

Nov 04, 2016 by **Javad Rad**

Iran's Cultural Diplomacy and its Cultural Centers ^[1]

Recent public diplomacy reports and testimonies released by both congress and government policy makers in Washington indicate concerns over Iran's growing cultural influence. It was a year ago when Senate Foreign Relations Committee's report warned about the growing number of Islamic Republic's Cultural Centers. One year later, but apparently based on the same report, Judith McHale, identifying the challenges of US public diplomacy in the 21st century, emphasized the adverse nature of Iran's cultural initiatives.

Considering the current relationship between the countries, it is not odd for the United States to be cautious of Iran's cultural influence, but one should be aware of the fact that Iran's approach to public diplomacy and its infrastructure is much different from a simple image-making or policy advocacy method. It is largely cultural and reflects on the Persian heritage.

Cultural Centers which constitute the backbone of Iran's cultural diplomacy are all sub-branches to the Islamic Cultural Relations Organization (ICRO). A brief look at the activities of the ICRO reveals that Iran is mostly interested in, first, cementing its cultural ties with its immediate neighbors, and second, introducing Persian culture and history to countries in Africa and Europe. ICRO's Cultural Centers indulge in activities which reflect mostly on culture, religion, and philosophy.

Notable categories are:

- Cultural diplomacy: Music, Film, Persian calligraphy, painting, literature.
- Religious philosophy: Quran events and competitions, publication of books about Shiaism, and religious lectures.
- Persian Language Teaching
- Iranian Studies Programs

As mentioned above, except for few special events such as the Revolution Anniversary, political advocacy is hardly an agenda for Iran's Cultural Centers and the task is left to the relevant embassies. If there is one primary task for cultural diplomacy, and that is to enhance understanding among nations, then Iranian cultural centers are definitely fulfilling their duty by introducing Persian culture, religion and political thought to the marketplace of ideas.

Granted, it is a move the US government would not welcome as a competitor; but one should be careful not to mix the paradigms of competition with that of war. This is no cultural war, and if not a joint project, it is a cultural competition in which the more one side digs in and offers, the more common bonds among human being are discovered. US government should justifiably pursue the promotion of American culture aboard, but frowning upon the cultural exchanges by other countries is not elegant or appropriate for the US position in the world.
