

# Report: 2019 Iran Short-Term Training Program

Aoyama Gakuin University  
Department of International Politics, Economics and Communications  
Junior

Date: Dec. 19th, 2019 ~ Dec. 29th, 2019

Locations: Tehran, Isfahan, Kashan

## 1. Program Description

This program provided by the Middle East and Islam Program Department of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation offers a study-opportunity to young students who are interested in the Middle East, especially in Iran. The short-term stay allows them to meet local students who are aspiring diplomats from the School of International Relations: SIR, professionals from the academia and diplomatic fields, as well as high officials from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japanese Ambassador to Iran. In addition, the group visited Tehran, the capital of Iran, Kashan, and Isfahan where there are many religious and cultural sites. This exchange program not only represents youth opportunities to discover each nation's society and culture but contains the symbolic meaning of diplomatic exchange between the two countries for further bonding and prosperity after 90 years of diplomacy.

The significance of this program is none other than the youth-exchange of honest opinions surrounding social issues: diplomacy; political economy; culture, as well as physically traveling to Iran to observe the society through our own lens.

## 2. Lectures, Student Exchange, Sightseeing

We had great opportunities to attend lectures given by SIR professors as well as opportunities for discussion between the students. The lectures covered topics on diplomacy, politics, economics highlighting both foreign and domestic policies. The topics that stood out the most were energy-sector related matters and domestic economic policies. In my opinion, domestic economic policy was the most interesting theme we covered. "Maximum Pressure, we (Iran) fight with Maximum Resistance", this was a phrase mentioned by Dr. Mehdi Fakheri, former full-time diplomat that served for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran. The phrase is a common term to describe Iranian economic policies to that the national economy

thrives despite various sanctions from the international society, especially the economic sanctions from the United States. The way that they frame themselves made me feel their inner confidence and pride for themselves. This shook me as a surprise as I consider neither their life standard nor the national economy is comparable to the level of developed nations. With Iran's strong self-confidence, I realized people that we encountered were generally proud of their nations and happy with their lives. This was certainly one of the moments that I recognized how strong a belief could influence individual lives and thoughts.

We have visited three major cities in Iran: Tehran, Isfahan, and Kashan. The first impression that I had entering these cities is the undeniable fact that each city was far more developed than I had expected. I acknowledge that my biased expectations towards urbanization and social development were moderately high in spite of negative media influence. Although my anticipation were not high enough to accept the actual urban development of Iran. The cities deserved to be called urban areas with modern architecture, availability of the internet, and various international influences from Western and Asian countries. The majority of the people receives benefits from the modern technological development thanks to the Korean tech-giant Samsung. Moreover, Iranian people are enjoying multi-culture in terms of clothing as well as food. We can observe the local clothing shops imitating Western luxurious brands by copying their logos and styles. There are also numerous fast food joints in the city that serve burgers, pizzas, and fried chickens to the public. The modern development is an interesting match to the traditional religious side of Iran where we can see urbanity and religious historical sites ranging from mosques to gardens co-existing. (Picture: Mosque in Isfahan) Iran is exposed to fragment of modernity and harmonious with rich history as well as traditions.

### 3. Findings and Feedbacks

The most interesting yet cynical finding that I discovered during this program is the fact that though some of the students as well as government officials were subjectively hating Western culture or the US due to their ideology that they believe in, the Iranian society is highly influenced and embracing imported Western cultural or industrial innovations. For example, the snacks which the Iranian students from SIR enjoy were potato chips, cornstarch-based snacks, or sweet snacks. Iran has *Oreno* as a substitute to *Oreo*. Despite the political friction between Iran and the US or Iran and the Western countries, the Iranian society has visible admiration for development of those countries. As I mentioned above, there is a surprising number

of fast-food chains which copy the Western style shops that serve junk foods. The popularity of these foods, fashions, and technologies signals how the Iranian society is ready to be more modernized, This could signalize further Westernization. Hence, I argue it is totally dependent on the political relationship with the US and Western nations regarding whether Iran's social life would be more modernized. Moreover, it would be interesting to observe how the government would respond to the shift in average civil life considering the common biased ideas towards Western ideologies and behavior. With the highly anticipated global companies that are heavily attracted by the size of the population and the average labor quality of Iran, it is likely that Iran would have a drastic transformation in their society at once the economic sanctions and political tensions would relieve.