



Iran needs to present a united front on science

Iranian scientists must be allowed to interact abroad without fear of persecution, says Elise Auerbach.

Iranian officials last month unveiled the Mustafa Science and Technology prizes, for researchers in Islamic countries. The creation of the four US\$500,000 prizes illustrates the growing importance to the Iranian leadership of domestic science and the nurturing of scientific cooperation and exchange with other nations.

The Iranian government has already developed a cadre of distinguished scientists. State-run media routinely vaunt advances made by Iranian researchers, often new military systems. Iran hosted the Fifth International Conference of Cognitive Science in Tehran last year. And Hessamaddin Arfaei, a physicist at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences in Tehran, visited the United States in April 2005 to deliver a lecture at a meeting of the American Physical Society and to continue his efforts “to establish interaction between Iranian scientists and the international scientific community”. His trip was presumably carried out with the blessing of Iranian officials.

But these efforts are being subverted by other sectors of Iran’s ruling establishment, which are determined to ferret out ‘traitors’ among the country’s most promising scientists. As Iran’s interest in science and demand for international cooperation grows, researchers abroad have an opportunity to tip the balance of power away from these hardliners.

Too often, scientists in Iran are victims of a fantasy that there is a massive campaign orchestrated by the US government (including the CIA), Israel’s Mossad and the British intelligence services to launch a ‘Velvet Revolution’ (*Enghelab-e Makhmal*) to undermine the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To achieve their aim, the forces behind the conspiracy are alleged to be recruiting high-profile Iranians through academic exchanges, by attracting them to attend conferences abroad or by inviting them to hold residency at Western institutions.

Hardline Iranian newspapers and websites recite every known or imagined contact between Iranian scholars and their European and US colleagues, no matter how benign, including research grants and visiting fellowships at universities and private foundations. The conspiracy about the Velvet Revolution, and the concomitant requirement to seek out and uncover ‘enemies’ — the higher profile the better — serves only the interests of the security agencies and the hardliners, who can justify the power and scope of the elaborate (and costly) security apparatus by claiming its necessity as a bulwark against those aiming to destroy the country.

The physicist Omid Kokabee, for example, was arrested on spurious charges of crimes against national security in 2011 and given a ten-year prison sentence in 2012. Kokabee, who was pursuing a PhD in quantum optics at the University of Texas at Austin, had resisted repeated invitations from

Iranian authorities to work on military and intelligence projects. His claimed crimes were communicating with a hostile government and receiving illegitimate funds — an apparent reference to the normal stipend given to graduate students at his university.

His case and others like it must have a chilling effect on other Iranian scientists engaged in legitimate interactions with colleagues in the West. This inhibits the advancement of science in Iran and seems to be utterly counterproductive to the state-endorsed efforts to promote Iran’s scientific achievements internationally.

The more moderate members of Iran’s ruling establishment surely understand that the country’s successful integration into the global community is undermined if its best and brightest scholars fear the consequences of engaging in normal interactions with colleagues abroad.

The reality of Iran’s ‘brain drain’ problem was recognized by its science and technology minister, Reza Faraji Dana, who noted in January: “Every year, about 150,000 of our elite emigrate from Iran, costing our economy \$150 billion.”

The harsh penalties imposed on Kokabee and others have earned Iran the condemnation not only of the human-rights organizations campaigning on his behalf, but also of scientific and scholarly societies — including the American Physical Society, with which the country is otherwise engaged in a dialogue to improve opportunities for collaboration.

Scientific diplomacy can help to build bridges and defuse international tension. In an article titled ‘Which Iran Will We Choose?’, published in December by the *The WorldPost*, academics Trita Parsi, Bijan Khajehpour and Reza Marashi argued that sustained engagement with Iran on science projects

“can spill over to other crucial areas, such as the human rights situation”.

A necessary precondition for such collaboration must be the right of scientists to engage in their normal professional activities without incurring persecution. Iran’s scientists, its population and the broader scientific community would all benefit from Kokabee’s release. Campaigns to free Iranian scientists persecuted in this way have succeeded in the past. Brothers Arash and Kiamar Alaei, both HIV/AIDS physicians, were arrested in 2008 and convicted of “communicating with an enemy government”. They were released following international pressure.

By offering the prospect of shared scientific enterprises on one hand, and advocating for an end to the persecution of scholars on the other, science diplomacy could help to convince decision-makers in Iran that the benefits of international scientific cooperation greatly outweigh any value in placating those who prefer to perpetuate a giant conspiracy. ■

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