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### **IRAN TRIP REPORT: "THE DIALOGUE OF ISLAM AND PEACEMAKING IN IRAN"**

In October 2007, seven American Muslim scholars of Islam and conflict resolution, including Qamar-ul Huda and Mohammed Abu-Nimer of USIP, went to Iran for ten days to discuss conflict resolution and peacemaking. The delegation's mission was to engage with Iranian experts to better understand their approaches to peacemaking, conflict prevention, dialogue, and conflict resolution. The delegation met a wide spectrum of representatives of civil society, lawyers, human rights experts, non-governmental organizations, academicians, high-ranking religious leaders, university students, social scientists, and theologians.

This trip report, written by Huda, reviews the meetings and analyzes the peacemaking processes used in Iran.

#### **Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran**

The UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Peace and Democracy at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran were the group's local partners in Iran. On the first day in Tehran the UNESCO Chair conducted a one-day conference on "Dialogues of Peace in Islam" at the university. At the conference, the American Muslim delegates presented their work and activities on conflict resolution and peacemaking and the ways it is rooted in the Islamic tradition. Ayse Kadayifci, Professor of Conflict Resolution Studies at American University, and Amr Abdalla, Professor and Vice Rector for Academic Affairs for the University for Peace in Costa Rica, presented various Western and Islamic models of conflict assessment and areas where these models may or may not converge. There was a stimulating debate with faculty members who questioned the role of religion in the arena of defending human rights, democracy, and promoting equality.

Abdul Hayy Weinman, Professor of Communications at the University of New Mexico, spoke about the Sunni-Shi'ite dialogues, areas for reconciliation, and effective practices in dialogic encounters within religious communities. Dr. Safi, of the Shahid Beheshti University Law School, responded by posing questions about the process of dialogue and whether any dialogue can change a set of core values. He spoke about the theorization of dialogue and the problems of historical influences of culture that shape the understanding of self in dialogue.

Karim Douglas Crow, Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International

Studies in Singapore, initiated a discussion on the historical dimensions in the early generation of Muslim communities that added to the formations of Sunni and Shi'ite traditions. He asserted "these basic foundational differences in theology, political authority, religious leadership, and the interpretative understanding of *Ahl al-Bayt* (family members of the Prophet) added to the schism between Sunnis and Shi'ites." Ayatollah Dr. Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, chairman of the Philosophy Department at Shahid Beheshti University, responded by saying that historical theological differences will not resolve current Sunni-Shi'ite conflicts. Dr. Damad said, "We need to focus on community building and increasing dialogues on practical areas of governance, rule of law, and leadership."

The conference consisted of faculty members of the Shahid Beheshti Law School and members from the Departments of History, Philosophy, Anthropology, Literature, and Sociology. Both undergraduate and graduate students from neighboring universities attended the conference, and they asked about justice, injustice, international law, religious law, the problem of authority and interpretation in Islam, and the applicability of conflict resolution skills.

The conference displayed a tremendous amount of internal debate among the liberals, reformists, leftists, conservatives, religious and secular, and students and academicians. However, the debate raised an important point on whether religion can or cannot contribute toward resolving and preventing conflict, and to what extent a modern nation can balance culture, politics, and tradition. While Iran has an energetic intelligentsia interested in gradual reform, the critical component was for the rule of law to protect its citizens and treat individual as equals.

Students, in particular, were very sophisticated and intellectually vigorous in their respective fields; they spoke French, German, and English with ease. Law, Sociology, and History students – both undergraduate and graduate – were impressive as they shared their knowledge of Western authors and their grasp of contemporary thought. Huda was invited to present a brief talk on "The intersection of American-Islamic practices and US civil law" to a seminar on criminal law at the University's Law school. The level of discussion in the classroom surpassed my expectations and students easily navigated through the issues and key concepts.

The discussions at the conference eclipsed and possibly countered the negative Western media images of mullahs dictating every thought and movement of Iranians and the notion that there is no self-criticism in public space. Rather, the delegation found an immense degree of self-criticism, reflection, lively debate, and strong opinions on a variety of subjects.

### **QOM: City of Seminaries**

The delegation later traveled to Qom, almost 100 miles south of Tehran, and met with theologians, academicians, students, and three eminent grand ayatollahs. Qom is known for being the center for Shi'ite higher education- both for theological studies and for liberal arts studies. The city has more than two dozen universities, seminaries, and research centers that focus on religious studies and comparative religions. In addition, Qom is renowned for the holy shrine of Fatima Ma'suma, sister of Imam `Ali ibn Musa Rida (789-816 A.D.), the eighth Imam in Twelver Imami Shi'ism. The city is the largest center for Shi'ite scholarship in the world, and is a significant destination of pilgrimage.

### *Al-Hauza Al-Ilmiyaa*

At the al-Hauza al-Ilmiyya ("The Seminary of Knowledge"), one of Qom's preeminent theological institutions, Shi'ite theologians and the American Muslim delegates discussed the particular understandings of peace and conflict. We learned that within Shi'ism there is a tremendous amount of literature on this subject, and their perspectives on "Just War" theories differed from traditional Sunni premises of engagement. While conditions of war mandated specific definitions, Shi'ite theologians agreed that fighting, if necessary, is restricted to defensive purposes and that there are no acceptable reasons for offensive war. Violence is a result of a breakdown of peaceful relations, and followers are theologically mandated to resolve all conflicts peacefully. Al-Hauza theologians repeatedly said that dialogue and interfaith cooperation is an established practice in Islam, and in a time when religious extremism is on the rise, it is the responsibility for all to be proactive in dialogues. By citing textual sources, historical evidence, and religious ethics, al-Hauza theologians stressed the importance of engaging with all leaders in order to create a peaceful world.

The theologians at al-Hauza displayed an exceptional degree of tolerance, and we benefited from participation in their culture of debate and scholarship. The Shi'ite scholars view themselves as continuing a rich intellectual tradition, one that respects others while being open to learning from outside research and debate. Many of the theologians, who had already reached the status of ayatollahs, had doctorates from western universities and spoke two or three Western languages. They clearly were accustomed to interacting with Western scholars and spoke of current exchange programs with European scholars. It was common for at least two al-Hauza theologians to present their analysis in comparative theological terms. They also frequently referred to notable Christian authors like Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Aquinas, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Wesley. These Iranian theologians not only knew each of these Christian authors thoroughly, but they offered a comparative analysis to Shi'ite Islam and ways in which there may be areas of similar discourse. I was amazed at the level of command these scholars had of works from Christianity. It was clear that they wanted American Muslim scholars to remember the extent of shared histories that exists between Islam and Christianity.

### *Mofid University*

In Qom, Mofid University hosted the delegation and arranged a series of meetings with scholars, researchers, students, and faculty members. The University's Center for Religion and Human Rights held an afternoon symposium open to the public. The Vice-Provost of the University, Dr. Nasser Ghorbannia, opened the symposium stating, "It is urgent and compulsory on us as scholars to have a dialogue between different opinions [in order] to have reconciliation and peace." My USIP colleague Abu-Nimer pointed out that the human rights field rarely includes religious scholars or the works of theologians, and he was very pleased to see a research center at Mofid University dedicated to this area.

Ghorbannia stated in his opening remarks, "There are accusations that peace, equality, and fairness are not compatible to the Islamic tradition. We must address these statements. However, as a Muslim, we need to deal with these issues seriously and simultaneously engage in intra-faith dialogue to find common ground amongst ourselves. We need to recognize human dignity and equality."

After an inspiring conversation on human rights and religious peacemaking, the delegates asked Mofid University students if peace studies and conflict resolution is taught, and if so, how it shapes their thinking. Several students differed on the definitions of peace studies and offered their own versions from literature, religion, politics, or history. One expressed the need to have a structured program linked to Western universities in order to pursue graduate studies. Another student felt that universities in general did not factor in the role of the arts, music, films, and theatre in peacemaking. He believed that any peace studies program must contain all aspects of culture. Among students there was a general desire to expand the program of peace studies and conflict resolution. Faculty members were interested in working collaboratively on this project.

#### *Private Meetings with Three Grand Ayatollahs*

During the trip, the local host arranged personal meetings with Iran's prominent grand ayatollahs in Qom. They were Grand Ayatollahs Vahid Khorasani, Mousavi Ardebili and Yousef Sanei. Each one has held public office and remains influential in the religious and political culture of Iran. In the early 1980s, Grand Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili realized that seminarians lacked a modern liberal arts education. As a result, he established Mofid University. We were told that the university receives over 25,000 applications for less than 1,600 slots. Grand Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili still has over 4,000 students who attend his weekly lectures.

The three grand ayatollahs represented different positions, from conservative to the reformist. Each of the ayatollahs spoke about the necessity of being just to each other -- that justice must start with the individual's heart. Khorasani spoke about majestic presence of the divine in all living creatures. Whenever one small act of injustice occurs, it is a violation of our trust with the divine, he said. His

talk not only was theologically eloquent and poetically powerful, but also simple. For scholars of conflict resolution, his talk was another reminder of merging both the mind and heart in their work.

Grand Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili, former head of the Iranian Judicial system and a *Marja Taqlid* (“Source to Follow”), insisted on greater dialogues between Western and Eastern leaders, and the importance of not losing focus on establishing peace. “Dialogues,” he stated, “have no obstacles. Rather, it is the individuals involved that create difficulty in dialoging. Individuals want to find problems and obsess over them, but rarely ask themselves ‘Who created these obstacles?’” He elaborated on dialogues ranging from religious (interfaith and intra-faith), to the political, social, cultural, legal, artistic, economical, and intellectual fields. His talk was refreshing, as it asked us to reflect on ways individuals understand a conflict and how perception can be a factor in resolving or exacerbating it.

Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sanei, another *Marja Taqlid*, is a popular scholar, activist, jurist, and philosopher. His sermons are common on television, and his websites are in Persian, English, and French. A staunch reformist and longtime critic of the government, for many years Grand Ayatollah Sanei has vigorously opposed the development of nuclear weapons and other forms of weapons of mass destruction. He is extremely vocal against suicide bombing, religious extremism, terrorism, and fundamentalist movements, which are baseless in Islamic jurisprudence, in his view. In his talk he said, “Killing innocent lives is a serious violation in Islam, it can not be reversed, and we all are held accountable on the destruction of life.” Known as a stirring personality, Sanei spoke on complete equality between men and women, and between all religious traditions. He repeated, “Equality means absolute equality- there is no room for discrimination. Those who use religious texts to defend violence are abusers of the faith!”

## **Reflections**

The delegation to Iran embarked on this trip to learn from Iranian counterparts in the field of conflict resolution and peacemaking, and especially to explore ways Iranian Shi’ites view their religion in this pursuit. Aside from witnessing the beauty of Iranian culture and society, the trip was very educational in terms of divergent voices. As opposed to the images of a stagnant society imbedded in our minds, this trip forced us to question our basic concepts on how we view each other, on how perceptions are accepted and not contested, and specific means to improve US-Iranian relations. For many years Iran has been portrayed as totalitarian religious society, closed off to progress and modernity. Only in the past ten years has the portrayal of Iran begun to include images of a small band of reformers playing an important role in the social process. Yet the truth is far from this image. Iranian society is far more complex than even these images suggest. With a literacy rate of 92 percent, Iran has a vibrant civil society and intellectual life. Bookstores sell Persian, English, French, and German materials, and colleagues spoke in these languages with ease.

While a vibrant grass-roots reformist movement does exist, it contains varieties of thought on how to improve Iranian society. It would be simplistic, if not careless, to present Iranians as either humanists/secularists and/or religious-minded. There are individuals who traverse in all of these worlds at certain times in their lives. On certain subjects, one may hold both religious reformist positions and also humanistic idealism. Notions of peace, equality, and justice were discussed at each meeting – almost every scholar, student, theologian, and researcher built their argument on these ideas. Their debates and exchanges were memorable because these individuals spoke about their vision of an alternative society. Arguments over religion, I found, were fascinating since some scholars felt that the fusion of politics and religion is baseless in Islamic jurisprudence. Citing Western societies as examples, some argued that a modern nation state cannot equate the ideals of liberty and equality with the influence of religion. These heated conversations appeared to flow naturally in this community. In this respect, nothing stood out as unusual and no one displayed a sense of intellectual fatigue on the subject.

On my return to the U.S., Dr. Ghorbannia's comments continued to repeat themselves in my mind – “we need to find common ground amongst ourselves. We need to recognize human dignity and equality.” I think it wasn't the words so much that stayed with me but the sincerity behind the words. The difficult challenge he posed was to think how two nations can overcome the intense political hostility without losing sight of the other's human dignity and equality. With intense world pressure on Iran and all of the negative images associated with that society, these comments reflected a grander vision of peaceful coexistence.

Whether in the East or in the West, the notion of religion and religious peacemaking is still finding its niche. Interestingly, the three grand ayatollahs in Qom never mentioned religion or religious peacemaking. They were not consumed with humanist versus religious paradigms; rather, their concerns were about responsibility and the common good. They did not label these as “religious” but just human responsibility to creating a just society. The variety of these dialogues indicated how much there is to understand Iranians and the need to be open, to dialogue, and be partners in peacemaking.

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**About the Author:**

This trip report was written by Qamar-ul Huda, a Senior Program Officer in the Religion and Peacemaking program at the U.S. Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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