



Iran: Visits and Dialogue

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Introduction

by Ed Martin

You know the president is going to the United States in September. Could you arrange a meeting for him with American religious leaders?" When a contact from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iran made this request, I gulped and said, "Yes, we will try." This was the first time that I had received such a request, and meeting with national leaders is not common for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff. MCC traditionally works more at the community level. This request came as a result of a series of relationships that had developed over the seventeen years of MCC involvement with Iran and was consistent with MCC's emphasis on promoting understanding and friendship between Iranians and North Americans.

MCC's first involvement in Iran followed the massive earthquake of June 1990 in Gilan and Zanjan Provinces. At that time, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed that Islam was replacing communism as the enemy in the view of the American government, and Tehran had replaced Moscow as the source of evil in the world. We wanted to demonstrate that MCC would respond to human need irrespective of religious and political factors.

When the first MCC delegation visited Iran in January 1991, we met Mr. Sadreddin Sadr, Director General for International Affairs in the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS). He had a vision for the symbolic importance of cooperation between MCC, a North American Christian humanitarian organization, and the IRCS, an essentially Islamic Iranian humanitarian organization.

Over the years of cooperating in disaster and refugee relief, both MCC and IRCS learned that we shared values and that our motivation for humanitarian service was based on our religious faith.

Mr. Sadr introduced me to the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations in New York, Dr. Kamal Kharrazzi and Dr. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, the representative of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) in the UN Mission. Because Dr. Sajjadpour had a strong interest in peace studies programs in American universities, MCC arranged for him to visit the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) of Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). He and the ambassador were instrumental in helping MCC develop a student exchange program with an Islamic institute in Qom, Iran, that enables American Mennonite students to study Islam in Qom and Iranian students to study philosophy of religion in Toronto, Canada. This exchange program allows for North Americans and Iranians to develop friendships and learn to understand and appreciate each other.

When Dr. Sajjadpour returned to Tehran as the Director General of IPIS, I invited him to nominate one of the IPIS staff to attend the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) with MCC sponsorship. He selected a young diplomat in the Europe and North America section of IPIS, Mr. Ali Akbar Rezaei, who attended SPI in the summer of 2000. MCC also introduced him to its head office in Akron, Pennsylvania, and its advocacy offices in Washington and at the United Nations in New York.

Finding ways for people of the two countries to learn to know each other as fellow human beings is essential to breaking down the stereotypes.

Over the years since 2000, I have remained in contact with both of these gentlemen. In the summer of 2006 as relations between the United States and Iran were becoming increasingly tense, MCC proposed a visit to Iran to discuss with Iranian religious leaders how leaders of the faith communities in both countries could work to avoid a disastrous war between our countries. It was in a phone call about visa approval for our small delegation that MCC was asked to arrange a meeting for President Ahmadinejad with American religious leaders.

A group of 45 religious leaders representing a number of Christian denominations and several American Islamic groups met for about one and one-quarter hours with President Ahmadinejad on September 20, 2006, in New York. This was followed by a visit of a 13-person delegation of American Christian leaders, representing more than half a dozen denominations and church organizations, to Iran in February 2007 at the invitation of Iran's President. At the end of this week-long visit that included meetings with Muslim and Christian religious leaders, scholars, government officials, and former President Khatami, the delegation had a two and one-half hour meeting with President Ahmadinejad. We came away from that meeting with several positive responses to our questions including:

1. There is no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, only a political solution.
2. Iran has no interest in developing atomic weapons—they would not provide security. The former regimes of the Soviet Union and South Africa had atomic weapons, and they are no longer in power.
3. Iran is prepared to enter into direct negotiations with the United States if the United States shows good will.

The nurturing of personal relationships over seventeen years resulted in the unexpected meetings with the President of Iran after more than 28 years without diplomatic relations between the governments of Iran and the United States. Finding ways for people of the two countries to meet and learn to know each other as fellow human beings is essential to breaking down the stereotypes and dispelling the misinformation fostered by government rhetoric and the news media. One never knows where relationships built on mutual respect will lead. To paraphrase Dr. Sajjadpour, "small efforts by ordinary people are a key to peace and justice."

Ed Martin is Director of Central and Southern Asia Program for Mennonite Central Committee.

Religious Leaders Delegation to Iran: Personal Observations

by Mary Ellen McNish

The journey to Tehran was exhilarating and exhausting, and left me filled with hope.

The American religious leaders' journey to Tehran in February 2007 was exhilarating and exhausting, and left me filled with hope. Preparations for the delegation including invitations, travel, security, visas and orientation took much time and effort. But of all the things we went through to make this trip happen, my greatest moment of trepidation was the announcement made by the pilot just before we landed in Tehran. He said "We are about to land at the Tehran airport. By decree of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, all women must cover their heads."

For me, raised in the proud traditions of American equality, suddenly to be ordered to assume the outer trappings of a religion that many view as repressive to women wasn't easy. But our goal was to show respect and establish trust. So, I donned my head scarf and went out into an unknown territory.

Jamila Paksima, an Iranian-American journalist from PBS, had joined our delegation to film our journey. When we realized we didn't have the proper clothing, she took us in hand and we went shopping. Besides buying a lightweight black head scarf, I also chose a "manteau," long linen coats that women wear. Always black, a manteau must cover the woman to at least the knee.

I was unnerved to discover how invisible I felt in this traditional dress. I stand 5 feet 10 inches (178 cm), and I towered over most Iranians, both male and female. In my black headscarf and black manteau, I blended into the background. The Iranian government is serious about maintaining the Islamic dress code. I couldn't walk down the hotel corridor without my black scarf and coat, and several times taxi drivers gestured that my scarf had slipped.

Each morning, the members of the delegation met for morning prayers. Because our delegation included those from Christian traditions that ranged from conservative to liberal, we worried that we might find a lack of unity among us. Our fears were groundless. We discovered our common ground—our commitment to peace, tolerance, and respect—and didn't worry about the small differences that separated us.

As a Quaker, I introduced the tradition of silence to our group. This silence, common to Quaker meetings around the world, provides an opportunity for each person to listen for the still inner voice that guides us all. I was very gratified when a fellow delegate from another denomination approached me afterward to express his appreciation for the silence.

As we reached out to the people of Islam in Iran, I realized that we were also reaching out to people of other traditions within our own Christian faith. We were building relationships and finding friends. What an unexpected blessing!

I was astonished by the friendliness and kindness of the people of Iran. Everywhere we were greeted with smiles, and as we walked down the street, the people around us called out in English, "Welcome! You are welcome!"

This was a remarkable contrast to the pain we found in the formal meetings. The people of Iran hold the United States government to be a source of tremendous instability in their nation. They could hardly contain their anger at the history of America's role in Iran. Yet, they also know that the American people are not the American government. They were eager to stop and talk, meet us, and to express their joy that we'd come to learn about Iran.

Tehran was astonishing—vibrant, cosmopolitan, full of amazing energy. The city was going strong with tea shops and internet cafes, bustling grocery and souvenir shops, and an avant-garde theater scene. We found crowded sidewalks, horrendous traffic jams, four English language daily newspapers, and cell phones everywhere. Tehran was as complex and vigorous as any major U.S. city.

Although we endeavored to behave appropriately, pitfalls were everywhere. It's considered terribly rude to cross one's legs; one sits with both feet firmly on the floor. But as meetings wear on, it's hard to remember to keep those shoes down!

A man doesn't shake hands with a woman. Rather, he would put his hand over his heart and bow slightly. This is a gesture of respect, and I tried to appreciate it. So I often fought the instinct to be mildly insulted over things which are simply cultural differences. It became more and more clear to me that our societies need more interaction, not less!

One of our most important meetings was with Dr. Said Jalili, Deputy Foreign Minister for Europe and America, who warmly welcomed us. He talked with us about Iran's commitment to the provisions of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and pointed out that Iran's record on human rights deserved international respect for:

1. Breaking diplomatic ties with South Africa because of apartheid.
2. Rationing commodities during the Afghanistan/Soviet Union war because of the influx of refugees.
3. Dealing with one million refugees during the 1980's war with Iraq.
4. Iran was the only country in the region to support the Constitution in Iraq.
5. Iran believes the same approach should be used for Israel/Palestine. Use of force and occupation is not legitimate. Legitimacy comes by vote and the right of return for displaced Palestinians.

On our last evening in Iran, we went to the Presidential compound for our scheduled meeting with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. I told President Ahmadinejad that we had five questions for him. Speaking through an interpreter, he replied, "I can see you are a nice lady. I will allow two."

I found myself speechless. The delegation had struggled long and hard to come up with just the right questions, and the thought of having to pick only two was daunting. And then the President laughed and said I should ask my questions. What relief!

These were our questions to the President.

1. What is the role of religion in peace building?
2. Have you seen the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report? Do you think Iran could play a role in creating peace in Iraq?
3. What are Iran's intentions for its nuclear program?

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I was astonished by the friendliness and kindness of the people of Iran.

Tehran was vibrant, cosmopolitan, full of amazing energy.

Everywhere we went, we found a mutual desire to move toward peace.

4. Your statements on the Holocaust and Israel (being wiped off the map) have caused great difficulty. Can you help us interpret your statements in order to create an environment for bridge building?
5. What do you think of the concept of people-to-people diplomacy—is there room for a sense of exchange between our two nations?

We found several points of encouragement from the discussion. The President made a clear declaration that Iran was not developing nuclear weapons. He stated that the Israel/Palestine conflict could only be solved through political—not military—means. Finally, he said that Iran was ready to talk with our government if only the United States would show some good will.

The delegates agreed that this important visit could help move our two nations from the brink of war to a more just and peaceful relationship. We learned that it is possible to build bridges of understanding. Everywhere we went, we found a mutual desire to move toward peace. We were encouraged that the Iranian government had already reached out to the U.S. by inviting our delegation to Tehran. To us, this was the very beginning of our journey for peace.

Mary Ellen McNish is General Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee.

Religious Dialogue Matters: Lessons from an Experience

by Ali Akbar Rezaei

Now is the time to change the Cold War paradigm by recognizing multi-culturalism and multi-polarism.

Two lengthy and timely meetings have been held so far in New York and Tehran between Dr. Ahmadinejad, Iranian president, and a group of American Christian religious leaders. In these meetings both sides raised many issues of mutual interest and differences. At the macro level one may not see much difference before and after these events. So when, in a gathering of scholars and religious people in Tehran, Dr. Shanta Premawardana of the National Council of Churches quoted a Rabbi who described dialogue as “drinking tea and sympathy,” that seemed reasonable to everybody at the meeting. Despite that Rabbi’s view (with which Dr. Premawardana disagreed), there are some good reasons at the micro level for holding dialogue between the two sides.

From this recent experience, in this article I try to explain why dialogue matters, particularly at the micro level.

First, let’s get rid of the Cold War heritage. That heritage is the tacit assumption underlying almost any kind of dialogue between the nations. Unfortunately, the world still seems influenced by the Cold War to a large extent, and there is little reason to hope that this situation will be easily changed. In the Cold War a nation needed to identify itself by antagonizing another. In other words, having enemies was a necessity of life to the nations in the Cold War world. Conse-

quently the enemy should be demonized to help a nation unite against the enemy. In contrast, it is ironic and unusual to have dialogue with any nation that is presented as the enemy.

Now is the time to change the Cold War paradigm by recognizing multi-culturalism and, consequently, multi-polarism. Otherwise, hatred and submission will continue to be the criteria of behavior between the nations. If a nation continued the Cold War pattern, it would demonstrate its hatred of a superpower by submitting to another superpower. Under such an approach there is no place for mutual respect towards each other. Instead it creates a vicious circle of hatred and hostility. Dialogue between the nations is the only solution to break down such hostility. In a dialogue each side recognizes the other as an equal and respected partner for the discussions. For example, in the Tehran meeting President Ahmadinejad praised the American nation. The visiting delegates responded by expressing apologetic sentiments for America’s intervention through the 1953 coup in Iran and the American government’s support of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein during the eight-year war that Iraq waged against Iran. This approach to dialogue is a great achievement which needs to be acknowledged. From what I have learned of the pacifist tradition, especially the Mennonite one, this is a kind of story telling between the wounded of the two sides.

New ideas can make a difference.

Second, most students of international politics take it as a given that actions speak louder than words. In that sense one may not find much interest in dialogue without strategic changes in actions of the others. But that is true only if it is assumed that the empirical world always takes precedence over the world of ideas. That assumption has been challenged by some scholars in the academic field of International Relations who argue that the world of ideas can take on the material world. They argue that one may not understand the world without reference to its psychological environment and what we have learned about human behavior. If that is the case, then nations should talk to each other in order to change their conceptual assumptions toward the hostilities. Once they change their initial assumptions, the way towards peace will be open. In the February meeting of the religious delegation with President Ahmadinejad, differences were raised without hesitation, but it was astonishing to see the similarity of many ideas between the two sides. At the end one could see the two sides as anything but enemy to each other. President Ahmadinejad expressed vividly that “we don’t have any problem with American people.”

Third, new ideas can make a difference. This approach to world politics is contrary to what was thought of as Realpolitik. In the latter, nations only recognize the paradigm of power politics, i.e., where the power is and how to exploit it. But I believe that

ideas *per se* can make a difference and can have their own influence over the behavior of nations. Once ideas are invented they take on a life independent of the outside world. So it is worth spending some time to try to invent them. In dialogue, I like to say that one begins to think aloud. It is not an easy job to get to a mutual idea in a dialogue, but this is an opportunity for both sides.

Finally, I want to explain why religion matters in dialogue. Religion is about respect and spirituality. The notion of justice has been a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity and is an important platform from which to build up the relations between people of both religions. Both religions contain a paradigm for dialogue and many ideas to share. This was evident in the meetings by how often both sides recited the sayings of Prophets or the verses of the Holy Quran and Holy Bible in their exchanges.

Showing respect to the other party is vitally needed in any kind of dialogue. So dialogue through religion may be a short cut to get to a common point. Concerning the lens of religion, President Ahmadinejad commented that “if Jesus Christ were here we would accept whatever he ordered us.” That means that religiously we Iranians don’t have any problem with Christians, including Americans.

Ali Akbar Rezaei is Director of the North and Central America Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iran.

Religion is about respect and spirituality.

The notion of justice has been a cornerstone of both Islam and Christianity.

A Visit With Iran’s President in New York

by Judy Zimmerman Herr and Robert Herr

I expected that we would talk about religion. Instead, we talked about issues of justice and peace—but I guess that is also religion!” With these words, and an invitation to meet again in Teheran, President Ahmadinejad ended an hour-and-a-half long meeting with 45 American religious leaders September 20, 2006 in New York City. It was the first such meeting between the Iranian president and American religious leaders, the result of a hectic week of organizing.

On Sunday, September 10, 2006, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) received a phone call from an official in the Iranian Foreign Ministry asking if we could set up a meeting of the Iranian President with American religious leaders while he was in New York for

the United Nations summit meeting. The Iranians indicated that they hoped for a large meeting of several hundred leaders, held in a church in the city.

Our first reaction was that this was not something we could do. MCC does not have a very large presence in New York City, and we do not know the church networks there. We approached others who were leaders in that community about hosting such a meeting. The head of the National Council of Churches was out of town and unavailable to talk about this. The head pastor of the Riverside Church, which has often hosted such gatherings, was interested but needed to consult his board.

The tone of the meeting was quickly influenced by the personal openness that both the Americans and the Iranians publicly expressed to each other.

Thirty-four Bridges

“Build one bridge to me and I will build thirty-three bridges to you.” While in Iran we heard varying versions of this Persian proverb. A multi-span bridge in Esfahān is reported to be a concrete expression of this saying.

This proverb provided a powerful metaphor for our recent religious delegation’s visit to Iran. It is urgent that someone start to build the bridge. We became convinced that there is much that religious leaders in both the United States and Iran can do to build bridges of peace and understanding at times of increased tension between the countries. The steps may be small. When we met with one of the Iranian Christian pastors, using the bridge imagery, he said, “sometimes you have start by laying down small stones.” He went on to express great appreciation for the efforts of the group. We look forward to the day when through God’s grace there will be strong bridges of peace and understanding between the two nations.

—Ron Flaming

Ron Flaming is Director of International Programs for Mennonite Central Committee and was a member of the delegation of Christians that visited Iran in February 2007.

It was clear that the sense of cordiality from both sides had something to do with a mutual recognition of each other as persons of faith.

And so it went through that week. As persons in church circles in New York heard about the idea their first reaction tended to be: “Yes, it’s a great idea! This is a way to demonstrate that it’s important to talk rather than threaten, it’s a way to show that we will not be deterred from relating to those who some designate as ‘enemy’.” But a second thought soon emerged: “We want to be involved if it happens, but we can’t host this meeting. It could be too costly.”

The hesitations included legitimate concerns about how to ensure security, how to handle demonstrators and the press. But a larger concern was how leading such an effort would impact their relationships with others in the city, particularly Jewish leaders. The speed with which this needed to be organized would not allow time to process this with others. The President had publicly stated his questions about the Holocaust, about the nature of the State of Israel, and his government was known to oppress religious minorities such as Ba’Hai.

At the same time these conversations were going on, with various church and religious organizations hesitating, we were getting daily phone calls from the Iranian Mission to the UN which was hosting the President. Did we know yet if the meeting would happen? Where would it be? Could we give them a list of names of those who would be involved?

Finally, at the end of the week, we sent the Mission a counter-proposal for what we thought was possible. MCC could host a meeting the next Wednesday (September 20), but it would be much smaller and less public than what they had originally proposed. We could hold it at the Church Center (where MCC’s UN Liaison Office is located), and we suggested names of around 20 persons, largely from the church offices that relate to the UN. We returned home from New York on Saturday doubting that such a meeting would happen.

Late on Monday afternoon, the call came. Yes, the President does want to have the meeting. We could have between 20 and 50 persons, and we would meet at his hotel in Manhattan (thus eliminating our worry about providing security). They needed the names of those who would come as soon as possible.

We alerted the various contacts we had made the previous week and quickly put together a list of names. Lack of time meant that we were limited to persons already on the East Coast, and prevented having as well

balanced a group as we would have preferred. However, in the end 45 U.S. religious leaders, representing mainline Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, historic peace churches and several American Islamic groups, came together.

The group met briefly before the meeting with the President to plan for the conversation. Robb Davis, Executive Director of MCC, led the group and spoke for us. We had suggested several questions ahead of time, focusing on the role religion could play in reducing tension between our countries, issues of hate speech and the Holocaust, and the treatment of religious minorities. U.S. religious leaders felt a great need to be seen asking the President the “tough” questions that are current in U.S. media, such as about Iran’s nuclear research, about attitudes toward Israel, and about comments on the Holocaust. Iranian leaders, on the other hand, were eager to have a meeting where the President could engage U.S. religious leaders, to demonstrate interest in dialogue and contact between Iran and the U.S.

When we got to the meeting, the tone was quickly influenced by the personal openness that both the Americans and the Iranians publicly expressed to each other. A sincere desire to get beyond the popular issues was communicated, even though the time was short. Because of this, the invitation to repeat such a meeting, in Teheran the next time, emerged. So even though there were reasons for distance and suspicion between all involved, open personal engagement and a spirit of integrity was a significant part of the event, demonstrating that personal encounter is no small part of peacemaking and bridge building efforts.

Since the meeting, we have reflected on the President’s words, quoted above. How might we have had a conversation that strengthened our common interests? If we had more time to prepare, could we have found a way to get beyond the obvious hot-button issues that everyone was asking him about, and have had a conversation on a different level? Despite these questions, it was clear that the tenor of the meeting and the sense of cordiality from both sides had something to do with a mutual recognition of each other as persons of faith, who were eager to share from the basis of our faith.

Judy Zimmerman Herr and Robert Herr were Co-Directors of the MCC International Peace Office from 1991 to 2007, and are now Co-Directors of the MCC (International) Program Development Department.

A New Narrative?

by J. Daryl Byler

If you asked most Americans about the history of the tense U.S.-Iranian relations, they would probably begin by talking about 1979. That was the year when Iranian students took American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held 52 of them for 444 days. This event was traumatic and embarrassing for most Americans—certainly for the Carter administration.

From Iranians, you would likely hear a different date and a very different story. In 1953, the U.S. CIA joined the British to support a coup that overthrew Iran's democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq. The alleged U.S. rationale for supporting the coup was to contain communism and Soviet influence in Iran. Still, the fact that Iran holds one of the world's largest oil reserves can hardly be dismissed as a contributing factor. At the time, the British held exclusive rights for drilling and selling Iran's oil, and Mossadeq wanted to nationalize Iran's oil reserves. After the coup, U.S. firms gained a 40 percent share of Iran's petroleum output.

In Mossadeq's place, the United States bolstered the leadership of Shah Pahlevi, who repressed, detained and tortured his opponents. In a scholarly piece in the *World Policy Journal* (Summer 2002), Mostafa T. Zahrani, writes: "It is a reasonable argument that, but for the coup, Iran now would be a mature democracy. So traumatic was the coup's legacy that when the Shah finally departed in 1979, many Iranians feared a repetition of 1953, which was one of the motives for the student seizure of the U.S. embassy."

When the U.S. religious leaders' delegation traveled to Iran in February 2007, the Iranians rehearsed this narrative many times for us, and added a growing list of grievances from the intervening years.

Upon returning to the United States, our delegation visited 17 congressional offices and the U.S. State Department. In these meetings, we talked about the Iranian narrative and urged Congress to hold hearings aimed at learning more about the history that divides the two countries, rather than continuing down a path toward a possible military confrontation. We urged more people-to-people contacts, including direct talks between political leaders in both

nations. (The United States cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 1979.) Finally, we emphasized the following themes from our conversations with Iranian leaders:

1. Iranian officials expressed willingness to talk about a range of issues any time, anywhere, if they sense good will from the United States.
2. When we pressed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his comments about wiping Israel off the map, he said that there is not a military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—only a political solution. He favors a one-state solution, with all Israelis and Palestinians (including refugees) participating in a referendum to elect a single governing body—thus, an end to a Jewish state.
3. Iran's declared policy is that it is not seeking nuclear weapons. Iran is willing to participate in talks about its nuclear program, if there are no preconditions. Religious leaders emphasized a formal *fatwa* or Islamic decree that prohibits the production, stockpiling and use of weapons of mass destruction. "We want to exercise our rights under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, not more not less," Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Jalili stressed.
4. Iran shares many common strategic interests with the United States. Both nations are interested in a stable Iraq. Both want to reduce the influence of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Both want to control opium flow from Afghanistan.

While some congressional offices favor tighter sanctions, most told us that there is not a military solution to the U.S.-Iran stand-off. Some offices expressed an eagerness for direct talks and encouraged religious groups to continue "Track II" discussions. However, the State Department said that it would be a concession to talk to Iran unless it first stops enriching uranium.

Current legislation on Capitol Hill falls into four general categories:

1. **Bills that impose new and tighter sanctions.** Primary among these bills is the *Iran Counter-Proliferation Act of 2007* (H.R. 1400), introduced by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), and co-sponsored by 156 members of Congress. Ironically, the bill intends

Upon returning to the United States, our delegation urged more people-to-people contacts.

Both nations will need to find ways to listen to the other's story, and to pull back from the precipice of war.

Further Resources

Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*. Longman. 2003.

Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Simin Daneshvar, *Suvashun (The Mourners)*. 1969. (the first novel written by an Iranian woman).

Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*. Random House, 2006. (by Iranian woman Nobel Prize Winner).

Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. Harvard University Press, 1980.

Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*. Simon and Schuster, 1985.

“To enhance United States diplomatic efforts with respect to Iran by imposing addition economic sanctions against Iran.” H.R. 1400 adds new bilateral sanctions against Iran, seeks to prevent investments in Iran’s oil sector and restricts nuclear cooperation with countries that assist Iran’s nuclear program. On the other hand, the bill encourages exchange programs with the people of Iran. In the Senate, Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR) has introduced S. 970, which has many similar provisions. Smith’s bill has 33 co-sponsors.

A second bill, H.R. 957, introduced by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and co-sponsored by 38 Representatives, seeks to clarify and expand the list of U.S. entities against which sanctions can be imposed for conducting business with Iran.

2. Bills that would require congressional approval before President Bush can take military action against Iran. Chief among these bills is H.Con.Res.33, introduced by Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR) and co-sponsored by 53 House members. DeFazio’s bill expresses the sense of Congress that previous congressional authorizations of force (in response to September 11, 2001, and against Iraq) do not extend to using force against Iran; and that it is the president’s legal and constitutional duty to seek congressional authority before taking military action against Iran. Sen. Bernard Sanders (I-VT) has introduced a parallel bill, S.Con.Res.13, in the Senate.

Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC) has introduced a slightly different version, H.J.Res. 14, which requires the President to obtain congressional authorization unless there is “an attack by Iran, or a demonstrably imminent attack by Iran, upon the United States, its territories or possessions or its armed forces.” Jones’ bill has 61 co-sponsors.

3. Bills that would prohibit funding for military action against Iran. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) has introduced a bill, H.R. 770, which would prevent any U.S. government department or agency from using funds “to carry out any covert action for the purpose of causing regime change in Iran or to carry out any military action against Iran in the absence of an imminent threat,” without congressional authorization. Lee’s bill has 16 co-sponsors.

Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), has introduced a bill stating that no funds may be spent “for military operations or activities within or above the territory of Iran, or within the territorial waters of Iran, except pursuant to a specific authorization of Congress.”

4. Bills that call for positive steps. Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), has introduced H.Con.Res. 43 that calls for the President to implement the Iraq Study Group’s recommendation that the United States should engage directly with Iran and Syria in order to obtain their cooperation in working to stabilize the situation in Iraq and the region. Paul’s bill has 12 co-sponsors.

Reps. Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD) and Gregory Meeks (D-NY) have formed a Dialogue Caucus to promote the increase of U.S. diplomatic engagement throughout the Middle East and around the world.

In both Tehran and on Capitol Hill we found leaders who are largely absorbed in their respective narratives about the source of the U.S.-Iranian conflict and quick to point fingers at the other’s motives and actions. Meanwhile, the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate. As of late April 2007, the United States has moved a second naval carrier group into the Persian Gulf, and the possibility of miscalculation from either side grows.

For the tension to be resolved in a constructive way, both nations will need to find ways to listen to the other’s story, acknowledge their respective contributions to the tension, pull back from the precipice of war and create a new, more complete and hopeful narrative together.

J. Daryl Byler has been Director of the MCC Washington Office since 1994. In August 2007 he and his wife Cindy will become co-MCC representatives for Iraq, Iran, Jordan and Palestine. He was a member of an ecumenical Christian delegation to Iran in February 2007.

A Visit to Iran

by Maureen Shea

By decree of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, all female passengers are required to cover their heads with a scarf” announced the pilot as we touched down in Tehran on February 19th, 2007. Our 13-person ecumenical delegation traveled to Iran for a one-week visit at the invitation of President Ahmadinejad and the Islamic Culture and Religion Organization. Our hope was to explore ways to reduce the growing tensions between the United States and Iran through meetings with religious, government, and political leaders. I donned my “rusari”—a head scarf purchased at the Modesty Boutique, a shop for Muslim women, at Bailey’s Crossroads, Virginia—and headed down the stairs.

While women and women’s rights were not the focus of the trip, the seven women in the delegation were curious about what we would observe and hear about women in Iranian society. As Western women, we were both intrigued and uncomfortable with a society where signs proclaiming “A woman dressed modestly is a pearl in its shell” are commonplace. Upstairs in one coffee shop another sign served as a reminder about covering—“Hejab is the symbol of dignity.” Yet I suspect that Iranian women find our concern about their dress odd and perhaps superficial, for it is but a small part of a far more complex world for women in the Islamic Republic.

In the only interview we had with a woman, Dr. Nasrin Mustafa, Professor of International Relations and Human Rights at Tehran University, told us one needs to live there and experience their society in order to understand it. Not surprisingly in a country where women make up 65 percent of the students at the university, she resented what she saw as the American attitude of: “You are veiled, you are backward.”

For one week we did “live and experience” Iranian society as women but primarily in terms of dress and in conversations with religious and other leaders. We would not come up against the laws that place women in secondary positions when dealing with divorce, custody, inheritance rights, or the fact that the testimony of a woman is worth only half that of a man in court.

Our experience, as visitors, of dealing with the “hejab”—covering—continued when on our first morning in Tehran we were taken to a shop to buy a “manteau”—a coat/dress falling above or below the knee. The young woman who waited on me assured me I could get one that was above my knee—guidance gained by my pointing at the ubiquitous picture of the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini and then my knee and asking OK? Her response was a vigorous approving nod. Others in the shop insisted that something below the knee was needed given the number of religious leaders we would meet and our visit to Qom—the holy center of Iran and third holiest city for Shi’a worldwide. Just to be safe, I bought an additional head covering at the shop—a “maghna’ez” or fitted hood that would not slip off my hair—for the visit to Qom.

Since our return, a number of people have asked about burkhas. I saw no burkhas and only one woman who was totally covered except for her eyes. We marveled at how some women in Tehran were able to keep on a head scarf that looked as if it would slip off the back of their head but never did. Riding in a taxi, the scarf of one of the women in our delegation did slip off. The taxi driver quickly admonished her to put it back on as he, not she, could be fined for carrying a passenger without it.

The chador, however, is seemingly omnipresent and a bit complicated. The chador is a long head-to-toe dress. After coming to power in 1953, the Shah outlawed the wearing of the chador, although many rural women continued to do so. Immediately after his overthrow in 1979, to wear the chador was a statement about the revolution itself and so a political symbol. The male clothing political statement since the 1979 revolution is to not wear ties. However, today the chador is certainly more than a political statement and very much a part of what it can mean to be a theocracy. For a while the chador was required to be worn in Qom, and on our visit, the only women not wearing it were those in our delegation and the Mennonite Central Committee woman there with her husband.

As a sign of respect, all women visitors are required to wear chadors in order to visit the Holy Shrine of Fatemeh in Qom. We were given multicolored print chadors, while the

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women of Qom wore only black. As we walked around the large open area of the mosque in our print chadors, we stood out like awkward mutants among ebony butterflies. Only Muslim women could enter the mosque itself, and once there women would be segregated from men and worship at the back.

Truth to tell, a week is just not enough time to get the hang of gracefully wearing a chador or even a headscarf. However, it is enough time to realize that either can be a way of separating women from a group—whether by letting people know that they are strangers at a shrine as in the print chadors or simply the discovery that your hearing is muffled by a head scarf and conversations can become more difficult.

In preparation for our visit, we had asked to meet with women Parliamentarians and made our disappointment clear when that did not happen. Was it really because they were too busy working on the budget? There were rumors in the Iranian press that we were US government spies so perhaps that had been the stumbling block. Or was it just too uncomfortable for them in ways that we could not know? But not wanting to disappoint us, our hosts hastily arranged the meeting with Professor Mustafa on our last day, hours before our meetings with former President Khatami and President Ahmadinejad.

The Professor's words were a careful balancing act—women must not challenge the basic norms of the family, but they are also trying to determine how to bring justice, equality, and equity for women. We were not allowed to videotape the meeting and we were joined by a male professor from the University. When we questioned the ayatollahs with whom we met about Islam and the role of women, they all emphasized Islam's respect for women and that women are responsible for the piousness of the family which is the most important role in society. The result, of course, is that despite their university and advanced degrees, many educated Iranian women do not pursue careers.

Professor Mustafa differentiated between what was going on in society, where she inferred change was occurring, and what was required by law. She was most comfortable putting women's concerns in a global context of issues of women's empowerment, child care and domestic violence. We appreciated meeting with her but were left with many questions and wondered if she might have responded differently without her male colleague in the room.

Soon after our return we read that 33 prominent Iranian female activists had been arrested just before International Women's Day for demonstrating against Iran's penal codes which treat women as second-class citizens. I couldn't help but reflect that the chador seemed very thin protection for these "pearls."

In her memoir, *Iran Awakening*, Iranian Nobel Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi has written:

It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered. That belief, along with the conviction that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within, has underpinned my work. p. 204

For in the end, the Iranian Revolution has produced its own opposition, not least a nation of educated, conscious women who are agitating for their rights. They must be given the chance to fight their own fights, to reform their country uninterrupted. p. 215

The message from Ebadi and Mustafa seems clear—we will work for change from within. We must respect their message, support them as appropriate, and pray for our sisters in Iran that "dignity" for women will soon include full human rights.

Maureen Shea is Director of Government Relations for the Episcopal Church. She traveled to Iran February 19–25, 2007 with an ecumenical delegation organized by the American Friends Service Committee and Mennonite Central Committee. An earlier version of this article appeared in the May 2007 Episcopal Diocesan newspaper, Washington Window, page 11. See it at edow.org/news/window/print/index.html

Christians Talking with Iranians: An American Muslim's Perspective

by Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen

In September 2006, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was asked to arrange for a meeting between the Iranian president and some American religious leaders. In February 2007, MCC helped to lead a delegation of American religious leaders to return the visit to President Ahmadinejad in Iran. Such meetings are controversial, both in the United States and in Iran.

American opponents of such meetings argue that they provide a kind of Christian religious legitimization for a regime that has been repeatedly condemned by the US government for support of terrorism abroad and violations of the human rights of those it governs. It is also argued that Americans who participate in such meetings are allowing themselves to be used for propaganda value by the Iranian government. Some might also think that policy toward Iran is most effective if backed by military threats, and the resolve to carry out such threats is weakened when American religious leaders express a desire to talk things over.

Iranian opponents of the meetings complain that there can be no meaningful dialogue with those who do not publicly denounce the anti-Islamic statements made by some Christian leaders and the policies of the US government directed against Iran. Some think that the Christians who participate in such delegations are only trying to use the false image of Iran to their own benefit, to display their own willingness to talk to "the enemy" without challenging the manner in which Iran is portrayed. Some might also think that national unity in Iran is best served by recognizing American enmity, and talking with American religious leaders undermines that clear recognition in the Iranian populace.

On both sides, opposition to dialogue is based on three claims: (1) the allegation that dialogue is not right without beginning with a condemnation of x, y, or z, and is not right with those who do not renounce x, y, or z; (2) the claim that dialogue has propaganda value for the other side; and (3) the idea that dialogue weakens the resolve to stand firm against the other side.

To the contrary, I would argue that such meetings can be beneficial, and that the objections raised are irrelevant or mistaken. First, dialogue can take place without any question of either party providing any sort of legitimization for the views of the other side or the policies of the governments or religious organizations of the other side. Dialogue cannot take place in a fruitful way if made conditional on the condemnation of positions and policies that are a matter of dispute. Second, I would hope that both sides would get some public recognition and approval for engaging in dialogue; but unfortunately, the propaganda value for all concerned is rather equivocal. Third, when we engage in dialogue, there is no need to compromise our disapproval of unjust policies or unfair statements of those with whom we enter into conversation or of their political or religious leaders; and no such compromise was perceived on the part of the Iranians or Americans who met through the MCC-sponsored visits. On the other hand, I believe that dialogue can and should undermine efforts to demonize our dialogue partners, and that dialogue should encourage others to seek peaceful resolutions to issues of controversy.

So much for the critics. What then of the benefits? I would promote the idea that dialogue is beneficial both for Americans and Iranians, provided there is a sincere desire on both sides to be honest and to seek truth. First, misjudgments are often made regarding others because of a lack of understanding. To a certain extent, lack of understanding can be overcome by research. However, some understanding only can be gained by engaging in the give and take of dialogue on a personal basis. Through personal conversations one comes to gain an appreciation of the sensibilities of those with whom one engages. So, dialogue between Iranian officials and American religious leaders can help dispel American misunderstandings about how people in the Iranian government look at things, and Iranian misunderstandings of how religious people in America see the world.

Second, these sorts of meetings can serve as an entry for further and deeper conversations. For example, delegation members and Iranian officials would be able to suggest and provide

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introductions to institutions of higher education that might be able to cooperate on the development of programs of Iranian or Islamic studies or Peace studies and religious studies. As another example, dialogue partners might find issues of common concern, e.g., the environment, about which the means for further cooperation could be sought. Third, through the deeper conversations and opportunities found for cooperation at the level of people-to-people communication, the political will might be fostered in our societies to seek to change United States government policies that Iranians find objectionable and Iranian government policies that Americans find objectionable.

Fourth, both sides might also discover with whom cooperation is not beneficial, and how to discern opportunities for fruitful cooperation from prospects of wasted effort. Fifth, through dialogue a shared understanding is made possible through which moral reflection with others can be conducted. Sixth, when dialogue is strengthened and matures, it is possible to get past posturing and stereotyping that interfere with the efficient pursuit of religious aims as well as other aims, commercial, educational, cultural, etc.

Seventh, by opening the way to broader people-to-people cooperation, dialogue can help each side to find elements of priceless value in the other that can inspire efforts to improve ourselves. Theologically, I believe that God enables us to encounter others in which we may find signs to lead us toward Him, as we are led to truth through dialogue.

Needless to say, the benefits sketched are highly idealistic. I certainly do not mean to claim that meetings that have taken place have come close to achieving them. The obstacles to such achievement are enormous. Still, such ideals may serve a regulative function. As a committed Muslim with a profound sense of gratitude for the friendship and good will I have found among Mennonites by His favor, I am also convinced that it is religiously incumbent on both Christians and Muslims to work at dialogue for the sake of achieving peace through understanding, and for keeping the course God has set for us.

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