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American and Iranian Public Opinion: The Quest for Common Grounds

Clifford Grammich and C. Christine Fair*

Introduction

The emergent and ever-deepening conflict between Iran and the United States is often framed in the rhetoric of “clash of civilizations.” Iran’s religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, alleges, “The bitter and venomous taste of Western liberal democracy, which the United States has hypocritically tried to portray through its propaganda as a healing remedy, has hurt the body and soul of the Islamic Ummah and burned the hearts of Muslims.”¹ The U.S. President, George W. Bush, for his part contends “the greatest obstacle to th[e] future [of] Iran that [its] rulers have chosen to deny [the people of Iran] liberty and to use [their] nation’s resources to fund terrorism, and fuel extremism, and pursue nuclear weapons.”² While sharp differences persist at the level of U.S. and Iranian official rhetoric about the value of democracy and the nature of the influence exerted by both states, diminished personal contacts between Iranian and American

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¹ Michael Slackman. “Behind Iran’s Challenge to West, Cleric Cloaked in Immense Power,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2006.

² George W. Bush. Text of Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 19, 2006 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060919-4.html>>.

peoples frustrate efforts to discern whether such sharp differences in values and worldviews exist among Iranian and American polities.

Conveniently, data exist that allow analysts to explore both the shared and differing values of the Iranian and American peoples, namely the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS is a multi-country social survey designed to assess values and attitudes across nations and among peoples of varying economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. The survey includes questions on personal values of respondents as well as their opinions on broad issues of politics, work, family life, and religion. The surveys use a stratified, multistage random sample of persons at least 18 years of age.³

We analyze data from Wave 3 of the survey, which is the only available wave of data for both Iran and the United States. In the United States, Wave 3 was conducted in 2000 and includes data for 1,200 respondents. In Iran, this wave was fielded in 2003 and contains data for 2,532 respondents.⁴ (Various details on the sample of respondents are given in Table 1.) Though now somewhat dated, Wave 3 of the World Values Survey, particularly for the questions of more enduring values that we examine, still offers numerous policy-relevant insights.⁵ Indeed, Wave 3 datasets comprise the *only* source for such insights for recent years on the values of the peoples of both nations. A fourth wave is currently being fielded in Iran but the data have not been publicly released and the fourth wave of data collection has not yet begun in the United States. Significantly, despite the fact that tensions between Iran and the United States have continued to intensify in recent years, such analysis has not been executed.

³ For more information about the World Values Survey, consult the project website <<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>>.

⁴ For information about the survey questionnaire administered and other technical dimensions of the survey, see the World Values Survey website <<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>>.

⁵ We are aware of the fact that the U.S. sample was fielded prior to the events of 9-11 and the Iranian sample afterwards overlapped the onset of the U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, we have found no compelling reason to believe that the variables selected for this analysis should be greatly impacted by those tragic events. This can only be tested once Wave 4 data are available.

Table 1

Number of WVS Wave 3 Respondents by Selected Characteristics

	Iran	U.S.A.
Total	2,532	1,200
Male	1,361	600
Female	1,171	600
<25	952	199
25-34	586	227
35-44	379	282
45+	615	491
Completed no more than primary education	621	173
Completed at least some secondary but no tertiary education	1,142	418
Completed at least some tertiary education	661	605
Low income ⁱ	852	426
Middle income	546	401
High income	849	305

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

ⁱ No specific income gradations are given for Iranian respondents. For the United States, “low income” respondents are those reporting household incomes of no more than \$35,000, “middle income” respondents are those reporting household incomes from \$35,001 to \$62,500, and “high income” respondents are those reporting household incomes of more than \$62,500.

The World Values Survey was designed to test how far “post-materialist” values have advanced in societies throughout the world. Analyses using its data typically divide countries by two axes: one with “traditional” and “secular-rational” values at opposing poles, and another with “survival” and “self-expression” values at opposing poles.

The “traditional” and “secular-rational” axis reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. More “traditional” societies tend to emphasize traditional family values and absolute social standards, rejecting divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and

suicide. They also have high levels of national pride. “Secular-rational” societies have opposing preferences on these topics. Previous analyses have shown Iran to be more “traditional” than the United States, and the United States to be more traditional than most European nations.

The “survival” and “self-expression” axis reflects the contrast between developing and industrial nations that emphasize economic and physical security and those post-industrial nations where survival is taken for granted and there is greater emphasis on environmental protection, tolerance of diversity, and participation in economic and political decision making. Post-industrial nations are also more likely than others to emphasize imagination in children and interpersonal trust. Previous analyses have shown the United States to be among the nations most emphasizing “self-expression,” but also Iran to be further away from the “survival” pole than most Muslim nations.

In sum, although previous analyses have shown Iran and the United States to differ on these two axes, they also show some areas of similarity to each other, particularly in comparison to other Muslim and post-industrial nations. We explore these similarities in this analysis.

This present analysis serves three purposes. First, it makes use of WVS data to form an important baseline on values held by U.S. and Iranian publics. Second, this analysis hopes to inform U.S. and Iranian publics about the important commonalities—and where appropriate—differences in the values they espouse. Finally, it informed ongoing survey work in Iran undertaken by the United States Institute of Peace, which along with Search for Common Ground and the Program on International Policy Attitudes, fielded a nationally representative survey of Iranian respondents in the fall of 2006. Data and concomitant analysis are forthcoming.

Our analysis of WVS Wave 3 data is organized around five topics. First, we explore a cluster of questions pertaining to personal values and opinions, including the importance respondents place on such topics as family, friends, politics, work, and religion, as well as the confidence they have in social institutions such as religious congregations, the government, and social movements. Second, we examine U.S. and Iranian attitudes towards politics, including their personal interest in politics and their views on democracy. Third, we review respondents’ views on work issues, including the most important qualities they seek in a job and the right of women or immigrants to hold jobs. Fourth, we examine views on family issues, including the ideal number of children, family care issues, and family income and savings. Fifth, we consider respondents’ attitudes on religion,

including their own religious practices and the role they believe religion should play in society. We conclude with an analysis of the implications of this work.

Data and Analytical Methodology

As indicated, we make use of Wave 3 of the World Values Survey. We compare sample means for each question for both national samples. Because of the large number of respondents in these surveys, nearly every difference shown between U.S. and Iranian respondents is statistically significant. Moreover, we present *only* those findings that are statistically significant. For these reasons, we do not present statistical test results when discussing differences between respondent answers in each nation. In addition to examining national averages, we also explore several national subgroups, including gender, age, educational level and income. Detailed information by each subgroup is given in Table 1. In our narrative, we note differences across subgroups only when they are statistically significant or when subgroup findings differ from the corresponding national mean. We only report distributional differences by sub-group that are statistically significant, as determined by the use of the Chi-Squared technique.

For purposes of data analysis, we omitted observations where the respondent “Refused” to answer; however, we retained “Don’t Know” responses because this answer was not randomly distributed, as discussed below. This method differs somewhat from that of the WVS Codebook, which excludes all observations marked as “Don’t Know” or “Refused.” For this reason our values may differ somewhat from the published means of the WVS Codebook.⁶

We found that Iranian respondents were much more likely than Americans to respond “don’t know” in response to querying their views on democracy, the police, and religious authorities, among others. This proportion of Iranian “don’t know” responses significantly affected analysis of these questions. Use of this response category may suggest respondents’ discomfort with the question, fears of answering the question, as well as actual uncertainty about how to answer the question. For these reasons, we note in our exposition when Iranian respondents disproportionately answer “don’t know” to particular questions. Because some subgroups may be more vulnerable than others and therefore more likely to say “don’t know,” we analyze the subgroups that are more likely to indicate “don’t

⁶See Ronald Inglehart, Miguel Basañez, Jaime Diez-Medrano, Loek Halman, and Ruud Luijkx, eds., *Human Beliefs and Values*, 1st ed. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2004).

know.” The statistically significant results of these analyses are also given where appropriate.

What the Data Say

Personal Values and Opinions

We first examine those aspects of life that respondents claimed to value, including friends, family, leisure, politics, work, religion and service to others. (See Table 2) Iranian and American samples tended to concur on the importance of family, service to others, and the unimportance of politics. For example, nearly all Iranians and Americans indicate that their family is “very important.” In fact, more than 90 percent of persons in *every* subgroup (gender, age, education and income) in both nations said family is very important in their life. Surveyed Iranians and Americans also agree on the value of service to others with majorities of both groups indicating that this is very important. They also agree on the relative insignificance of politics; only one in six respondents in either nation indicates that politics is important to them.

But Americans and Iranians differ significantly when it comes to the value of friends, work, leisure and religion. American respondents, more so than their Iranian counterparts, value their friends with more than twice as many Americans (64 percent) as Iranians (29 percent) indicating that friends are very important. This asymmetry in valuing friends held across all subgroups in both national samples. In every Iranian subgroup, *33 percent or fewer* highly valued their friends compared to the U.S. sample wherein *58 percent or more* did so across all U.S. subgroups.

Iranian respondents place more importance on work and less on leisure than American survey participants. Seventy-eight percent of Iranians said that work was very important compared to 57 percent of Americans and only 29 percent of Iranians said leisure was “very important” compared to 42 percent of Americans. The prioritization of work held across each Iranian subgroup within which 70 percent or more respondents in every Iranian subgroup said work was very important.

Iranian respondents place greater importance upon religion than do Americans. In each Iranian sample subgroup, at least 70 percent said religion was very important. Among U.S. respondents, at least 50 percent of every subgroup we examined—except males and those less than 30 years of age—said religion was very important.

We next examine a battery of questions that gauge respondent confidence in a number of prominent public and private institutions such as the

press, police, labor unions, civil service, television, national government, political parties, social movements and the United Nations (Table 3). Both publics expressed comparable levels of confidence in religious congregations, the press, labor unions, and political parties.

Consonant with the level of importance ascribed to religion in both samples, Iranians and Americans express the greatest confidence in their religious congregations. Iranian respondents expressed somewhat higher confidence in religious congregations, and this held across all subgroups. Nevertheless, majorities of U.S. respondents in every subgroup also expressed high levels of confidence in religious congregation. In fact, religious congregations are the most trusted institutions in both societies.

Despite minor differences, Americans and Iranians shared a relative dearth of confidence in the press, labor unions, and political parties of their nations. In each subgroup as well only minorities of respondents indicated confidence in these institutions. This result was affected by the large number of Iranian respondents—about one in three on labor unions and one in four on political parties—who said they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in two of these institutions. Female respondents were more likely than others to answer “don’t know” regarding their confidence in labor unions, and females and persons of lower education were more likely to answer “don’t know” when queried about political parties.

Respondents in both Iran and the United States are unlikely to see political parties as a useful means of change. Only about one-fourth in each has a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in parties. In all subgroups in both national samples, fewer than one in three respondents express much confidence in political parties.

Despite these similarities, Iranian and American publics differed regarding their levels of confidence in numerous other areas including the police, television, national government, civil service, major companies, social movements and the United Nations. For example, police fare reasonably well among respondents in both nations, albeit better in the United States. A solid majority (71 percent) of Americans expressed confidence in their police compared to a slight majority (53 percent) of Iranians. One reason for the lower confidence enjoyed by the police in the Iran is the higher proportion of Iranian respondents who say they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in the police. Because some respondents may be more apprehensive about this question, we analyzed which Iranian subgroups are more likely to answer “don’t know” when asked this question. We found that female and less educated respondents are more likely to give this response.

Iranians have a relatively higher level of confidence in television than their American counterparts with 47 percent of Iranians indicating that they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot of confidence” compared to only 24 percent of American respondents who did so. Television is particularly trusted by Iranians at least 50 years of age (53 percent) and those of lower education (58 percent), but also enjoys greater confidence among every Iranian subgroup we examined than among comparable U.S. subgroups. The cause, and therefore implications, of this confidence are not clear.

Iranians have more confidence in their national government than do Americans. A solid majority of Iranian respondents (61 percent) said that they have either a “great deal” or “quite a lot of” confidence in their national governments compared to a minority (37 percent) of Americans who do so. But Iranians have substantially less confidence in their civil service than do Americans. While a slight majority of American respondents (52 percent) are confident in their civil service, a minority of Iranians (37 percent) feel this way. The civil service and national government failed to garner the simultaneous confidence of a majority of respondents in all subgroups in both national samples.

Major companies enjoy the confidence of a majority of Americans (53 percent) but a minority of Iranians (22 percent). In both nations, major companies enjoy substantially more confidence among those of upper income than of lower income. In every subgroup we examined, however, confidence in major companies among Iranians was lower than that in the comparable American subgroup. Furthermore, in all Iranian subgroups, fewer than 27 percent of respondents say they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in major companies while in all American subgroups, at least 46 percent of respondents has such confidence.

Social movements such as “the environmental protection movement” and “the women’s movement” also enjoy more confidence in the United States than in Iran. Majorities of Americans said they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in these movements, but majorities of Iranians do not. One reason for the differences is the high proportion of Iranians who said they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in these movements. Nearly one in four Iranians said they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in the environmental protection movement, and nearly two in five said they “don’t know” how much they have in the women’s movement. Older and less-educated Iranians were most likely to say they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in these movements.

The United Nations also enjoys far greater support in the United States than in Iran. More than half of Americans (55 percent) said they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the UN, compared to just one in four Iranians. Even among the most educated Iranians, most (52 percent) said they have not very much or no confidence at all in the UN. Again, “don’t know” respondents account for much of the difference; nearly one in three Iranians said they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in the UN. Female, older, and less educated respondents were most likely to say they “don’t know” how much confidence they have in the United Nations.

In sum, the overall impression afforded by analyses of these data is of nearly universal agreement on the importance of family, the very high levels of confidence religious congregations enjoy in each society—and the minimal importance of politics and trust in political parties.

Table 2

“For each of the following, indicate how important it is in your life. Would you say it is [very important]?”

	Iran	U.S.A.
Family	95%	95%
Friends	29	64
Leisure time	29	42
Politics	17	16
Work	78	54
Religion	80	57
Service to others	62	51

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 3

“For each [of the following organizations], could you tell me [if] you have a great deal of confidence [or] quite a lot of confidence [in them]?”ⁱ

	Iran	U.S.A.
Religious congregations	83%	74%
Press	33	27
Labor unions	23	36
Police	53	71
Civil service	37	52
Television	47	24
National government	61	37
Political parties	26	22
Major companies	22	53
Environmental protection movement	41	58
Women’s movement	26	57
United Nations	25	55

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

ⁱ Respondents saying “not very much,” “none at all,” or “don’t know” are not shown.

Politics

Below we explore in more depth the broad political attitudes of the American and Iranian peoples. This includes additional questions about the importance of politics in their lives, the most important goals they perceive for their nations, beliefs in who runs their country (and for whose benefit), their respect for human rights, pride in their nationality, the value of democracy, and the proper roles for men and women in politics. We see further agreement here on the importance of politics as well as on the goals for each nation, but some differences in the value of democracy as well as on the proper role for women in politics.

The previously observed minimal importance that both U.S. and Iranian respondents report for politics in their lives is matched by the amount of discussion they report on it and the level of personal interest they have in it (Table 4). By these measures, the most educated are the most engaged in politics. Among persons with at least some tertiary education in Iran, 25 percent say they discuss politics “frequently,” and 23 percent say they are

“very interested” in politics. Among such persons in the United States, 21 percent say they discuss politics “frequently,” and 23 percent say they are “very interested” in politics. This is not surprising, given the general empirical observation that better educated persons more easily participate in politics.⁷ Nevertheless, there are some notable differences. Within the United States, for example, these measures show persons at least 55 years old to be most engaged in politics, while in Iran those 25 to 34 years old are most engaged.

Iranians and Americans have similar political priorities. A majority of Iranians and a large plurality of Americans said “a high level of economic growth” was the most important goal for their country over the next decade (Table 5). Economic growth was the most important goal for every subgroup we examined in each society.

Giving people “more say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities was the second most likely goal to be cited as most important in each nation, albeit one more likely to be cited by Americans than Iranians. Making sure their country “has strong defense forces” was cited by only one in six respondents in each nation.⁸

One possible reason for the desire for a greater say in work and community affairs is the cynicism with which some Iranians and most Americans view their nation’s affairs. Most Americans believe that their “country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” (Table 6). Iranians are more likely to say that their country “is run for the benefit of

⁷ As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 433) note, education not only gives persons the skills and knowledge needed to participate in politics, it also places them “in institutional settings where they can be recruited to political activity, and it fosters psychological and cognitive engagement with politics.”

⁸ It is likely that more Americans would now see the most important goal of the nation as “making sure this country has strong defense forces.” Yet it is not clear whether this would have supplanted “a high level of economic growth” as the most desired goal. To assess the growing importance of a strong military to Americans in recent years, we examined the proportion of respondents to the National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey (Davis and Smith, serial) who believe too little is being spent on military, armaments, and defense. It increased from 25 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2004. Yet even in 2004 there were far more respondents who thought too little was spent on improving and protecting the nation’s health (78 percent, an increase from 73 percent in 2000), or on improving the nation’s education system (74 percent, a slight increase from 72 percent in 2000). It is also noteworthy that, even after the second Persian Gulf War brought a large U.S. force to a neighboring nation, a majority of Iraqis still thought ensuring a high level of economic growth was a more important goal for the country than ensuring the strength of the country’s defense forces.

all the people,” but a large proportion of Iranians are also unsure (or “don’t know”) in whose interests their country is run.

Among Iranians, those with at least some tertiary education are most cynical about national affairs, with 41 percent saying their country “is run by a few big interests.” Even this level of cynicism, however, is well below that in the United States, where majorities of every subgroup we examined said a few big interests run their country.

Though cynical about public affairs, majorities in both countries say they see considerable respect for human rights in their nations (Table 7). Majorities in both nations, as well as in each subgroup we examined, say there is “a lot” or, more typically, “some” respect for human rights. Only about a fourth in each nation say there is “not much respect” or “no respect at all” for human rights.

Most Iranian respondents (91 percent) and most American respondents (71 percent) said that they are “very proud” of their nationality. While one may suspect that respondents in all countries would invariably express such pride in their nationality, a perusal of *all* countries in Wave 3 of the WVS data suggests that this is not the case. Across all respondents in all countries surveyed in this wave, only 58 percent of those surveyed indicated that they are “very proud” of their nationality. The largest national average for this response was observed in Venezuela, with 92 percent of respondents saying that they are “very proud” of their nationality. At the other extreme was Taiwan Province where only 14 percent of respondents indicated such pride. Thus respondents in the Iranian and U.S. samples are among the most proud of their nationalities.

Majorities in both Iran and the United States support democratic political systems, and have similar views on their strengths and weaknesses (Table 8). A higher proportion of Americans than Iranians say that it is “very” or “fairly” good to have a democratic political system. Yet only 10 percent of Iranians say it is “bad” or “very bad” to have a democratic political system. Nearly one in three (31 percent) Iranians say they “don’t know” whether having a democratic political system would be good or bad. Analysis of respondents offering “don’t know” suggests that less educated Iranians are more likely to give this response than others. Thus it would seem that the smaller majority in Iran favoring democracy is not necessarily a result of explicit opposition to it.

Iranians and Americans share the same relatively muted criticisms of democratic political systems. Only minorities in each nation, fewer than one in four, say democracies have badly run economic systems, are inde-

cisive, or are not good at maintaining order. As a result, far more persons in each nation agree rather than disagree that democracy is better than any other political system. While just over two in five Iranians say democracy is best, only one in five disagree, with more than one in three saying they “don’t know.” Again, Iranians most likely to say democracy is best, and least likely to say they “don’t know” how good it is, are younger and better educated.

When it comes to gender and political roles; however, Iranian respondents sharply differed from those in the United States (Table 9). Six in ten Iranians agree that, “[o]n the whole, men make better political leaders than women do,” with nearly three in ten strongly agreeing with this statement. Majorities of every Iranian subgroup we examined agree with this statement, although women (51 percent) were least likely to do so. More than two in ten U.S. respondents said men make better political leaders; Americans most likely to agree with this statement are older or less educated.

Table 4

Discussion and Interest in Politics

	Iran	U.S.A.
Discuss political matters “frequently” with friends	16%	17%
“Very interested” in politics	16	18

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 5

Most Important Goal of Country for Next Ten Years

	Iran	U.S.A.
“A high level of economic growth”	54%	48%
Giving people “more say about how things are done”	19	31
“Making sure this country has strong defense forces”	16	16

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 6

“Would you say that this country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?”

	Iran	U.S.A.
A few big interests	35%	60%
All the people	37	35
Don't know	27	5

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 7

Respect for Human Rights; Pride in Nationality

	Iran	U.S.A.
Say there is “a lot” or “some” respect for human rights in country	67%	74%
“Very proud” of nationality	91	72

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 8

Opinion on Democracy

	Iran	U.S.A.
Say it is “very” or “fairly” good to have a democratic political system	59%	86%
Agree that democracies . . .		
· Have badly run economic systems	20	22
· Are indecisive	17	38
· Aren't good at maintaining order	20	21
· Are better than any other political system	45	85

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 9

“On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.”

	Iran	U.S.A.
Agree strongly	28%	5%
Agree	32	17

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Work

Iranians also hold starkly divergent views from their American counterparts on the role of women in the workplace (Table 10). In Iran a large majority (71 percent) believe that men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce. This trend held in every Iranian subgroup—including women—that we examined. In contrast, only small minorities of every American subgroup, and one in ten (10 percent) of all Americans, we examined hold this view.

Iranians are even more biased against immigrants in the domestic labor market. At least 89 percent of every Iranian subgroup we examined believes that employers should give priority to employing Iranians over immigrants. Americans are also more biased towards immigrants than they are towards women; nearly half believe that employers should give Americans priority to jobs during job scarcity. Among Americans, opposition to employment of immigrants was particularly high among those of lower education and income.

At work, Iranians and Americans look for many of the same things. Money matters most to both groups, with job security ranking very high as well (Table 11). Aside from these issues, Americans place more importance in being able to achieve something in their job while Iranians are more likely to prize respect in their employment.

Table 10

“When jobs are scarce...”

	Iran	U.S.A.
“...men should have more right to a job than women.”	71%	10%
“...employers should give priority to (Iranians/Americans) over immigrants.”	92	49

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Table 11

Important Characteristics of a Job

	Iran	U.S.A.
Good pay	81%	89%
Good job security	78	72
A job respected by people in general	62	46
A job in which you feel you can achieve something	52	84

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Family Life Issues

We next examine Iranian and American views on an array of family life issues (Table 12). Iranians and Americans tend to agree on many of the issues queried by the survey including spousal economic contributions, the fulfillment of housewives, and the ideal number of children, but they differ over the institution of marriage and savings.

Even though Iranians are more likely to believe men have more right to a job than women, Iranians (68 percent) and Americans (67 percent) are similar in their support for both spouses contributing to household income. Among Iranian respondents support for this is higher among younger and better-educated participants. Among U.S. respondents, the less educated and those with lower incomes are more likely to say both spouses should contribute to income.

While majorities in both nations believe both spouses should contribute

to income, majorities in both nations (69 percent in Iran and 77 percent in the United States) agree that “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.” In both nations, older respondents are more likely to agree with this statement. Iranians and Americans have similar views on ideal family size. Majorities of respondents in both nations say “the ideal size” of a family is two children. Majorities of nearly every subgroup we examined in both nations said two is the ideal number of children; in all subgroups, two was cited as an ideal size more than any other number.

Majorities in both nations also agreed that “a child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily.” A higher proportion of respondents agreed with this in Iran, where at least 79 percent of respondents in every subgroup we examined agreed with this. While majorities in every U.S. subgroup we examined agreed with this, large numbers of female (43 percent) and respondents 25 to 34 years of age (47 percent) disagreed.

Regardless of their views of proper roles for each spouse within a family, very few Iranians or Americans view marriage as an “outdated” institution. Much of the difference that does exist between the two nations on this question is a result of the higher proportion in Iran of younger respondents, who are more likely to think marriage outdated.

American and Iranian respondents differed sharply when it came to savings with surveyed Americans (46 percent) being far more likely to report savings in the past year than Iranians (17 percent). Even Iranians of the highest income are less likely to report saving money in the past year than are Americans of the lowest income. Much of this may be a result of differing income levels in the two nations; World Bank Development Indicators suggest that per capita gross domestic product, even under purchasing power parity, is more than five times higher in the United States than in Iran.

Table 12

Family Life Issues

	Iran	U.S.A.
Agree husband and wife should both contribute to income	68%	67%
Agree being a housewife can as fulfilling as working for pay	69	77
Say two is the ideal number of children	59	52
Agree that to be happy child needs a home with both parents	82	63
Say marriage is an outdated institution	18	10
Saved money last year	17	46

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Religion and Science

We next analyzed a cluster of questions that probed respondents on various aspects of religion and science. Surprising similarities exist among respondents about personal religiosity, assessment of scientific advancement, and the adequacy of religious institutions in addressing various needs even though differences were observed regarding frequency of attendance at religious services (Table 13). Notably, Americans are far more likely to report attending religious service at least weekly than are Iranians. Reported religious service attendance is greater in the United States than in Iran for every subgroup we examined except for those of the lowest education levels. While there is a positive relationship between reported religious service attendance and education in the United States, the relationship in Iran is negative. That is, in the United States, more educated persons report attending religious services more often, while in Iran they report doing so less often.

Large majorities in both nations consider themselves to be religious. At least 70 percent of every subgroup we examined in both nations claimed to be religious. In no subgroup did even 4 percent claim to be “convinced atheists.”

Most Americans and Iranians also trust religious authorities to provide answers to other problems. Majorities in each nation say they give adequate answers to moral problems, family life issues, and spiritual needs.

Fewer in each nation have similar levels of trust in religious authorities to provide answers to social problems. Persons of higher education are least likely to say religious answers on these problems are adequate.

While placing somewhat more confidence in religious authorities, Iranians are also more likely than Americans to believe scientific advancements help rather than harm mankind. Confidence in the benefit of scientific advancement is highest among Iranians of lower and middle education levels and Americans of upper education levels. Iranians of upper education levels and Americans of younger age groups are more likely to say at least that scientific advancement will both help and harm mankind.

Table 13

Family Life Issues

	Iran	U.S.A.
Report attending religious services at least weekly	27%	45%
Consider self to be religious	89	81
Believe scientific advancements help rather than harm	68	54
Say religious institutions give adequate answers to issues of...		
· Moral problems	70	55
· Family life	64	59
· Spiritual needs	64	71
· Social problems	51	44

Source: Author tabulations of World Values Survey, Wave 3 data.

Conclusions

We analyzed these data to understand the similar and differing values held by the American and Iranian peoples and how these may affect relations between them. The *similarities* we found were greater than the differences.

- Both Americans and Iranians place high importance on family, religion, work, and service to others in their lives, valuing these above nearly everything else.
- Both show roughly similar levels of religious belief.
- Politics and political organizations have relatively little importance for both polities.

- Above all, both national samples expressed a desire to see their nations enjoy economic growth, and are comparatively less concerned about the military might of their nations.
- Many respondents in both countries trust the answers of religious authorities on some of the broader issues facing their nation, including those involving social problems.
- Respondents in both samples generally agree that it is good to have a democratic political system, and tend to believe that such a system is better than any other.
- At work, both Iranian and U.S. respondents are likely to seek good pay above anything else, although Iranians value job security more than Americans and Americans value achievement on the job more than Iranians do.
- At home, they agree that both spouses should contribute to income, but that being a housewife can be as fulfilling as working for pay, that two is the ideal number of children, that children need both a mother and father at home, and that marriage is still a relevant institution.

A few important *differences* did emerge between the two national samples.

- Americans are more trusting of some features of capitalism, as demonstrated by their greater confidence in such features of it as major companies.
- Americans expressed some confidence in institutions such as the United Nations in world affairs, while many Iranians say they do not know enough about it to have an opinion.
- Iranians, relative to American respondents, are more likely to believe that men make better political leaders than women, that they should have more right to a job than women, and that citizens of their nation should have more right to a job than immigrants.
- While both Americans and Iranians place very high importance on their families, the greater importance that Americans place on friends in their life may indirectly underscore the importance of families to Iranians. Iranians are more likely than Americans to believe scientific advancements will help rather than harm mankind.
- Surveyed Iranians are less likely than Americans to report attending religious services weekly, and even somewhat more likely to think marriage is an outdated institution.

Surely some of the differences between Americans and Iranians stem from the differing views of younger persons generally, which is exacerbat-

ed by the higher proportion of young respondents in the Iranian sample. In fact, 61 percent of the Iranian sample is under 35 years of age compared to 36 percent of the American sample, reflecting the different age structures of the two nations' populations. Younger Iranians are more likely to support democratic politics, perhaps meaning that, in some ways, similarities between the values of the Iranian and American peoples may grow in future with Iran's youth bulge.

In summary, this analysis finds considerable common ground in the values of the American and Iranian peoples, with relatively few of the differences contributing to "civilizational clashes" between them. Whatever the sources of conflict between the two peoples in future years, differing goals in the lives of each, contrary to the rhetoric of some leaders, is not likely to contribute significantly to these conflicts. Moreover, at some point in the future, both governments could conceivably turn to these shared values *if and when* Washington and Tehran decide to normalize relations.

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