



Next Stop: Iran

The goal of the New York Law project is to forge ties with a nation at odds with the United States.



Members of the Iran Project team include, from left, Shahab D. Ghalambor, Tai-Heng Cheng and Matthew B. Abrams.

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RICK KOPSTEIN

BY EMILY HELLER

While the governments of Iran and the United States remain locked in a high-profile standoff, a foreign policy project at New York Law School is quietly under way to connect young professionals here with their Iranian counterparts.

The Iran Project is a collaboration between New York Law's Center for International Law and Network 20/20, a New York-based nonprofit organization of 200 young workers in 30 professions in the United States.

The program has several components. First is identifying and describing what the 20,000 nongovernmental organizations working in Iran have managed to accomplish. Next, a delegation from Network 20/20 and the law school will travel to Iran this fall. Then, in early 2007,

the project will present its findings before an international conference.

Two third-year New York Law students—Matthew B. Abrams and Shahab D. Ghalambor—have been named Network 20/20 fellows to work on the project.

Mr. Abrams said he has been conducting online research on Iranian civil society “as it is formed on the Internet.” His online research has branched out to contacting professors in the United States and Europe to gain a “subjective appraisal” of the situation in Iran, he said.

He said he has been surprised by the number and variety of Iranian groups represented on the Internet.

“There’s everything from women’s groups and environmental groups to a filmmakers’ society and anti-drug groups,” said Mr. Abrams. “It’s an encouraging step.”

Mr. Ghalambor, who immigrated with his family to the United States from Iran when he was 4 and speaks Farsi, Iran’s official language, is one of the 10-member delegation headed to the country.

“It will be a tremendous opportunity to reconnect with my culture and see my country,” he said.

And, he said, he is looking forward to making a concrete contribution to the world stage.

“It’s a great opportunity to be part of a project outside of the school and that might actually make a difference that will shape policy in the next couple of years,” said Mr. Ghalambor.

The project’s goal is to establish collegial ties between the private sectors of the two countries. The program seeks to give young lawyers and other early-career professionals

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School’s Iran Project

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an understanding of foreign cultures and issues as well as train them in the art of international diplomacy.

“Government-to-government relations between the U.S. and Iran are as a legal and factual matter nonexistent,” said Tai-Heng Cheng, a charter member of Network 20/20 and an associate director at the law school’s international law center.

Nongovernmental organizations need to fill that vacuum, he said.

“So much of the Iran question as it is framed today involves the nuclear question,” said Mr. Cheng, another member of the delegation. “What we would like to do with this project is to reframe the question. We would like to change the story from one of conflict to a story of cooperation.”

Citing concerns for their safety, Mr. Cheng declined to provide specifics about other delegation members and their mission.

“More and more people are coming to us expressing an interest... But for the moment we have to respect their request for anonymity so we do not put their lives in danger,” he said.

Mr. Cheng noted, however, that the group hoped to meet with Iranian educational officials.

The Iran project is an example of the school’s declared mission: “Learn law. Take action,” Mr. Cheng said.

“At New York Law School we really do see the law school and all its components as participating in global decisions,” he said. “We don’t just

profess to the students but we ourselves are involved in global decisions.”

Merely talking about legal theory unrelated to the practice of law does not do enough to prepare students, said New York Law Dean Richard A. Matasar.

The Iran project is one of several partnership programs in which students work outside the classroom. Law clinics provide one way for students to gain experience by doing work for individual clients, he said. In these larger partnership projects—in which New York Law School works with corporations, government agencies, nonprofit groups and other schools—there is no client.

“The general public is the beneficiary,” said Mr. Matasar.

“More and more people are coming to us expressing an interest,” said Mr. Cheng.

Network 20/20

The law school’s partner in the Iran project, Network 20/20, has a track record of similar programs focusing on Turkey and Poland, said Mr. Cheng, who was involved in both of those projects but was not serving on the law school faculty at the time.

Network 20/20’s objective is to train future heads of business and government and nongovernmental organizations for a clearer understanding of foreign affairs, cultures and customs.

A Network 20/20 report on the Iran project raised the question: “Twenty years from now, when business leaders and policy makers from the United States and countries of pivotal concern for global peace sit down at the negotiating table, will they meet as strangers or as colleagues with a history of cooperation?”

Providing financial support for the project is the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in New York, which has given Network 20/20 \$75,000 since 2004, according to fund spokeswoman Gail Fuller. Another supporter is the Flora Family Foundation in Menlo Park, Calif., which gave \$30,000, said foundation President Steve Toben.

The key to the group is its independence, said Patricia Huntington, Network 20/20’s president.

Private delegations traveling to foreign countries have an advantage because they often get better access than government-sponsored groups, she said. Leaders in business, academia, nonprofit and religious groups “talk more freely with us,” she said.

Another factor is that Network 20/20 views itself as an international, not an American, organization, Ms. Huntington said.

The program has not sought the approval of the U.S. State Department or any government agency, Mr. Cheng said. Overcoming Iranians’ distrust of the U.S. government is one of several challenges.

“Our view is, the bigger the challenge the more important the project and the greater the potential to make a positive difference,” Mr. Cheng said.

— Emily Heller is a freelance writer. A version of this article first appeared in *The National Law Journal*, an ALM affiliate of the New York Law Journal.