

2012

An American Sociologist in Iran

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Recommended Citation

Hammond, John L.. 2012. "An American Sociologist in Iran." *Societies Without Borders* 7 (3): 364-372.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol7/iss3/5>

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J. Hammond/Societies Without Borders 7:3 (2012) 364-372

Notes From the Field **An American Sociologist in Iran**

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Received July 2012; Accepted September 2012

Abstract

I was invited to a conference in Tehran on Occupy Wall Street. I was hesitant to accept because I feared that my criticisms of US policy through the lens of OWS might lend support to the oppressive Iranian regime, but I thought it might be an opportunity to express solidarity with the Iranian people against possible US or Israeli aggression. In the end I decided to go and found it an eye-opening experience. On my return I was attacked as a terrorist by apologists for Israel and censored by Tehran University because, in a paper I submitted at the conference sponsors' request, I compared Occupy Wall Street to the Green Movement which had been repressed in Tehran by the Iranian government.

Keywords

Iran, Occupy Wall Street, Peace, Intervention

Last November (2011) I received an invitation to present a paper at a conference on Occupy Wall Street sponsored by the North American Studies Department of the University of Tehran. It took me by surprise; I had begun thinking about doing research on Occupy, but hadn't gone public yet.

The invitation certainly piqued my interest, but also created a dilemma. Did I want to go to Iran? Its brutally repressive regime had killed thousand of opponents since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It also crushed the Green Movement, which had erupted to protest fraud in the election that returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power in 2009, and was a precursor of the Arab spring and, in turn, of Occupy Wall Street.

On the other hand, Iran is the target of sanctions and threats of attack from the US and Israel, determined to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. Iran insists that it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons; it only wants to develop nuclear

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technology for peaceful purposes (as allowed under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty). But the US and Israel, arguing that a peaceful nuclear program could be the basis for future weapons development, have demanded that it dismantle its facilities. The US has engineered in the UN Security Council a severe sanctions regime, mounted an aggressive military buildup in the Persian Gulf and, with Israel, waged cyberwarfare against Iran's nuclear installations. By going to Iran, I might demonstrate my solidarity with the Iranian people in the face of possible aggression

My colleague Ervand Abrahamian, a Middle Eastern historian born in Iran, told me that the Iranian government celebrates the Occupy movement because in its view the movement lays bare the failings of the US government and society. No matter that Iran had brutally repressed a similar movement in 2009, and was supporting its allies Syria and Russia which were doing the same thing now. He also told me that dissident faculty members had been purged and that the university was completely aligned with the regime.

If I accepted the invitation, was I endorsing the regime? Or might I, instead, be standing up against US aggression? Among friends whose political advice I sought, I heard two views: Don't go: you will be giving aid and comfort to the regime and your words and presence will be manipulated; Go: Americans must stand in solidarity with the Iranian people at this time of escalating threat even though we condemn the government's brutality and repression.

In speaking about Occupy Wall Street, I would discuss criticisms of escalating inequality and capitalist corporations' domination of US politics, apparently echoing Iran's criticisms. But I would take these issues on wherever I might speak. I could also draw connections between Occupy and the protest movements in Iran, Syria, and Russia. I felt that I could in good conscience present my own views, not tailored to what my Iranian hosts might want me to say.

So I decided to go to the conference, which took place in February. Admittedly my decision was in part self-serving. I was eager to see a new part of the world—I had never been to any Muslim country before.

Three other US academics took part: sociologists Heather Gautney of Fordham University and Alex Vitale of Brooklyn College

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(who are both friends of mine) and Idris Samawi, a scholar of Islam from Colorado State University. Other than the four North Americans, all the conference participants were Iranians, and most were academics. Their presentations were mixed in quality. An interesting paper examined the relation between the Occupy protest and Islamic values of justice; others discussed the need for Iran to refocus its attention to nonwestern regions of the world. But some made triumphalistic claims that American/western civilization is collapsing and insisted (unrealistically, I am afraid) that Iran could withstand any aggression.

I was not pressured to present any particular point of view, nor, I believe, were my colleagues. In my presentation about Occupy Wall Street and the media, I discussed the use of Facebook, Twitter and live streaming to mobilize protesters, and to salve my conscience, I added that movements that used the social networking media in Iran, Russia, and Syria had been severely repressed.

Some disagreements came up in discussion. My argument was that the treatment of the Occupy movement in the mainstream print media in the US was surprisingly favorable, compared to the usual treatment of social movements. Several audience members challenged me on that claim. I was also asked whether I thought Occupy Wall Street meant the decline of the West. I was not sure what motivated the question, but I answered that in my opinion, on the contrary, it affirmed some important western values of democracy and responsive government.

I did not challenge the Iranian regime more boldly; it would have been an abuse of my invitation and in any case was not relevant to the paper I was presenting. I hoped, however, that my gestures were noticed and had some impact. (And I believe that the later censorship of my paper, which I describe below, shows that they did.)

Our hosts were generous. They invited us to stay beyond the two-day conference and provided us with chaperons and transportation while we were there. Alex and I took a road trip to Qum, Kashan, Abyaneh, and the spectacular Esfahan. The graduate student who accompanied us is an architecture and history buff who had lots of interesting commentary.

Some friends warned me that making this trip would be dangerous, as if I was going not to Iran but to Syria, in the middle of

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an insurrection. They may have been thinking of the American hikers who (apparently accidentally) crossed the Iranian border from Iraq in 2009, were apprehended and held in jail for a long time. I did not think that I ran any such risk since I had an official invitation, although I was touched by my friends' concern. In fact, life in Tehran feels normal. Traffic jams are massive and rival those I have experienced in some Latin American cities. But there is no sense of danger. Sanctions and boycotts of oil purchases were beginning to bite, but I did not feel an overwhelming atmosphere of repression.

While preparing for the trip, I had met some Iranian-Americans who invited me to look up their friends and relatives. This created two problems: our hosts did not want us moving around alone, and several people with experience in Iran warned me that someone could get in trouble for meeting an American. I took the latter very seriously but ultimately decided that if the Iranian-Americans introduced me, their friends and relatives could decide whether they wanted to see me. Maybe some decided not to: several people whom I had contacted earlier by e-mail told me they were sick or out of town when I arrived.

As to the no-travel-without-escort rule, I told my hosts ahead of time that I wanted to meet some people on a personal basis; I called them, we agreed to meet, and then I informed my hosts that I had appointments to see them.

Meeting these people was valuable (I only had time to see two), because they gave me a very different sense of Iran than I got from colleagues at the conference. They felt restricted in their movements and conversations, especially since 2009, and they stuck to their immediate circles to avoid compromising encounters. None of the conference participants, who I assume were vetted for political reliability, said anything like that. Two people I spoke with seemed to be wary of what they said in the company of other Iranians, however, and took dramatically different lines when talking to me (or me and the other Americans) depending on whether any Iranians were listening.

While I was there, the English-language Iranian press was full of bravado about standing up to US and Israeli aggression, like some of the speakers at the conference. I was interviewed, as were Heather and Alex, by Press TV, the government's English-language service.

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The clip, which can be seen on YouTube, is headlined, "Experts: Occupy Wall Street likely to topple US administration," although no one said anything like that except the interviewer (Press TV 2012).

The internet is censored. Key websites with mobilizing potential, like Twitter, are blocked. When I tried to read my Twitter feed, I was taken to a page of links in Persian. I asked someone to look at my computer to tell me what the message was; he said, "I don't have to look; I see it every day." He explained that the site invites the user to go to other sites featuring discussions of religion and family issues. Yet his response illustrates a paradox: while some sites are blocked to the general public, someone with a little savvy can link to them through a proxy server. Similarly, one of the graduate students said that they could get any DVD or music they wanted even if it was frowned on by the regime.

Handicapped by total ignorance of the language (I learned to say "thank you" in Persian), I nevertheless tried to cast my sociological eye on everything I saw. I was especially interested in issues of religion and gender. Based on a few random observations, religious sentiment seems intense and pervasive. I went into several mosques and saw men praying during the day (women use a separate entrance so I could not see them). There were many breaks in the conference schedule during which I could talk at length with the academics there. Several of them, in an understated way, mentioned their own religious observance. Some of them, who had Ph.D.s in the social sciences, had also spent several years in seminary studying the Koran.

I knew in advance that men and women do not shake hands, so I didn't embarrass myself or anyone else by offering my hand. (One woman offered me her hand, but in a place where no one she knew except her boyfriend could see her. I was told that this was some young women's form of rebellion.) The veil is obligatory, for foreign women as well as Iranians, but in middle class areas I saw some women who pushed the limits with hairdos piled high on their heads and covered loosely with a kerchief rather than a garment that covered the head and shoulders. There are many women in the professions in Iran, and most of the graduate students I met (but only one faculty member) were women; I was told that there were more men students in the natural sciences.

Since I returned home, public rhetoric on the US side has

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ebbed and flowed, but there is still a threat of war, and the sanctions regime is being progressively tightened. I cannot claim to evaluate Iran's nuclear program, but the CIA itself says there is no evidence that Iran is developing a weapons capability.

The public posture of the US against Iran echoes the stance it took against Iraq before the 2003 invasion, even though the US does not claim that Iran actually has nuclear weapons, unlike the claims—subsequently proven false—that Iraq did have them. Even if there is no overt military action, however, the present sanctions regime is itself an act of war. Sanctions hurt the civilian population most. Inflation has been steep and it is virtually impossible to get some imported goods including vital medicines. The sanctions undoubtedly strengthen the resolve of the government to stand up to the US and make many Iranians want their country to go it alone internationally and pursue nuclear research.

Iran has good reason to mistrust the US. The CIA toppled Mohammed Mossadegh's government in 1953 and the US propped up the Shah for the next twenty-five years. In the enormously destructive eight-year war of the 1980s, the US supported Iraq, which started the war and used chemical weapons against Iran in violation of international law. In this century the US has invaded and ousted the governments of Iran's eastern and western neighbors. The US has consistently refused to engage in serious diplomacy in a manner that respects the autonomy and sovereignty of Iraq; it essentially enters into negotiation insisting that Iran concede all the important points ahead of time (Parsi 2012).

The aftermath of my trip was revealing. I have been assaulted on both flanks, accused of being a terrorist sympathizer for the very fact of having gone to Iran, and censored by the Iranians for not toeing the official line.

I got a few invitations to speak about Iran, but I didn't want to make any public appearances because I knew how limited was my knowledge, and I didn't want to claim to be an instant expert after six days in the country. But despite my reticence, my trip got noticed. First, the Press TV clip, in which I appeared saying no more than two fairly innocuous sentences about Occupy Wall Street, appeared on the internet. It was picked up by an organization that I had not heard of, the Middle East Media Research Institute in Washington, which used

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the clips showing me and my two sociologist colleagues and then showed some clips from another conference in Tehran about Israel, featuring harsh anti-Zionist rhetoric from a number of Americans including a rabbi. MEMRI's presentation made it appear that the two conferences were one, and that the three of us had spoken at the same conference that had condemned Israel so vituperatively (The offending video has been removed). The implication that my going to Iran meant that I shared these views was a complete fabrication not based on anything I did or said. I got some hate emails, and I was accused by some twitterers of being a terrorist sympathizer and, in a Huffington Post article, "legitimizing the Iranian Regime" (Ahmari 2012).

I also faced censorship by the Iranian sponsors of the conference. I have to say I was and am grateful to the people who invited me, even if I don't share their views or support their government. But when I was asked to join the editorial board of their journal, the World Studies Quarterly, I decided that that went beyond any obligations I had to them. My name on the editorial board of a journal published in a language that I cannot read would clearly only serve a decorative function, and whatever prestige they might garner from it would redound to an institution that is essentially part of the government.

I did agree to send my paper to the journal; I regarded that as a legitimate obligation of attending the conference. In it I said that Occupy Wall Street was "inspired by the Green Movement in Iran, the Arab Spring of 2011 that spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and elsewhere; the occupation of the state legislature in Wisconsin protesting the curtailment of public employee unions; the *indignados* in Spain and the Greek protests against austerity." I received a letter requesting editorial revisions which said,

the referees believe that Iran's Green Movement and Occupy Wall Street Movement are different in nature and cannot be classified as of the same type. So you may omit the Green Movement.

This deletion was clearly unacceptable in the light of my determination not to let my trip or presence at the conference lend

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support to the Iranian government. So I wrote back:

I cannot agree to delete the reference to the Green Movement.

Please let me know whether you wish to publish the article with this reference. If so, I will make the other changes requested. If not, I will reluctantly withdraw the article from consideration.

I didn't get any reply.

Being assaulted from opposite sides is not necessarily a warrant of legitimacy, but I nevertheless feel that the attack and the censorship do validate my belief that I took a coherent position in the trip and its aftermath. In any controversy, there is a strong temptation to assume that if one position is wrong, its negation must be correct. But while that assumption may serve well in logic, it does not in politics. Such dichotomies are often created by states to instrumentalize human rights to justify their policies, as we see when many governments claim purity for their allies in observing human rights while accusing their adversaries of rampant abuse.

To defend a regime against foreign aggression while at the same time denouncing its treatment of its own citizens is to walk a difficult line. Nevertheless there are forces within the US peace movement that have declared clearly and consistently their condemnation of repression in Iran and at the same time call for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the US and Israel without sanctions and without military intervention. One organization taking this position is Havaar, formed of Iranian-Americans and Iranian students in the US (www.haavar.org). On July 1, 2012, the day the US-European Union oil embargo against Iran took effect, I marched with them in a demonstration at the United Nations in support of Havaar's platform: "no war, no sanctions, no state repression."

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