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Between Intention and Serendipity: Iranian-German Science Diplomacy

Dennis Schroeder

The 250 Iranian scientists looked nervous when our alumnus struck the first piano notes. We were in the lobby of Tehran’s Grand Hotel, where a group of former German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) scholarship holders had gathered. It was October 2015, two years after I had begun my job as Iran country director for DAAD.¹ I had invited a pianist, an Iranian DAAD alumnus who had completed his PhD in Germany in Persian piano music and music education, to perform for the Iranian alumni group and fifteen guests, professors, and DAAD representatives, all from Germany. The audience represented the past four decades of a rich, successful academic dialogue in times of political tensions.

However, the recital was complicated by the nearness of our gathering to the start of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar. Muharram is the month of mourning in Iran, when performing live music is forbidden—and eager authorities often prefer that people begin their observance early. I had left the interpretation of this issue to the pianist and the hotel manager, who decided to proceed with the concert. Unaware of these concerns, the invited German scientists were delighted with the music. After a few tense moments, their Iranian colleagues also began to relax and enjoy the beautiful, strong Iranian classical melodies that filled the hall.

Dennis Schroeder is director of the DAAD Information Center in Tehran; his primary duties include representing German universities and research centers, promoting scholarship programs and advising to and liaising with regional and international institutions.

Early Years in DAAD

I joined DAAD in 2010, working to facilitate academic and scientific exchange between Germany and other countries, particularly developing countries and politically difficult partners. It was my experience as a DAAD liaison officer in postwar Sri Lanka from 2010 to 2013 that first influenced me to explore science diplomacy's full potential. From our small office in Colombo, DAAD encouraged cooperation between scientists from the country's majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities, and between these scientists and their German peers.

The broader context was that thirty-five years of civil war had laid waste to Sri Lanka's higher-education sector, especially in the island's northern part. When we realized that the higher education sector was not being included in the Sri Lankan government's postwar policy, we began to look into implementing programs in this sector that could contribute to the reconciliation process. Across my three years there, I led projects that established partnerships between Tamil professors in northern Sri Lanka and Sinhalese partners in the south. The key to this was identifying and establishing joint areas of research that could be conducted with German counterparts from either universities or the development sector. The resultant networks helped connect local experience and foreign technical expertise through an exchange of students and professors. They also promoted job creation and social stability in a post-conflict context where the educational sector's resources would otherwise have been overlooked or underutilized in the reconciliation process.

In 2013, when I became country director for DAAD in Iran, my role was to launch and establish the DAAD office in Tehran. Presently, DAAD Iran is the country's largest facilitator of international educational and scientific partnerships. We manage scholarship programs and fund bi-national and multinational projects. In my work, I conduct higher-education and science policy analysis and advise Iranian and German universities on the other nation's education policies; I also advise the German Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Research and Education about Iran.

Science and Diplomacy in Iran

While DAAD's work is not labeled "science diplomacy" as such, in the circumstances and places where we work, academic exchange becomes diplomacy and exchange leads to change.² In times of crisis, science diplomacy can become an alternative channel of communication between states and national groups with contrary interests. In times of peace, science diplomacy can help anticipate problems and challenge isolationist positions. In Iran, we are seeing a transition between these paradigms.

During the last three years, global politics and smart diplomacy have shifted Iran's relationship to the rest of the world. With the dialogue-oriented foreign policy of President Hassan Rouhani and efforts by the U.S. administration and many European member states, past times of crisis are being succeeded by times of rapprochement, culminating in last year's nuclear deal. This development had a tremendous impact at the regional and international levels, and science diplomacy played a vital part. Moreover, the recent diplomatic success story would not have been possible without the efforts of the scientists at its center. Leading individuals, such as U.S. Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz and Ali Akbar Salehi, who heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, discussed not only the difficult politics of nuclear nonproliferation but also the technical details of uranium enrichment in all their complexity.

While this success story is well known, science diplomacy with Iran is not limited to the field of nuclear technology. For example, joint German-Iranian initiatives in recent years, mostly funded and often initiated by DAAD and its alumni, have centered on endeavors such as summer schools and bi-national research programs covering content ranging from urban planning, to social inclusion and governance, to the joint discovery of more than one hundred novel genes for recessive cognitive disorders. Science diplomacy will likely gain further significance in the face of shared regional challenges relating to the environment, sustainable energy, and pandemics.

A paradigm shift is likewise happening regarding acceptance on both sides—Iran and the “West”—of scientific collaboration. Previously, collaboration between Iranian and Western scientists was seen as undesirable by political decision makers on both sides—so collaboration occurred quietly or exclusively on paper. However, such collaboration has come into vogue, especially since the summer of 2013, when numerous scientific delegations from European countries, the United States, China, and Russia came to Iran. We can see efforts in general science collaboration exemplified in co-authorship: according to UNESCO,³ approximately one-quarter of recent Iranian scientific articles have a foreign coauthor. The top four partners, in descending order, are politically unlikely but a perfect match in matters of science diplomacy: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.⁴ Diplomacy begins to play a role once we consider science and research together as key tools not only for scientific advancement but also for peace building, and thus commit to reinventing the academic as well as personal ties that connect Iran with other countries.

DAAD in Iran

My first year in Iran involved a tremendous amount of meetings and networking activities, at which I explained the range of our work and pointed out its limits,

gave examples of best practices from other regions, and provided transparency of our work to the ministries. Trust building and diplomacy require a dialogue across this spectrum.

Hours of meetings in government offices, which I sustained with patience and liters of tea, secured DAAD's presence in the country and furthered the sort of scientific German-Iranian cooperation that did not indeed begin recently but rather dates to the early twentieth century. Cultural relations, however, had reached their apogee already with Goethe's nineteenth-century West-Eastern Divan, a collection inspired by his encounter with Hafez's magnificent poetry from five hundred years earlier. Modern scientific cooperation between Iran and Germany is similarly symbolized in the University of Tehran, Iran's first modern university, which was built in the 1930s with German architects and scientific advisors. Today, the institution is one of DAAD's main partners and the host of the majority of German students, professors, and DAAD scholars in Iran.

The first German DAAD scholars went to Iran in the 1960s; the first Iranian DAAD scholars visited Germany in the early 1970s. Both parties played a vital role in another endeavor necessary to mention in this short retrospective. In Iran's northwestern province of Guilan, the first German international university abroad was founded, based on cooperation between Iranian and German scientists, diplomats, and politicians—however, it lasted only from 1977 until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Nevertheless, the memory of those times is still vivid in Guilan University, and its connection to German universities and colleagues remains strong thanks to numerous active alumni from both countries.

In the 1980s and after, this scientific exchange persisted despite difficult circumstances. In 2002, DAAD aimed to institutionalize German-Iranian scientific cooperation by opening a DAAD office in Tehran; the office was closed for political reasons at the height of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2007.

Since 2013, and in collaboration with the relevant Iranian and German ministries, universities, and scientists, we have been able to reestablish a solid bridge between the German and Iranian academic communities—this in spite of tensions and weak political ties. In 2015, DAAD Iran sent more than six hundred Iranian scholars to Germany, most of them as part of joint research projects or young PhD students who plan to conduct part or all of their doctoral work abroad. Currently, DAAD is working toward multilateral collaborations among Afghan, Iranian, and German universities in the field of industrial development. Because of the growing threats of water scarcity in the region, which may eventually fuel future conflicts, we are also engaged in funding projects on sustainable water management that could help address these challenges.

In doing this work, I have learned a lot about the political dynamics, both domestic and international, associated with conducting scientific exchange with a state like Iran, burdened by numerous political and cultural constraints. The work of international scientific collaboration is ultimately both political and

inherently intimate. In a country like Iran, where almost everything can have a political dimension, science diplomacy must be built upon strong personal ties that eventually evolve into institutional relations. Mutual respect, visible collaboration, political sensitivity, intercultural understanding, and patience are all essential components in any science diplomacy endeavor in order to build trust and support sustainable peace building.

It is a special privilege to visit Iranian universities every other week to talk to students and staff about possibilities for study and research in Germany. I tell them about scholarship opportunities, tools for project funding, and the possibility of inviting German scientists and students to Iran. Mostly, I am invited to technical universities, whose scholars possess English (and, surprisingly, often German) language skills and where the technical fields provide another common language. Often, I am accompanied by German professors who have been supported by DAAD in order to join conferences or conduct workshops in Iran. One of the more common remarks these professors offer when visiting these technical schools involves surprise at the high number of women enrolled in the programs. Indeed, Iranian technical universities, and universities in general, often have a majority of female students, unlike in many other countries.⁵ This educational empowerment suggests that Iranian women may be building a stable base for future leadership positions in state and society. At present, however, the vast majority of Iran's decision makers are men, while well-educated women not only face social difficulties but also have a harder time pursuing careers that lead to leadership positions.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated by recent elections and changes in higher education, Iran is opening up: many of the top Iranian universities are now led by more open-minded academics who often spent part of their studies doing research abroad. The Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology adopted a strong internationalization policy and continues hosting foreign delegations of scientists every other week. In 2015, more than 100 DAAD-supported German scientists took part in such delegations, which discussed different topics and models of cooperation as well as further internationalization. And this may only be the beginning of the gradual opening of Iran's scientific landscape.

But while old tensions fade, new obstacles appear on the international political stage. For every two steps forward, there is one step back due to political quarrels between different factions. The reality of brain drain and accusations of tainting Western influence on Iranian youth also inhibit progress. Most decision makers whom I have encountered, however, understand that brain drain is happening first and foremost because of a desolate labor market, crippled by sanctions and mismanagement, that has not met the demands of highly skilled Iranian graduates.

Another rather new obstacle for science diplomacy and cooperation is the suspension of the U.S. visa waiver for Europeans who have traveled to Iran since 2011.⁶ With gradual changes in how Iran is perceived internationally—namely, its

path from “axis of evil” member to a potential partner for Middle East peace—more scientists have dropped their hesitation to interact with their Iranian counterparts. But now, the U.S. Congress’s new visa waiver bill complicates or denies visa-free entry to the United States to those same people, whether they traveled to Iran as tourists, on business, or as science diplomats. In fact, I was recently denied entry into the United States to attend Science Diplomacy 2016 (an annual international conference run by the AAAS Center for Science Diplomacy, publisher of *Science & Diplomacy*) because of my current position as a science diplomat in Iran. This makes potential scientific and cultural delegates more circumspect when considering travel to Iran. Another well-known problem is the exclusion of Iranian students from different STEM subjects in some European countries.

International science policy and diplomacy cannot offer all the answers to the perennial questions of peace, development, and innovation. However, working in tandem with well-articulated global policies, science diplomacy efforts can help surmount some of the challenges posed by segmented thinking and narrow approaches.

My work in Iran would not be possible without passionate scientists and optimistic political actors. However, it still faces many obstacles. These range from remaining economic sanctions on Iran to consular issues to political pressures. Therefore, because science diplomacy is still not in the global mainstream, it will be necessary to more effectively integrate it into the fabric of foreign policy. When this becomes an intentional goal of global policy makers, then beautiful moments of serendipity like our alumni concert in Iran will occur more often. **SD**

The information and views set out in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Endnotes

1. The acronym matches the German—Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst and refers to a publicly funded independent organization of higher-education institutions in Germany. Each year, DAAD, its regional branch offices, its information centers, and DAAD professors around the globe provide information and financial support to more than 120,000 highlyqualified students and faculty for international research and study.
2. “National Priorities: Recent Trends & Future Developments, Germany,” DAAD, pp. 54–56, http://www.iie.org/~media/Files/Corporate/G8/G8%20National%20Priorities_Germany.pdf?la=en
3. UNESCO Science Report: Toward 2030 (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2015), p. 389, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002354/235406e.pdf>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ehsan Masood, “Islam and Science: An Islamist Revolution,” *Nature* 444, no. 7115 (November 2, 2006): 22–25.
6. “Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act Frequently Asked Questions,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.cbp.gov/travel/international-visitors/visa-waiver-program/visa-waiver-program-improvement-and-terrorist-travel-prevention-act-faq#>