to communicate across cultures has very little to do with language.

The conflict between the United States and Iran began long before a theo-political movement, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, successfully ended the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah and set up a new government as the Islamic Republic of Iran. A similar misunderstanding of Iran and its culture has led the United States to repeatedly make the mistake of interfering in Iranian politics to secure access to its natural resources. As I will illustrate in the first section of this study, these mistakes were made in part due to a theory of international politics which has dominated US foreign policy since after World War I. A commitment to a political ideology which assumes that cultural differences were irrelevant led to disastrous consequences during the period following Desert Storm, during which Iraq was to be rebuilt as a beacon of democracy and free trade in the Middle East. As the same elements in US politics beat the drums for a military confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program, an awareness and understanding of Iran’s unique culture is necessary to avoid creating yet another unstable state in Central Asia.
I will begin this study with a brief description of Constructivist theory in international relations, the theoretical framework on which my research is based. I will then provide a brief historical context of relations between the United States and Iran during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The heart of this paper will be a presentation of evidence, examples and anecdotes of non-semantic and non-verbal communication that have affected and/or could affect political relations between the US and Iran. This main section will be followed by a discussion of the significance of this evidence in relations between the US and Iran at the state level, the present state of communications/relations between the two and where we can and should go from here.
CHAPTER 2
A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE US AND IRAN

US Occupation during World War II

The first extended political contact between the United States and Iran occurred during World War II. In order to secure the supply of oil coming from that mineral-rich nation, Britain and the United States occupied the Southwest half of Iran while the Northeast was controlled by the Soviet Union. The emperor of Iran, Reza Shah, had made friendly contact with the Axis powers, using their common “Aryan” heritage as a platform for relations. The Allies stepped in to secure the mineral resources and key supply lines. US soldiers were issued a rather well-constructed handbook to prepare them for contact with Persian culture and instruct their behavior while in Iran. Within a year of D-day, the United States and Britain had returned control of their occupied territories to Reza Shah, while the Soviets following suit not too long after.

The Abadan Crisis

The second significant political interaction between the United States and Iran took place during what has come to be called the “Abadan Crisis” of 1951-1953. The crisis began when workers at the British-owned Anglo-Persian Oil (APO) refinery rioted over poor working conditions. In exchange for helping his rise to power, Reza Shah had given the company highly favorable mineral rights. Many Iranians felt that their country was giving away its most valuable resource for a pittance while the management of APO treated the Iranian workers at the refinery like lowly servants.
A vocal opposition to The Shah’s dealings with Anglo-Persian Oil (APO) began to rise in the Iranian majilis (parliament), led by outspoken member Mohammed Mossadegh. In 1951, Mossadegh became the Prime Minister and successfully championed legislation in the majilis to nationalize Iran’s oil resources.

Outraged by what it saw as a breach of contract, APO, now re-named Anglo-Iranian Oil (AIO) shut down its operations at Abadan and used its influence with the British Government (their largest customer) to induce other states to boycott Iranian oil. The British set up a naval blockade in the Persian Gulf to assure that Iran could not export its oil.

Both sides appealed to the United Nations for justice. The British government also urged its greatest ally, the United States, to defend its claim to Iranian oil. Mossadegh appealed to the United States as a champion of democracy to support its democratically elected majilis and its actions. President Truman resisted British requests for military involvement in favor of negotiation.

After the US presidential elections of 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower, a staunch anti-communist, became president and US policy toward Iran changed. The Eisenhower administration viewed Mossadegh’s actions as socialist in nature and thus viewed Mossadegh as a potential ally of the Soviet Union. Allen Dulles, then US Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, proposed covert action to depose Mossadegh and re-establish the Shah’s ultimate control over Iran’s mineral wealth. Operating out of the US diplomatic mission in Tehran, CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt bribed religious and military officials to arrange a coup to unseat Mossadegh. The coup succeeded, and the Shah returned under US protection.
Democratic and religious leaders in Iran were aware of the involvement of the CIA in organizing the coup and to this day have not forgiven what they saw as the betrayal of Iran by the US in undermining its democratic state.

**The Islamic Revolution and US Hostage Crisis**

Marginalized by what they saw as the Shah’s “westernization” of Iran, clerical and bazaari (traditional business) leaders, as well as leftist/socialist elements, began to speak out against Mohammad Reza Shah, the son of and successor to the Shah during the Mossadegh era. The Shah met these challenges with suppression, arresting journalists, artists and activists who opposed him and sending his notoriously brutal secret police, the Savaak, to harass, intimidate and even assassinate dissidents (Kinzer).

By 1978, the opposition, led by exiled dissident and cleric Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, had become much stronger. His dynasty collapsing and life in danger, the Shah fled to Panama with his family. It was soon discovered that for many months before his departure from Iran he had been suffering from a deadly cancer for which he could only receive proper treatment in the US. Months later he was given sanctuary in the US for humanitarian reasons, despite the adamant protests of the US diplomatic staff in Tehran (Limbert). President Jimmy Carter prophetically asked proponents of asylum for the Shah, “So what will you advise me to do when the embassy in Tehran is invaded and our diplomatic staff taken hostage?”
The Revolutionary government, which demanded that the Shah be returned for trial, saw this as another US betrayal of the Iranian people. In retaliation, radical students occupied the US embassy in Tehran, holding its staff hostage for 444 days. As a result, the US expelled Iran’s mission to the US, shuttering its embassy in Washington, D.C. Official diplomatic relations between the two remain suspended to this day.

![Figure 3: Vacant Iranian Embassy in Washington, D.C.](image)

**The Iran/Iraq War**

In 1980, Iran was invaded by its neighbor, Iraq. The leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, carried out this invasion with the tacit approval from the United States, then a good friend of the oil-rich state and its dictatorial government. During the bloody, eight-
year war that followed, the US officially sided with Iran's enemy, providing Iraq's armed forces with weapons.

In the year prior, the same year as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the USSR had invaded its border state of Afghanistan and began a war for control of that nation. Like the Eisenhower administration before it, the administration of President Ronald Reagan began to see Iran as a potential ally of the Soviet Union. Amid fears of collaboration between its two enemies, the US made back-door offers of weapons to Iran in exchange for improved relations. These offers were rebuffed by Iran's Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, who demanded official recognition of Iraq as the aggressor in the eight-year war as well as an apology from the US for harboring the Shah (now deceased). In 1988, however, Iran, its military resources depleted and its people demoralized after eight years of brutal war, was forced to accept a truce agreement with Iraq without either of those conditions being met.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Historical Context

Since World War 1, one theoretical framework has dominated International Relations (IR) theory. “Neo-Realism” (an updated version of an earlier theory known as “Realism”) is based on the assumptions that 1) states are rational actors that act solely out of their own interests, b) at the international level, individuals (states) act in a context of chaos; there is no global governance, thus states are constrained only by their own interests, and c) identities and cultural norms are irrelevant in the study of international relations. Neo-Realism came to dominate IR theory during the Cold War, and some argue that the context of the Cold War itself reinforced Neo-Realist assumptions.

Constructivism

_The thing was, though: When James Wait got there, a worldwide financial crisis, a sudden revision of human opinions as to the value of money and stocks and bonds and mortgages and so on, bits of paper, had ruined the tourist business not only in Ecuador but practically everywhere._ -- Kurt Vonnegut, Galapagos

After the fall of the Soviet Union, other theories of international relations gained ground. Constructivism, a theoretical framework which has applications in many fields of
study, is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed. Many social contexts, including and especially International Relations, depend upon the existence of agreed upon “social facts” - facts that do not exist in the physical world. For example, as illustrated in the quote from Vonnegut above, the monetary value of an object, and even the value of money itself, only exists as long as everyone agrees that it does. Stefano Guzzini, a Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, observes, “Besides brute facts, there are some facts which exist only because we attribute a certain function or meaning to them…they depend in their very existence, and not only in their observation, on an intersubjectively shared set of meanings” (160).

While Constructivists agree that International Relations exist in a state of anarchy, they argue that this condition has been socially constructed. In other words, “Anarchy is what we make of it” (Wendt 395). The system of power-politics in existence today did not spring on to the Earth fully formed, but developed after states became a social fact and began to interact with one another. Constructivists contend that chaos in the international arena only exists because the actors within it accept it as reality. Furthermore, they argue that state identities play a role in International Relations, and that these identities are also socially constructed. In their view, each state evaluates their own interests and those of others from varying contextual bases. For example, the domestic politics of one state can greatly affect how it behaves in the international arena and can constrain how a state pursues its national interests.

National sovereignty, borders, economics, and rights are all examples of social facts that exist only as long as there is general agreement that they do. Money, for example, simply would be scraps of paper and metal if actors did not collectively ascribe
an agreed-upon set of meanings to them (Ruggie 856). This could be applied to concepts important to IR such as aggression, concession, containment, stability, imperialism, and so forth. The designation of actions and/or conditions into these categories is subjective, and can differ among state actors.

Constructivists focus on the role of norms and identities in shaping international politics (Checkel 230). International politics is, in essence, human activity. If all human activity is inherently intersubjective in nature (Ruggie 856), then on an individual level, IR can be affected by social facts regarding interpersonal communication such as politeness, morality, and ethics. Wendt asserts that, “Actors acquire identities – relatively stable, role specific understandings and expectations about self – by participating in such collective meanings” (397). Furthermore, the individual leaders who control a state’s international policy are influenced by personal motivations, such as retention of personal power and/or wealth, desire for a legacy of greatness, fear for one’s life or safety, loyalty to one’s ethnic group, etc., that can steer them away from championing their state’s survival in the most direct way.

The important implication here is that the rules can change by an act of collective will. For example, rather than viewing all other nations as enemies or potential enemies, it is possible for states to interact as though the security of each is the responsibility of all (Wendt 400). If one assumes that the current system of International Relations only exists because the players agree to play by the rules, then it is implied that the system can be changed if the players simply agree to change the rules. In other words, in order to change the state of relations, there need only be change in the actors’ intersubjective ideas about those relations (Wendt 407).
This change is not easily achieved. Constructivists do not pretend that the system is easy to change, they only seek to emphasize that the possibility for change exists. While Wendt maintains that “security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature,” he also admits that “once institutionalized such a dilemma may be hard to change” (407). He goes on to note that “...systemic change may also be inhibited by actors’ interests in maintaining relatively stable role identities...for almost any role identity, practices and information that challenge it are likely to create cognitive dissonance and even perception of threat” (Wendt 411).

Many Constructivists see language as the core mechanism for arguing, persuasion and deliberation leading to changes in core agent properties (Checkel 239). If change relies on understanding the varying contexts in which states act, then examining cultural differences in communication becomes an essential part of understanding how states interact at both the structural and democratic levels and how relations can be improved. In my view, the current political impasse between the United States and Iran is particularly illustrative of and best described from a Constructivist perspective.
CHAPTER 4
A Comparison of Iranian and American Cultural Lenses

*Linguistic codes and the ability to interpret them do not themselves constitute speech…In a broad system of communication, the code includes not only linguistic forms but a vast array of symbolic and behavioral forms as well.*

-- William O. Beeman

Wendt argues that, “...people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them” (Wendt 397). In these actions, William O. Beeman, Chair of the department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota and self-describe sociolinguist, observes that “Culture provides a great help…in that it establishes a set of ready-made cognitive ‘frames’ for interaction that do most of the work for actors who need to make it clear to others exactly what they are doing” (Beeman "Emotion and Sincerity in Persian Discourse: Accomplishing the Representation of Inner States" 35). According to Constructivists, identities play a role in cross-cultural relations, and these identities are socially constructed. What happens when two people from different cultures try to interact under even slightly complicated conditions (for example, a communications task more complex than “Hello, my name is…” or “where is the bathroom?”)? Is effective communication possible if differences in culturally determined frames of reference are not taken into account? In a 2004 study Shmuel Bar asserted that, “Iranians…do not expect foreigners to copy Iranian etiquette” but went on to note that “While Iranians who interact with the West on a regular basis
are aware of the low-context nature of Western (and particularly American) styles of communication, many tend to infer non-verbal clues from the behavior of their Western interlocutors according to Iranian criteria.” (Bar 30). It is reasonable to assume that most people will expect and forgive some breaches of local etiquette when encountering people of another culture. However, this can only apply to rules of etiquette which one is consciously aware of, not those that are automatic and unexamined. This is particularly true of non-verbal communication (Vogeley 514).

“Manners” and Ta’ārof

Ask any Iranian what an American should know about going to Iran, and the first thing they will talk about is taʻārof. Ta’ārof is the name given to a system of politeness that involves lowering the self in favor of the other. It is not that different from American politeness in principal, but more elaborate and ritualistic in practice. While it is important to be aware of it, taʻārof is by far the most examined part of Iranian culture so I will not dwell too long on it here. One can find any number of books, articles and web sites that provide in-depth explanations of this system.

In Iran, hospitality is paramount and the needs of one’s guests always (at least formally) come before one’s own. For example, when one makes a new acquaintance, an invitation to dine at that person’s home is nearly assured. However, An American might not know that it usually isn’t actually meant to be accepted. In fact, you are expected to protest the invitation as too much trouble for the host. If your potential host insists three times, then you can be assured he or she really desires your presence. This can cause trouble for Iranians who come to the US, who might find that Americans
will often take a protest seriously and not insist, even though they really want you to come.

Another example of ta'ārof is the typical response to a complement aimed at one of your possessions. An Iranian will say “qābeli nadāre,” meaning “it is not worthy of you” (literally meaning “it has no value”). This will be accompanied by an offer of the admired object as a gift to the admirer. This offer is meant as a polite gesture of hospitality, but one is expected to refuse it. Iranians coming to the US have often run into this problem, insisting their friend take the sweater he or she found so striking, only to have them actually take it! A warning to Iranians: If an American says, “Are you sure?” this is a forewarning that you are about to lose your favorite sweater.

As I mentioned earlier, a thorough description of ta'ārof is beyond the scope of this study and would only be redundant to the plethora of publications on the topic that already exist. Some recommended sources include, Sofia A. Koutlaki’s Among the Iranians, Beeman’s Language Status and Power in Iran, and Funny in Farsi by Firoozeh Dumas.

**Turning One’s Back**

One nonverbal cue in Persian culture is turning the back. It is considered very rude and a sign of intentional disrespect to turn one’s back on another while speaking. Iranian-born author Gelareh Asayesh described an incident that illustrates this prohibition in her memoir Saffron Sky. She wrote of a road trip taken with friends during a visit to her homeland. For the duration of the trip, the occupant of the front passenger side sat twisted around uncomfortably in her seat so she would face those in back as
they conversed (36). I have experience this myself, once with the inverse intention. When meeting with an Iranian instructor who was angry with me, he established his contempt at the outset by spending the first five minutes of our meeting with his back turned to me, ostensibly finishing an email. Knowing that I am a student of Persian language and culture, he knew I would understand the meaning of his posture.

There is some prohibition against turning one’s back in the United States, as well. The admonition, “Don’t turn your back on me!” or the lament, “He turned his back on me” are common in English and indicate a negative attitude toward this movement. However, the prohibition in the US applies mainly to situations in which a conflict is already in play or when a need for attention has been established. In normal, day-to-day interactions, especially while "multi-tasking," it is not considered so rude as to require a verbal apology.

**Gesturing with Head Movements**

A close friend once indicated to me that I should be careful about how I gesture with my head when speaking with Persians, especially while speaking the Persian language. Using an American gesture could result in misunderstanding. For example, a quick jerk up of the head, which in the US usually means "What's up?" in greeting or "Look over there" in conversation, expresses negation in Persian discourse. For example:

Jamshid: *Eh, Oon doostet eh?* (Hey, is that your friend?)

Parviz:: Responds with a quick upward jerk of his head, indicating *nah* (no).
The head jerk is often accompanied with a "tch" sound, a sound used in the US to express disapproval. I encountered this for the first time in a Persian immersion course in the summer of 2009. I made a mistake in translation, and my normally sweet and sunny teacher jerked her head and "tsk'd" me. Unaware of the difference, I read the sound and gesture in the American sense; I assumed she meant to express disapproval at my ignorance. In fact, she meant only to express "Nope, that's not it," and her use of that gesture was an implication that she felt close enough to me to be informal. In other words, it was more of a sign of friendship than contempt. Fortunately, only a few days later we discussed this gesture in the context of a documentary we had watched in class, and I was relieved to discover its true significance.

Another head gesture that can be confusing during conversation between Iranians and Americans involves moving the head side to side, at the same time tilting it slightly to the left and right. Though there is no direct US equivalent, Americans often interpret this gesture as a negating shake of the head, indicating "No." However, in Persian discourse the gesture signals neutral agreement to a request or proposal, approximating the phrase, "OK, that's fine." in English. To interpret lukewarm agreement as outright refusal, or vice versa, can certainly cause trouble.

In the following anecdote from Iranian.com, Journalist Bahram Saghari illustrates another head gesture that can cause confusion:

(My father in law) was working in the backyard one day and my wife was standing further away on the other side, at the patio door when he called her:

"Taban jan, Inn Gaaz Annbor ro Na DeeDee?" [Dear Taban, Did you see the
pliers?] to which Taban nodded, shaking her head left for (sic) right and right to
left, basically saying no!

He asked again, shouting this time: “Taban jan, Shoma Inn Gaaz Annbor ro Na
DeeDee Dokhtaram?” [Dear Taban, You, Did you see the pliers sweet heart?] -
Taban nodded her head no, again.

He asked for the third time, this time shouting off the top of his lungs, rather
frustrated...”Taban jan, Azizam, Gaaz AnnBor, Gaaz AnnBor, Migam Gaaz
AnnBor - Shoma Inn Gaa Annbor ro Jayee Na DeeDee?” [Dear Taban, Sweet
heart, did you see the freaking pliers!]

Taban, now more upset than her dad, shouted back: “Naa Baba, NaDidam,
Chand Dafeh Begam?” [No, I didn’t see it, I did not see any pliers, how many
times should I say it?]

Her dad...responded: “Naa DeeDee, Dokhtaram agar Naa DeeDee, Begoo
NaDeeDam”, and he nodded his head up and down, “Chera MeGee
NashNeedam”, as he shook his head left to right! [If you didn’t see it, say so, why
do you say you can’t hear me!]

We understand from this account that shaking the head from side to side (without
tilting the head, as in the gesture previously discussed) signifies “I did not hear you.” In
my own observations, this is usually accompanied by a slight lean inward, as if to imply
coming closer to hear better. Taban, having grown up mostly in the US, used it in the
way that she was used to when speaking with Americans, as meaning “No.” For
Americans, adding a lean inward to the gesture would make it into a more emphatic
“No.”

**Thumbs Up**

The American “thumbs up” is a positive gesture meaning “everything is going well.” It means something entirely different in Iran. Never use this gesture in Iran.

**Mode of Dress**

Mode of dress is also used to communicate status and to demonstrate one’s political orientation in relation to the Islamic regime. Men who wish to signal their non-alignment with the regime’s Islamist philosophy wear jeans and colored or graphic t-shirts and gel their hair into punkish styles (Gerami 271; Mahdavi 113). This is to intentionally contrast with conservative men who wear baggy pants, long shirts with wrist-length sleeves, beards and short haircuts. Ties, considered a symbol of “West-toxification” (*qarb-zadeghi*) are never worn by conservatives and rarely by progressives for fear of harassment. Girls and women who wish to signal that they are “progressive” wear short, form-fitting *manteau* (long shirt-jackets that fall to mid-thigh, worn over ankle-length jeans or trousers) and brightly colored scarves pushed back off their foreheads to expose hair that is often bleached and/or dyed. Heavy make-up is also part of the rebel’s uniform. Conservative women wear longer, looser dull-colored *manteau* or *chador* (a long, loose body-length veil that covers all but the face of the wearer), cover their hair completely and wear no make-up.
Physical Affection

In Iran, physical affection between men, such as kissing and holding hands, is normal and is not construed as implying sexual attraction. Conversely, in the United States, such physical contact between men is often stigmatized as homosexual. For Iranian men visiting or emigrating to the US, this may be a difficult difference to understand, especially when among other Iranian immigrants/tourists. As pointed out by Beeman:

Emotional relations are very different. Men and women both may become exceptionally attached to people of the same sex, to the point that Westerners would swear that they must have a sexual relationship. It is not necessarily so. Kissing, holding hands, weeping, jealousy, physical contact and all the signs of partnership can exist without any sexual activity or, indeed, with an undercurrent
of absolute horror that it might take place (Beeman “No Gays in Iran… But Many Same-Sex Couples” paragraph 7).

A demonstration of this difference occurred during President George W. Bush’s visit to Saudi Arabia in 2005. A famous photo of the president holding hands with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah was published in numerous newspapers and websites. In Saudi Arabia - and in the Middle East in general - men hold hands as the photo became an object of comedy, mocked as an image that implied an embarrassingly effeminate demonstration of affection by the Commander in Chief. However, had George Bush refused to take the Saudi prince’s hand, this would have been seen in the East as a serious slight and breach of etiquette.¹

Gender: the elephant in the Iranian/American meeting room

In the United States there is a pervasive belief that women in Iran are powerless victims of male domination. So, we wonder, can a woman have a political discussion with an Iranian man? Can an American man have any sort of one-on-one conversation with an Iranian woman without compromising her virtue? Of course the reality is never

¹ I must emphasize at this point that Persians and Arabs are sensitive about being conflated with one another ethnically. However, the cultural expectation of non-sexual physical contact between men is shared throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The US is, in fact, unusual in its social prohibitions toward such contact.
as extreme as the nightmare scenario, but there is evidence that there are differences in cross-gender communication between the two cultures.

For example, Beeman notes that in traditional families, a mother would never directly upbraid a male member of the household – even her own son or grandson. In some very traditional families in the United States, a wife would be expected to refrain from directly contradicting her husband, but sons and grandsons would still be fair game. Does this mean that traditional Iranian mothers never criticize their sons? According to Beeman, the prohibition applies strictly to direct criticism. Sarcasm is perfectly acceptable.

So what about non-traditional Iranians? In 2008, Reza Ghaffar Samar and Goodarz Alibakhshi published the results of a study measuring gender-linked differences in face-to-face communication strategies. They concluded, “In Iran, except for some cases in rural areas, men do not interrupt women to express their dominance and superiority” (Samar 68). Their findings suggested that one’s level of education was paramount in establishing hierarchy in communication, rather than gender. However, University of Colorado professor Lynn Schofield Clark did not find this to be the case when in 2005 she was the only western woman invited to speak at the first Conference on Media and Religion in Tehran. She noted, “…whereas the conference organizers always referred to my (male) colleagues as Professor Hoover and Professor White or Professor Mitchell…I was called Mrs. Clark.” When she noted in her speech that religious programming in Iran highlighted only men’s stories and suggested that the national broadcasting company could play a key role by paying more attention to women’s issues, she was immediately contradicted: “…an executive of IRIB took the
microphone and said, ‘Mrs. Clark is wrong, we have never had any gender difficulties in the Islamic Republic, and there are no tensions now.’” (Clark 98).

**Style in Argumentation**

The above anecdote leads me into a discussion of a difference in argumentation style between the Americans and Iranians. Americans generally refrain from using hyperbole and absolutes in argument, and are mistrustful of the same in other’s speech. Suspiciously round numbers, such as 75%, 100 million, and 10 thousand, are also taken automatically as rough estimates rather than absolute figures. Claims of absolute conformity to one condition or another is generally regarded as intellectually unsupportable. Iranians make frequent use of hyperbole and absolutes, whether arguing formally or informally, which can cause a bit of confusion for Americans. For example, Iranians often engage in hyperbole. During a discussion I had with friend about the possible return of Mohammad Reza Shah’s son to the throne should the Islamic regime fall, my friend asserted that “The Shah never hurt his own people.” It is well-documented that the Shah’s secret police, the Savak, was responsible for the arrest, torture, exile and assassination of political dissidents, particularly religious and Marxist dissidents (Kinzer 2568). The oppressive excesses of the Savak were a major contributing factor of the 1979 Revolution. Was he really saying none of that happened?

No. He expected me to understand that he meant only to downplay the oppression under the Shah against that of the Islamic regime. This tendency to assert absolutes with the expectation that others will know not to take you literally may contribute to the perception that Iranians are more deceitful than Americans. However, it
is not unheard of for Americans to use absolutes in a casual argument. For example, a terrified airline passenger might be admonished by a travelling companion that the plane “isn’t going to crash.” Of course, it isn’t possible to know this is advance. The true meaning of the statement is that the chances of a crash are very low. Americans are not averse to using absolutes and hyperbole, the difference lies only in the rules limiting usage.

Iranians should be aware that Americans are distrustful of absolutes and will regard them with suspicion. A more exact approach, or an acknowledgment that exact numbers are not known, is appropriate when having a serious discussion. In the example above, if the statement had been “The Shah rarely hurt his own people, only when it was necessary to protect others,” it may have been more palatable to American ears. It doesn’t mean it is necessarily more believable, but the speaker will be taken seriously rather than dismissed out of hand.

Differences in the social perception and utility of compromise can also get in the way of improved relations between the US and Iran. I won’t argue that either side is particularly good at it, but it in Islamo-Persian culture compromise is seen as weakness and loss of honor. (Beeman "Iran and the United States: Postmodern Culture Conflict in Action" 673). A disagreement between two Iranians can last forever unless a third party intervenes to mediate the dispute so that both parties can acquiesce without losing face. In essence, they symbolically sacrifice themselves for the sake of the innocent intermediary (self-sacrifice being highly regarded in Persian culture) rather than “giving in” to the offending party.
Compromise does not bear such a stigma in US culture; it is actually viewed more as the mature and dignified way to settle a dispute. Whether or not they choose to do so, Americans do not risk the kind of shame in society an Iranian might by giving in a little in order to resolve a conflict. However, on a political level this is not so true. As the US becomes more divided on party lines, refusal to compromise has become conflated with integrity.

This disparity in the cultural regard for compromise has obvious implications for relations between the US and Iran. Even with mediation from other states, the two have been unable to re-establish ties. States don’t always make good mediators, especially since they may be perceived as having a bias toward one party. In the case of Iran and the US, the disparity of global power puts Iran at a great disadvantage in talks. Negotiators have often claimed bias toward the US based on the advantages to be gained by pleasing the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

**Deception:**

In my view, differences in the social rules regarding deception are one of the main causes of misunderstanding and mistrust between Iranians and Americans.

Take, for example, the anecdote related above in which an Iranian friend told me that in Iran he could understand what kind of person he was talking to almost immediately, but in the U.S. he could not. This piqued my interest, because I felt the same way about the Iranians I had met. My intuition, fairly reliable in an American context, was almost useless in assessing the character of any individual Iranian.
What accounts for this difficulty in forming a useful first impression outside one’s own cultural context? Language differences and accents may obscure some of the verbal cues that clue us in to an individual’s character. In their 1982 article “Nonverbal Strategies for decoding deception,” psychologists Miron Zuckerman, Nancy Spiegel, Bella DePaulo and Robert Rosenthal examined non-verbal “leakage cues” and “deception cues” that tell us when someone is lying and give us information about what they may be concealing (172). They found that body movements and tone of voice were more important than facial expression and verbal content to individuals evaluating the honesty of a speaker (185). One can infer from this that there are non-verbal cues we are attentive to that signal honesty and sincerity as well. What if, like spoken language, these signals vary across cultures?

There is evidence that this is the case. For example, A study published in 2009 found that the use of emotional display rules varied between that of Dutch children living in the Netherlands and Iranian children living in Iran (Novin, “Self-reported Use of Emotional Display Rules in the Netherlands and Iran: Evidence for Sociocultural Influence”).

Distrust can arise simply from the lack of expected body cues or a mix of body cues that send contradictory signals according to how one would normally interpret them in one’s own cultural context. In an earlier study, Psychologists Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friedman found that body movements that deviate from the norm during a given social interaction can provide important deception clues. (“Nonverbal leakage and clues to deception” 97) One cultural difference that is often cited by those writing in a negative way about Iranian national character is that of tagiyya, or religiously sanctioned
dissimulation. In the west, it is generally considered shameful to conceal one’s religion or beliefs out of fear. We may do this but we don’t necessarily want anyone to know we have done it. In Islam, however, it is considered acceptable to conceal one’s religion if it is a matter of physical danger (Beeman *Language Status and Power in Iran* 28).

Given that there are often messages in US media\(^2\) that indicate Iranians are untrustworthy (Slackman 2006; Campbell 2006 25-48), the inability to judge an Iranian’s sincerity, and certainly any mistake made in doing so, can simply serve to confirm information about Iranian national character that is already abundantly on offer. There is a tendency to attribute the deceptive actions of one or a few to those of the entire culture.

Iranians are even more inundated with biased information about the US. The state media of the Islamic Republic frequently decries the United States as the “Great Satan” and portrays Iran as the innocent victim of American greed and bigotry. Most educated Iranians pay little mind to these messages, but when they come to the U.S. unprepared for different rules of acceptable deception and different non-verbal cues for sincerity, the cognitive priming by Iranian state media prepares them to assume the worst. The inexplicable inability to parse sincerity from dishonesty in their interactions with Americans may be perceived to confirm the Islamic regime’s warnings about American character.

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\(^2\) For example, many articles have appeared in major US newspapers with titles such as “A lesson for Americans about Iranians: the fine art of hiding what you mean to say to Iranians”, “Iran’s nuclear deception: tagiyya and kitman” and “Taqiyya: How Islamic extremists deceive the West” (Slackman, 2006; Campbell, 2006). The implication seems to be that Iranians are somehow more crafty and deceptive than Americans as a people. However, the examples he gives are characteristic of nearly every nation engaged in international relations, especially a small country facing a much more influential and better-armed state. Some might simply call their employment of deception self-preservation. The United States certainly has never shied away from deception as a tool of statecraft; perhaps Mr. Campbell’s objection is simply that Iran does it well.
It is not that either side lies more than the other, it is that we are each less able to evaluate when it is happening, precipitating surprise when we find we have been deceived and sowing distrust in future interactions.

**Overshare vs. Keeping Secrets**

One of the key characteristics of Iranian life is the great distinction between the *zaher*, the appearance one maintains outside one’s circle, and the *baten* or the inner life (Beeman, 1986, 2001). This separation can be seen in many aspects of Iranian life. For example, Iranian homes are always surrounded by a tall wall so the occupants, particularly the women, can walk in the yard out of public view. Even within the home, the space where visitors are received, referred to as the *birun*, is kept separate from the family living areas, the *anderun*. Whereas in the United States new acquaintances may be treated to a “grand tour” of the home, in Iran years of familiarity and faithful trust would need to develop before an outsider was allowed into the family quarters. Asayesh recalls being shocked when her family moved to the United States and their new house was open to the street such that anyone could walk through their front yard! (Asayesh 62). Exiled Iranian philosopher and ethicist Abdolkarim Soroush also confirms the importance of keeping secrets in modern Persian ethics by listing it as one of a list of essential “serving values” (Surūsh, 2000, p. 39). This separation between outside and in is nothing new; even in ancient texts such as the *Akhlāq-I Muhsini*, where secrecy is the focus of one of the 40 chapters on the various virtues a king should embody, the importance of keeping the inner and outer separate in emphasized.
While Americans are no strangers to “keeping up appearances,” there is a greater degree of openness, growing especially as psychoanalysis became a more acceptable and normal part of American life. For example, it is not uncommon to hear an American student talk about his or her emotional problems and therapeutic and/or pharmaceutical solutions in a class full of relative strangers. In Iran, it is unusual for students to speak in class at all unless asked a direct question by the instructor. As a result, Iranians can mistake this greater degree of openness as a sign of deeper trust and intimacy than exists. They can also take it as a sign of real foolishness on the part on their American acquaintances; it can even be perceived as an attempt to draw them into a vulnerable position where they will be taken advantage of.

On the other hand, Iranian reticence can be confusing for Americans, who can take it as coldness or even as deliberate deception.

In order for Americans and Iranians to create relationships in which negotiation can take place, this difference must be understood on both sides. To foster mutual trust and respect, Americans must not push for intimacy at the pace they are used to and must also limit their own openness, aware that it can be perceived as foolishness. For their part, Iranians must understand that they must speak more plainly if they wish to win American trust.

Uncertainty

Iranians live with a degree of uncertainty in communications that Americans might find difficult. In the US, we like to get to the heart of the matter quickly and find
solutions. The popularity of the phrase “time is money” speaks to the value we place on expediency. Iranians see much more wisdom in a slow and cautious approach, particularly in their interactions with those outside their inner circle of family and close friends. As discussed above, they are reluctant to reveal details about themselves and their objectives; even in situations that Americans would perceive as low risk they prefer to discern the objectives of the other party or parties before revealing their own. This can be a slow process, which often leads to no solution at all. This can be frustrating for Americans, who are used to a greater degree of information to inform their decisions. Americans expect a resolution, Iranians do not.

In order to establish a productive dialog with Iranians, Americans cannot push for too much information too fast. An Iranian confronted with direct questioning is more likely to become a bit alarmed and shut down than to offer more information. Iranians, on the other hand, must understand that Americans are likely to perceive hesitation as disinterest and cease their pursuit of a conversation.

**Accusation, Apologies and Saving Face**

In Persian, the passive voice in sentence construction is not only acceptable, it is the norm. The active voice is rarely used, especially when discussing the actions of another (Boroditsky 4). This grammatical idiosyncrasy is illustrative of a more general norm of interaction in Persian culture: avoiding direct accusation, even in a mild form. This is especially true with members of one’s inner circle.

However, this does not mean that a Persian is not aware when he or she has offended someone. The offense may be communicated obliquely, but it is
communicated. I have already discussed one of these indirect methods above, turning one’s back. Other means may be to become suddenly very formal in speech, to adopt a stiff body posture and/or even to verbally indicate the error by telling a story, usually fictional, about a “friend of a friend” who experienced something similar. For example, when speaking to a male Iranian friend, I made a rather clumsy generalization about his attitude toward women being “part of his culture.” Prompted by my statement, he launched into a story about an unnamed classmate who had once said that all American women were “whores.” In an oblique way, he was telling me that my generalization had offended him by relating a story involving a generalization he knew would offend me.

Once offense has been communicated, culture may also influence how and if the offender tries to repair the rift. Sociolinguist Anna Trosborg found evidence of this in her 1987 study of the use of apology strategies by native speakers of English as compared to native speakers of Danish who were learning English. Building on this study, linguists Mohammad Shariati and Fariba Chamani conducted a study on apology strategies in Persian and found that, "...traditional Iranians consider apologizing as a sign of weakness and thus it is not an easy task for them to admit their mistakes" (Shariati 1696). However, research conducted by Zohreh Eslami-Rasekh, an Associate Professor of Second Language Acquisition at Texas A & M University, indicates that Persians are not, in fact, more reluctant to apologize, but more often employ apology strategies that seek to reduce the importance of the offense to the injured party. Her study, published in 2004, examined differences in apology strategies between Americans and Persians. She found that, consistent with other research into collectivism vs. individualism in both cultures, Persians use strategies that emphasize
unity of the group whereas Americans tend to use strategies that emphasize the individuality and privacy of those involved (Eslami-Rasekh 189). Explained in a more general way, saving the face of the offender is the responsibility of the offended in Persian culture; a person cannot save face without the forgiveness, patience and/or understanding of the one they have offended.

The opposite is true for Americans. In the US, where individualism, privacy and personal responsibility are key values, an individual is responsible for saving his or her own face. Saving face involves accepting responsibility and, often, attempting to make amends. Whether or not the injured party offers forgiveness has only minor impact – if any - on the offender’s standing in society.

Because Americans place much less emphasis on group unity, they can often argue with friends, even heatedly, and remain friends afterward. For Iranians, behavior that threatens group unity is more risky, and they are very careful not to criticize or disagree with anyone directly. Consequently, Iranians are often taken aback by the directness of Americans and may perceive a complete breach of friendship where an American sees a rather pedestrian disagreement. On the opposite end, in the absence of a direct accusation Americans interacting with Persians are unlikely to even perceive that they have caused offense. The error is subsequently compounded by a lack of evident remorse.

Even when offense has been successfully communicated, differences in apology strategies can still cause difficulty. For example, a common Persian apology is the phrase, “mohem nist” (it is not important). This is meant as an expression of comfort by reducing the perceived depth of the injury – akin to “It’s not that bad!” or “It will be OK!”
in English. But the word *mohem* is so consistently translated as “important” that to Americans it sounds like dismissal. On several occasions I was surprised and hurt to hear Persian friends “belittle” my pain with this phrase, and I would always respond, “*beh man mohem hast!*” (To me, it *is* important!).

**Patience:**

At times I have perceived that my Iranian friends seem to lose patience with my broken Farsi very quickly. I have often thought to myself, “Wow, Iranians are not a patient people.” Upon reflection however, I realized that it is not a difference in the *feeling* of impatience, it is in the expression of it. We may become equally impatient, but in the U.S. the rules regarding when it is and is not OK to express impatience differ from those in Iran. There are times when Americans express impatience in situations where Iranians wouldn’t consider it appropriate. For example, expressing impatience with one’s parents or other elders is considered extremely bad behavior.
Change is never easy. Maintaining stable role identities is important to both individuals and societies. Even recognizing those identities as socially constructed is threatening because it means they may change; the unknown is always a bit disconcerting. In terms of International Relations, Wendt observes that

The exceptional, conscious choosing to transform or transcend roles has at least two preconditions: First, there must be a reason to think of one’s self in novel terms. This would most likely stem from the presence of new social situations that cannot be managed in terms of preexisting self-conceptions. Second, the expected costs of intentional role change – the sanctions imposed by others with whom one interacted in previous roles- cannot be greater than its rewards (Wendt 419).

These two preconditions have been met. Globalization and rapid technological change have produced a new international social, cultural and economic context. The US does not have the influence it once had to bully other nations militarily or economically. In Iran, the Islamic Revolution precipitated an external political isolation and internal unrest. Inflation rises at break-neck speed and unemployment among young people is estimated at 50% and growing (Beeman The Great Satan vs. the Mad
Mullahs 117). Both nations are at a juncture where change is necessary for survival, and adjusting identities is critical to that change.

Both nations can benefit from a reduction in hostilities that threaten an expensive and destructive war. Furthermore, improved relations can benefit both nations economically. This will require the creation of new intersubjective meaning, a pivot away from the current construct of, as Beeman puts it, “The ‘Great Satan’ versus the ‘Mad Mullahs.’” This process begins with communication, the process of signaling, interpreting, and responding that completes a “social act” (Wendt 405). Effective communication requires overcoming some of the non-verbal and non-semantic differences I have described above. Political theorist Robert Jervis finds that

...if messages are sent from a background that differs from that of the receiver, misunderstanding will result unless either party is alert to this danger and knows the other’s perspective. What the sender means to be central may strike the receiver as unimportant or unintelligible. What is obvious to the former may be hopelessly ambiguous to the latter or, worse yet, have a clear meaning that is different from the intended one. (Jervis 205)

Thus, the process of creating new intersubjective meaning at the international level begins at the individual level, with meaningful, purposeful dialog.

Americans have something of an advantage over Iranians in overcoming cultural barriers. The “melting pot” that has been a part of this nation’s history, even before it was a nation in its own right, has prepared Americans for this process. I do not mean to
imply that Americans have always done it well, only that it has been an issue in our national consciousness for a long time. In the past 30-40 years, the conversation about multiculturalism has become even more prominent and even those who are resistant to the idea are at least familiar with it and are required to live with it at the present time.

Iranians do not have the multi-cultural conversation that we have in the United States. Having survived three major invasions and subsequent occupations, Persians have a more negative view of blending cultures. In their history they have mostly had other cultures violently thrust upon them in their own homeland while their own culture was repressed. Iranians have become very protective of their Persian heritage; at present, influence from the West and a growing immigrant population are seen as threats. Thus the idea of trying to see a problem from another cultural perspective is not only unfamiliar, it is uncomfortable.

However, the population of Iran is very young; 75% of its citizens are 35 years of age or younger. This so-called “Revolutionary Generation” (the name given to those who grew up in Iran after the Islamic Revolution) is more used to blending its cultural heritage with that of others, and their desire for economic change and greater personal freedom were clearly demonstrated in the post-electoral protests of 1998 and 2009. For this generation, the cost-benefit analysis falls clearly in favor of change.
CHAPTER 6
Envisioning a Way to Detente

There have been a number of positive developments that may serve to increase understanding, at least on the American side. It is this side that has been neglected most in consciousness building, since Iranians are still exposed to American culture through black-market media and satellite television.

First, several books published recently highlight communication difficulties between Iranians and Americans. For example, Beeman’s *The Great Satan versus the Mad Mullahs*, published in 2008, takes on the subject of media framing of political discourse between the US and Iran. Limbert’s *Negotiating with Iran* tackles some of the political communication issues (mentioned above) and *Among the Iranians* by Sofia A. Koutlaki brings the issue down to the one-on-one.

Another step toward detente was taken by the US Department of State when in April, 2011 it hired its first ever Persian language spokesperson, Alan Eyre. For the first time, Iranians can hear the US side without interpretation. Eyre is not only fluent in Persian language, he also has an extensive lexicon of colloquialisms and an intimate knowledge of Persian literature. This familiarity lends him a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people, and he has been very successful in establishing a real dialog between Iranian citizens and the US government. His following on Facebook is extensive and not only fosters dialog with the US, it also fosters debate among Iranians themselves. He also produces a program titled *Az Alan Eyre Beporsid (Ask Alan Eyre)* in which Iranians can submit questions which he answers on video.
The State Department continued this positive trend by relaxing visa requirements for Iranian students, thus encouraging interaction between Americans and Persians through student exchange. Prior to May, 2011, Iranian students could only obtain a single-entry visa valid for four years. They were unable to leave the U.S. without applying for a new visa to re-enter. In a culture where family is everything, to be separated for such a long time is almost like a prison sentence. The advantage gained is considered great enough by many to justify the sacrifice, but it is very hard on them and it is certain many choose not to go due to separation issues. The relaxed requirements allow Iranian students (with some exceptions) to go home for family events without having to apply for another visa to return to the US. This will make travel to the US more appealing and thus more Iranian young people will come and be exposed to American citizens and culture while conversely exposing more Americans to young Iranians and their culture.

Despite the progress, there remain many barriers to creating a new political reality for the United States and Iran. To begin with, far more Persians study the English language than Americans study Persian. In fact, there are very few universities that offer Persian as a foreign language of study. Despite its forward steps in bringing on a Persian language spokesperson and relaxing student visa requirements, The US State Department took a regrettable step by removing funding for the Persian Flagship Program at University of Maryland, a program which trained many of the non-native Persian language speakers working in Washington D.C. and abroad today. The rare Persian Studies and even rarer Iranian Studies departments at American Universities mostly focus on classical Persian literature. While certainly an important component in
understanding Persian culture, Ferdowsi and Hafez can only partly inform a view of modern Iran.

While more Iranian students will now be able to come to the United States, Iran remains exceedingly cautious about granting US students the opportunity to study there. As a result, many more Iranian students have the opportunity to study both language and culture immersively in the US than Americans can in Iran. Tourist visas are more easily obtained, but they are valid for only a maximum of 21 days. American tourists are also required to travel with a government-appointed guide, and are thus very limited in their ability to converse freely with everyday Iranian citizens.

Actors in society generally base their assumptions and choose their actions based on probabilities, rather than possibilities. They base their assumptions about a particular exchange on prior experience. Interaction is the only means by which one can observe another's pattern of behavior and make assumptions about what they are most likely to do. (Wendt 403-404) Thus if Americans lack the opportunity to interact with Iranians, they cannot develop the means to accurately interpret the actions of Iranians or to understand how their own actions may be interpreted using Persian criteria.

While the internet has certainly created more opportunities for global cross-cultural dialog, in Iran the growing fear of arrest inhibits the development of dialog between Iranians and Americans. An interaction I had with an Iranian friend via Skype in 2010 illustrates this fear. From the apartment of an Iranian friend staying in the US, I was conversing with my friend's mother and sister in Iran. We were discussing the sister's upcoming trip to the United States, and she asked me if I would like her to bring me something from Iran. Knowing her political leanings, I jokingly replied in Persian,
“Yes, the head of Ahmadinejad.” This was met with uncomfortable laughter, followed quickly by a change of subject. I had forgotten that the Iranian government claims to monitor online communications and that Iranians in country are certainly reticent about expressing their views openly as those staying in the US.

In March of 2011, Officials of the Islamic Republic announced that social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, in company with many other blogging and news sites, would be blocked in Iran country full time. This came in tandem with an announcement that the regime was planning the launch of its own “internet,” separate from, and meant to replace, the World Wide Web. Satellite television, another source media from the West, has long been illegal in the IR, though very weakly enforced. In addition to the elimination of the World Wide Web, a crack-down on satellite television has also begun, partnered by the implementation of technology to block satellite signals.

Despite the challenges, my hope is that a middle way can be found between the cultures of Iran and the US; that through determined interaction, the intersubjective creation of meaning may take place, producing new communication patterns that bridge the gap between the two cultures.

Perhaps one way to begin this process is a preliminary dialog about language patterns. In my research, I found a great deal of research into Iranian culture from Americans, but not the reverse. This disparity should be addressed. Even the IR in its current form cannot achieve its goals if it cannot understand the perspective of American negotiators. A thorough study of American speech patterns from the
perspective of Persian speakers, followed by a “summit” on the two perspectives may one way to lay the foundations for a bridge to cross-cultural understanding.

Another possibility for improving understanding would be the development of university-level “American Studies” courses specifically for foreign nationals. I fear that such courses may never be offered in Iran under the current regime, as it has regarded any influence form the West as negative and threatening.

In recent years, there has been growing discussion in the US about “citizen diplomacy.” Psychiatrist Kai Vogeley observes that “Humans are shaped and ‘classified’ by culture, but, they also shape and constitute it simultaneously themselves” (Vogeley 513). Throughout the history of international relations, delegates, usually appointees with connections to a privileged class, negotiated with delegates from other states behind closed doors. With the technology available to us today, citizens can take on the task of diplomacy from their own living rooms. In the United States, opportunities to meet and interact with foreign nationals abound. Advances in travel also allow us greater mobility to immerse ourselves in other cultures and to act as representatives of our own – to act as citizen diplomats. A common refrain in the US has been, “Think Globally, Act Locally.” We now have to opportunity to also think locally and act globally.

In the process of this study, I haven't just learned about Iranians. I have learned quite a bit about Americans, the people I have lived amongst my entire life and thought I knew well. I was unaware of how many ways of being I took for granted as universal, never asking, “Why is it this the accepted way? What does this gesture really mean and why does it mean that?” For example, before I studied Persian culture, I would have branded the uncertainty that Iranians live with as a problem to be overcome. However, I
have come to see it as a sort of existential strength. There will always be uncertainty; if
that makes one uneasy, he or she is bound to be uneasy throughout his or her life.

Questioning what we take as given in life is scary. Culture provides criteria for
everyday decisions, informs the individual's sense of identity in his or her society, and
facilitates group cooperation. When we are exposed to other cultures and see that there
are other ways of doing things, our foundations are shaken a little. However, the
information we gain about ourselves by opening up to others is worth a little existential
terror.

In a matter of days after completing this text, I will visit Iran for the first time.
When I tell people I am going to Iran, they look worried or confused. Going to Iran for an
American is not without its dangers, but staying away has not improved matters. If
anything, the lack of contact has made conditions worse. If Iran and the US are to avoid
another disastrous war, the mutual demonization must end. It has been perpetuated by
those who benefit politically and financially from fear-mongering. The peoples of both
nations have been manipulated. It is now up to each and every one of us to reach out to
the “other,” to ask questions, to listen to the answers and seek solutions to international
problems from the grassroots up.
WORKS CITED


