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A CONTRAPUNTAL READING OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE 'AXIS OF EVIL'

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Although interaction as well as conflict with the United States is definitely not new to Iranian politics and society, the idea of American Studies as a university degree program is surprisingly rather new in the country. The idea is only six years old and the North American Studies department itself was established at the University of Tehran in 2005.

For those closely involved with the program, the last few years have been eventful to say the least. Many American and European colleagues are often surprised that there actually is an American Studies program in the country and they often assume that our main problem with the program would be with Iranian government officials or, alternatively, that the students in the program are fed with anti-American rhetoric, perhaps in accordance with the constructions of Iran predominant in the Western media. It should be noted that despite its financial restrictions, the University of Tehran has been particularly supportive towards the Institute for North American and European Studies and its North American studies program in particular. In reality the easiest part of our journey was the establishment of the department within the Institute.

The academics involved in the program, who are largely adjunct professors, consist of some of the best and brightest in the University of Tehran. As our MA program is interdisciplinary, our professors have backgrounds in Cinema, Social Sciences, Literature, Economics, Women's Studies, and Politics. With their help, over the last two years we have enrolled three groups of MA students and by April 2008 we hope that our first group of students will have graduated from the University of Tehran.

However, there are a number of issues with which we continue to struggle. The most important is bringing together academics who have both the ability to and interest in working in this particular field. Their linguistic competence must be good enough for them to teach in English, as from the very start we decided that all courses in the Department of North American Studies must be taught in the English language. The second problem is that of limited library resources and the limited opportunity for students and even scholars to travel to the United States, Mexico, or Canada to gain a better understanding of North America. Of course, the main focus of our

department is currently the United States, because of its global influence, as well as its cultural, economic and military hegemony.

The fact that we do not have an adequate number of academics to teach and to supervise our students has actually benefited the department in some ways. A number of academics who work in the field of American and Canadian Studies from the University of Birmingham, Northwestern University, the American University of Beirut, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, and New York University have supported our program through traveling to Tehran, despite an acute shortage of funds, to give lectures to our students. Not only does this further exempt us from accusations of feeding students anti-American propaganda, but far more important is the fact that such interaction allows our students to gain greater insight into their field of study.

Interaction with our students and academic staff has also allowed visiting scholars in American studies, in their own words, to develop a far more realistic understanding of the role that the United States plays in today's world. To be more precise, American Studies in Iran provides the format for a contrapuntal reading of America as an object of study. Not only does it have the potential to create a better understanding in Iran of the United States, but it also provides a unique opportunity for a different and somewhat distinctive understanding of the United States. This makes the program beneficial for Iran as well for American Studies in general.

Of course, there is no innocent way to approach American Studies in the world today. However, as Iranian academics as well as visiting professors have discovered, while almost all students are highly critical of the United States as an empire, attitudes towards the United States are extremely complex and diverse. For example, some of our students who are outspoken critics of the United States would like very much to have the opportunity to do a PhD in American Studies at a high-ranking American university.

However, the fact that the American government has formally set aside an enormous yearly budget of nearly \$100 million to increase cultural and academic exchanges in order to bring about what it calls 'regime change', has muddied the waters and complicated American Studies in Iran. It is difficult for Iranian scholars and universities to retain their independence and to be seen as doing so, when cultural warfare is being carried out by the US state-private network. Indeed, such irresponsible behavior basically serves to intensify suspicion and in reality decreases the opportunity for real and meaningful dialogue.

Hence, as a result of this overt politicization of cultural exchange, to cite an example, even a long-planned nine-month trip to the United States that six of our students were to take part in has been cancelled. Through US funding, the students were to teach Farsi at different American universities for nine months and then return to Iran, presumably to inform their peers about their experiences in the so called 'Free World'. Nevertheless, it was hoped that this opportunity could be used for the students to do research in American Studies. This cancellation was largely a result of the American side having rejected three of our top students who were known to be vocal critics of the US government. Despite the fact that the American partner was eventually forced to change its decision and accept the students, this aroused suspicion in different parts of the University of Tehran and the Ministry of Higher Education. Eventual-



ly the Minister withdrew his support for the program. This chapter in American public diplomacy has done little but to intensify the sense of mistrust and decrease opportunities for cooperation in the near future.

Despite these problems and the harm they have caused to our program and, more importantly, to our students, it seems that American Studies as an independent academic program at the University of Tehran is making headway. Our academic staff and our students, with the support of American Studies scholars abroad, continue with their endeavor to enrich the field through their own research in comparative American Studies.