



RED TAPE

The Iranian Quest for U.S. Education

IRON NERVE



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Red Tape, Iron Nerve

The Iranian Quest for U.S. Education



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An accompanying infographic is available for download at

<http://washin.st/1cgoFEj>.

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Introduction

THE UNITED STATES IS THE global hub for higher education. More than 800,000 international students study at American universities¹—one fifth of the estimated 3.6 million worldwide who pursue education outside their home countries.² Popularized following World War II, international education plays a central role in advancing American economic and political interests. Economically, not only do international students contribute more than \$24 billion annually to the U.S. economy through payment of tuition and living expenses, but skilled international graduates also fill employment gaps in the critical science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.³ Moreover, those graduates who return home are a diplomatic commodity: the best and brightest of their respective countries, they are equipped with the academic skills and mindsets, familiarity with American customs and values, and professional networks to serve as agents for development, dialogue, and reform. As one recent study noted, American higher education is the “best export”:

Higher education is the best export, not only because it is profitable and meets labor market and growth needs. Higher education also fulfills a diplomatic and cultural mission like no other form of trade. It diffuses the best of the U.S.’s values across the world, strengthens the U.S.’s image and international position, and creates personal relationships which are ever so important in stabilizing the world’s global order.⁴

America’s international student body cannot be understood through sheer numbers alone. Although almost half of these students come from developing powerhouses like China (235,000), India (96,000), and South Korea (70,000), among them are 8,744 students from Iran—the fifteenth

country on the list.⁵ While Iranians constitute only about 1 percent of international students on American campuses, these students hold several notable distinctions:

- According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), more than 80 percent study at the graduate level, the highest percentage of any country.⁶
- More than 75 percent are enrolled in STEM fields—likewise the highest percentage among the top twenty countries that send students to America.⁷
- Fifty-six percent study engineering, dwarfing the next country, India, at 36 percent.⁸
- According to the National Science Foundation (NSF), a U.S. government agency that conducts an annual survey of doctoral recipients in STEM subjects and the social sciences, in surveys from 2005 to 2011, on average 89 percent of Iranian students indicated a *preference* to stay in the United States after graduation (employment permitting). Known in educational and labor economics as the “stay rate,” Iran’s proportion is also higher than that for any other country.⁹

While these statistics demonstrate that Iranian students are highly motivated, study in critical fields, and are broadly oriented toward and wish to contribute to America, they likewise only tell a part of the story. In fact, Iranian students first came to the United States almost a century ago, and for nearly a decade in the 1970s and 1980s were the largest group of international students—holding the number one spot from 1975 to 1983, peaking at 56,000 students in 1980.¹⁰ However, history had its own plans: the political, social, and financial repercussions of the 1979 Islamic Revolution slowly diminished their numbers, which reached their lowest point in 1999 at just 1,660 students.¹¹

Although their academic achievements and history are notable, Iranian students today can only be understood through the lens of politics. Since the contested summer 2009 presidential elections and subsequent unrest, Iranian enrollment at American universities has more than doubled from 3,500 students to the present figure of 8,000+, the largest exponential increase in more than thirty years. In 2012–2013 alone, there was a 25 percent increase in students over the previous academic year, one of the

highest annual increases in student enrollment from any country.¹² These trends also mirror skyrocketing enrollment at universities in Malaysia and India, where today Iranians constitute the largest group of foreign students.¹³ These statistics demonstrate what can readily be observed: young Iranians increasingly seek international education as their sole means to experience the broader world, pursue economic opportunity, and escape social and political repression in Iran.

Cognizant of this fact, the U.S. Department of State—concurrent with a mandate to promote democracy and human rights through “transformational diplomacy”—has sought, since the mid-2000s, to engage Iranian students and promote American university education. In 2007, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) created the EducationUSA Iran program, which provides a dedicated Persian-language website and a Persian-speaking academic advisor to guide Iranian students through the application process to American universities, along with providing help for scholarships and immigration.¹⁴ However, the most poignant example of this outreach occurred in May 2011 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed Iranian students directly in a video and announced their eligibility for multiple-entry visas—allowing easy departure from and return to the United States for holidays, academic conferences, and family emergencies—despite a lack of bilateral “reciprocity.” She explained:

I want you to know that we are listening to your concerns. We want more dialogue and more exchange with those of you who are shaping Iran’s future. We want to be able to share what we think is great about America. Because as long as the Iranian government continues to stifle your potential, we will stand with you. We will support your aspirations, and your rights. And we will continue to look for new ways to fuel more opportunities for real change in Iran.¹⁵

The message has been clear: democracy, human rights, and student exchange are intimately linked. Despite these outreach efforts, however, Iranian students continue to face severe limits on their global mobility and are confronted with significant financial, logistical, and consular challenges on the path to an American education. These challenges are so acute that they can, in fact, end educational aspirations prematurely. Furthermore, they often create physical and emotional hardships for the broad swaths of Iranian students who do manage to study in the United States, jeopardizing the public diplomacy mandate aimed at reaching them.

- **FINANCIAL** In addition to traditional monetary constraints, sanctions on the Iranian government, dating back to the 1980s, have limited student access to international banking services and credit cards. Routine activities like paying university application and testing fees, sending transcripts, and receiving funds from family members have become expensive, cumbersome, and sometimes even illegal affairs. Moreover, once Iranian students are in the United States, currency fluctuations and devaluation can affect their ability to pay tuition, ending academic programs mid-process. On average, Iranian students report spending \$3,000 to \$5,000 on study-related expenditures before even traveling to the United States—the equivalent of roughly five to seven months of income for an average urban family.
- **LOGISTICAL** A lack of international business infrastructure in Iran, along with the absence of an American diplomatic presence, can result in costly trips abroad for standardized testing and student visa interviews. Moreover, for men who have not served, and are not exempt from Iran’s compulsory military service, the Iranian government demands a “guarantee” in order to exit the country—in the form of a \$12,000 (150-million-rial) cash security deposit or even deeds to property—to ensure return home after completion of academic programs.
- **CONSULAR** Despite the 2011 decision to issue multiple-entry visas, surveys of Iranian students indicate that this directive is unevenly applied by regional U.S. embassies and consulates, and subject to broad inconsistencies—resulting, according to these surveys, in nearly 75 percent of visas issued still being single-entry. Although these surveys likewise document the effects of this policy on student well-being, the words of one Iranian student sum up the prevailing sentiment: “[A single-entry visa] practically imprisons the person inside the U.S....causing lots of personal and emotional problems.”¹⁶

The pervasiveness of these challenges led one student—now pursuing a PhD in the United States—to claim that Iranian students must be equipped with “shoes and nerves of iron” in order to study in America. He elaborated:

I remember when I wanted to start the application process, my friend who was in [the] USA at the time told me that you have to get shoes and nerve[s] made of iron to start this process. Once I started the process, I realized what he meant!¹⁷

A profile of Iranian students has never been created—limiting the ability of policymakers and university administrators to fully grasp the breadth of these obstacles, provide understanding and help, and craft meaningful solutions. While not all their challenges can be solved, there do exist limited solutions—with little financial or political cost—that can be taken to *ease* them. The bottom line is that easing the stresses faced by Iranian students not only advances their right to global mobility—permitting them to travel and study with ease and in safety—it also inculcates significant goodwill in the Iranian people toward the United States, paying dividends in the long run.

Moreover, a study of Iranian students affords the U.S. government an opportunity to revitalize its public diplomacy mandate with the Iranian people. As will be explored, a new presidential administration in Iran presents the ideal opportunity for the U.S. government to reaffirm its commitment to the rights and aspirations of ordinary Iranians, as well as to acknowledge the central role that international students can play within outreach efforts. And, concurrent with recent political developments between the United States and Iran, such an acknowledgment has been forthcoming. The Joint Plan of Action—the November 2013 nuclear negotiations framework concluded between the P5+1 and Iran¹⁸ guarantees the establishment of a “financial channel to facilitate humanitarian trade,” including “direct tuition payments to universities and colleges for Iranian students studying abroad” if the Iranian government fulfills pledges to demonstrate the peaceful intent of its nuclear program.¹⁹ Public details of this measure indicate that \$400 million in previously frozen Iranian assets can be transferred to universities in any country where Iranians are studying, in order to defray tuition expenses.²⁰ Building on this positive momentum in the nuclear deal, and concurrent with broader political developments, the time is ripe to better understand students from Iran, their challenges, and the opportunities to assist them, and revitalize public diplomacy outreach to them.

To these ends, this paper—based on extensive research of open-source and historical material, personal interviews, and surveys—will present an in-depth profile of Iranian students in the United States; explain their challenges; and highlight limited avenues for reform and diplomatic reengagement.

Chapter 2 provides a background of Iranian students in the United States, including the history of U.S.-Iran educational exchange, current

demographics, public diplomacy efforts, stakeholders, and the responses of the Iranian government and society.

Chapter 3 details the financial, logistical, and consular hardships Iranian students encounter within the Iran–U.S. student pipeline, both before and during their studies in the United States, along with recommendations for remediation.

Chapter 4 summarizes this study, offering realistic steps on ways in which the U.S. government can proactively provide assistance to Iranian students.

Notes

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14. See www.EducationUSAIran.com.
15. U.S. Department of State, “Changes to Iranian Student Visa Validity,” May 20, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/05/164001.htm>.
16. This quotation, and others in this paper, was obtained through an anonymous survey sent by the author.
17. *Ibid.*
18. The P5+1 comprises the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China—plus Germany.
19. For the complete text of the November 24, 2013, Joint Plan of Action, see <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/IranP5plus1jointplanofaction131124en.pdf>.
20. As of press time, details concerning this financial channel and tuition assistance to Iranian students outside Iran remain largely unknown. For instance, what mechanism will be used to select the students to whom the tuition assistance can be directed? Moreover, the overall intent of this measure remains opaque: is it a formal public diplomacy initiative or merely a humanitarian allowance localized to the nuclear agreement? For more details, see “Testimony of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs,” December 12, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2243.aspx> and “Briefing on Iran and Implementation of the Joint Plan of Action,” January 20, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/220058.htm>.

2

Background:

Iranian Students in America

ALTHOUGH IDEALLY THE RIGHT TO higher education and the acquisition of knowledge transcends the constraints of politics and governments, political will has played a central role in Iranian student mobility. An overview of the related history, demographics, public diplomacy initiatives, stakeholders, and Iranian government and society responses will help demonstrate this reality—as well as the aspirations of Iranian students.

History

Student exchange between Iran and the West began almost two hundred years ago. Throughout the nineteenth century, students from Iran studied at European universities, and they began coming to the United States almost a century ago.¹ A 1924 record of foreign students lists twenty-two Iranians enrolled at American universities.² Following World War II—owing to Iran’s economic development efforts and political cooperation with the United States—educational exchange took on diplomatic significance. In 1949, a bilateral entity, the United States Commission for Cultural Exchange between Iran and the United States, was created to “promote further mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States of America and Iran by a wider exchange of knowledge and professional talents through educational contacts.”³ It also allocated federal funds for Iranian and American students and scholars to undertake study, teaching, and research exchanges. By 1975, multiple factors—including a cooperative political atmosphere, increased Iranian state funding for higher education, and burgeoning output of first-generation high school graduates in Iran—made Iranians the largest group of foreign students in the United States, a distinction they held until 1983. During the peak academic year 1979–1980, 56,694 Iranian students studied in the United

States—three times more than the number from Taiwan, the next largest—and more than thirty American universities had student and scholarly exchange agreements with Iranian counterparts.⁴

Global Footprint and Demographics

The 8,700 Iranian students in the United States today represent almost one fifth of the estimated 50,000 Iranians in total who study outside the country.⁵ The top destination is Malaysia, where about 12,000 Iranians study, a significant increase from the only 100 students the United Nations estimates to have been in the country in 2000. Next is the United States, followed by the United Kingdom (3,500), Germany (3,000), India (3,000), Sweden (2,700), Canada (2,300), and Australia (2,000).⁶

However, firm demographic data on international students is difficult to determine, and statistical anomalies are rampant. Although rudimentary data on international students in the United States is collected and reported annually by the Institute of International Education (IIE)—through the *Open Doors* publication funded by the Department of State—robust statistics, including gender reporting, are not publicly available (see figure 1).⁷ To put this anomaly in perspective, relying on voluntary reporting by university admissions offices, *Open Doors* estimated in 1980 that 51,000 Iranian students were in the United States. However, upon a com-

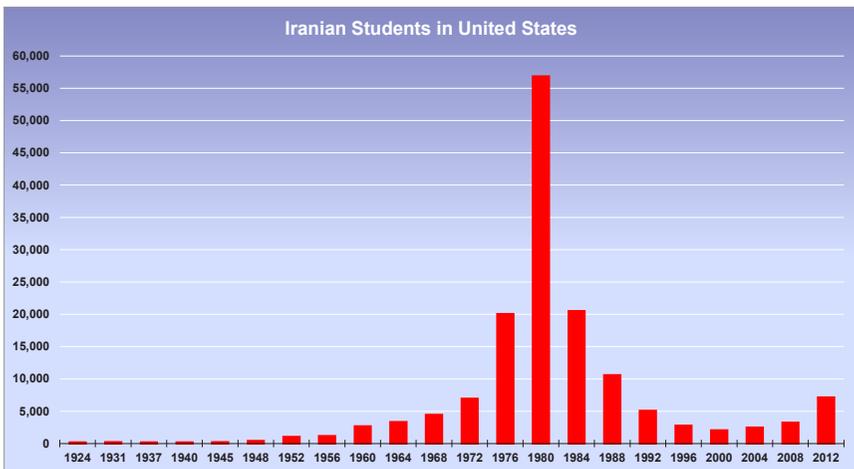


FIG. 1 Iranian students in the United States, 1924–2012.

plete check by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) following the Islamic Revolution, more than 56,000 total students were accounted for.⁸ Similar indications—based in part on public annual visa statistics—suggest that today’s true number of Iranian students in the United States could be higher by several thousand than the published figures.

The data below reflect an attempt to piece together the current demographics of Iranian students in the United States and have been synthesized from a variety of sources. They should be taken as approximate, rather than exact, figures.

- **LEVEL OF STUDY** 82 percent of Iranian students study at the graduate level, the highest proportion of any country sending students to the United States. The majority are enrolled in doctoral programs.⁹
- **FIELDS OF STUDY** 75 percent study STEM subjects, the highest percentage from the top 20 countries sending students to the United States. Fifty-six percent study engineering (compared to the next country, India, at 36 percent). Only 4 percent study business, the lowest rate among the top student-sending countries. A combined 6 percent study the humanities and social sciences.¹⁰
- **WOMEN** One third are estimated to be women, for whom the most popular degree fields are health science (19 percent), physical sciences (17 percent), math and computer science (13 percent), engineering (12 percent), and business (8 percent). Humanities account for only 3 percent of female enrollment.¹¹
- **FUNDING** 55 percent receive full tuition funding through scholarships, grants, or teaching assistantships; 18 percent have partial funding; and 27 percent pay for their education through personal funds alone.¹² At the STEM PhD level, upwards of 85 percent receive full funding.¹³
- **STAY RATE** According to the National Science Foundation (NSF), a U.S. government agency that conducts an annual survey of doctoral recipients in the STEM fields, in surveys from 2005 to 2011, on average 89 percent of Iranian students indicated a *preference* to stay in the United States after graduation (employment permitting).¹⁴ Known in educational and labor economics as the “stay rate,” this percentage is higher than that for any other country. Only 55 percent on average indicate they have “firm plans” (i.e., job offers) allowing them to stay, however.¹⁵

- **MILITARY SERVICE** 70 percent of men have not performed compulsory military service (34 percent have been exempted, while 36 percent have deferred due to university studies and must fulfill the requirement if they return to Iran). Of the remaining 30 percent who have served in the military, 12 percent served in the army (*Artesh*), 5 percent in the police force (NAJA), 5 percent in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah*), 2 percent in the Ministry of Defense (*Vizarat-e Defa*), and 6 percent in miscellaneous other service options.¹⁶
- **WORK EXPERIENCE** 43 percent have no prior work experience. Those who do have overwhelmingly worked in the private sector and, to a lesser degree, academia. Approximately 3 percent have been employed by the Iranian government.¹⁷
- **MARITAL STATUS** 28 percent are married.¹⁸
- **U.S. CONNECTION** 32 percent have at least one relative in the United States.¹⁹

U.S. Engagement

The U.S. government push to engage Iranian students began in the mid-2000s when the Department of State, led by Secretary Condoleezza Rice, undertook the Global Diplomatic Repositioning initiative to increase funding and manpower for critical countries and regions. This initiative was created concurrently with President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda," which promoted the use of "transformational diplomacy" to engender democracy and human rights in the developing world.

In February 2006, Rice requested a \$75 million budget supplement for human rights initiatives, democracy promotion, and public diplomacy outreach vis-à-vis Iran, \$5 million of which was earmarked for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), responsible for student and cultural exchange programs.²⁰ This mandate to engage the Iranian people was further enshrined into law when, in September 2006, Congress passed the Iran Freedom Support Act, which authorized the president to provide "financial and political assistance...to foreign and domestic individuals, organizations, and entities that support democracy and the promotion of democracy in Iran."²¹

Pursuant to these initiatives, in August 2007, ECA, in cooperation with the nonprofit organization AMIDEAST, created the EducationUSA Iran program, now administered by IIE. EducationUSA programs—

which provide local advising centers, Web resources, and dedicated students advisors to help navigate the university application and American immigration processes—had existed for a variety of countries. However, outreach to Iran was considered unique. A Persian-language website (EducationUSAIran.com) was established to provide podcasts and information guides, along with the hiring of a dedicated, Persian-speaking academic advisor.

Despite this outreach, however, Iranian students began to voice dissatisfaction with their circumstances. Following a campaign created by an Iranian PhD engineering student, and aided by Iranian-American advocacy groups, a high-level decision was made within the Obama administration in May 2011 to extend multiple-entry visas to Iranian students, despite a lack of diplomatic “reciprocity.” Addressing Iranian students directly in a video, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton elaborated on the rationale for this change:

I want you to know that we are listening to your concerns. We want more dialogue and more exchange with those of you who are shaping Iran’s future. We want to be able to share what we think is great about America. Because as long as the Iranian government continues to stifle your potential, we will stand with you. We will support your aspirations, and your rights. And we will continue to look for new ways to fuel more opportunities for real change in Iran.²²

Following this announcement, the State Department released a second statement, reiterating these rationales:

As President Obama noted in his Nowruz (Iranian New Year) statement, on March 20, 2011, Iran’s young people carry with them the power to create a country that is responsive to their aspirations. He pledged U.S. support for Iran’s young people, and this is an example of that support. Making these adjustments to our visa policy reaffirms the President’s pledge and will help build new avenues for engagement with Iran’s youth, facilitate their ability to study in the United States, and allow Iran’s young people to better interact with the rest of the world.²³

Concurrent with these outreach efforts, the U.S. Congress was also increasing sanctions pressure on the Iranian government. The Iranian Transactions Regulations (ITR) were inceptioned by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 1987, in response to Executive Order 12613 by President Reagan, which limited

Iranian imports due to government support for terrorism. Due to growing sanctions legislation and regulations, OFAC promulgated the Iran Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR) in 2010, which enumerate and interpret the limits of economic engagement with Iran. However, given this broad mandate to support democracy efforts, ITSR regulations specifically exempt the funding of educational and cultural exchange programs, as well as scholarships aimed at reaching Iranian students. American educational testing companies are similarly exempt from sanctions—allowing them to continue operating inside Iran, accept payment for testing services, and employ local staff.²⁴

Stakeholders

Beyond the U.S. government, numerous stakeholders have sought to engage and aid Iranian students. In 2011, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), an Iranian-American advocacy group, played a key role in effecting the change to a multiple-entry visa policy.²⁵ Furthermore, in 2012, NIAC successfully lobbied to have vague language removed from a draft of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act, which would have prevented *all* Iranian engineering students from obtaining student visas. (The final bill, the only congressional legislation to date to limit the physical movement of Iranian students into the United States, only limits those seeking to pursue studies in energy-related fields or nuclear science.)²⁶ Moreover, in February 2013, the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), another advocacy group, conducted a survey detailing the financial hardship faced by Iranian students in the United States.²⁷ PAAIA subsequently raised \$50,000, which was matched by IIE, which in turn established a \$100,000 “emergency student fund” for disadvantaged Iranian students.²⁸

Besides special interests, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), over the past decade, has increasingly engaged in dual-track diplomacy with Iranian scientists and advocated immigration reform, both with visa issuance and U.S.-based employment of skilled international graduates.²⁹ NAS advocacy highlights a disparity that exists in consular policy—which mandates, for issuance of a visa, that international students demonstrate “intent” to return to their home countries after studies in the United States—and the reality that U.S. education is an important pipeline for American employment and helps guarantee American economic inter-

ests and spur innovation, especially in the high-tech, engineering, and scientific fields. Currently, there exists no streamlined process for highly skilled international graduates to transition from a student visa (F-1) to an employment visa (H-1). The transition of international graduates to employment in American companies remains a key point of contention in immigration reform—in part complicated by diplomatic considerations, in which countries must be assured that international study is not an automatic path to immigration, and subsequent brain drain.

However, the primary stakeholders in Iranian student success are Iranian students themselves. And because Iranian students maintain one of the most vibrant online student communities for support and guidance, alumni networks, academic contacts with universities, and personal relationships among fellow American-educated graduates can serve as a critical part of public diplomacy “follow-up” with international students, and help reinforce shared experiences and values learned while in the United States. Through ApplyAbroad.org and AcademiaCafe.com, prospective students seeking to study in the United States as well as those who have already done so can trade advice and information (see figure 2). The ApplyAbroad forum, specifically, has more than 130,000 registered members, and serves as a robust information resource and student community. Not only does it have a wiki to guide students through every step of the university application and consular processes, but many students have also developed Persian- and English-language “admissions guides” to help others in need (see figure 3).

#1 July 24th, 2013 08:10 AM

In person meetings with USA graduates/students

سلام بر همگی
از کاربر های قدیمی این فروم هستیم و کم و بیش با خودم یا ای دک من آشنا هستید. از دانشگاه جورجیا تک در رشته مکانیک/نانو تک اخیرا فارغ التحصیل شدم در 5 سال اخیر سوال های زیادی از من بطور پیغام های خصوصی انجام شده اما بمنظور پاسخ بهتر و کامل تر در برنامه های سفرم به ایران دیدار با دانشجویان و دوستانی هست که این قبیل سوالات از قبیل پذیرش/فاند/ زندگی در آمریکا/ رزومه/گراین کارد و هر چیزی که اغلب مورد بحث هست را دارند.....
من بعد فتر 92 میام ایران اما به شهر خودم اصفهان میرم.....حتما دیدار هایی با دانشجویان/دوستان قبلی خودم تا مدتی که در ایران هستم را خواهم داشت..اگر شما هم مایل هستید خوشحال میشم ببینتون و سوالاتون رو در حد اطلاعاتم و تجریم جواب بدم...
در صورتی که سفر به اصفهان برای شما میسر نبود یا هماهنگی که انجام میدیم من تهران هم خواهیم آمد.
تاریخ ها و زمان های این دیدار ها رو زیر همین پست و در Facebook خبر میدم ... لطفا اگه مایل هستید بهم خبر بدید (زیر این پست) و یک نفر به نمایندگی شما واسه دیداری که در تهران خواهد بود نیاز هست یا من هماهنگ کنه.....

Looking forward to seeing you in person in the Land of Persia

Countdown
ApplyAbroad Superstar
★★★★★
تاریخ عضویت: Apr 2008
رشته و دانشگاه: Mechanical- Georgia Inst. of Technology
ارسالها: 2,275

FIG. 2 This message board thread from ApplyAbroad.org was designed to organize meetings in Tehran and Isfahan for Iranians who graduated from American universities.

Students update each other about their admissions status and, once admitted to an American university, can connect to others who will be attending the same schools, meet in Iran, and even coordinate housing together.

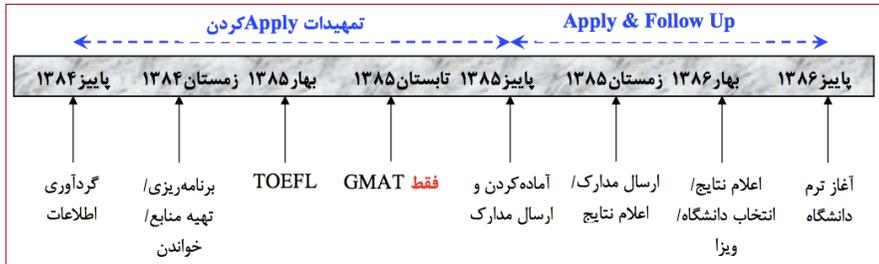


FIG. 3 Screenshot from an “application guide” developed by an Iranian business student, detailing an admissions time line. Advice about testing, admissions, and visas are routinely traded among students online.

Moreover, an Iranian student—Ali Moslemi, then a PhD candidate in mechanical engineering at Southern Methodist University—launched the initiative for multiple-entry visas.³⁰ In December 2009, a semester prior to his graduation—and anticipating immediate employment in the United States afterward—Moslemi returned to Iran to visit his family, whom he had not seen for the duration of his studies. However, his single-entry visa obligated him to reapply for a new one at the American consulate in Dubai, a process he assumed would be quick and without incident, given his status as a current student. As it turned out, his visa renewal would eventually take nine months, costing him a valuable spring teaching assistantship. It was only upon intervention from his professors and Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) that Ali was granted his new visa, and returned to the United States to finish his studies. Soon thereafter, Ali created the “MEVisa” (Multiple-Entry Visa) initiative, which included an influential survey of the problems Iranian students faced and collected stories of those who had likewise suffered because of single-entry visa policies. His case was eventually raised in Washington, resulting in the 2011 decision to extend multiple-entry visas to Iranian students. Today, Moslemi is married and employed by a Texas oil company, and he is president of the Iranian Students and Graduates Association (ISGA).

As Moslemi's story demonstrates, Iranian students are the primary stakeholders in their own success, both significantly invested in their education and in furthering their future outside Iran.

Iranian Government and Society Responses

The reaction of the Iranian government to international education has been mixed. Officially, due to a lack of high-quality domestic educational infrastructure, and the threat of brain drain, students have been provided tacit support in the hopes that they will return to Iran and contribute to national development. In January 2013, in his annual address to the Union of Islamic Students Associations in Europe” (*Ettehadīyeh-e Anjomanha-ye Islami-ye Daneshjuyan dar Orupa*), an Iranian student organization established before 1979, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei praised students abroad as part of the “great nation” and urged them to be prepared for their “future responsibility in Iran.”³¹ As part of this official sanction for international education, the Iranian government until 2012 even guaranteed special U.S. dollar exchange rates for students, a policy since discontinued owing to the economic difficulties posed by increased sanctions.

Unofficially, however, the government has evinced growing resentment over the exit of talent from the country, and policy implementation has been one of containment, if not outright hostility. Mirroring this contentious relationship with Western education, in his 2001 address to the Union of Islamic Students Associations—which took place four days after the September 11 terrorist attacks—Khamenei cautioned that students in Western countries should “not let the environment influence your faith and morality” and claimed that moral degeneration “threatens the future” of the West.³² Khamenei has even gone so far as to appoint a “clerical representative” charged with moral and cultural outreach to Iranian students abroad.³³ Likewise, Iranian parliamentarians in recent years have voiced a desire to pass measures that would nullify degrees from Malaysia and the UK. On top of this, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology—which employs a “head of affairs for scholarships and students abroad” (*modirkol-e umur-e burs va daneshjuyan-e kharij*)—in 2011 banned Iranian students from authoring theses or dissertations with “Iran” in the title.³⁴

Despite threats to nullify degrees, the Iranian government has taken practical measures to solidify connections with Iranian students abroad. For instance, international students have been urged to submit their theses

and dissertations to IRANDOC, an online depository for scientific literature. Likewise, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology briefly attempted in 2011 to establish a social networking website for students abroad, which has since been shut down.³⁵ The ministry has also used “scientific counselors” at embassies in Australia, Belarus, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, Russia, Ukraine, and the UK to establish scientific conferences solely for Iranian students abroad, and to foster connections to domestic scientific communities. It is estimated that approximately 3 percent of Iranian students abroad are funded by Iranian government scholarships, and it was only in 2005 that the ministry opted to allow scholarship recipients to study in the United States, Canada, and the UK.³⁶

However, there remains no official system for the Iranian government to regulate, or even track, Iranian students abroad. In fact, Hassan Moslemi-Naeini, who heads the department tasked with monitoring foreign students for the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, has openly admitted that the Iranian government does not know how many students return from their foreign studies.³⁷ Moslemi-Naeini has also stated that one of the motivations for supporting Iranians abroad is that if they do not receive such support or are “treated badly,” they will become more inclined toward “Bahatism and Wahhabism, and their connection to intelligence agencies.”³⁸

On the social level, support for international education appears high. According to the International Monetary Fund, more than 150,000 educated Iranians leave the country annually in search of better opportunities.³⁹ Therefore, the prospect of livelihood outside Iran, including education, has broad social support. A BBC report from 2007, which included interviews of students in an English-language class, for instance, not only accurately conveys how many Iranian youths feel but also highlights the strong economic—not only social or political—motives for pursuing education abroad:

“Today we are going to talk about jobs,” says the English language teacher to his class in Tehran. And it’s better jobs they’re all after. They’re preparing for what’s known as the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam—a requirement for emigration to many countries like Canada and Australia. Everyone in the class wants to go abroad. “The main point for going out of Iran is we have no job security here and there is economic tension,” says 32-year-old travel agent Nazaneen.⁴⁰

Brain drain has likewise played a prominent role in social discourse vis-à-vis Iranian students abroad. In 2012, to much publicity, the reformist *Sharq* newspaper reported that of the 225 Iranian students who participated in “World Olympiads” from 1993 to 2007, more than half were currently studying at American or Canadian universities, with some even employed by Google and Microsoft (see Figure 4).⁴¹

Likewise, in social media, the issue of international education briefly rose to prominence in 2010, when a Facebook user posted a 2001 newspaper article about those students who scored highest on the national university entrance exam from that year (see figure 5).⁴² The user found that the top three performers in both mathematics/engineering and science were studying in the United States. The top-ranking student in the humanities, moreover, had studied at Oxford but was detained following the summer 2009 presidential elections and sentenced to a term in Evin Prison. The fact that the highest-ranking students were either studying in the United States or had been imprisoned by the Iranian government fueled much commentary in Iranian social media about the state of the country.

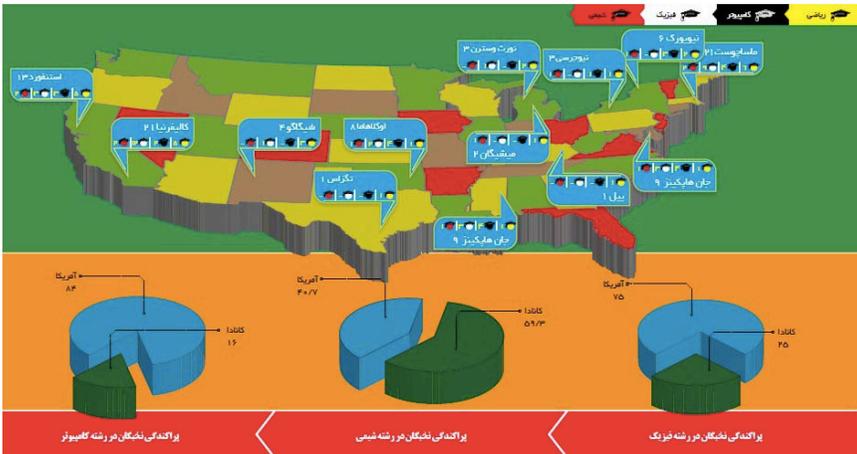


FIG. 4 This illustration, published by *Sharq* newspaper, shows the U.S.-based Iranian Olympiad winners in mathematics (yellow), computer science (black), physics (white), and chemistry (red).



FIG. 5 This 2001 graphic, likely from the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, is titled “The Leaders of the National Entrance Exam.” The best-scoring students in mathematics and engineering were Neda Nategh (top, far right), now at Stanford; Ashkan Borna (top, second from right), University of California, Berkeley; and Ehsan Shafii pour Fard (top, third from right), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In science, the top students were Mohammad Falahi Sichani (top, third from left), a PhD graduate from the University of Michigan and now a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard; Mohammad Amin Khalifeh Soltani (second from left), a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Francisco; and Peyman Habibollahi (top, far left), Harvard. Mohammad Reza Jalaeipour (bottom, far right), the top student in humanities, studied the “sociology of religion” at Oxford and has been arrested multiple times since 2009.

Notes

1. Mohammad Farhad Atai, “Sending of Iranian Students to Europe, 1811–1906,” PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1992.
2. Institute of International Education, “Education for One World,” 1950, pp. 46–47.
3. United States and Charles I. Bevans, *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776–1949* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1968), vol. 8: 1306–1309.
4. *An Analysis of U.S.-Iranian Cooperation in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1976), 134. For enrollment figures, see note 24 and associated text.
5. No precise statistics are available on the numbers of Iranian students outside Iran; the number here has been synthesized from a variety of sources. According to an estimate from the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, this number has reached 80,000, but the reliability of this estimate is possibly suspect.

6. These numbers have been synthesized from a variety of sources, including the United Nations and the Institute of International Education (IIE), and are approximate. See UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, "Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students," <http://www.uis.unesco.org/EDUCATION/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>. See also Institute of International Education, "Project Atlas," <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Project-Atlas.aspx>.
7. Data sources: Institute of International Education, "Education for One World, 1949–54" and "Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange, 1955–2012"; Near East College Association, "Register of Near Eastern Students Studying in the United States," 1946.
8. U.S. House of Representatives, *U.S. Immigration Policy regarding Iranian Nationals: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 96th Congress, 2nd Session, April 17, 1980 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 4.
9. Institute of International Education, "Open Doors 2012: Report on International Educational Exchange," p. 51. This is in contrast to the peak of Iranian student enrollment in 1979–1980, where these numbers were reversed and the vast majority of students were undergraduates, owing to Iran's then nascent state of development.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. The number of Iranian women studying in the United States is based on data from The Institute of International Education, "Profiles: The Foreign Student in the United States," 1990, p. 9. While information on fields of study is only available from 1990, the proportion of Iranian women in the 1990 *Profiles* data was confirmed in a 2010 survey of 1,100 Iranian students. See Iranian Students and Graduates Association, "Survey Report on the Multiple-Entry Visa Policy Implementation for Iranian Students and Scholars," http://www.suta.org/Resources/Documents/news/ISGA/ISGA_Survey_Report_2012.pdf.
12. These statistics were derived from an online survey of nearly five hundred Iranian students who applied for visas at the U.S. consulate in Dubai. The survey was conducted by an individual on the Iranian student portal ApplyAbroad.org in spring and summer 2013. See the results at <http://washin.st/1e4aMbQ>.
13. This statistic is the result of a "special tabulation" conducted by the National Science Foundation at the author's request.
14. National Science Foundation, "Doctorate Recipients with Temporary Visas Intending to Stay in the United States after Doctorate Receipt, by Country of Citizenship: 2005–11," <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/sed/2011/pdf/tab53.pdf>.
15. National Science Foundation, "Plans of Foreign Recipients of U.S. S&E Doctorates to Stay in the United States, by Field and Place of Origin: 1998–2009," <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind12/append/c3/at03-20.pdf>.
16. See note 9.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. U.S. Department of State, “Update on Iran Democracy Promotion Funding,” June 4, 2007, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/jun/85971.htm>.
21. *Iran Freedom Support Act*, Section 402, accessed from the Library of Congress, [http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp109:FLD010:@1\(hr417\)](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp109:FLD010:@1(hr417)).
22. U.S. Department of State, “Changes to Iranian Student Visa Validity,” May 20, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/05/164001.htm>.
23. U.S. Department of State, “Changes to Visa Validity for Iranian Student Applicants in F, J, and M Visa Categories,” http://iran.usembassy.gov/transcript_clinton_visa_validity.html.
24. “Iranian Transactions Regulations,” *Federal Register*, <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/10/22/2012-25770/iranian-transactions-regulations>. See Article 560.544: “Certain Educational Activities by U.S. Persons in Third Countries Authorized.” See also Article 560.545: “Democracy and Human Rights in Iran and Academic and Cultural Exchange Programs.”
25. National Iranian American Council, “Iranian Students in U.S. Organize to Turn Visa Nightmare into Dream Come True,” <http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7463>.
26. National Iranian American Council, “New Burdens for Iranian Students Seeking to Study in U.S.,” <http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8564>. See also Section 501 (“Exclusion of Citizens of Iran Seeking Education Relating to the Nuclear Energy Sectors of Iran”) of *H.R. 1905 (112th): Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012*, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr1905/text>. Note: This prohibition on Iranian students studying in energy-related fields has been interpreted by the US Dept. of State as justification for denying visas to petroleum engineers, above and beyond those studying nuclear-related sciences. The swift implementation of the congressional measure in 2012 meant that many petroleum engineering students who had been accepted to American universities were nonetheless denied visas to study. Official news of this consular change seems to have been provided solely to universities; it only reached Iranian students through the informal channel of social media, leading to confusion as to the ultimate source of the prohibition.
27. Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, “Iranian Students Facing Financial Distress in U.S.,” <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/iranian-students-facing-financial-distress-in-us.aspx>.
28. Institute of International Education, “IIE Opens Emergency Student Fund for Iranian Students Studying on U.S. Campuses,” <http://washin.st/1fvFoW4>.

29. Glenn E. Schweitzer, *U.S.-Iran Engagement in Science, Engineering, and Health (2000–2009): Opportunities, Constraints, and Impacts* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2010). On immigration reform, see *Policy Implications of International Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005); *Science and Security in a post 9/11 World* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007); *Is America Falling off the Flat Earth?* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007).
30. MEVisa, “True Story—Bureaucratic Torture for Obtaining a re-Entry Student Visa,” <http://www.mevisa.org/content/true-story-bureaucratic-torture-obtaining-re-entry-student-visa>.
31. Islamic Republic News Agency, “Supreme Leader Commends Iranian Youth Studying Abroad, Says They Are National Reserves,” January 14, 2013, <http://washin.st/1gNlbAB>.
32. Islamic Republic News Agency, “Iran: Leader Sends Message to Iranian Students Studying Abroad,” Tehran, in English 1541 GMT 15 Sep 01/BBC Monitoring.
33. For more information on Hojjat-ol-Islam Sayyed Abu Muhammad Mortazavi, head of the Secretariat of the Supreme Leader for Overseas Students (*Dabirkhanah-e Nahad-e Rahbari dar Umur-e Daneshjuyan Kharij az Kishvar*), see <http://www.nahadiran.ir>.
34. Mehr News Agency, “Ministry of Science Bans Students Abroad Doing Thesis on Iran,” Tehran, in Persian 0843 GMT 8 Mar 11/BBC Monitoring.
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37. “The Exit of \$200 Million by Iranian Students” (Persian), *Mashregh News*, June 6, 2012 (17 Khordad 1391), <http://washin.st/1lbYKqz>.
38. Islamic Union of Iranian Students in East Asia, “Director of the Ministry of Science: The Students in Malaysia Do Not Disappoint Us” (Persian), September 14, 2011 (23 Shahrivar 1390), <http://uiais.com/archive/430>.
39. “Iran in Numbers: How Cost of Living Has Soared under Sanctions,” BBC News, June 7, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22765716>.
40. “Huge Cost of Iranian Brain Drain,” BBC News, January 8, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6240287.stm.
41. “Iran Faced with Growing Brain Drain: Report,” *Payvand Iran News*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.payvand.com/news/12/may/1297.html>.
42. “What Happened to Iran’s Top Ranking University Students 9 Years Ago?” *Kodoom*, November 9, 2010, <http://washin.st/1aunAxj>.

3

Challenges in the Iran–U.S. Student Pipeline

THE CHALLENGES IRANIAN STUDENTS FACE on the path to an American education are incongruous with the U.S. public diplomacy rationales and outreach efforts aimed at reaching them. This section will discuss the financial, logistical, and consular problems Iranian students most frequently articulate, and highlight potential avenues for reform. The issues herein are routinely cited as grievances by broad segments of the Iranian student community. They represent the students' perceptions alone and are not necessarily reflective of official government policy or consular protocol.

While the hardships Iranian students face are important to understand and deserve attention, in many of these cases few tenable reform options exist, as they are the product of the political tension and economic fallout inherent in relations between the United States and Iran. However, even within this existing framework, limited and minimally invasive steps can be taken to ease the Iran–U.S. student pipeline and can collectively serve to lessen hardship, engender goodwill, and help fulfill the aspirations of the Iranian people and, in limited cases, even contribute to positive change within Iran. Some of these measures, to be elaborated, could include

- creation of an “international application fee waiver,” already in place for American students, to exempt disadvantaged international students from paying university application fees,
- reestablishment in Iran of the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), used for application to business schools worldwide,
- reevaluation by the State Department of Section 306 of the 2002 Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act (EBSVRA), which could allow, at a minimum, those students studying in nonscientific fields to be exempted from the requirement for in-person visa interviews

- creation of a standardized, cross-embassy F-1 visa policy for Iranian nationals that affirms the 2011 directive to issue multiple-entry visas as the default and clearly enumerates the conditions under which single-entry visa issuance is necessary, among associated rationales.

The story of Iranian students, moreover, often mirrors that of students seeking a U.S. education from across the developing world. Indeed, many of the challenges Iranian students face are encountered elsewhere, and the solutions outlined above can be applied to, and benefit, students from many countries. For instance, financial constraints and limited access to credit cards are common throughout the developing world. The lack of an American diplomatic presence will likewise impair the ability of a citizen from Syria or the Gaza Strip to easily obtain a U.S. visa. Highlighting the challenges encountered by Iranian students can therefore raise awareness about global student mobility as a whole. No such student group, however, compares with the Iranians in terms of their academic talent or level of priority for U.S. public diplomacy and national security. Yet these Iranian students continue to face significant obstacles.

Finally, it must be noted that the State Department does not regulate the number of international students who study in the United States. Addressing the challenges Iranian students face does not mean the U.S. government would have to increase the number of “visa slots” for qualified students. There is a free market, with international student enrollment only being regulated by individual universities and academic departments. However, many assume incorrectly that quotas do exist on international student enrollment, as illustrated in this passage on the State Department website:

Myth 1: The United States sets a quota on visas to limit the number of foreign students entering the country.

Reality: There is no limit to the number of student visas issued by U.S. embassies and consulates around the world. If you are a qualified student visa applicant who has gained admission to a U.S. institution, the State Department wants you to pursue that opportunity.¹

All in all, ample opportunity exists to ease the experience of Iranian students. A closer look at the challenges they face will elucidate possible remedies that can be taken to more fully uphold their right to study in the United States.

Financial

Financial difficulties pervade the Iranian student experience. Not only do Iranian students report spending on average \$3,000 to \$5,000 during the application process to American universities—roughly five to seven months of income for an urban family—but a February 2013 survey of more than a thousand Iranian students in America noted that more than 90 percent were negatively affected financially in 2012. According to this survey, conducted by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), more than 75 percent of students indicated they would take “any kind of financial help they could get,” while 10 percent were considering stopping their education and returning to Iran.²

Therefore, understanding the central role that finances play in the lives of Iranian students is important. And these challenges have coalesced in three specific issues: (1) credit card payments, (2) currency devaluation, and (3) bank transfers.

Since the 1980s, numerous executive orders and pieces of congressional legislation have sought to limit the Iranian government’s ability to conduct business outside Iran.³ Part and parcel of these sanctions packages have been measures to isolate Iran’s banking sector from the international marketplace. While ordinary Iranians have credit cards and can purchase domestic goods on the internet, Western banks will not process transactions originating from Iran, limiting the ability to purchase international goods and services. For Iranian students seeking to study in the United States, this constraint has an immediate impact by limiting their ability to pay application fees on university websites. Therefore, unless they have a friend or family member outside the country, Iranian students are forced to purchase foreign, prepaid debit cards through the underground economy—essentially, the black market. This not only implicates Iranian students in an illegal activity at the very beginning of their path to the United States, but it also creates significant financial hardship.

Over the past decade, both physical and internet-based businesses have emerged to cater to Iranians who need to make international purchases by offering “virtual debit cards” (see figure 6). Obtained by Iranian brokers in Gulf Arab states, debit card numbers are sold at 20 to 30 percent premiums. This means that, for an Iranian student, a \$1,000 prepaid card could cost \$1,300. Moreover, these cards must be obtained through official banks and registered with valid names and addresses. When used outside

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فروش این کارتها در قالب **تحويل فوری** (طی 2 ساعت الی یک روز کاری) و از نوع **پرواکارت** یا **مستتر کارت** (VisaCard, MasterCard) با قابلیت انتخاب توسط شما مابین کارت های **فایل شارژ**، **غیر فایل شارژ**، **مجازی**، **فیزیکی** می باشند.

در صورتی که مایل به پرداخت اینترنتی هستید ولی تمایل به خرید کارت اعتباری ندارید، یا تجربه کافی جهت انجام پرداخت آنلاین ندارید، میتوانید انجام پرداخت خود را به شرکت لینیکس بسپارید تا با استفاده از کارت های اعتباری شرکت، پرداخت شما با امنیت و سرعت بیشتر و بصورت حضوری و یا غیر حضوری انجام گردد. **اینجا** را کلیک نمایید

موارد مصرف

پرداخت حق عضویت وب سایت ها، بهترین جاگزین پول نقد در سفرهای خارجی شما، پرداخت هزینه هاست و دامین، اخذ پذیرش در دانشگاه ها، رزرو هتل و بانسیون در خارج از کشور، اجاره انومبیل، خرید آنتی ویروس و نرم افزار اورجینال، خرید کتاب و مجلات خارجی، پرداخت هزینه مهاجرت و مقالات ISI، شرکت در کنفرانس و سمینار های بین المللی، شرکت در آزمونهای علمی نافل (Toefl, GRE)، استفاده در Moneybookers, Google Adwords, Ebay, ccBill, iBill, 2Checkout, Yahoo, ClickBank, Amazon, Godaddy ...

VISA MasterCard Discover PayPal

FIG. 6 Leenxy.com is a popular outlet for Iranian students to obtain prepaid debit cards. Notice the listing of “TOEFL” and “GRE” as reasons to purchase a card. The reality is that such cards are necessary to pay for educational services, including application fees.

the country of origin (e.g., by a student in Iran), they can be blocked by the issuing bank, necessitating privacy software to mask computer location. Some students are unaware of these risks and can incur significant financial losses as a result.

Second, since 2011, owing to increased multilateral sanctions, the purchasing power of Iranian currency vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar has decreased by 300 to 400 percent. For example, in 2012, the average salary for an urban Iranian family was 833,000 tomans per month, or roughly \$600–\$700, depending on market fluctuations.⁴ In 2008, this salary was equivalent to almost \$2,000. Iranian currency devaluation affects not only dollar-based transactions of Iranian students (e.g., application and even consular and immigration fees) but also the ability of parents in Iran to fund their children’s tuition.

The third challenge is bank transfers from Iran to the United States. Often, Iranian students arrive in the United States with significant quantities of hard currency to fund years of education and living expenses. However, money transfers from family members in Iran are an inevitable reality. In 2008, “U-turn” payments—the sending of money from Iran to a third country, to be sent onward to U.S. bank accounts—became prohibited by sanctions regulations.⁵ Although there are services that can bypass these restrictions, Iranian parents most commonly use *hawala* transactions, which likewise charge high brokerage fees. For many students, the devaluation of Iranian currency, in addition to fees, can significantly disrupt studies. Many Iranian students in the United States report, for instance, that a family member in Iran has become ill and cannot work—a manageable situation under normal circumstances. However, under these financial constraints, it has the potential to end U.S. education prematurely, in addition to causing significant emotional hardship.

RECOMMENDATIONS Many of these financial challenges cannot be easily resolved, but one step could help significantly in easing Iranian students’ financial strain: the creation of an “international application fee waiver.” For nearly thirty years, American students in financial need have been able to apply for exemptions to university application fees through the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)—a measure neither standardized nor applied evenly for international students.

Given their overwhelming desire to leave Iran, Iranian students routinely apply to eight to even ten universities, and with fifteen or twenty not unheard of. Coupled with the debit card and exchange-rate issues, application fees—usually \$50 to \$75 each—can easily add up to more than a month of household income. One Iranian student summarized the situation:

We are not able to have international credit cards. We have to pay [an] extra amount of money to people having [a] credit card. [The] dollar is going up rapidly. For example: Two years ago one dollar was about 1,000 tomans, but now one dollar is about 3,500 tomans. Really, application fees take up a large percentage of our budget.⁶

Often, these high fees do limit the number of universities Iranian students can apply to, decreasing their odds of being accepted to an academic program and being able to leave Iran. Figure 7, taken from an application guide

۱. من برای دکترای بازاریابی ۲۰ دانشگاه اقدام کردم. از دانشگاه‌های Alberta و Concordia پذیرش یا بورس کامل دریافت کردم. در نهایت، دانشگاه آلبرتا را انتخاب کردم.

No	B-School	Country	Decision of the Admission Committee
1	Toronto / Rotman	Canada	Reject
2	York / Schulich	Canada	Reject
3	Western Ontario / Ivey	Canada	Reject
4	McGill	Canada	Reject
5	UBC / Sauder	Canada	Reject
6	Queen's	Canada	Reject
7	Concordia / Molson	Canada	Admission
8	Calgary / Haskayne	Canada	Reject
9	Alberta	Canada	Admission + Full Scholarship
10	LBS	UK	Reject (I was short-listed & interviewed)
11	INSEAD	France	Reject
12	UC Berkeley / Haas	USA	Reject
13	USC / Marshall	USA	Reject
14	UCLA / Anderson	USA	Reject
15	Northwestern / Kellogg	USA	Reject
16	Harvard	USA	Reject
17	Chicago GSB	USA	Reject
18	New York / Stern	USA	Reject
19	Emory / Goizueta	USA	Reject
20	Boston	USA	Reject

FIG. 7 Besides logistical challenges, Iranian students must invariably deal with the universal student experience of rejection from universities. In their case, however, the news can be particularly devastating.

produced by an Iranian student (who applied to twenty business schools in four countries), demonstrates the lengths Iranian students go to pursue Western education.

While certain universities, such as the University of Chicago and MIT, do have policies exempting disadvantaged international students from application fees, no consensus exists among American university administrators that international students even face disadvantage. Canadian universities, by comparison, have already banded together to exempt students from the “world’s 50 least developed countries” from application fees. Higher education at many Iranian universities is free of charge, and educational attainment is not indicative of financial solvency.⁷

To remedy this situation, the U.S. State Department can work closely with EducationUSA affiliates, IIE, and NACAC—the largest organiza-

tion of American admissions professionals—to raise awareness and create a standardized application fee waiver for international students who can demonstrate disadvantage. This measure, along with enabling student mobility, could be a positive step in recognizing the central role of university education in today's global reality. Moreover, it would help affirm a commitment to human rights in Iran, and the challenges and aspirations of Iranian students.

Additionally, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the Treasury Department can undertake an exploratory study into how to facilitate the secure transfer of limited funds between Iranian students in the United States and their families in Iran.

Logistical

An inherent challenge for Iranian students seeking to study in the United States is the lack of services inside Iran. Most standardized university admissions tests, for example, owing to the lack of an international business infrastructure, are not offered in Iran, forcing prospective students to travel outside the country for testing. Moreover, a lack of American diplomatic presence results in an annual journey of Iranian students to regional embassies and consulates. For two groups of Iranian students—men who have not served in Iran's military and women—these trips abroad are especially difficult and costly.

Although business relations between the West and Iran have been affected by economic sanctions, American educational testing companies have taken great pains to continue operating in the country. OFAC specifically exempts universities, and by extension educational companies, from sanctions associated with operating in Iran, and employing and paying local staff. Therefore, the most common standardized tests are still offered in Iran: the TOEFL (English-language proficiency test) and the GRE, both administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). In fact, in 2012, nearly seven thousand Iranian students took the GRE—the fourth largest testing population worldwide, behind only the United States, India, and China.⁸

However, several tests are not offered in Iran, among them the GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, and SAT. Although Iranian students are in need of all these tests, the lack of GMAT testing presents the most acute challenges. For more than a decade, business programs have attracted the highest number of international students to the United States, surpassing engineering.

While the GMAT is offered in 110 countries, Iran is alone among the top twenty countries that send students to the United States to lack a GMAT testing center. This gap not only hinders student mobility, but it most likely also hurts entrepreneurship in the country: only 4 percent of Iranian students in America (roughly 350 students) study business or management, the lowest percentage among the top student-sending countries.⁹ This is a two-thirds decline from 1979, when 12 percent (more than 6,000 Iranian students) studied business at American universities.¹⁰ Simply put, the number of Iranian students who formerly studied business nearly equals the total number of Iranian students in the United States today.

The lack of GMAT testing in Iran harms more than U.S.-bound students. According to the Graduate Management Admission Council, more than “1,500 universities...in 82 countries use the GMAT exam as part of the selection criteria for their programs.”¹¹ In 2012, a total of 734 Iranian students took the GMAT exam, among them 278 women, a significant increase from the 449 students who took the test in 2008.¹² While the 2012 figure actually exceeds that of many European countries, it also shows the global nature of the GMAT. All business students in Iran—whether destined for North America, Europe, Asia, or Oceania—are affected.

For women, the reality of seeking an education abroad can be especially difficult, as Iranian authorities sometimes arbitrarily prohibit them from leaving the country without being accompanied by a male guardian. When foreign education comes with the significant challenges encountered by Iranian students, it loses its legitimacy to function as a force for social betterment and change. For women from conservative families, education outside the country can be derided by already skeptical family members, who under better conditions might be willing to consider its merits. Figure 8 depicts a posting by a female Iranian student on a GMAT message board that accurately conveys the logistical and financial challenges Iranian business students face in traveling abroad.¹³

Finally, the lack of standardized tests in Iran raises another complicated issue: the obligation of Iranian men who have not served, and are not exempt from military service, to submit a deposit to the government when exiting the country. This constitutes 36 percent of male Iranian students in the United States, or roughly two thousand students. Whether for tourism, standardized testing, an academic conference, a visa interview, or a study abroad opportunity, any time an Iranian male with no military exemption

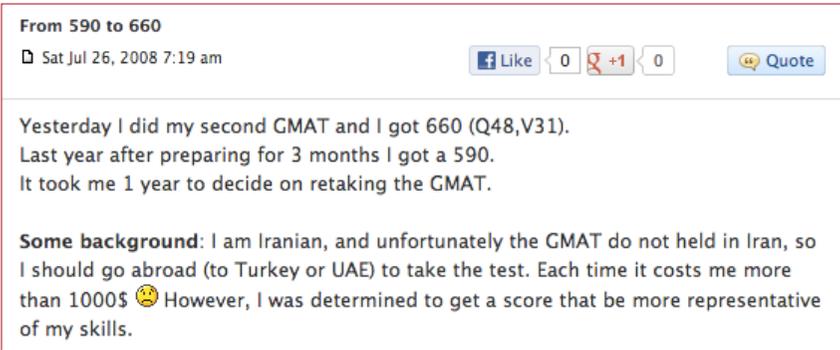


FIG. 8 The financial and logistical challenges faced by Iranian students also limit their ability ability to “retest.”

seeks to leave Iran, a letter from his university must be obtained and an “exit security” (known as a *vasighe*) paid in order to obtain an exit permit (*khорuj az kishvar*). The cost of this deposit varies based on the type of trip—and, while the deposit is returned on the individual’s return to Iran, the cost is always excessive and adds to the hardship and worry students face. In most cases, the sum is too great, and instead of a cash deposit, students must even relinquish the deed to their family’s house or car.

Figure 9, a screenshot from the “student affairs” website of the Islamic Azad University, Iran’s largest private university,¹⁴ displays the costs (in pink) for each type of trip (in blue) outside the country—with “GMAT” clearly visible as one reason students would leave the country. An “academic trip” (*safar elmi*), such as to an academic conference, costs 50 million rials (\$4,000). A “semiacademic trip” (*safar nimeh elmi*), to take a standardized test, costs 80 million rials (\$6,500). And finally, a “nonacademic trip” (*safar gheir-e elmi*)—which despite the name includes study abroad opportunities—costs 150 million rials (\$12,000), more than an entire year of average household income.

Finally, because “visa interview at the U.S. embassy” is not considered a valid reason for exiting Iran, many Iranian men need to depart under the guise of attending an academic conference, adding significant stress. On top of this, students who have not served in the military can have difficulty even obtaining a passport or official copies of university transcripts, resulting in the need to pay a *reshve*, or bribe. Moreover, because many graduate students receive admissions decisions in the spring—coinciding with the

official monthlong Nowruz holiday in March—delays can occur in receipt of the forms and permissions necessary to leave the country for visa interviews and pickup, creating further frustration.

- **سفر علمی:** سفرهایی است که دانشجوی جهت ارایه و دفاع از مقاله در کنفرانسها، همایش های علمی یا سمینار ها دعوت شده است
- **سفر نیمه علمی:** سفری است که به منظور شرکت در آزمون های زبان مانند تافل یا GMAT-IELTS-GRE و... یا آزمون مقاطع دانشگاهی کارشناسی ارشد و بالاتر (مانند ALES ترکیه) یا آزمون های علمی و همچنین بازدید از نمایشگاهها و کارخانجات باشد.
- **سفر غیر علمی:** سفرهایی است که به منظور افزایش معلومات فردی و یا تفریح یادیدار از بیستگان که در خارج از کشور باشند انجام میگردد.
- **سفر علمی:** به مبلغ ۵۰۰۰۰۰۰۰ (پنجاه میلیون) ریال
- **سفر نیمه علمی:** به مبلغ ۸۰۰۰۰۰۰۰ (هشتاد میلیون) ریال
- **سفر غیر علمی:** به تمامی کشورها و از جمله سوریه به مبلغ ۱۵۰۰۰۰۰۰۰ (صد و پنجاه) میلیون ریال

FIG. 9 Composite screenshot of costs for each type of trip outside the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS The Graduate Management Admission Council can work to establish GMAT testing in Iran. This would not only ease student challenges but also be a small but significant step in restoring an entrepreneurial and business culture in Iran that has been eroded since 1979.

Concurrently, the State Department can explore options to more loosely interpret and implement Section 306 of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2002 (EBSVRA). Although not explicitly articulated, Section 306 is interpreted to obligate nonimmigrant visa (NIV) applicants from state sponsors of terrorism (Iran, Syria, Cuba, and Sudan) to interview in person at a U.S. embassy or consulate. Given statistics demonstrating the noninvolvement of the vast majority of Iranian students with the Iranian military or government, their desire to contribute to the United States, and their significant financial and logistical challenges in traveling outside the country, a looser in-person visa interview requirement could send a clear message to Iranian students that the U.S. government has their interests in mind.

Consular

Even after the financial and logistical challenges of applying to American universities and traveling abroad for standardized testing, being accepted, and securing funding, Iranian students still need to actually obtain their visa and travel to the United States. Yet it is with the visa-acquisition phase, and the consular process in general, that Iranian students consistently express the greatest frustration. One student summed up the dynamics:

After all those steps, application fee, taking the tests, finding professors for some funding (I still couldn't get any funding for my PhD)[,] it's now the most important part which is [the] visa application. For this part students and all the visa applicants that are from Iran should travel to other countries. Usually American embassy priority for accepting the application is the people of the country that embassy is located in.... They have our future in their hands.... And if you are too lucky and your application will be approved you should wait for [an] unknown time, called [a] clearance period, [and] it is possible that the visa even will be rejected during this period. After passing the clearance they have to travel again to that third party country to pick up their visa! So it goes without saying that it is such a big project.¹⁵

These challenges with the consular process overwhelmingly coalesce into four issues: (1) visa appointments, (2) visa clearance times, (3) multiple-entry visa issuance, and (4) visa pickup procedures at regional U.S. embassies and consulates.

First, in the past, Iranian students complained that Iran-based travel agencies, in cooperation with local brokers (or “middlemen,” known as *dalal* in Persian), often reserved visa appointment slots at regional U.S. embassies and resold them to desperate students as part of expensive tour packages (see figure 10). Although students were routinely taken advantage of by such companies, some preferred it over the challenges of booking the appointments on their own. The situation became so dire that, in 2010, an Iranian student designed a Firefox browser add-on, called the “Visa App Timer,” which would automatically register students for visa appointments when the form became available online. Registration for visa appointment slots at regional U.S. embassies was a free-for-all that contributed significantly to students' stress, after they had already gone through the admission process. However, the State Department has taken steps to improve this process: with the 2012 implementation of an online visa portal, at usvisa-info.com, many of these challenges seem to have been recognized and corrected.

Questions still remain, however. As the earlier student quotation showed, many Iranian students report having to travel not just once but *twice* to regional U.S. embassies. Visa clearance times, routinely one to two months, mean Iranian students must return home between their visa interview and visa pickup. Two trips must be made, two flights purchased, and, as noted, Iranian men with no military exemption must provide two separate deposits to the Iranian government to exit the country. This

FIG. 10 Even today, some Iranian travel companies continue to advertise “tours to the U.S. embassy in Ankara.” Dalahoo.us, the company whose website is pictured here, sells packages “starting at \$380,” not including a \$140 “appointment fee,” along with lodging and “invitation letters.”

policy does vary by embassy, according to discussions with Iranian students. Allegedly, some embassies allow “friends” to drop off passports and pick up visas for approved Iranian students after the clearance process. But if an embassy does not allow this, or if the student does not have a friend outside the country at the requisite time, a second costly trip is necessitated. In some cases, the same middlemen who book visa appointments also charge fees to transport Iranian passports out of the country and employ local “brokers” for drop-off and pickup.

The second issue, visa clearance times—or the “Visas Mantis” process in consular parlance—represents another hindrance for Iranian students. Because Iran has been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism, lengthy clearance times for student visas can occur close to the start of the fall semester, contributing to missed flights and even resulting in university deferrals by a semester or more, thereby jeopardizing scholarships and funding. Indeed, according to student surveys, Mantis times have improved significantly. A 2012 survey of 175 incoming Iranian students indicates that only 22 percent reported that visa clearance took from three to more than six months—down from 36 percent in a survey conducted the previous year. Visa clearances of “one month or less” also rose signifi-

cantly, from 29 percent to 45 percent.¹⁶ However, there are still challenges. A 2013 survey of nearly five hundred students who applied for visas at the American consulate in Dubai noted an average clearance of forty-five days. Even after ninety days, 16.8 percent still had failed to have their applications cleared.¹⁷ Despite these lengthy processing times, outright rejection of a visa is rarely reported by Iranian students.

The third issue is multiple-entry visas. The May 2011 decision to begin issuing multiple-entry visas stemmed in large part from the 2010 survey of Iranian students conducted through Ali Moslemi's MEVisa initiative, discussed in the previous chapter. The November 2010 survey of 1,100 students, which sought to gauge challenges and attitudes relating to the consular process, yielded resounding conclusions: More than 80 percent indicated that the "single entry visa policy affected studies or research in a negative way." Sixty percent indicated that a family emergency had occurred but that they could not return home due to fear of reentry complications. And 78 percent reported that fears over consular complications were their main reason for not traveling home during the course of their studies (see figure 11).¹⁸

In April 2012, one year after the State Department's decision to extend multiple-entry visas to Iranian students, Moslemi conducted a new survey to gauge the implementation of the initiative. The results were disappointing, reflecting not only a low proportion of multiple-entry visas issued (for only 25 percent of students overall) but also a marked variance in issuance and clearance times by embassy (see figure 12). He summarized:

The survey results were filtered based on the place of interview and surprisingly it was found that the visa number of entrance is highly dependent on the visa issuing post. While near 100% and 70% of visa applicants who had interview[s] in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan respectively received multiple-entry visas only 10% and 20% of visa applicants who went to UAE and Turkey respectively received multiple-entry visas. The average waiting time for visa clearance was 49 days which again was found to be dependent on visa issuing post. Students who went to the U.S. consulate general in Dubai for interview waited on average about 70 days while students who went to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent waited on average about 15 days.¹⁹

The survey also noted that while only 17 percent of "engineering and science" students received multiple-entry visas, 74 percent of "arts and humanities" students did. Moreover, only 29 percent of women surveyed received multiple-entry visas.

- 7- If you have never left the US during your studies, what prevents you from traveling outside the US?
- **Risk of not obtaining the re-entry visa: 78.2%**
 - Long visa issuance process: 63.3%
 - Cost of re-applying for visa: 19.1%
 - Does not apply: 10.7%
 - Other: 2.6%
- 8- Has there been a specific emergency occasion or a family event that required you to visit family but you could not due to single entry policy?
- **Yes: 62.3%**
 - No: 37.7%
- 9- Has single entry visa policy affected your studies or your research in a negative way? If yes, please Explain.
- **Yes (please specify): 82.7%**
 - No: 17.3%

FIG. 11 As the numbers demonstrate, the issuance of single-entry visas had a significant impact on the well-being of most Iranian students in the United States.

These rates seem to have changed little. According to the earlier-mentioned 2013 survey of almost five hundred Iranian students who applied for visas at the American consulate in Dubai, 72 percent indicated that they received a single-entry visa, versus 28 percent who reported obtaining a multiple-entry visa.²⁰ Coincidentally, this proportion generally corresponds to the numbers of Iranian students studying in scientific and nonscientific disciplines, respectively. The statistics seem to portray a clear reality: the U.S. government still harbors deep concerns about the possibility of dual-use technology transfer back to Iran in support of the Iranian government's nuclear program.

RECOMMENDATIONS The broad denial of multiple-entry visas to Iranian students in the STEM disciplines—who constitute not only the majority of Iranian students in the United States but the highest percentage of STEM students from any country—reflects a disproportionate response to a geopolitical situation in which most Iranian students have little involvement. More than any other challenge Iranian students face, the denial of multiple-entry visas—especially after announcement of the initiative to issue them—causes significant hardship, in addition to hurting Iranian goodwill toward the United States.

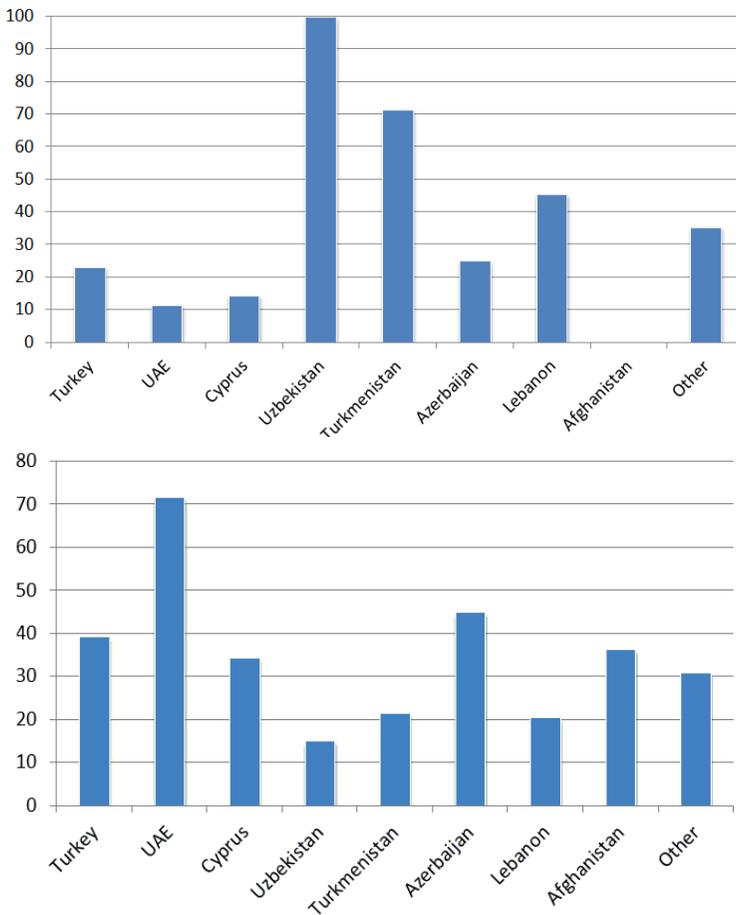


FIG. 12 Dependency of multiple-entry visa issuance on U.S. consulates: (top) percentage of multiple entry visas; (bottom) average waiting time in days (see note 16).

Another apparent incongruity involves the overlap between U.S. law and visa-issuance policy. For instance, Section 306 of EBSVRA affirms that no individual from a state sponsor of international terrorism can receive a non-immigrant visa to the United States, except if it can be guaranteed that such an individual does “not pose a threat to the safety or national security of the United States.” Moreover, Section 501 of the 2012 Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act affirms that a visa must be denied to any Iranian citizen who “seeks to enter the United States to participate in coursework at an institution of higher education...for a career in the energy sector of Iran or in nuclear science or nuclear engineering or a related field in Iran.”

The text of these laws makes clear that no student deemed a threat for technology transfer can be issued a visa in the first place, a measure that starting in 2012 was even extended to students studying petroleum engineering. Therefore, the basis for the continued bifurcation of visa-issuance policy between science and nonscience students remains unclear. For instance, who are the 70 percent of Iranian students who study hard sciences, and are allowed to enter the United States, but nonetheless cannot be granted multiple-entry visas like their peers in nonscientific fields? Even with a single-entry visa, a student could theoretically return to Iran and “transfer” knowledge or skills learned. Based on these rationales, the connection between visa *type* and the propensity for technology transfer remains unclear.

Therefore, the creation of a standardized, cross-embassy F-1 visa policy for Iranian nationals appears to be necessary. This policy, if not already in place, should not only affirm the 2011 directive to issue multiple-entry visas as the default but also clearly enumerate the conditions under which single-entry visa issuance is necessary, along with associated rationales.

In closing, voices of Iranian students, along with survey data, have been united and clear: single-entry visas simply cause hurt—not only do they not necessarily mitigate the possibility of technology transfer back to Iran, they hinder the ability to easily return home for holidays to see loved ones or to attend academic conferences and present papers, which are important for career development. In interviews with Iranian students, those who had received multiple-entry visas expressed gratitude, and indeed many have gone home to visit family during the course of their studies. However, for single-entry visa recipients, the sentiments are clear:

This type of visa practically imprisons the person inside the U.S., because if the student exits the country, he/she should apply for a visa again, which is so risky that [it] may prevent the student from continuing his/her education. That is why many students tend not to exit from [the] U.S., causing lots of personal, emotional, etc. problems.²¹

Notes

1. U.S. Department of State, "Study in the U.S.," <http://guangzhou.usembassy-china.org.cn/the-basics-on-u.s.-visas.html>.
2. Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, "Iranian Students Facing Financial Distress in U.S.," <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/iranian-students-facing-financial-distress-in-us.aspx>.
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6. This quotation, and others in this paper, was obtained through an anonymous survey sent by the author to Iranian student organizations at American universities.
7. For more, see Steven Ditto, "International Students and Disadvantage: How Admissions Professionals Can Contribute to Global Student Mobility" (National Association for College Admission Counseling, March 22, 2013), <http://www.nacacnet.org/learning/communities/Admitted/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=400>.
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14. Islamic Azad University, "A Summary of Regulations for Exiting the Country" (Persian), copy of documents available at <http://www.kerman-samacollege.ir/sites/default/files/articles/mo.khorojje%20az%20keshvar.pdf>.
15. This quotation, and others in this paper, was obtained through an anonymous survey sent by the author to Iranian student organizations at American universities.

16. Iranian Students and Graduates Association, "Survey Report on the Multiple-Entry Visa Policy Implementation for Iranian Students and Scholars," http://www.suta.org/Resources/Documents/news/ISGA/ISGA_Survey_Report_2012.pdf.
17. These statistics were derived from an online survey of nearly 500 Iranian students who applied for visas at the U.S. consulate in Dubai. The survey was conducted by an individual on the Iranian student portal ApplyAbroad.org in spring and summer 2013. See the results at <http://washin.st/1e4aMbQ>.
18. Ali Moslemi, "Survey Report on Difficulties Faced by Iranian Students in the U.S. due to Single-Entry F1 Visa," MEVisa, November 2010, http://selfscholar.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/mevisa_survey_results.pdf.
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20. See note 17.
21. This quotation, and others in this paper, was obtained through an anonymous survey sent by the author to Iranian student organizations at American universities.

4

Conclusion: Revitalize, Reaffirm, Reform

A STUDY OF IRANIAN STUDENTS in the United States reveals two predominant themes: (1) their academic talent and deep aspirations to seek knowledge in a free society and (2) the central role that American political will has played in facilitating such aspirations throughout the long history of Iran–U.S. student exchange. For a public diplomacy initiative to be successful, both of these facets must be acknowledged, respected, and balanced. And although a remediation of the challenges faced by Iranian students can lead to positive outcomes, a broader question remains about the extent of the U.S. government’s commitment to its public diplomacy mandate with the Iranian people.

Since the mid-2000s, much effort has been made to cultivate goodwill and create outreach to the Iranian people. Through television and radio, social media, and short-term cultural exchange programs, the United States has demonstrated its commitment to the promotion of democracy and human rights in Iran. However—in spite of limited initiatives, such as the 2011 decision to issue multiple-entry visas—the 8,700 international students from Iran in the United States have received comparatively modest attention. The U.S. government therefore has an opportunity to

- *revitalize* its public diplomacy mandate vis-à-vis Iran, with traditional students playing a more central role;
- publicly *reaffirm* its commitment to the aspirations and rights of the Iranian people, students included; and
- seek *reform* in those areas where doubt has been cast on this public diplomacy mandate—centrally with the Iran–U.S. student pipeline—while continuing to build upon existing positive steps.

Revitalize

Although all public diplomacy initiatives are important, and targeted outreach to Iranian professionals, artists, and athletes through short-term, person-to-person exchange programs has been highly successful, the fact remains that traditional international students come most closely into long-term contact with American culture and political and social values, and live, work, and forge contacts in the United States.

Higher education is deeply respected in Iran, and Iranian students maintain well-connected, transnational networks. Whether they are part of the 45 to 50 percent of students who will likely return to Iran after graduation, or those PhD graduates in the critical STEM subjects who will remain in the United States to pursue postdoctoral educational opportunities or employment, Iranian students as a whole have the ability to sway public opinion in Iran and project their opinions far beyond themselves.

Given that international student exchange does not necessarily result in students' return to their countries of origin, the notion that Iranian students can serve as "agents of change," or that American study experiences can "fuel more opportunities for real change in Iran"—in the words of former secretary of state Hillary Clinton—is open to question. Thus, a step in the revitalization of the U.S. government's public diplomacy mandate should be to recognize the nuanced and limited political role that Iranian students could contribute in Iran but also the much larger role that international graduates—whether they return to their home countries or remain in the United States—can play in the process of political reform.

The effects of study experiences on students from a country like Iran are much more nuanced than those for others in the developing world. Unlike Saudi Arabia, for instance—the only Middle Eastern country to have more students in the United States than Iran—Iranian students come from a society that is largely egalitarian and has a social, professional, and academic ethic based on meritocracy. Moreover, for many Iranian students, dissent to the established system of governance is a part of the common ethos. Therefore, the "transformative" effects a student from Saudi Arabia might experience in America—where even classroom settings, relations with superiors, and social situations differ markedly from those in their home environment—will inevitably be stronger than those for a student from Iran.¹ In short, even before they come to the United States, Iranian students already have the mindset and social ethos to engender "change."

Still, whether they stay in the United States or return home after graduation, Iranian students can fulfill a key political role. Much like the role American-educated Libyan academics played in the 2011 post-Qadhafi transition period, Western-educated Iranians can serve as a vital collective voice of legitimacy and consensus should a transition of government ever occur in Iran. The fostering of a technocratic community based both in the United States and Iran—rather than focusing on the return of Iranian students to Iran to “fuel change”—is a necessary step in the maturation of public diplomacy outreach to the Iranian people. This step, moreover, will engender respect for the aspirations and talents of Iranian students separate from their political identity. If the U.S. government can facilitate the pursuit of education for education’s sake, political payoff is likely to follow.

Reaffirm

Although the summer 2013 election of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has served to decrease global tensions directed toward Iran, a new presidential administration affords the U.S. government the ideal opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to support the aspirations and human rights of the Iranian people.

In August 2013, four days after Rouhani’s inauguration, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a document, personally authored by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, laying out its roadmap for the Rouhani administration. One goal set forth by this document is to remove human rights from the international discourse directed toward Iran. The document states that the Foreign Affairs Ministry is to “prevent the reformation of international consensus and decisions against the country, especially in the area of human rights.”² As it happens, this goal has been embraced by the Iranian government since the 1990s, and has been articulated by Rouhani himself on numerous occasions. Therefore, at this critical juncture, the U.S. government should seize the opportunity to not just reaffirm its commitment to human rights in Iran but also to ensure that this commitment is articulated to Iran’s best and brightest.

While Rouhani’s measured rhetoric with the world community has been greeted positively outside Iran, many educated Iranians are not so much beholden to Rouhani himself as relieved that someone has “put the foot on the brake” following the downward spiral of the Ahmadinejad years. For educated Iranians, however, Rouhani’s election has yet to broadly

spur greater fealty toward or connection to the Iranian regime. Therefore, demand for education outside Iran, and especially in the United States, is not likely to be affected by his election; it is a demand driven by political, social, and economic challenges within the country and cannot be remediated through domestic political change alone. In fact, a limited easing of sanctions and improved exchange rates might even attract a new wave of students for whom international education was previously financially prohibitive. Moreover, a reaffirmation of the U.S. government's commitment to human rights in Iran would send a robust message at this early stage.

Reform

Finally, as this paper centrally highlights, the challenges Iranian students face in the Iran–U.S. pipeline have not only affected their lives but also, according to observations, hurt perceptions of U.S. government competence and American commitment.

Despite the challenges, Iranian students continue to see the United States as the premier destination for study, and they see their future as associated with America. If their challenges can be eased, and if the U.S. government can reaffirm its commitment to human rights and fulfill its past pledges to Iranian students, U.S. public diplomacy efforts can be revitalized and significant goodwill engendered, paving the way for both short- and long-term change in Iran.

Beyond any statistic, survey, or quotation, every year greater numbers of bright, driven, and talented Iranian students take significant financial, logistical, and political risks to seek their education and future in America. At this key political juncture, genuine, consistent assistance from the United States could be the start of a relationship that bears fruit for both countries.

Notes

1. “For more about the effects of international education on students from the Arab world, see Steven Ditto, “Islam, Tolerance, and Globalization: What Study Abroad Research Can Tell Us About the Future of the Middle East,” December 4, 2012, <http://selfscholar.wordpress.com/2012/12/04/islam-tolerance-and-globalization/>.
2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, “The Approach to Foreign Policy and the Program for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif)” (Persian), August 12, 2013 (21 Mordad 1392), <http://www.mfa.gov.ir/?siteid=1&siteid=1&pageid=128&newsview=5843>.

About the Author

STEVEN DITTO is an independent Middle East researcher who specializes in law, human rights, and education. He reads French, Arabic, and Farsi, and has written extensively on topics related to Islamic law and history, religious freedom and women's rights, and education and public diplomacy. Most recently, he authored the Washington Institute study *Reading Rouhani: The Promise and Peril of Iran's New President* as well as an in-depth, historical study, *Nuclear Weapons in Iranian Religious Discourse, 1962–Present*. He holds a master's degree in international education from George Washington University, and blogs at selfscholar.wordpress.com.

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“Iranian students continue to face severe limits on their global mobility and are confronted with significant financial, logistical, and consular challenges on the path to an American education. These challenges are so acute that they can, in fact, end educational aspirations prematurely. Furthermore, they often create physical and emotional hardships for the broad swaths of Iranian students who do manage to study in the United States, jeopardizing the public diplomacy mandate aimed at reaching them.”

