

## Iran Project: Fellowship Report – Shahab Ghalambor

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As I find myself approaching the final days of my time at New York Law School, it is perhaps unavoidable that I reflect on some of the memorable experiences that have defined my education. Without a doubt, my Iran Project Fellowship with the Center for International Law and Network 20/20 stands out as both the most challenging and rewarding experience that I could ever have hoped for as a law student. In this report, I plan to briefly report on the details of the project, the benefits I received from my participation, and describe why I believe that other students would benefit greatly from taking part in similar endeavors.

The Center for International Law first joined forces with Network 20/20 on the Iran Project in the summer of 2006. Matthew Abrams and I – both 3L students who were enlisted to serve as Fellows on the project – began working with Professor Tai-Heng Cheng and Dr. Patricia Huntington in August. Although Network 20/20 had been exploring the issues surrounding the United States' relations with Iran for several years, it is safe to say that the Iran Project looks very different in retrospect than it did in the early days of our involvement. In fact, the goals of the project evolved dramatically as we experimented with research techniques and strived to overcome the many challenges we faced along the way.

The project began as an endeavor to analyze the involvement of international organizations and civic groups operating within Iran. To narrow our search, we primarily focused on environmental groups, health organizations (particularly those who dealt with HIV/AIDS and narcotics treatment), and women's rights. Our goal was to find ways in which Iranian civil society had sought to tackle some of the domestic challenges they face and identify areas in which NGOs in the United States could collaborate with their

Iranian counterparts without controversy. Working initially on the internet, we learned very quickly that there are countless organizations working toward solutions to these problems; the environmental groups alone numbered in the hundreds as I recall. General information on these groups was readily accessible, but we experienced great difficulty tracking down actual contacts that would be willing to speak with us about their work. The barriers to communication that we experienced led to a gradual shifting of our focus – as well as the goals of the project – to trying to identify the reasons why our two societies are separated by such a clear rift.

By late September, the project began to focus on laying the groundwork for a sizable delegation to Iran. The purpose of the trip was clear – to assess the situation on the ground while deepening our relationship with the various contacts that we had made. As the trip approached, Matt and I worked feverishly to try to find some hard data or information that could be expanded while the delegation was in Iran. We came up short in many ways, but thankfully were part of a talented team of individuals who were able to establish contacts. The weeks that preceded the Iran trip, at least for myself, were filled with growing excitement and anticipation.

The experience of traveling to Iran for two short weeks in November was nothing short of unforgettable. In an instant, I was struck not only by the significance of the Iran Project and the small possibility that we could contribute to the national dialogue, but also by my personal return to the country where I was born. Having emigrated from Iran to California at the age of four, I had very few memories of my childhood home. I was lucky enough to spend some time in Tehran with family that I had not seen in over twenty-three years, to tour my childhood home, and to speak with countless Iranians on the street about the challenges they face on an everyday basis. Despite the images

we see in America and the inflammatory rhetoric that emanates from both sides of the debate, Iranians are among the most friendly and hospitable group of people that American tourists can hope to encounter. Whether we spoke to teenagers on the street, elderly merchants in the bazaars, or high-level dignitaries in their homes, we were treated with respect and admiration – a constant reminder that Iranian civil society is perhaps the closest we could ever come to a natural, cultural ally in the Middle East. Unlike many of their Arab neighbors, Iranians are receptive to western culture and lifestyle; they are not fanatics.

Our on-the-ground observations of Iranian civil society, and our many interviews while in Iran, led us to conclude that there were indeed many areas in which non-governmental organizations could collaborate in the future without controversy. So long as groups steered clear of certain subjects, such as women's rights – which are viewed by some as a pretext for the stated goals of the Bush administration, including regime change – they would have little trouble working with their American counterparts. Of course, the process of deepening those relationships is difficult to accomplish without renewing our diplomatic channels of communication with Iran, which have been severed for over a quarter of a century.

The personal benefits I received from my tenure as a Fellow on the Iran Project have been immeasurable. It was an opportunity to reconnect with my culture. It was an opportunity to reconnect with my undergraduate area of interest – international relations. Most importantly, it was an opportunity for me to step outside of the traditional routine that consumes law students from the very first days of law school. Instead of writing motions, briefs, or helping with negotiations at a local firm, I was able to take part in what I consider to be a historic endeavor that is both relevant and

profoundly important to our Nation's foreign policy objectives. Throughout the process, I grew very close to my colleagues on the project, and made countless friends with whom I hope to remain in contact throughout my life. It was an experience unlike anything that I have ever even heard of law students taking part in, and I feel privileged for being given the opportunity to do my small part to help.

The administration of New York Law School, and the Center for International Law in particular, should be commended for providing us with this rare opportunity. Too often, our experiences in law school focus *solely* toward the practice of law. My fellowship was a truly refreshing chance to contribute to the foundation of *all* law: public policy. It is important that future students be afforded the chance to take part in similar projects, both in terms of their personal growth and the growth of our great institution. As we train our students for the practice of law, we must not forget to train them to remember the big picture – our beloved country's role in the world – and to seek pragmatic solutions to the difficult issues of the day. My experience as a Fellow on the Iran Project was a stunning example of an experience which has inspired me to faithfully remember our motto: *Learn Law, Take Action*.