The Citizens’ Affair: Sports and Tourism in Post-1998 United States-Iran Relations

By David Kessler

This paper explores the phenomenon known as “citizen diplomacy” as it pertains to United States-Iranian relations since 1997 (when Mohammed Khatami was inaugurated as President of Iran). Citizen diplomacy, broadly defined, refers to contact between ordinary citizens of different nations, in such contexts as sports, education, tourism, and business; this study’s focus is twofold: on organized athletic competitions and tourism. As described in the paper’s conclusion, these unscripted encounters are best seen not as an automatic prelude to diplomatic relations, but rather as a sui generis way to re-humanize the other—to ensure that United States-Iranian diplomatic relations, whenever they arrive, are reinforced by positive and meaningful cultural relations.
The traditionally well-regarded diplomatic channels have failed to reconcile the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. In many ways, diplomacy has provided interested Iranian or American parties with little more than a platform to send vaguely positive messages or invitations to the other side. As each side continues to ignore, scoff, or balk at the other’s diplomatic advances, some less conventional methods of reconciliation have gained appeal. These alternatives—which promise to inspire future rapprochement—target and rely upon the Iranian and American people, and are thus classified as “citizen diplomacy.” Understanding the aim of citizen diplomacy between Iran and the United States (which began in earnest during the first term of Reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami) involves grasping the difference in each nation’s perceptions: many Iranians have long viewed Americans favorably, yet most Americans are unaware of Iranians’ goodwill and continue to see them as “somehow genetically programmed to burn the American flag and shout ‘Death to America.’”

To achieve success on this front is to update Americans on Iranians’ convictions and to create some basis for inter-cultural understanding. Although Americans’ stereotypes are not easily dismantled, citizen diplomacy has two dynamic, engaging tools at its disposal: sports and tourism. These two avenues for diplomacy, unlike classic methods, have allowed for real progress in the American-Israeli relationship because they depend primarily upon the efforts and interests of regular citizens, not on the vagaries of Iranian and American politics. Accordingly, athletes, travel correspondents, and tourists are the vanguard of these initiatives, which are geared towards discovering Iran’s human side and advertising it for both nations’ benefit.

**SPORTS DIPLOMACY EXPLORED**

Sports, by nature, involve intense competition, rivalry, and conflict, none of which would seem useful in reconciling nations like the United States and Iran. Though these elements may appear to serve a counter-diplomatic end, contemporary sports diplomacy manages to minimize or even capitalize on them. In contrast to the Cold War years when sports were exploited by nations aligned with or against the Soviet Bloc, the decade following the Soviet Union’s collapse has marked a decline in political athletic strife and has allowed sports diplomacy to take a positive and ameliorating role. The competitive realities of international sporting matches are very salient in the twenty-first century. Successful sports diplomacy, however, confines these rivalries strictly to the playing field, or even sublimates them into something bilaterally constructive. The end result, in both cases, is to emphasize similarities over differences between both nations’ players and fans, thereby making an eventual rapprochement possible: “Although sports historically have been used to demonstrate the superiority of one system (or people) over another, it can now be an avenue to demonstrate similarities and bring societies (and people) closer together, preparing the way for eventual public policy changes.” According to one official at the US State Department, sports-based diplomacy entails far more than the superficial element of international rivalry and competition despite the media’s tendency to depict some sporting events as highly politicized nationalistic struggles. Indeed, sports diplomacy is predicated on the notion that everyday citizens are captivated more by the shared humanity they observe in the stadium than by the fierce metaphors deployed by journalists and television commentators. Much of the media coverage might depict international sports as hotly contested bouts concluding with one nation’s total and decisive triumph, but the field is better viewed as a means to symbolize cooperation through competition. When executed properly, international sporting events are now an outlet for popular diplomatic partnership rather than for the rabid nationalism that they were once known to ignite.

A member of the State Department has called “respect for diversity, leadership, teamwork, and dialogue” the fundamentals of sports diplomacy. Even if other forms of cultural exchange can impart similar ideals, sports arguably broadcast them most easily to the highest number of citizens, including the disenfranchised. The factor of popular appeal distinguishes sports from more conventional diplomacy in at least one expert’s estimation: “Notwithstanding the value that academic, scientific, and even military-to-military exchanges have in bringing about cultural understanding among participants, it is sport that receives the mass media coverage and involves the

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broader public. From a diplomatic standpoint, then, sports boast a much-needed capacity to attract and unify a large national audience with little distinction between race, religion, or social class. Perhaps, as a scholar of sports sociology has remarked, sports’ universalism stems from its interactive qualities:

Sports exchanges and international competitions provide perhaps the greatest single opportunity for people-to-people contact and communication—more so even than music or art because with sports, the fans—the people—tend to be so much more actively involved in the creative athletic achievements. Witness the impact of that thousands of cheering fans have upon the performances of athletes and teams receiving such adulation.

It is evident why sports hold such tremendous potential as a public form of diplomacy, given their strength in engaging the public on a personal level; fans in an international sporting match may not always cheer for the opposing national team, but they often feel a strong—even personal—connection to its players. This connection may soon extend to that nation’s fans, and ultimately, towards everyday citizens of the opponent country. If orchestrated well, a simple soccer match can thereby fulfill the diplomat’s seemingly lofty wish, by allowing a newly-formed, positive impression of his country to permeate a very large audience.

An often-cited example of the merits of sports diplomacy is the “ping-pong diplomacy” between the United States and China in 1971. A study of this case reveals, *inter alia*, that such sports diplomat claims as “the real benefits...have nothing to do with wins or losses, and more to do with celebrating our [international] shared experiences” are not unrealistic, and that for the architects of sports diplomacy, the actual game is almost ceremonial. After competing in the World Table Tennis Tournament in Nagoya, Japan, in early 1971 the American team received an invitation to play the Chinese team in China’s Great Hall of the People. The next week on April 6, the two national teams met in a highly publicized athletic dialogue. The mere sight of Americans players in China resonated deeply with the American and Chinese populaces; Chou Enali’s statement “I am confident that this beginning again of our friendship will certainly meet with majority support of our two peoples” signified the importance of this public athletic spectacle. Which team actually won the matches soon became a trivial detail of history, but the episode itself served as an ideal prelude to the ensuing détente in Sino-American relations. With the visit of President Nixon the following year, ping-pong diplomacy may be thought of as the crowning moment of sports diplomacy, because it united two disparate populations in a way that only something as powerfully engaging and truly popular as sports can.

**The Promise of Sports Diplomacy for United States-Iranian Relations**

Sports diplomacy can repair many kinds of international relationships, but it is remarkably well suited for improving relations between the United States and Iran. In a relationship fraught with misconceptions and negative stereotypes, sports contact—at least on the part of the United States—is an effective way to advertise the benefits of American democracy. To illustrate, a proponent of sports diplomacy has described a brief incident involving Turkish athletes: “It [sports diplomacy] is about Turkish participants approaching their U.S. counterparts after the game to talk about life in America. In providing opportunities like these, sports diplomacy is diplomacy at its best.” One could imagine the same situation with Iranians. Likewise, the American public could greatly benefit from a positive Iranian sports personality to counter the hitherto-resilient American image of Iranians as vicious and anti-Western crusaders. Here, sports diplomacy is also effectively, because “more than just being celebrated, athletes can replace dominant images that tend to dominate or demonize the other side.”

Perhaps the greatest advantage for the case of America and Iran is the relatively low risk factor. Particularly with events on Iranian soil, if the athletes and coaches are well-intentioned, then the fans will have a high chance of satisfaction. Unlike high-level talks, sports matches are not subject to intense governmental scrutiny (in fact, they often do not even require formal governmental approval), nor the associated high expectations. The simplest of spectacles, such as American and Iranian athletes occupying the same place, adhering to the same rules, and respecting each other’s abilities—essentially, allowing the professional athletes to perform their job—will suffice to impress and inspire countless American and Iranian citizens. To Americans, as long as the American flag is displayed without being burned or trampled upon, the message is already positive. What also makes sports diplomacy the perfect, low-risk first step in Washington-Tehran
diplomacy is that in the unlikely event that it fails to underscore the similarities between the American and Iranian squadrons, neither state is compelled to take any action. Furthermore, even a failure provides, at the very least, an accurate barometer of how ready the people of one nation may be to actually reconcile with the other. Even when compared to other forms of cultural exchanges — such as art, when something might unexpectedly be construed as “anti-Persian” or “un-Islamic” — there are few opportunities for mishaps or gaffes which only multiply the grievances and cumbersome apologies. In sum, when it comes to American-Iranian relations, nothing can be considered surefire, but sports diplomacy is clearly a very safe, yet potentially high yielding venture.

**Two Instances of US-Iran Sports Diplomacy: The Takthi Tournament and the 1998 World Cup**

Considering sports diplomacy’s promise for United States-Iran relations, it should not be surprising that sports have been recently applied to this relationship, and almost always with impressive results. Incidentally, one of the first known cases of sports diplomacy between the two nations occurred in 1950, when the Pennsylvania State University soccer team accepted an invitation by the Iranian Football Federation to visit Iran. Throughout their Iranian sojourn, the Americans were welcomed very warmly, leading the American team’s manager to observe, “the [Iranian and American] people have to learn to play together before they learn to work together.” Regrettably, the team manager’s words were apparently forgotten for the next forty-eight years — the next major American athletic delegation entered Iran in 1998, during the term of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. In a high-profile break with Islamic Republic precedent, the newly-inaugurated Reformist president cited sporting links as one means to overcome the American-Iranian cultural divide. Weeks after this call to crack the “wall of mistrust” separating American and Iranian athletes, an American organization called Search for a Common Ground—with the help of Bruce Laingin, the head official held hostage in 1980—helped send an American wrestling delegation to Iran. No Americans had entered the Islamic Republic in any official capacity since the bitter hostage crisis of 1979-1981, and naturally, the media hype was palpable. Comparisons to ping-pong diplomacy abounded, with articles such as “Wrestling with Tehran: U.S., Iran Go to the Mat in a Replay of Ping-Pong Diplomacy” from the *U.S. News and World Report*, and journalists gleefully coined the term “pin-down diplomacy” in anticipation of the United States Olympic Wrestling team’s appearance at the Takthi Wrestling Cup in February 1998.

In a poignant moment at Tehran’s Azadi Sports Complex, American and Iranian athletes finally met on the wrestling mat in what quickly emerged as an unforgettable episode of sports diplomacy. By any reasonable account, the international tournament proved successful for both sides: for the Americans, it was a long-overdue reintroduction to the people of Iran, and for the Iranians, it was a chance to break away from the fiery, intransigent ayatollahs who had come to embody their state. Indeed, by watching the match alone, it was difficult to sense any sort of tension between the two nations. Not only did their flag hang proudly and unmolested in the Iranian capital’s stadium for the first time in decades, but the Americans also received the second-loudest applause (after the Iranian delegation). Both sides offered simple, yet striking goodwill gestures during the match: the American wrestler Zeke Jones waved a miniature Iranian flag, and the twelve thousand Iranian spectators...
responded by chorusing “America” loudly, glad to omit the menacing part of the chant. After competing, an American and Iranian wrestler shared an extended, spontaneous embrace, which prompted one observer to note, "Melvin Douglas and Abbas Jadidi [the two wrestlers] were not official representatives of their countries. They were citizen diplomats who, through sports, were able to touch deep-seated feelings. In the process, they demonstrated an alternative model for how their countries could interact. With the help of a cooperative crowd and well-intentioned athletes, wrestling had brought citizens from each side together, in a fully literal sense.

To those Americans who had previously dismissed others’ convictions that the Iranian people were genuinely supportive of Americans, this wrestling match was a compelling invitation to reconsider. If anything could dissolve Americans’ deep-rooted resentment and anguish towards Iranians, it would be candid statements from American athletes like, “We’ve been treated with more hospitality here than in any other country we’ve been in.” Moreover, the event was essentially an inversion of the standard images thrust upon American audiences for the past few decades: not only did the Iranian crowd cheer for the American delegation, but they also roared in disapproval at the most prominent anti-Westerner in the audience—Iran’s former conservative presidential candidate, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri. The Islamic Republic, ironically, had always marketed wrestling as the sport of the Revolution and true Iranian ideals, yet watched Iranian fans use a wrestling tournament to snub a poster-child of the regime. For the twelve thousand everyday Iranians in the arena (and millions more in their homes), the wrestling match was thus a true relief, a chance to cheer unabashedly for what was — at least for that night — no more than a nominal enemy.

Now that the Iranian people’s affection for the other side had been exposed through sports, the athletes, journalists, and citizen diplomats who orchestrated the event were left wondering how long it would be unrequited. Shortly after the match, Iranian wrestlers toured the United States (although as some lamented, their American visit began with a very thorough, rather demeaning security delay that included fingerprinting). Naturally, many in the Clinton and Khatami administrations remained optimistic for a large-scale re-humanization; however, a single event—no matter how successful and well-publicized—could hardly unseat the damaging beliefs alienating Iranians from Americans. To really convince the American public that Iranians were not benighted, “slogan-shouting terrorists,” (in one journalist’s words) the engines of sports diplomacy needed to remain active. Furthermore, there was little time to idle, as one prescient observer remarked:

The project now underway — the use of athletics as a vehicle for improving U.S.-Iranian relations — must be undertaken with a sense of some urgency because the window of opportunity could close, blown shut by political winds no less removed and distant in their source than those which blew the window of opportunity open.

The next opportunity arrived in June—only so quickly because the American and Iranian soccer teams happened to qualify for a first round playoff game at the 1998 World Cup in Lyon, France. On the eve of the much-awaited match, President Clinton expressed his wish that the event would be “another step toward ending the estrangement between our nations,” adding that “President Khatami and I have both worked to encourage more people-to-people exchanges, and to help our citizens develop a better understanding of each other’s rich civilizations.” Once the game concluded, he could not be unhappy with the result.

As with the wrestling tournament, the symbolism proved irresistible to American journalists writing about the World Cup match, particularly in post-game coverage; by foisting sociopolitical symbolism onto the game, the media may have lost credibility, but it was still clear that the game (which Iran won, 2-1) drew Americans and Iranians ever closer. One journalist, although perhaps too absorbed in the political tropes, offered a valid point about the mutual humanization: “This [game] was not a case of Iran against the Great Satan in the stands, nor was it that way on the playing field. There was no political zealousness on the eyes of the Iranian players on the field, no holy mission in their faces or their actions.”

Eschewing the political metaphors, another observer simply declared, “Americans were able to view Iranians as sports fans and human beings rather than terrorists.” Yet another journalist provided an almost staggering verification of this general positive finding: “Iranians and Americans, in full party mode, tied together the tips of their national flags and danced the linked colors through the streets of Lyon.” Many Americans who tuned in to or read such accounts of the match, whether sports fans or not,
must have finally stumbled upon something redeeming in the Iranian people. Granted, Ayatollah Khamenei’s praise of Iran’s soccer team for routing its “strong and arrogant opponent” certainly proved provocative, but most Iranians ignored such inflammatory language. Indeed, rejoicing Iranian soccer fans repudiated anti-Americanism by emphasizing the 2-1 score as an Iranian victory rather than an American loss (much of the celebration surrounding America’s defeat actually occurred in Shi’ite Lebanon and the West Bank). What transpired from the game, then, was not the dramatic American-Iranian kulturkampf that Khamenei may have hoped for, but rather another instance of Iranian-American reconciliation, cultural exchange, and even some healing.

**Why Sports Diplomacy, Despite its Merits, Cannot Bring Reconciliation on its Own**

Following the World Cup, it remained to be seen whether 1998, as the year of two major sports successes, would be a preview of more substantial cultural and political normalization or only a short-lived spark in United States-Iranian diplomatic history. For a variety of reasons—mostly external to sports diplomacy itself—the events of 1998 fell closer to the latter category, since political reconciliation never arrived. Retrospectively, it may be tempting to fault sports diplomacy in failing to induce political reconciliation, but to do so would be to misunderstand the nature of sports diplomacy—characterized by one proponent as “a convenient and frequently effective early step to the improvement of bilateral relations between countries where the desire for rapprochement has already been established.” By incorporating this definition and examining the background to the events of 1998 against that of ping-pong diplomacy, the purpose, limitations, and potential of United States-Iranian sports diplomacy become clear.

The paragon case of sports diplomacy, between the United States and China in 1971, demonstrates the potential for further American-Iranian sporting exchanges, but is perhaps more valuable for explaining why Khatami’s first term—despite the Takhti Tournament and World Cup—still saw no substantive progression in Tehran-Washington relations. An analysis of the Chinese case suggests that sports diplomacy can be instrumental in the quest for rapprochement but cannot be expected to initiate it independently. In this successful application of sports diplomacy, the desire for rapprochement—while not entirely overt—was certainly latent among the American and Chinese administrations before their countries actually met on the ping-pong table. What they lacked—and what ping-pong diplomacy provided—was a symbolic backdrop, a kind of positive pretext for future meetings between able negotiators. Once the two nations met in a friendly, civilized manner over a ping-pong match, negotiations had an ostensibly valid reason to get underway: a continued flow of American and Chinese cultural emissaries came to complement the planned political harmonization. In the context of the United States and Iran, sporting events are also an ideal symbolic prelude, providing (whether in 1998 or in the future) an outward confirmation that each side can respect the other’s humanity. Whether the countries ultimately use the symbolism in the interests of diplomacy, however, remains a separate matter. In 1998, in the wake of the wrestling and soccer tournaments, Iranian and American officials failed to extend the contact beyond the (literal) arena of sport; both made casual conciliatory overtures before the matches, yet neither side was prepared to make the critical, post-game offer, to engage in formal dialogue. To some, both the Clinton and Khatami administrations—unlike Nixon and his Chinese counterparts—could not proceed into the real world of diplomacy because they faced too much opposition from domestic conservatives. Regardless of where these obstacles originated, they apparently halted the thaw in its infancy and show that sports diplomacy—while very dynamic as a tool for international relations—is not an instant diplomatic panacea.

**The Citizen Tourism Track: Definition and Background**

Another powerful, nontraditional mechanism for engagement between Americans and Iranians is citizen tourism. When Americans visit Iran, they find themselves discovering not only the country’s breathtaking sights, but also the friendly, hospitable, and mostly modernized Iranian population. Like sports diplomacy, citizen tourism ventures beyond the painful memories of 1979 and reminds Americans and Iranians of how much they share. The difference between these two diplomatic phenomena is in their modus operandi: sports diplomacy begins as popular
or public reconciliation and then descends to the individual level, while citizen tourism instead starts with unscripted personal interactions and moves ultimately to reshape the national ethos. Citizen tourism, then, serves to complement and fortify sports diplomacy by reinforcing the commonality of the two estranged populations. Interestingly, in the absence of diplomatic relations, America’s citizen tourists become instant cultural ambassadors—if not by choice, then by default. They are usually enamored by the Iranians they meet, often so much that they collect their Iranian experiences into books, articles, films, or conversations to illustrate the true nature of the Iranian people. Their piecemeal efforts, when multiplied, serve to combat the illusions that plague the Iranian-American relationship.

American tourism in Iran is a recent phenomenon, having slowly resurfaced during Khatami’s first term after a twenty-year hiatus. President Khatami, calling for more cultural exchanges, was likely instrumental in attracting some 580 Americans to Iran between May 1997 and May 1998. Ever since, the Islamic Republic has been widely regarded as an exotic destination reserved for the most ambitious (or foolhardy) American travelers; after considering American visitors’ actual experiences, however, this perception clearly has little to do with the Iranian people and is instead likely a function of the Iranian regime’s rhetoric. Shortly into Khatami’s first term, the US Department of State toned down its warning to American citizens visiting Iran, reflecting a new emphasis on tourism as a vehicle for constructive cultural interaction. In fact, tourism has remained perhaps the only point of agreement between the American and Iranian governments, even under Presidents Bush and Ahmadinejad. Though Iran’s government was famously identified as belonging to the “Axis of Evil,” various State and Defense Department officials have cited tourism to Iran as an excellent avenue in American-Iranian citizen
exchange—not least among them Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who as recently as May 2008 asked to “open up the channels and get more of a flow of [Iranian and American] people back and forth,” explaining that “there are actually a fair number of Iranians that come to the United States to visit. We ought to increase the flow going the other way, not of Iranians but of Americans.”

Late in 2006, Iran’s government began to offer travel agencies twenty dollars for every American and European tourist they brought to the country.

Both initiatives, combined with the Iran’s growing significance in world affairs, have steadily increased the number of American tourists, who bring different perspectives, goals, and perceptions to Iran and whom invariably encounter respect rather than hostility in the Iranian people.

Recently, most American visitors to Iran, other than those of Iranian descent, have traveled there to meet and engage with the Iranian people (whether fully aware of this reality or not). Certainly, Iran offers spectacular architecture, culture, and cuisine, but these alone hardly suffice to attract average Americans to the Middle East; in a country devoid of business opportunities (for Americans) and advanced tourist infrastructure, it is difficult—and for Americans, not even desirable—to avoid sustained interactions with the ordinary residents of Iran. Given the complex Iranian-American legacy, many Americans entering Iran are ambivalent as to what they should expect to encounter in its people. Well-acquainted with the standard United States-Iran narrative, one American traveler found himself wondering, “Did they [Iranians] really hate Americans? Or was that old news?”

Another was more incredulous of the mass media, but equally anxious to test his American identity in Iranian company: “I knew only the news-report version of Iran: renegade developer of nuclear technology, member of the Axis of Evil, and mortal enemy of the Great Satan, the United States. I was hoping to learn what the country was actually like; I wanted to know how it would feel to be an American in Iran.”

From a reporter’s perspective, to inform readers of Iranians’ pro-American disposition is to carry out some kind of educational mission, which includes sharing anecdotes that put Iranians’ respectable social mores into concrete terms. For instance, after describing how American tourists are “enveloped by unstinting hospitality” in Iran, one correspondent proceeds to illustrate: “Within minutes, the Americans are surrounded by shy villagers bearing tea trays, children skittering at their feet. The village’s practice, cultivated through years of desert-dwelling, is to provide food, drink, and lodging to any visitor, asking nothing in return.”

In another journalist’s experience, the pro-American sentiment even extends to government employees, such as police officers; this visitor’s episode involved a policeman who was about to hand a traffic ticket to his cab driver. Stating that he was visiting from America, the journalist asked for the ticket in place of his driver. Once the policeman heard of the journalist’s nationality, however, he initiated a

**Iranian Tourism Through the Eyes of American Journalists: Hospitality Breeds Understanding**

Although American visitors to Iran share the general motive of interacting with Iranians, they do so in very different capacities. Of those who record their experiences, many are journalists or travel correspondents for American newspapers—most of whom tiptoe into Iran only to find themselves embraced because of (not in spite of) their American identity. In fact, the theme that unites their varied encounters is the overall positive attitude held by ordinary Iranians toward Americans. As one reporter begins his 2005 account, “Perhaps the most striking thing about anti-Americanism in Iran today is how little of it actually exists.” After encountering Iranians’ warmth and humanity firsthand, many of the reporters (familiar with longstanding American perceptions of the Iranian people) become eager to enlighten their American audience. In doing so, whether intentionally or not, they exemplify how tourism can bridge the cultural divide between the two peoples: “What took place over the next fortnight astonished me. Everywhere I went — from the traffic-choked streets of Tehran in the north to the dusty desert town of Yazd in central Iran, to the elegant cultural centers of Isfahan and Shiraz — I was overwhelmed by the warmth and, dare I say it, pro-Americanism of the people I met.”

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friendly conversation about Carson City, Nevada (his cousin's current home), ripped up the traffic ticket, and said, smiling, "Welcome to Iran. We love America." It is a shameful sign of how far apart Iranians and Americans have drifted that most Americans would initially (yet incorrectly) assume the policeman's words were sarcastic if taken out of context. Once American readers begin to assimilate these types of stories, however, they will not forget what they signify.

To an American readership, the most intriguing American-Iranian interactions are those that bespeak the Iranian people's humanity. These simple yet meaningful episodes, particularly common in American journalists' travelogues, also reveal everyday Iranians as dedicated partners in tourism-based citizen diplomacy. In a manner convenient for American citizen tourism, Iranians sense their own alienation and hence make extra overtures to American tourists. One Iranian, a carpet vendor in Isfahan, confided such feelings to an American reporter: "People think that we are all religious extremists with nuclear weapons and beards down to our stomachs. But Iran is actually a very safe place for tourists."

As a cartoonist describes in an illustrated column about his Iranian visit, the only kind of barrage that Iranians direct at Western tourists is one of humanity and civility: Iranian locals approach visitors and say, "Please can I talk with you? Please, tell the people in the West not to be afraid of us." Displeased with their international reputation, many Iranians gladly settle into the role of committed citizen diplomats, willing to directly engage with Americans in order to dispel any antagonistic stereotypes. Indeed, two American correspondents shared nearly identical experiences that attest to Iranians' unyielding politeness; in 2006, one journalist wrote, "During my visit, I could not pause on a street corner [in Iran] for more than 30 seconds without someone coming up and shyly asking if they could help. Discovering they had an American in their midst, they would often insist on walking me to my destination." The following year, a different journalist received very similar treatment: "If a traveler had any lingering doubts about the hospitality of Iranians toward Americans, this was the place to dispel them. Making a new friend required no more effort than standing still for 30 seconds." At a time when American travelers must cope with unpleasant receptions overseas, the Iranian embrace is a welcome change. Many international correspondents for American newspapers, used to an anti-American affront, are hardly able to contain their excitement at such refreshingly (and ironically) pleasant conduct: "While much of the world seems to be holding their collective noses at us Americans, in Iran people were literally crossing the road to shake an American's hand and say hello. Who knew?" These encounters, more than the wonders of Isfahan or Bam, truly make Americans' vacation to Iran memorable, fulfilling the core mission of citizen diplomacy.

GROUP CITIZEN DIPLOMACY TRIPS: DEDICATED OUTLETS FOR AMERICAN-iranian DIALOGUE

A distinct, but related category of American tourists in Iran includes American delegations traveling on organized citizen diplomacy trips. Like their journalist counterparts, these groups receive a consistently warm welcome in Iran; they find that their American identity is never worth concealing, for it allows them extraordinary opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. The American participants haul from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds —their delegations project many more American sub-identities than a single journalist ever could—yet they all share the aforementioned desire to discover the Iranian people and engage with them. Trip organizers (unlike individual citizen-tourists, such as American reporters) are generally aware of the positive reception bound to greet American visitors in Iran while many of the actual participants still have vague expectations about Iranians. The architects of these tourism projects, therefore, design them to offer constant interaction with, and even immersion in, Iranian society. Indeed, a glance at the mission statements of these trips
demonstrates that these organizers understand the intricacies of Iranian-American citizen diplomacy: Rick Steves—one of America’s leading travel writers and host of an eponymous travel show—stated the goal of his 2008 Iran trip was to “rub the humanity of Iran in the face of America,” while the co-leader of two successful Fellowship of International Reconciliation Iran trips intended for her participants “to have a direct dialogue with Iranians, to present a friendly and respectful American face, and to continue to learn, talk, and write about Iran when we returned home.”

In action and in words, these trips recapitulate citizen diplomacy’s most fundamental principles. In fulfillment of their objectives, citizen diplomacy delegations capitalize on the reconciliation opportunities afforded to them through their larger collective identity as an American tour group. For instance, participants from these expeditions fondly recall such Iranian characters as “the 12-year-old girl in the small village of Izad-Khoist who invited our entire group (15 people) to her small adobe house for tea and grapes” or “the hotel manager in Isfahan, [who] upon learning we had some Southerners in our group, shouted: ‘Howdy Y'all!’”

To be sure, participants are still able to interact with Iranians on an individual level, experiencing the one-on-one encounters that make citizen tourism so remarkable. One American tourist recalled “the middle-aged man in the park in Isfahan, who, upon learning I was an American, shook my hand so vigorously I thought my shoulder would come out of its socket,” while another reminisced about “the candy and fruit vendor in Shiraz who—when he learned I was an American—filled a sack full of dates and nuts and refused payment.”

As American groups encounter these warm Iranian faces, not only do they witness the stereotypes crumble, but they are also inspired to combat them at home; when other Americans, incredulous that they traveled to the Islamic Republic of Iran, offer them a wrinkled nose and snide comments (as one participant received) these trip participants can respond with a list of heartwarming experiences that their group enjoyed only because they were Americans.

Citizen Diplomacy Expeditions: Authentic Encounters with Iranians, or Contrived Ones?

Considering these nostalgic experiences of American tour groups, it is only natural to wonder if this “closet” pro-Americanism truly runs rampant in Iran, or if the trip organizers merely succeed in presenting this idea by being selective in what they show American visitors. Such a possibility, while perfectly legitimate to consider, does not reflect the actual conditions of the trips (or the basic premise of citizen diplomacy). First, it seems difficult to overestimate the degree of pro-American sentiment in the Iranian people. Even the supposed outposts of fervent anti-Westernism are far less radical than most Americans would expect. To illustrate, it is worthwhile to consider one American traveler who, stunned by the hospitality that greeted him as an American in Iran, decided to search actively for any remaining hotbeds of anti-Americanism. His quest led him to a rally in honor of Ayatollah Khomeini, where he heard the infamous anti-Western slogans chanted by thousands of Iranians. Conversing with some of the Iranian rally-goers afterwards, he slowly disclosed his nationality only to hear them reply “America good, America welcome” in excited voices. In the most skeptical interpretation of this episode (i.e. that which assumes these Iranians attended the rally to express their genuine opposition to modern-day America), one still must acknowledge Iranians’ acute ability to differentiate the American government and the American people. While often not aligned with the United States government’s policies, ordinary Iranians—unlike many of their Middle Eastern neighbors—have long abstained from extending any resentment to the American people. Accordingly, American citizen diplomacy groups can hardly avoid encountering some verbal opposition to the American government, yet they also cannot help but marvel at the Iranian overtures offered to them and extended to their compatriots at home. Citizen tourists in large American groups are quite aware of these dual Iranian affections, as an experienced American trip leader has found. By no means, then, do citizen diplomacy tours to Iran desensitize Americans or rely on their (admittedly) low expectations; Americans may be used to seeing one side of Iran in the media, but after their participation in an organized tour, none of the Iranians’ beliefs (especially not their affection for Americans) remain hidden from them.
THE FUTURE OF SPORTS AND TOURISM IN UNITED STATES–IRAN DIPLOMACY

For sports diplomacy and citizen tourism between Iran and the United States to succeed, Americans must discard their unfounded suspicions, and Iranians (seventy percent of whom are under thirty years old) must continue to view the American people favorably. Until the rancor dissolves, sports and tourism cannot play a larger part in the two countries’ relations. Soccer and wrestling are ideal platforms for future instances of sports diplomacy—both Iran’s and America’s soccer teams are equally exceptional, but in wrestling, they are both perennial powerhouses (which suggests that their soccer and wrestling games will always be fairly close, so as not to utterly humiliate one side). As for tourism, attracting more Americans to Iran as traveling journalists or dedicated citizen diplomats will help demonstrate to the rest of America that the benighted, excessively devout, and virulently anti-American mass media’s imagination. In some sense, there is even a place for hybrid American athlete-tourists in Iran, as evidenced by the American basketball player Mike Jones. Jones, who plays for the Zob Ahan team in the Iranian basketball league, was asked in an Iranian newspaper interview if his initial perceptions of Iran changed once he actually arrived in the country, to which he responded: “Yes, when I arrived I did not think the [Iranian] people were going to be this friendly. The image you get in the media in the United States is angry and mad people, but it’s nothing like that once you get here, so it was a pleasant surprise.”

At the same time, no matter how much sports and tourism manage to mend the American-Iranian popular relationship, it is critical to place them (and by extension, all of international cultural relations) in perspective. Citizen diplomacy should not function as a substitute for traditional diplomacy, nor is it even a precondition for it. In the right circumstances, however, citizen diplomacy can invite or hasten rapprochement, as evidenced by China and the United States in 1971. Yet even if sustained citizen interactions do not culminate in diplomatic normalization, they will at least reinforce it upon its arrival. Indeed, for Iran to avoid the fate of Saudi Arabia, which enjoys warm diplomatic relations with the United States without meaningful cultural relations, it must continue to develop these types of robust cultural ties. §
This section, even more than the previous one, takes a unidirectional approach, highlighting Americans encountering Iranians; in terms of tourism, it is arguably more profitable to focus on Americans visiting Iran than the reverse, since American tourists appear to benefit more from discovering the other group in its own country (even with the large Iranian community in America) than Iranians, who already view the other favorably.

44 Christopher Reynolds, “Encountering Soaring Architecture and Warm Hospitality in a Country Where Americans were Not Welcome For 20 Years,” Los Angeles Times, June 28, 1998.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


52 Knipp.

53 Reynolds.

54 Molavi.

55 Knipp.


57 Knipp.

58 Vlahos.

59 Knipp.


62 Poisson.


64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Wurzer.

69 Poisson.

70 Knipp.

71 Chelabi, 96.