

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence.

The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at [www.tctv.net](http://www.tctv.net).

You can also watch the program described below (and more than 90 of our previous interview programs and special programs) at the Olympia FOR's website, [www.olympiafor.org](http://www.olympiafor.org). Simply click the TV programs link to reach [www.olympiafor.org/tv\\_programs.htm](http://www.olympiafor.org/tv_programs.htm), scroll down, and click the program you want to watch.

Many of our website's TV program listings also include a .pdf document describing the program.

## SEPTEMBER 2013

# "IRAN: UNDERSTANDING THE REALITIES – ACHIEVING PEACE"

by GLEN ANDERSON, PRODUCER AND HOST OF THIS TV SERIES

Iran is often in the news, but much of what the US's news media and politicians say grossly inaccurate. Much of it is mean-spirited and downright harmful.

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's September 2013 TV program:

- Reviews Iran's history
- Provides for context for understanding what is really happening now.
- Corrects some of the misinformation we've been hearing for many years.
- Suggests more constructive ways to promote peace with Iran.

This TV interview features two exceptionally well informed Iranian-American guests.

- **Laila Taraghi** has one parent from Iran and one from the US. She was raised in the US but also has spent time in Iran. She has relatives and friends in both nations. Laila earned a Master's degree in Political Science and is starting a doctoral program in Public Affairs. She volunteers in several ways for the Rachel Corrie Foundation and serves on their Public Policy Committee.
- **Moji Agha** is originally from Iran but has lived in the US for many years. He writes essays in two languages. He is trained as a cultural psychologist. For a number of years he has worked on a variety of issues and activities, including the peace, climate, and Occupy movements within the U.S., and also in Iran's nonviolent Green Movement for democracy, justice and civil spirituality. He founded the Mossadegh Legacy Institute to help people understand and appreciate the life and work of Mohammad Mossadegh, the elected Prime Minister of Iran, who was overthrown by the U.S. and Britain in 1953.

We taped this TV program on June 20, 2013, just a few days after Iran's June 14 presidential election. By the time you watch this program, political events might have changed. But the information on this TV program was accurate and current as of June 20, 2013.

Some of our viewers might not know that the modern nation of Iran is rooted in the ancient civilization of Persia. Over thousands of years, Persia achieved a number of advances in the sciences, the arts, and other aspects of civilization. Iranians of all ages greatly revere their poets from long ago. Within the US, one of the leading poets in terms of book sales nowadays is the Persian poet Rumi, who wrote wonderful poetry during the 1200s. Nowadays Iranian filmmakers enjoy a great reputation worldwide.

Although Iran was never a colony in the sense that other countries were, over the years it has suffered colonial experiences while under the strong influence of Russia, Britain and others.

Most Americans do not know that Iran had a democracy in the early 1950s. Iran's voters elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, but he had served only a few years before Britain and the US overthrew Iran's democracy in 1953. Mossadegh's sense of liberation was more profound and wide-ranging than the ordinary word "nationalism." The term in Iran's language is "*melli*." Mossadegh was building a foundation for broad-based nonviolence and justice as part of liberation and democracy. He was "of the nation" and "of the people" in their language. His coalition was diverse. His cabinet and the elected parliament included representatives from a very wide spectrum.

Mossadegh said internal despotism and external colonialism are two sides of the same coin. They need each other. They are co-dependent. Moji Agha cited Mossadegh's insight several times during our TV interview. He compared how external oppressors and internal despots similarly oppress the local population and prevent the people from achieving real democracy.

Moji said that Mossadegh was working on liberation from colonialism (somewhat like a secular version of Latin American "liberation theology," but without the theology). The profoundest harm that removing Mossadegh caused was precluding the "*melli*" solutions. The only thing left was the Islamist approach. When a society is under real existential assault, where it is profoundly threatened, people mobilized the public by holding firmly to what people consider sacred, and by affirming the soil and the heritage of the ancestors.

Mossadegh's approach led to the Non-Aligned Movement and a later slogan, "Neither East Nor West."

Mossadegh's legacy is important for the American people to know about. It provides context for US diplomacy.

The British oil company BP, which recklessly spilled oil in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, was making huge profits by extracting oil from Iran's oil fields, but it paid Iran less than what was fair. Prime Minister Mossadegh wanted to nationalize the oil business and use the profits to help the Iranian people. But Britain and the US overthrew Iran's democracy and installed a brutal monarch, the Shah of Iran. The US provided weapons so he could violently repress the Iranian people who wanted democracy and human rights.

By the early 1970s the Vietnam war turned US public opinion against deploying US troops into foreign wars, so Nixon and Kissinger decided to provide many powerful US weapons to regional thugs who would enforce the US empire in their regions of the world. Nixon and Kissinger provided massive amounts of the US's most sophisticated weapons, including jet fighter planes, so the Shah of Iran could dominate that region on behalf of US geopolitical interests.

Indeed, in the 1970s a subcommittee of the US Senate Armed Services Committee investigated the extent of US weapons sales to Iran's dictatorship and declared our weapons sales to be "out of control." Also, in the 1970s Amnesty International declared that Iran had the worst human rights of any nation in the world. But the US kept providing deadly weapons so the Shah could violently repress his people and – as the US's client – the rest of that region. In 1979 when huge numbers of Iranians were nonviolently protesting in the streets there, the Shah used the helicopters the US had made and provided to fly low down the streets and shoot the people who were nonviolently protesting for human rights.

In 1979 the people rose up and – largely through nonviolent protest – overthrew the Shah. The 1979 revolution was popular and broad-based with diverse kinds of people who wanted to overthrow the Shah, but people on the political Left were purged after the revolution. The new government includes an unusual combination of democracy and Muslim control. Nearly 1,300 years ago when Islam came to Iran, it became the only "check and balance" against the absolute power of the kings. This historical context is relevant. The Muslim leaders need to value elections as a way of legitimizing their role as popular leaders.

During the time when the moderate Khatami was president, there were more opportunities for the arts, etc. Iran's system of government allowed this. It includes the religious power and also multiple political voices.

Iran's government gives much more power to the Supreme Leader than to the elected president. So when President Ahmadinejad uses bold rhetoric, his rhetoric performs certain political functions in his own country and that region of the world. But he has less actual power than the presidents of many other countries.

Ironically, though, the oppression from rigid elements within the government (what Moji calls "internal despotism") interacts with threats from outside (currently the US's vendetta against Iran) to reinforce each other.

US politicians and news media typically fail to put Iran's political realities since 1953 in this context. There are valid reasons why Iranians criticize the US. US politicians and news media almost entirely ignored this historical context during the 1979-1990 hostage crisis and during the US's current conflicts with Iran.

After the 1979 revolution had removed the Shah from power, the US government brought him into the US. The Iranian people did not like that, so they seized the US embassy in Iran and held some Americans hostage. The American

people were outraged by the hostage crisis, but US politicians and news media had not informed the American people about what the US government had really been doing to the people of Iran since 1953, so the American people lacked the historical context for the hostage crisis, nor for the conflicts that have continued to the present time.

During the 1980s, Saddam Hussein sent Iraq's military to attack Iran, and the ensuing Iraq-Iran war continued through much of the 1980s. That Iraq/Iran war killed many, many thousands of people on each side. The US militarily supported both sides to fight each other and weaken both nations.

For a number of years, US politicians and news media have been talking about Iran's nuclear program. But – as always – what the politicians and mainstream news media say is not very accurate. Laila provided some useful information to correct misconceptions.

By and large, Iran has been complying with the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency (the IAEA). The current head of the IAEA has a hawkish political bias, but when Mohamed El Baradei was heading IAEA, he was more fair-minded and accurate. He tried to debunk the hawkish accusations of US politicians.

Ironically, when the US government increases pressure on Iran and threatens military violence, this only causes Iran's government to feel defensive and move further ahead with their nuclear program, and this might even push Iran to actually develop nuclear weapons for self-defense.

The American people need to know that the US has military bases in more than 150 nations around the world. For more than a decade the US stationed many, many thousands of US troops and a horrendous amount of weapons occupying the nations to the east and west of Iran – Afghanistan and Iraq – ready to squeeze Iran from both sides.

After the US was attacked on September 11, 2001, Iran's leaders expressed support for the U.S. President Khatami, a moderate, tried to improve relations with the US, but George W. Bush rebuffed him. Later, George W. Bush convinced Congress to spend tens of millions of dollars a year for something called the "Iran Democracy Project," which funded groups inside Iran that were promoting democracy. Ironically, this outside funding by "the Great Satan" only undermined the credibility of people inside Iran who wanted democracy. Obama stopped the funding.

The US has been imposing "sanctions" on Iran and pressuring other countries to do the same. These have hurt ordinary Iranian people and their economy. Economic shortages have increased the prices of basic items. For example, the price of paper has gone up so much that some smaller alternative presses can no longer afford to print publications. This is very counterproductive. The US's sanctions actually help the regime because they can point to the external threat and urge people to rally around the hard-line leaders.

When Obama became President, he said some things supporting peace with the Muslim world, but after a few years in office, his words and actions became hard-line against Iran, including escalating the sanctions to become even more harsh – even worse than Bush's. The US talks about using sanctions to force Iran to "come to the table." But when Iran does come to the table, the US does not follow through with productive diplomacy.

Several times during the TV interview, Moji mentioned how the "internal despot" needs the "external colonialist" or external threat, and vice versa. Netanyahu and Khomeini and Ahmadinejad each call each other "enemy," and this mutual enmity gives each of them political value within their respective nations.

In 2005 Iran elected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be president. He was a hardliner with bombastic rhetoric. Many people said the election was rigged so he would be elected. Four years later, in 2009, when he ran for re-election, there was more opposition to him and a moderate candidate running. Many people suspect that the vote-counting was manipulated and that the moderate candidate – Mir Hossein Mousavi – should have won. This is still in dispute.

People who suspected corruption in counting votes in the 2009 election coalesced into what was called the Green Movement. (Mousavi's campaign color was green, and green is an important color in Islam.) Supporters of Mousavi and of another reformist candidate – and many other people – coalesced to protest the results on the grounds that the votes were not counted fairly. More people joined this new Green Movement and expanded its demands from the slogan, "Where is my vote?" The Green Movement's protests were largely nonviolent, but thousands of protesters were arrested and some were executed.

The Green Movement was not a "revolution," and it was not trying to replace the religious government with a secular one. Several statements and manifestos were issued, but they did not have anything near consensus. The movement wanted to reduce but not eliminate the religious power. People in the Green Movement were saying to Israel and US, "please do not support us." People there do not trust the US government to serve the interests of Iranian democracy.

The June 14, 2013, election produced quite a surprise. Term limits prevented Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from running for a third term as president in 2013. We videotaped this TV program on June 20, 2013, less than a week after the June 14 presidential election. The Guardian Council approves candidates before they can run. Many conservatives were running, and one moderate reformer, Hassan Rouhani.

As election day drew near, people were feeling more confident that the government would actually count the votes honestly, in order to avoid more protests and to shore up its legitimacy, so more people were urging people to vote. The voter turnout of about 80% was much larger than in US elections. Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric, won 50.7% of the vote, an absolute majority, so no run-off election was needed.

Governments typically assume that they are in charge. But the US was founded on the sense that “We the People” are in charge. And people in many other countries feel the same way. Many of Iran’s people believe it is possible to practice Islam and be modern and have democracy all at the same time. Compassion and fairness are inherent in Islam.

If the US wants peace and democracy, we cannot achieve that by bullying or threatening. The US needs to negotiate in good faith, not simply issue demands. That bellicose approach only strengthens the hardliners.

Mainstream news media have largely failed to provide accurate and thorough information. A number of organizations and other resources are much better. These include:

- National Iranian American Council (NIAC), [www.niacouncil.org](http://www.niacouncil.org) The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) is the largest Iranian-American grassroots organization. NIAC has been at the forefront of opposing war, favoring diplomacy and opposing broad sanctions that only hurt the Iranian people, while, at the same time, rebuking Tehran's horrible human rights record.
- Havaar, [www.havaar.org](http://www.havaar.org)
- Foreign Policy in Focus, [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)
- Al Jazeera, [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com)
- Mossadegh Legacy Institute, <http://mossadeghlegacyinstitute.blogspot.com/>
- Rachel Corrie Foundation, [www.rachelcorriefoundation.org](http://www.rachelcorriefoundation.org) (360) 754-3998

For more than a century – and throughout the world – the US government has been interfering with other countries, taking their natural resources, overthrowing their governments, and inflicting military violence against their people.

This must stop!

The people who run our government seem to be greedy and cruel, but the American people are not that bad. Most Americans are poorly informed. Most Americans are disempowered from making national level decisions.

It’s long past time for “We the People” to inform ourselves and to shape US foreign policy toward peaceful and humane purposes.

Our dealings with Iran would be a good place to start.