

# Reaching for an Audience: U.S. Public Diplomacy Towards Iran

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## IN BRIEF

- For over thirty years, the United States and Iran have not held formal diplomatic relations. U.S.-Iran tensions have escalated over concerns regarding the Iranian nuclear program.
- A comprehensive public diplomacy strategy reaching average Iranian citizens holds potential to help create dialogue, foster trust, and build long-term relationships that can be valuable assets for the United States.
- Developing such a strategy in the absence of formal relations has been challenging, although various American public diplomacy initiatives in Iran have emerged over the years.
- Online tools should not be the centerpiece of a public diplomacy plan, but instead serve alongside real-world components in a comprehensive approach that prioritizes further dialogue and exchanges between Iranians and Americans.

## Background

More than three decades have passed since the Iranian Hostage Crisis, during which the United States was forced to sever diplomatic ties with Iran. Since the attack on America's diplomatic assets in Tehran, the United States has struggled to find ways of reaching and interacting with average Iranians. These difficulties have constrained American public diplomacy efforts and hindered its ability to make informed foreign policy decisions, as gaining vital information and understanding from within Iran is more difficult.



Beginning in 1980, all U.S. interests in Iran have since been represented by the Embassy of Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., Iran currently maintains an interests section in the Pakistani Embassy.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the Iranian nuclear program has become a major concern for the international community, and attempts at allaying those fears through traditional diplomatic routes have yet to achieve the desired results. Such a precarious situation is only worsened by the limited access to information and people in Iran, a fact which impacts the development of a tailored national security strategy for the United States.

For the last two U.S. Administrations, the Iranian nuclear issue has been a top national security priority. These Administrations have employed a variety of efforts to help break the stalemate. In 2006, in an attempt to refine U.S. strategy towards Iran, the Bush Administration created the State Department's Office of Iranian Affairs. Under the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, the office became the central place to devise strategies on all Iran-related issues, including public diplomacy.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of State unveiled the Virtual Embassy Tehran,<sup>3</sup> an online hub at the center of a new strategy designed to increase communication with Iranian citizens. This latest public diplomacy effort does not imply an attempt to reestablish diplomatic relations; the Virtual Embassy, as its website states, "is not a formal diplomatic mission, nor does it represent or describe a real U.S. Embassy accredited to the Iranian Government."<sup>4</sup> Its goals include fighting misinformation and promoting mutual understanding, and it has the long-term objective of supporting grassroots pro-democracy groups.<sup>5</sup> At the core of this strategy is the idea that the United States can impact the information Iranian youth has access to, and thus help shape their opinions.

In the 30 years since the Iranian Hostage Crisis, an entire generation of Iranians has grown up unaware or unable to relate to the crisis that led to the fallout of diplomatic relations. This is primarily the audience that new public diplomacy projects online are trying to reach. Despite this, a State Department official explained that the name Virtual Embassy Tehran<sup>6</sup> was deliberately chosen to draw attention to the new site by evoking the 1979 Hostage Crisis that took place at the brick and mortar U.S. Embassy in Tehran. But as it is standard practice to name embassies after the capital cities they are based in, and the target audience is too young to relate to events from three decades ago, choosing this name may not have had the effect that the State Department intended.



Hostages returning to the U.S. after being released from Iran

If the U.S. wishes to exert strategic influence in Iran, it should cultivate relationships with citizens and battle misperceptions through exchange and dialogue. Though eliminating a potential nuclear threat from Iran may be a short term objective, long term goals to end the overall threat Iran poses to regional and U.S. national security dictates the need for tools and methods specifically geared towards achieving that end.

This paper explores the American government's foray into virtual engagement, as well as other public diplomacy programs currently underway in Iran. It also presents a discussion on the ways in which the U.S. can increase its interaction with the Iranian people while remaining cautious of the limitations and effects certain strategies can produce.

## Turning to Virtual Communication

Public diplomacy can be defined as "Communication with foreign publics for the purpose of achieving a foreign policy objective."<sup>7</sup> The Internet and social media tools have given U.S. public diplomacy practitioners a new venue for such communication. Without the valuable on-the-ground presence of a diplomatic mission however, its online presence is currently the chief route of direct access to Iranian citizens.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of this online presence has been in line with the State Department's development of a virtual diplomacy strategy – entitled 21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft – which includes efforts to establish an online apparatus for nearly all U.S. diplomatic missions.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, internet access in Iran has experienced incredible growth, increasing from a quarter of a million to over 42 million users in a decade.<sup>10</sup> Today, more than 50% of the population uses the Internet, albeit constrained by government censorship.<sup>11</sup> It is in this context that the idea for Virtual Embassy Tehran was conceived.



The Virtual Embassy Tehran

Some of the initial metrics include:

- The website received half a million hits upon its launch, most of which came from outside Iran.<sup>12</sup>
- Over a thousand messages were submitted on the first few days, most inquiring about visas and opportunities to study in the U.S.<sup>13</sup>
- During its first year, the Virtual Embassy totaled almost two million page hits.<sup>14</sup> Current numbers remain slightly over that mark.<sup>15</sup>
- A mere twelve hours after it went live, the Iranian government added the Virtual Embassy to their list of blocked sites.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that efforts by the Iranian regime to block the website do not necessarily completely prevent access. However, blocking the website does make it more difficult for those beyond the young, tech-savvy population who understand circumvention technology to visit the site.

With the regime preventing direct access, the State Department believes Iranians visit the site using virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxy servers. This is evidenced by traffic to the Farsi version of the website,

with a significant portion appearing to come from countries with small Persian populations such as Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> State thus assumes that users are actually inside Iran but bypass the government's block through VPNs that appear to change their location.

## Issues with a Strictly Virtual Presence

Virtual methods of communication can help break geographical barriers. They are usually not, however, best suited to be used as the primary outreach method in a public diplomacy strategy. Relying solely on a virtual presence such as the Virtual Embassy can be problematic for many reasons, some of which are outlined below:

- Restricted ability to measure efficacy and understand the audience
- Limited ability to reach target audiences
- Difficulty in building lasting relationships

## Measuring efficacy and understanding the audience

Two fundamental issues with implementing an online strategy relate to measuring effectiveness and understanding the audience reached. The State Department was not surprised that the Iranian government blocked the Virtual Embassy Tehran, but that action has severely limited its ability to accurately assess how many and just what kind of users view the site. In order to access a blocked website, a user must take certain steps online to hide their origin. Once their identity is hidden, the virtual embassy can only make informed assumptions about who they are reaching.

In successful public diplomacy efforts, understanding the target audience is essential for developing messages and techniques that resonate.<sup>18</sup> Without this information, it is difficult to develop metrics for measuring program effectiveness. In a video message marking the virtual embassy's launch, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that "in the absence of direct contact, it can work as a bridge between the American and Iranian people."<sup>19</sup> Yet a lingering question remains: without an on-the-ground, solid understanding of the audience and its perceptions, how does it actually produce results or serve as a bridge between the two countries?

Online, the ability to reliably survey the audience varies by platform, and numbers of visits or clicks do not necessarily indicate success. Nor do they indicate that people are reading these messages or are, for that matter, in agreement with them.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, efforts must be made to measure the relationship between virtual communication and real-world action. Although much attention has been given to the role that Twitter played in the Iranian protest movement of 2009, analysts must keep in mind that protests and revolutions have changed the course of history, including in Iran, without the presence of the Internet.

## Building relationships and reaching target audiences

When users must be tech-savvy to overcome hurdles in order to reach a blocked website, this substantially limits an online strategy's scope and reach. Average Iranians who may not be as interested in politics or do not

rely on the internet to get their news may be far more difficult to reach online.

Certainly, the rise in individual access to mass digital communication has caused diplomatic entities and officials to increasingly use the internet to engage directly with citizens. Thus, social media and other online tools like the Virtual Embassy are used due to their perceived power<sup>21</sup> and ability to bring people together and spread messages to a large audience. But it should be noted that because online tools may only be reaching a very specific (and not the perceived) audience, these tools can distort the understanding of the wider audience and fundamentally hinder success.



A video from the USA Dar Farsi YouTube page

Ultimately, this approach is not a replacement for face-to-face interaction. One of the most important tasks in a diplomatic mission is information gathering. Having an on-the-ground presence affords officials the possibility to meet with leaders and citizens in formal and informal settings to understand local context.<sup>22</sup> A public diplomacy initiative such as the Virtual Embassy and other State Department incursions on social media (including a Persian Facebook and Twitter pages) can help raise awareness on certain issues, but awareness does not necessarily equate action or influence, nor does a “like” indicate a significant or lasting relationship.

State’s social media accounts relevant to Iran include the USA Dar Farsi Facebook page,<sup>23</sup> with 123,000 likes, a Twitter profile, with over 16,000 followers, Google+, YouTube and a blog in Farsi which is not regularly updated. On Facebook, where more information on the audience is available, State asserts 60% of users visiting the page are inside Iran.<sup>24</sup> It may be argued that these platforms allow for a clearer understanding of the perceived audience, but it is nonetheless a challenge to identify results from solely online interaction.

Scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy after 9/11 have given increasing importance to the simple, but sometimes unpracticed, notion of “listening.” State’s Farsi twitter account, as noted, has over 16,000 followers. Yet only a hundred or so users are “followed” from this account, of which almost half are other U.S. Government-related accounts. Thus, measuring how much “listening” actually takes place via this platform is difficult. This perceived lack of listening can also correlate to lower levels of trust from the very target audiences the U.S. is attempting to reach.

Having an “information central” to all things U.S., as the State Department puts it, is an important asset to Iranians in need of official information. For this reason, the website was designed to look exactly like those of all other U.S. missions, which is meant to reassure users of the credibility of the information available there.<sup>25</sup> As a hub to provide information about the U.S. and study abroad programs, the virtual embassy is valuable to Iranians who previously had to rely on expensive brokers to navigate a cumbersome and costly visa application process.<sup>26</sup> Through the website, it is now also possible to schedule the required in-person visa interviews.

The Virtual Embassy Tehran is limited as an outreach tool. Nonetheless, it is one of the few available to

the U.S. government in current circumstances. Despite its flaws, it serves an important purpose and should continue to be enhanced—keeping in mind the greater goal of moving beyond and into real-world projects.

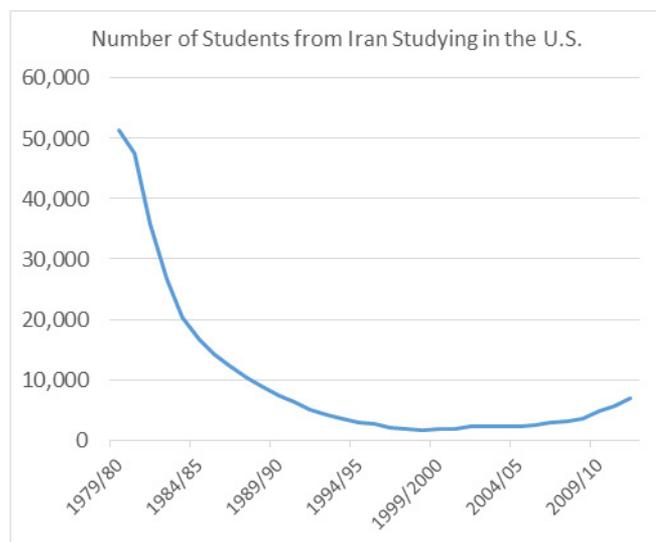
## On-the-Ground Initiatives

Any effort to reestablish diplomatic relations faces reasonable scrutiny in light of Iran's deliberate disregard for the safety and security of diplomatic staff. As evidenced by the 2011 attack on the British Embassy in Tehran,<sup>27</sup> the Iranian Government has exercised a lack of respect on several occasions for the sanctity of diplomatic missions. This makes establishing on-the-ground relations with the people of Iran incredibly difficult, and poses serious problems.

Today, there are efforts in the U.S. to invest in projects with the primary goal of building relationships with citizens despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations. Acting on its perception that many Iranians do not support the regime, the U.S. has adopted a plan that essentially prioritizes reaching out to Iranian citizens directly.<sup>28</sup> Some of these initiatives, along with their evolution are described in the following sections.

### Academic Exchange

Despite the state of relations between the U.S. and Iran, American universities have attracted young Iranians in levels not seen in two decades. Of the countries that send the most students to the U.S., Iran surprisingly ranks 20th on the list. Between 1974 and 1983, Iran sent the most students to the U.S., with as many as 50,000 a year. After Iranians stormed the U.S. embassy and took hostages, the U.S. severed diplomatic relations, and the number of students decreased significantly during the 1980's. Yet since the 2000s, there has been a significant increase in the number of Iranian students in U.S. universities compared to prior years.<sup>29</sup> By 2012, almost 7,000 Iranians studied in the U.S. (mostly at the graduate level) which was an increase of 24% over the previous year.



Data from the Institute of International Education

From the Middle East, only Saudi Arabia currently tops that number annually.<sup>30</sup> Amidst a contentious relationship between the two governments, this figure is impressive. It becomes even more interesting given the fact that students must endure a burdensome visa application process, traveling to a third country like Armenia or Turkey—an expensive ordeal for some. However, this phenomenon does not exist in a vacuum; the efforts by the now defunct Iran-America Society (IAS) to reach historic levels of Iranian students during the 1970's,<sup>31</sup> coupled with other exchange programs it promoted had an enduring effect. While the current rise in the number of Iranian students cannot be fully attributed to that, the IAS is a testament to the importance and

long-lasting effects of robust programs that privilege direct contact and cultural exchanges.

In contemporary times, there exists a limited yet resilient infrastructure for promoting several types of exchange with Iran:

- The EducationUSA<sup>32</sup> program works to attract students to the U.S. from all over the world, which includes providing support for recruiting Iranian students.
- There are several places within Iran where the necessary tests to study in the U.S., such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) are administered.<sup>33</sup>
- In 2006 the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) was restarted with Iran, bringing professionals from diverse areas to network and experience the U.S. in short excursions.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the decades of limited engagement, great educational institutions remain an attractive American symbol in Iran. This is at the core of Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, defined as the ability to get other countries to "want what you want" through "persuasion and attraction" as opposed to coercion.<sup>35</sup> Even as periods of great animosity have shaken Iranian perceptions of the U.S., it is remarkable that this connection remains. To tap into this potential, the U.S. government should examine how to expand public and cultural diplomacy programs to interact with and attract young audiences, capitalizing on this enduring soft power and building a bridge with future leaders.

## Science Diplomacy

A sub-type of public diplomacy, science diplomacy is defined as "scientific cooperation and engagement with the explicit intent of building positive relationships with foreign governments and societies."<sup>36</sup> The last two U.S. Administrations have taken greater interest in promoting new programs targeting these collaborations. Arranging science diplomacy programs may be difficult amidst current U.S.-Iran tensions. However, because science is a universal language, science diplomacy is one way to make a positive impact and foster dialogue while leaving politics aside, particularly between countries with strained relationships.

To help accomplish this, the State Department created the Jefferson Science Fellowship in 2003. It aims to involve the scientific community in the process of developing international scientific cooperation programs. Distinguished professors and researchers assist diplomats with projects and can serve as informal advisors to the Department for up to five years after they complete the fellowship.<sup>37</sup>

In 2009, the Obama Administration set up a fund for science and technology to foster partnerships with Muslim-majority countries. The U.S. Science Envoy Program has so far sent scientists to 20 countries; Iran is not on that list.<sup>38</sup> The State Department also has a Science and Technology advisor reporting directly to the Secretary to offer guidance and help with strategy in this matter.

While these and other efforts have helped make science diplomacy an important issue and tool in foreign policy-making, they require a long-term vision and sometimes significant resources, which can be a challenge particularly in periods of austerity.<sup>39</sup> Other partnerships that include the private sector to allocate funds for

projects may help science diplomacy continue to grow in the future.

Yet despite the difficulties, scientific collaboration between the U.S. and Iran has increased over the past two decades.<sup>40</sup> The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) played a key role in developing programs that have brought together U.S. and Iranian scientists during this period. The National Academy of Science (NAS), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), along with the State Department, are also at the forefront promoting these projects. Most of them focus particularly in the health field, where Iran has a long tradition of research, in areas such as biomedicine, neuroscience and telemedicine.<sup>41</sup> Various other small initiatives that engage in exchanges and short-term programs between American and Iranian scientists also exist. However, there is not a grand strategy that connects all the different institutions and agencies at work.



A 2009 team from Jackson State University visiting Iran to explore healthcare models to benefit low income communities in the Mississippi Delta.  
Photo Credit: Mohammad Shahbazi

Scientific collaboration can be an excellent path to open communication with countries like Iran. If it does not include sensitive fields of study like nuclear energy, science diplomacy can be a neutral area for cooperation, and in the process foster long-term goodwill among participants. Beyond that, it is one of the key areas where global perception of the U.S. remains relatively stable. Unfavorable views of American policy in general do not affect perceptions on the quality of U.S. higher education and research institutions.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

It may prove difficult for the United States to implement a greater variety and intensity of public diplomacy efforts if Iran upholds a policy of attacking diplomatic missions.

As Iran's population becomes more connected, the U.S. government's attempt to reach citizens via online platforms is justified, but that is only part of the struggle. Public diplomacy extends beyond virtual communication, and these efforts can only have long-lasting effects as components of a greater integrated strategy. A lot is being done to strengthen ties between Americans and Iranians—nonetheless, the uncoordinated and decentralized nature of these actions renders it difficult to paint an overall picture of their effects.

In the long-run, as a component of a comprehensive strategy, public diplomacy can help contribute to reducing the threat Iran poses to American and regional interests. In the immediate term, the focus of these efforts should be on establishing rapport with average Iranians. This could nurture an incredible asset—trust—and help dispel negative perceptions of the U.S.

While all of the programs in this paper can contribute to long-term goals, practitioners should be wary of

openly calling for or suggesting specific actions by the Iranian public. Doing so could jeopardize the entire effort and risk having it labeled as propaganda.

Ultimately, whatever leads to a free and democratic Iran must result from an entirely domestic, homegrown movement. U.S. public diplomacy should strive to foster relationships that can be called upon – from all sides – when that time comes.

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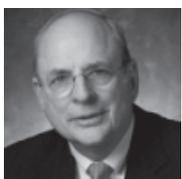
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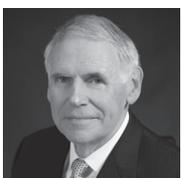
**Lee Cullum**

Lee Cullum, at one time a commentator on the PBS NewsHour and "All Things Considered" on NPR, currently contributes to the Dallas Morning News and hosts "CEO."



**Governor Christine Todd Whitman**

Christine Todd Whitman is the President of the Whitman Strategy Group, a consulting firm that specializes in energy and environmental issues.



**Admiral William Fallon, USN (Ret.)**

Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.

## Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



American Security Project

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