

Is Globalization Trumping Cultural Identity? The State of Iranian Studies in North America¹

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We are living in a new global century and an uncertain world order, where everyone is connected (thanks to the Internet) but no one is responsible.² Globalization (*jahani-shodan*) has been a mixed blessing, simultaneously strengthening the hands of democratic and anti-democratic forces. Perhaps the most important characteristic of life under globalization is that it has brought the countries of the world into closer contact. The process of globalization has cast many developing countries, rudderless, on a journey into the unknown, resulting in experiences that are socially rich, economically and culturally uncertain, and politically complex. Some Islamic scholars associate globalization with the “diabolical West” and “corporate hegemony,” arguing that globalization, especially in its cultural and economic forms, is the latest stage of Western neo-imperialism.³ It is too early to determine whether globalization is a progressive or regressive force or whether it has a prescriptive-normative or descriptive-empirical meaning. But merely on the human level, one could argue that globalization has made resistance in the global marketplace an effective and powerful tool.

On the positive side, people of different cultures have established contacts with each other beyond any government’s control. They have formed institutions of global civil society capable of coordinating a system of intransigence and resistance. Reform from below through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individual citizens has presented a legitimate alternative to neoliberal globalization and traditional power politics.⁴

On the negative side, local cultures seem to be cracking at the seams, with their foundations crumbling amid the

onslaught of globalization. Rejection of globalizing tendencies, as Richard Falk aptly notes, is often expressed by the resurgence of religious and ethnic politics in various extremist forms.⁵ How do we make sense of these turbulent times? Globalization of the economy and ideas of freedom undoubtedly are among the highest achievements of our times. So are the more widespread respect for diversity and tolerance and the promotion of equality, which are shared by all human civilizations.

An important debate in the globalizing world of the post-Cold War era concerns the question of whether the international community should press for the adoption of universal values. Some experts have asserted that "If there is a universal ethical standard in the world, we have not yet discovered it."⁶ A tension between meeting the requirements of universality (*jahan-shomooli*) on the one hand and fulfilling the obligations toward our particular cultural communities on the other hand lies at the heart of this challenge. We are the generation of Iranians beginning to grapple with this crucial intellectual struggle and cultural transition, and we surely cannot be indifferent to the disturbing aspects of globalization: rising inequality, spiritual emptiness, environmental degradation, social breakdown, and identity crisis. Nor can we afford to be blasé about preserving our cultural heritage. One does not have to be a moral absolutist or poststructuralist to argue that "diversity is a fundamental reality."⁷ Several questions energize this discourse: (1) is the relation between globalization and diversity contradictory and paradoxical? (2) are multiculturalism and globalization radically at odds? And (3) is the hope of any reconciliation between the two far-fetched? In what follows, we examine the state of Iranian studies in North America with a view toward analyzing the impact of the evolutionary process of change on such studies. Special attention is given to the state of Iranian studies at the University of Toronto.

The Challenge of Globalization

In his seminal book, *Globalization on Trial*, Farhang Rajaei of Carleton University, Ottawa, argues the need for a new thinking about globalization and formulating priorities, one which is based on holistic, multidisciplinary, and multicultural paradigm, with "pluralism, dialogue, celebration of the other, civility, global responsibility, and constant learning as its main components."⁸

Increasingly, scholars argue that a more complete understanding of globalization requires a comprehension of its cultural aspects. Seen from this perspective, the voices of those adversely affected by it and those who resist it must be taken seriously. "The more plausible use of culture as one component of an explanation," in the words of James H. Mittelman, "is the appreciation of subjective and selective orientations in contingent terms, including the capacity of both the state and resistance movements to mobilize these resources under given conditions."⁹

The issue before us is how to promote Iranian studies in North America amid the intruding process of globalization. It is desirable, and even necessary, to have a dialogue about what part of our cultural tradition must be retained and what part is disposable. Not every tradition is worthy of upholding. In Iran, for instance, the clergy traditionally has imposed its interpretation of the Islamic law (*Shari'a*) on the individual members of the community. Increasingly, this tradition has come under critical scrutiny. AbdulKarim Soroush, a professor of philosophy at Tehran University, maintains that "neither a single cleric nor a clerical group can claim to provide the true interpretation of Islam." ¹⁰ Pre-modern traditions and orthodox interpretations of Islamic canon law can no longer meet today's modern challenges. Jurisdic traditions, dominated by patriarchal social relations and structures, continue to present the most daunting impediment to any improvements in women's rights in the Muslim world. It has become difficult to avoid reconciling cultural "authenticity" (*essalat-e farhangee*) with "modernity" (*tajadod*).¹¹ Given that Islamic law is not static, it must be changed in line with evolving conditions and needs, especially with regard to gender inequalities.¹²

Dialogue and engagement about these issues, however, may not be enough to achieve cultural recognition, much less to sustain cultural diversity. Those who are interested in the preservation of Persian life and culture—be they students, specialists, or the educated general reader—must take on the responsibility of reviving cultural traditions, Islamic history, folklore, and those aspects of the culture that are vitally significant to our heritage.

The challenge, however, is to confront those monistic traditions that do not meet the *necessary* and *minimal* requirements of modernity and internationally recognized human rights standards. Global human rights, which brook no

cultural exceptionalism, rarely pose a threat to any legitimate interest in cultural self-preservation.¹³ From out of cultural diversity it is possible to trace certain common threads: freedom, social justice, and fairness. The claim of cultural authenticity, as some scholars remind us, should not be allowed to forgo the conversation on human rights. Nor should the sensitivity to the cultural values of others be allowed to degenerate into the dogma of culturalism.¹⁴ To guard against dogmatism, it is essential to “avoid the parochialism and intolerance that a sense of cultural difference can breed.”¹⁵

It is wrong to think that an exposure to the ethos of globalization will trump cultural diversity, but threats from globalization remain very real, absent any systematic efforts on the part of Iranian immigrants to preserve their cultural legacy. The fact remains that few countries today can escape entirely from globalization and its consequences. To defend cultural diversity at the expense of globalization is too naïve and costly. This logic puts the cart before the horse. Globalization can be utilized to revive one’s cultural identity by simultaneous processes of integration and construction. Coming to grips with these realities never ceases to challenge and provoke.

The Declining State of Iranian Studies

How have Iranian studies fared in this process? It is not clear whether globalization has assisted or impeded the state of Iranian studies. For the most part, the declining state of Iranian studies in North America can be explained by factors unrelated to globalization. Iranian scholars generally tend to reject the claim that Farsi suffers from some inherent deficiency in the modern world, blaming Iranians themselves for their deficient linguistic competence and not the language itself.¹⁶ Of the many factors that account for such a state of affairs, several merit serious considerations. First, and the most important factor, is the lack of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States of America: The current state of affairs prevents the exchange of students between Iran and the United States. The result is a lack of access to Iranian academic resources and archeological sites, as well as a lack of fellowship and endowed chairs in North American universities. In the absence of the flow of Iranian books and magazines to American educational institutions, very few American—and I will suppose Canadian—students seem to be keen on learning

about Iranian culture. Put simply, without political connections, cultural links are certain to taper off.

The second reason has to do with the lingering anti-Westernization posturing and anti-American sentiments: The expression of xenophobic sentiments and related posturing on the part of Iran are historically situated, yet they can be totally misunderstood and manipulated. Today, such sentiments, according to Manochehr Kashef, the editor of *Encyclopedia Iranica*, appear to be “a pretension to anti-US prejudice, if not a genuine anti-US prejudice.” Such posturing has substantially undermined the future of Iranian studies in the West in general and in the United States in particular. The failure to come to grips with the West, along with the ongoing misconceptions about its role in the world, has led to a pervasive but hugely flawed perception that the gaps between the two civilizations are irreconcilable.

The third explanation is that the Iranian government’s lack of material and moral support for Iranian studies has seriously undercut the expansion of cultural domains in the West. Promoting Iranian studies abroad requires a manifest political commitment and will on the part of the Iranian government. Sadly, that commitment is conspicuously lacking. Many Iranian-American or Iranian-Canadian scholars regard this lack of support as a major hurdle to promoting Iranian studies in the West. Nayereh Tohidi, Professor of Iranian Studies at the California State University-Northridge, and Mahnaz Afkhami, the Director of the Foundation for Iranian Studies (*Bonyad-e Motala-at-e Iran*), Bethesda, Maryland, point to the Turkish government’s support for and commitment to the promotion of Turkish language and cultural heritage in the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union and throughout Europe as well as North America. Aside from the geopolitics of such support, the effort to invest in such cultural endeavors by the Turkish government has been and continues to be instrumental in revitalizing Turkish life and culture across the globe. The contrast with what the Iranian government has done in this regard is distressingly stark.

Fourth, with the exception of a few universities on the West Coast of the United State, such as the University of California at Loss Angeles, universities and colleges in the West and North America more generally have continued to terminate courses and programs having to do with Iranian studies, blaming it on a lack of interest on the part of students, fewer prospective jobs, or the absence of research sites and

field work opportunities. Pre-Islamic studies were thrown into the dustbin of history at Columbia University almost a decade ago. Likewise, Germany's archeological research centers in Iran were shut down in the aftermath of 1979 Iranian Revolution.¹⁷

And finally, the paucity of economic resources and desirable attitudes has exacerbated the state of Iranian studies in North America. Iranian immigrants or the so-called "diaspora community" pays little or no attention to its own cultural heritage and does very little to preserve its cultural identity. Iranian communities throughout North America are doing little in the way of promulgating their cultural predilections and interests. Even though this task, as noted above, is clearly the responsibility of the Iranian government, there is a need for individual Iranians who live in the West to be the primary provider of such support. Dr. Hossain Ziai, Professor of Iranian Studies at UCLA, argues that "the successful and well off members of the Iranian community have shown tepid interest in promoting Iranian identity and culture. Without their financial support no endowed chair will ever be created or sustained." If this trend continues, not much can be expected from the second- and third-generation Iranians born in such communities. This lack of attention at times verges on indifference. The indifference to the tension between globalization and cultural diversity is premised on the belief that we do not have a stake in such a struggle—or if you pardon the expression, we do not have a dog in that fight. Such a belief taunts not only our conscience but also our dignity as immigrants.

Iranian Studies at the University of Toronto

Iranian studies at the University of Toronto face many difficulties. At the university level, Iranian studies encounter a twofold problem: not only is the university reluctant to fund such programs adequately, but more specifically, the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations shows a lackluster commitment to maintaining high academic standards in this field. Increasingly, the university is relying on outside contributions to maintain and promote specific cultural study areas. Consider, for example, the status of South Asian and Hebrew Studies. These studies receive donations from domestic and international benefactors. Iranian studies, in contrast, noticeably lack such benefactors.

At the departmental level, several major issues merit consideration. The department's mandate is multidisciplinary. This leads to competition between the various branches of study at the departmental level. Hebrew studies, for instance, receive an inordinate amount of attention, in large part because of the many outside benefactors and also their effective lobbying power within the university system. Furthermore, the department tries to keep Iranian studies as the exclusive domain of the few scholars already there. There are very few internationally renowned scholars teaching in the department, with no experts on Iranian studies.

The second problem is a lack of support by the Iranian government, which has devoted no major funding to the promotion of Iranian studies and culture in Canada. Iranian officials have frequently promised funding, but so far such promises have proven empty. As recently as the 2001 CIRA Conference, an official from the Iranian embassy pledged assistance and even met with the head of the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. No action has thus far been taken by the embassy, however. If the Iranian government has taken few steps in supporting the Iranian diaspora in Canada, the latter has seldom turned to the former for assistance either. This is largely attributable to the mistrust that exists between the two. An analysis of what accounts for such mistrust is beyond the scope of this study, but the fact remains that this pervasive level of the mistrust presents huge barriers to progress in the promotion of Iranian studies and in the overall cultural status of the Iranian community.

Finally, the Iranian community of Toronto is largely apathetic to its own cultural affairs. With over 70,000 Iranians, Toronto is home to the largest Iranian concentration in Canada. Nevertheless, there are neither community-wide coordinated programs nor an Iranian community center in Toronto. To make matters even worse, the Iranian community in Toronto has yet to take initiative in maintaining its identity or even to lobby for its rights. Given that the two previously discussed avenues are non-productive, it is fair to say that the responsibility for promoting Iranian studies ultimately rests with the Iranian community—a responsibility that thus far has not been taken seriously.

Course Offerings

The following is a brief description of the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of

Toronto. Middle Eastern Studies have been taught at the University of Toronto in one form or another for the past 150 years. At present, the department is "concerned with the interdisciplinary study of the civilizations and cultures of the Near and Middle East from neolithic times until the present, including their languages and literatures (Akkadian; Arabic; Aramaic; Syriac; ancient Egyptian; Hellenistic Greek; rabbinic, mediaeval and modern Hebrew; Persian and Turkish), archeology, history, art, and architecture."¹⁸

It is within this interdisciplinary context that Persian and Iranian studies in general are taught. There are no undergraduate Iranian/Persian studies programs. The department offers specialist, major and minor programs in 'Ancient Near Eastern Studies,' 'Hebrew Language and Literature,' and 'Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.' Major programs are also offered in 'Middle Eastern and Islamic History,' 'Islamic Religion and Thought,' and 'Islamic Languages and Literature.' At the graduate level, a 'Persian Studies' program is offered. Unfortunately, Iranian studies have been going through a major decline in recent years. The following is a list of courses that are directly related to Iranian civilization. Many courses, though listed in the department handbook, have not been offered for the last few years, and it is doubtful that they will be taught in the near future.

Undergraduate:

*Persian for Beginners and Elementary Persian*¹⁹
Offered 2000-2001
N. Danesh

*Intermediate Persian and Intermediate Persian Language Practice*²⁰
Offered 2001-2002
N. Danesh

The Iranian Short Story
Has not been offered since 1999
Formerly taught by Dr. R. Sandler, however no lecturer at present.

Survey of Classical Persian Literature
Has not been offered since 1998

Formerly taught by Dr. M. Subtelny, however no lecturer at present.

Turkey and Iran in the Twentieth Century
Offered 2000-2001
Dr. A. Hassanpur

History of Mediaeval Iran and Central Asia
Offered 1999-2000
Formerly taught by Dr. M. Subtelny, however no lecturer at present.

Graduate:

Contemporary Middle Eastern Women's Writing
Not offered 2000-2001
Dr. R. Sandler

Studies in Classical Persian Literature
Not offered 2000-2001
Dr. M. Subtelny

Persian Mystical Poetry
Offered 2000-2001
Dr. M. Subtelny

Readings in Mediaeval Persian Historical and Documentary Sources
Offered 2000-2001
Dr. M. Subtelny

Literature and Society in Twentieth-Century Iran
Not offered 2000-2001
Dr. R. Sandler

Persian Literature in the Diaspora
Offered 2000-2001
Dr. R. Sandler

With the retirement of Professors Subtelny and Sandler, the courses taught by them are in danger of being cancelled indefinitely, as the department appears less inclined to fill their vacant positions in the near future. The graduate course-list has yet to be determined. It is, however, unlikely that any courses will be offered in 2001-2002 for the reasons expressed earlier. At the undergraduate level, only one course (Intermediate Persian) will be offered in 2001-2002.

The Challenges Ahead

There are few stiffer challenges than explaining how important it is that we assert our cultural heritage so that global forces never strip our children of their cultural identity. Culture shapes interest-based social processes that reinforce or undermine the sum total ways of life, including the material dimension of life.²¹ Culture may then be “seen as a vehicle in the search for new themes and ordering propositions.”²² Thus conceived, Iranian studies are important to both Iranians living in the West and their children as way of maintaining their cultural identity and Westerners who need to understand the diversity of experience, culture, and beliefs in an increasingly multicultural world. By bringing their culture into the mainstream of American national life, Iranian can break down some of the prevailing stereotypes.²³ When faced with cultural differences, identity formation and family functioning could be very critical to communications between parents and children and consequently to the stability of the family.²⁴ Sensitivity to other cultures is certain to enhance tolerance in our growing multicultural setting—not to mention living in an interdependent world.

Multiple identities or shifting identities need not—and indeed should not—dampen one’s cultural heritage. To be sure, the tensions between dominant and native cultures are unavoidable, as are the confusions between personal and social identity. “Iranian-American adolescents,” as one study suggests, “may experience confusion in dealing with their self-identity and their self-image while trying to function in two conflicting cultures.”²⁵ The task of identifying with and accommodating to two different cultures requires that, as Bahareh Sharghi points out, immigrant populations support their adolescents in the search for identity, an identity that could lead to “a positive self-image by balancing ethnic cultural values while living within the cultural norms of the dominant culture.”²⁶

Likewise, the key is to find a right balance among Iranian, Islamic, and Western values—three influences that have historically interacted with each other as part of an evolutionary process. Our ancestors had to struggle for the proper equilibrium among such values. So should we. In fact, some scholars argue, “we have not had a dominant and popular paradigm about pure Iranian thought, pure Western thought, or pure Islamic thought in any modern period.”²⁷

What can CIRA do to help?

The purpose of this talk is not to argue that cultural studies are high on the lists of priorities of the CIRA's agenda. This is a judgment that conference participants themselves should render. I submit, however, that CIRA's annual meetings are not about scholarship and dialogue alone; they are also about a call to action by those who care and feel responsible. Preserving our cultural group/identity is essential not only for the sake of multiculturalism but also for the equality of respect and recognition. I concur with Charles Taylor when he argues that equality of respect and recognition forges identity.²⁸ Yet, although it is easy to call attention to the salience of such issues, practical solutions rest ultimately on collective action. The core question for our consideration is what kind of action-agenda we can pursue together. CIRA can play a meaningful part in building as well as nudging along such an action-agenda by:

- Voicing its protest over closing down centers of Iranian studies in North American universities. This can be done by coordinating with many NGOs such as the Foundation for Iranian Studies (*Bonyad-e Motala-at-e Iran*), which is dedicated to the preservation, study, and transmission of Iran's cultural heritage.²⁹
- Helping to hold conferences at universities throughout North America, while publicizing and mobilizing efforts aimed at the renewal of Iranian studies by devoting numerous workshops and panels to Iranian art, film making, music, photography, and anthropological studies.
- Creating a cultural center in a major city, such as Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, or Washington, D.C., as well as encouraging Iranians to donate books, money, and gifts to the center. The symbolic value of such a cultural center alone may well surpass our expectations.

In conclusion, if our cultural heritage is not to be trumped by globalization, the Iranian community in North America must do more. *Ultimately, responsibility falls squarely upon the Iranian community itself.* It is vitally significant that we take full advantage of the democratic setting in which we live to do whatever it takes for the recognition of our distinct cultural traditions and equality. Just as the obstacles are many and the task before us colossal, so

too are the opportunities and means at our disposal in an age of globalization. As the old saying goes, if there is a will, there is a way.

Endnotes

- ¹ The earlier version of this paper was presented at the 19th Annual Meeting of the Center for Iranian Research and Analysis, at the University of Toronto, Canada, April 28-29, 2001.
- ² We are especially indebted to Manochehr Kashef, Nayere'h Tohidi, Mahnaz Afkhami, Hossain Ziai, Shahram Kholdi, Mehdi Baghi, and Ismael Shakeri for sharing their insights with us.
- ³ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 53-64; see p. 57.
- ⁴ Roundtable, "Effects of Globalization on the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 2000, pp. 1-30; see pp. 11 and 15. Also see Richard Falk, *The Predatory Globalization: A Critique*, London: Polity Press, 1999, chapters 8 and 9.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ⁶ Ali Mazrui, "Pretender to Universalism: Western Culture in a Globalizing Age," *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 33-45; see p. 45.
- ⁷ I borrowed this terminology and modified it for my argument here from a book review in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No.1, March 2001, p. 267.
- ⁸ Farhang Rajaei, *Globalization on Trial: The Human Conditions and the Information Civilization*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2000, p. 130.
- ⁹ James H. Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome: Transformation and Resistance*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 27.
- ¹⁰ For more on this, see Dariush Zahedi, *The Iranian Revolution, Then and Now: Indicators of Regime Stability*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000, p. 49.
- ¹¹ Mahmood Monshipouri, "Islam and Human Rights: From Authenticity to Modernity," *American Muslim Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1997, pp. 19-32; see p. 31.
- ¹² Hossein Mehrpour, "Islam and Human Rights," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. VII, No. 4, Winter 1996-97, pp. 729-760; see p. 754.
- ¹³ Thomas M. Franck, "Are Human Rights Universal?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 1, January/February 2001, pp. 191-204; see pp. 193 and 202.
- ¹⁴ This argument is attributed to Ken Booth in Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, eds., *Human Rights in Global Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 6.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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- ¹⁶ See the review of Abbas Milani, *Modernity and the Struggle Against Modernity in Iran*, Tehran: Atiyeh Publishing House, 1999, by Dr. Seyed Assadollah Athary-Maryan, *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2000, pp. 243-265; see p. 252.
- ¹⁷ Dr. Manochehr Kashef raised this and similar issues with me in this connection.
- ¹⁸ For further details, see *Department Handbook, 2001-2002*.
- ¹⁹ Previously one course but as of 2000-2001, the classes have been split into two courses, one for native speakers and the other for non-native speakers.
- ²⁰ Previously one course but as of 2000-2001, the classes have been split into two courses, one for native speakers and the other one for non-native speakers.
- ²¹ James H. Mittelman, op. cit., p. 27. Mittelman attributes this statement to Raymond Williams.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ A similar point is made about Muslims in America. See Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Community Now Coming Into Its Own," *The US Today*, April 26, 2001, p. 7D.
- ²⁴ Bahareh Amid-Hozour Sharghi, "Iranian-American Adolescents' Self-Concept," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 1, April 2001, pp. 66-81; see p. 75
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 73.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 76.
- ²⁷ Seyed Asadollah Athary Maryan, "Challenge Between Tradition and Modernity in Iran," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 2000, pp. 61-98; see p. 93.
- ²⁸ See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 25-73; see p. 66.
- ²⁹ For more information on the Foundation for Iranian Studies, see <<http://www.fis-iran.org>>.