
MEMO

TO: ROY COFFEE / DAVE DI STEFANO
BY: TRITA PARSI, TRITA.PARSI@MAIL.HOUSE.GOV
SUBJECT: TOWARDS THE CREATION OF AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN LOBBY
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SUMMARY

This memo presents a preliminary strategy towards the creation of an Iranian-American lobby. It first explains the necessity of promoting a mature political culture within the Iranian-American community in order for successful grassroots lobbying to be able to take place. It highlights a few strategy issues that the proposed lobby should take into consideration: a strategic partnership with the National Iranian American Council (www.niacouncil.org), initial focus on non-controversial issues such as visas and discrimination, the importance of a “human element” in the lobby campaigns, and targeting of positive-image business with a strategic interest in Iran for financial support. The memo proceeds to describe the potential competition the lobby may face. It also presents a list of potential Board members from the academic and business communities. The memo concludes with a discussion regarding the lobby’s staffing needs, with Trita Parsi as the proposed Executive Director of the organization.

BACKGROUND

Presenting accurate demographic information on Iranians abroad in general is a challenging task. There is a huge discrepancy among the various studies done on this, with various reasons.

For example, the US Census estimates Iranian-Americans to be just over 300 thousand, while folklore estimates widespread among the group itself go up to 4 million and sometimes beyond. In the case of the Census, an issue of definition comes to mind, beyond possible flaws in survey methodology: Who is an Iranian-American? Iran considers nationality to pass by blood. Thus, a child born of at least one Iranian parent in America is considered Iranian by Iran, and American by the United States. Estimates on the high end are also most probably very far from reality.

More specifically, in the case of Iranians in the US, the estimates that the authors feel are most reliable are those calculated by the Iranian Interest Section in Washington, DC. It is that body that has been issuing passports and other official documents for the Iranians in the US, and in terms of sampling has had more access than any other organization to data. According to that source, at least 800,000 thousands Iranians are residing in the United States. Adding second generation Americans of Iranian decent, the number could exceed 1 million.

While there are no studies with exact information on the demographic spread of Iranians in the United States, it is believed that the majority of this group is clustered in southern California (Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County in particular). Other cluster areas include New York, the District of Columbia, Austin and Houston. It is also known that on average, Iranians abroad are more educated and wealthier than the society where they have immigrated.

The immediate question that comes to mind is why such a group's participation in--and impact on--our society is not commensurate with its contribution to America's economic growth. There are three underlying reasons for this lower level of participation in American society.

First, organizational life within the Iranian-American community has tended to be scattered with no national umbrella available to facilitate networking. The Iranian expatriate community is relatively less organized into associations than other immigrant groups. There are few organizations at the national or regional levels that serve as a unifying body for common community concerns. The groups that exist have often limited or no contact with one another, and therefore no way to ensure cooperation on matters of common interest. The lack of focal points in the community that can facilitate communication and mobilization has crippled past attempts to create Iranian-American grass-roots organizations.

Second, Iranian-Americans have not always been able to tell their story in their own words and on their own terms. This is partly due to the shortage in organizations that could give Iranian-Americans a venue to represent themselves. It is also the result of Iran's isolation, which has tended to color the Iranian-Americans' image more than their own actions and contributions to American society. The combination of carrying a negative stigma (because they are Iranian) and not being able to change their image, has caused many Iranian-Americans to try to distance themselves from other Iranian-Americans. Needless to say, it is difficult to create a lobby for a community that doesn't wish to be associated with itself.

Third, Iranian-Americans have shied away from actively participating in civic life due to the difficult experiences they had in Iran when attempting to form associations. As a result of having had to deal for years with the legacy of the hostage crisis at the embassy in Tehran, many Iranian-Americans have sought to keep a low profile – to be unobtrusive and unnoticed, uninvolved and disconnected. This fear of involvement has left much of the Iranian-American community voiceless, causing it to lack the necessary instruments and organizational structures to be able to defend its civil and political rights. A knowledge gap has been created in regards to the decision-making processes of America: How can the community best influence decisions made at the national and local level? Where, when and how can the community best apply its collective pressure? This political immaturity makes any lobbying effort significantly more difficult and expensive.

These issues, whose successful resolution is a prerequisite for any community-based lobbying effort, need to be addressed in parallel to the creation of the foundations of an Iranian-American grass-roots lobby. The National Iranian American Council (www.niacouncil.org) has for the last year focused on these issues. The Council's success will enable the successful formation of a grassroots oriented Iranian lobby.

STRATEGY

CORE ACTIVITIES

Although the existence of a mature political culture within the Iranian-American community is essential for a successful Iranian-American grassroots lobby, it is not necessarily the duty of a lobby group to create such a culture. Furthermore, organizations such as the National Iranian American Council are already addressing the issue of political education.

It should be the strategy of the proposed lobby group to develop close ties to NIAC and support its activities. While leaving the educational work to NIAC, the proposed lobby group should focus exclusively on lobbying activities on the Hill. Its support to NIAC will enable it to utilize NIAC's grassroots network for reaching out to the community, while being relieved from having to go through the arduous task of creating such networks itself.

POSITIONING

Although the mission of the proposed lobby should be to improve relations between the US and Iran and open up opportunities for trade, the initial targets should be less controversial issues such as visas and racial profiling/discrimination. Since the lobby will be spared from creating a grassroots network of its own, the initial focus on non-controversial issues will only serve to establish credibility within the community, and not massive support (which would necessitate the complete avoidance of issues such as US-Iran relations).

Furthermore, it would be a wise strategy to mainly target Iranian-American businessmen for financial support. This group has both a higher propensity to support the lobby's mission and it is also in a better position to underwrite the expenses of the lobby. Nonetheless, despite its predominantly business oriented constituency, it is essential that the lobby creates a "human face" for its aims and goals. AIPAC successfully painted the opponents of the Iran Libya Sanctions Act as "greedy businessmen who had no scruples when it came to doing business with terrorist regimes." The oil companies failed to characterize their campaign with "human concern for the well-being of innocent Iranians stuck with a dictatorial regime" or "support for the poor mid-Western family father who lost his job due the sanctions." The human element is essential both when it comes to attracting support among Iranian-Americans and when it comes to winning the debate and the votes on the Hill.

FINANCING

Iranian-American organizations have in the past targeted the oil companies for financial support. This strategy has been a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the oil companies have been relatively dedicated to the cause and have been generous supporters of groups such as AIC. On the other hand, oil companies have a bad reputation among Iranian-Americans and are easily depicted as greedy and insensitive to human rights concerns in the media.

It would be a wise strategy of the proposed lobby to seek limited support from US oil companies. Oil companies should not be the initial sponsors of the lobby and their share of the lobby's budget should perhaps not exceed 10 per cent. Diversification is the key.

The lobby should target business with positive images that have a strategic interest in trade with Iran. These companies include Motorola, who would benefit greatly from the 70 million strong Iranian telecom market, IT companies who could benefit from Iran's cheap yet highly skilled labor (just as they do in India), construction and irrigation companies, soft drink companies (displeasure with US policies in the Middle East has allowed Iranian soft drink companies to grab market shares from Coca Cola and Pepsi in many Persian Gulf countries) and fast food chains.

POTENTIAL COMPETITION

American Iranian Council (www.american-iranian.org). Headed by Rutgers Professor Hooshang Amirahmadi, AIC has been the most prominent Iranian-American group in US politics for the last five years. But the organization has lost most of its credibility due to the Amirahmadi's close relations with the conservative camp in Tehran. He has lost the support he enjoyed from US oil companies and his attempts to court the Iranian-American community has been futile. The organization's strength lies in its American Board members, who range from Donna Shalala and to Bob Pelletreau (former Assistant Secretary of State).

Iranian Trade Association (www.iraniantrade.org). Headed by Shahriar Afshar in San Diego, this organization was quite visible in the late 1990's but has since lost its momentum. Focusing entirely on trade issues turned out to be a weakness rather than strength—trade does not inspire people to get active and Afshar was never able to expand the group's support base beyond a few oil companies. After the axis of evil comment, the oil companies too have abandoned ITA.

AmIranPAC (www.amiranpac.org). A recently founded group that will launch officially in mid-October. Its leadership is of mediocre quality and its financial base constitutes of a single donor. Morad Ghorban, a former staffer for a Georgia Democrat in the House, leads the group. Its financier belongs to the Monarchist camp and is vehemently against any attempts to initiate dialogue or trade with Iran.

POTENTIAL BOARD MEMBERS

Academic Community

Ervand	Abrahamian	Baruch College
Ehsan	Yarshater	Columbia University
Rasool	Nafisi	Manassas
Shaul	Bakhash	Potomac
Nikki	Keddie	University of California-LA
Olga	Davidson	Brandeis University
Roy	Mottahedeh	Harvard University
R.	Ramazani	University of Virginia
Behnam	Tabrizi	Stanford University

Business Community

John	Ghaznavi	Ghaznavi Investments, Inc.	
Suzanne	Maloney	ExxonMobil	
Shahnam	Arshadi	President	Quest International, Inc. CA
Mehrdad	Baghai	Partner	Mckinsey and Company
Hamid	Biglari	Partner & Head of N American Investment Banking Practice McKinsey & Company NY	
Farzad	Dibachi	President	Niku Corporation CA
Farhad	Ebrahimi	President	Quark, Inc. CO
Mory	Ejabat	Chairman	Zhone Technologies, Inc. CA
Kambiz	Hooshmand	VP	Cisco Systems, Inc. CA
Anoosh	Hosseini	CEO	Global Publishing Group CA
Farhad	Kashani	Sr VP	Plantronics, Inc. CA
Kamyar	Katouzian	VP	Quest International, Inc. CA
Behzad	Kashani	VP	Cisco Sytems CA

Omid	Kordestani	VP	Google, Inc.	CA
Afshin	Mohebbi	President	Qwest Communications, Inc.	CO
Farzad	Nazem	VP	Yahoo Inc.	CA
Pierre	Omidyar	Chairman	eBay, Inc.	CA
Massih	Tayebi	CEO	Wireless Facilities, Inc.	CA
Masood	Tayebi	President	Wireless facilities, Inc.	CA
Sohrab	Vossoughi	President	Ziba Design, Inc.	OR
Anousheh	Ansari	Chairman	telecom technologies, inc.	TX
Hamid	Moghadam	Chairman	AMB Property Corporation	CA
Shahin	Hedayat	President	Centillium Communications, Inc.	CA

STAFF

The lobby should be staffed with an Executive Director and an office administrator / secretary. The lobby should rely as much as possible on interns from the many universities in the Washington area.

With several years of working experience with US-Iran relations, and extensive contacts in the Iranian-American community, Trita Parsi is an ideal candidate for the Executive Director position.

BIOGRAPHY OF TRITA PARSI

Trita Parsi has worked for the Swedish Permanent Mission to the UN in New York where he served in the Security Council handling affairs for Afghanistan, Iraq, Tajikistan and Western Sahara, and the General Assembly's Third Committee addressing human rights in Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Iraq.

Mr. Parsi is currently pursuing his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies under Professor Francis Fukuyama, while working part-time as a foreign policy advisor to Chairman Robert Ney (R-OH) on the Middle East and Iran.

Mr. Parsi worked as Director of the American-Iranian Council, headed by former Assistant Secretary of State Robert Pelletreau. Mr. Parsi has been very active in the Iranian community and in 1997, he founded Iranians for International Cooperation (www.iic.org), one of the first Iranian advocacy groups promoting Iranian-American interests.

Mr. Parsi was born in Iran and grew up in Sweden. He earned a Master's degree in international relations at Uppsala University and a second Master's degree in economics at Stockholm School of Economics.