

The Fine Art of Hiding What You Mean to Say

By MICHAEL SLACKMANAUG. 6, 2006



MYSTERY Americans often misunderstand Iranians, whose style of conversation often hides their feelings.

TEHRAN

IT is certainly unfair to accuse all Iranians of being liars. The label is judgmental and reeks of stereotype. The more appropriate way to phrase the Iranian view toward honesty, the way many Iranians themselves describe it, is to say that being direct and telling the truth are not prized principles in [Iran](#).

Often, just the opposite is true. People are expected to give false praise and insincere promise. They are expected to tell you what you want to hear to avoid conflict, or to offer hope when there is none.

There is a social principle in Iran called taarof, a concept that describes the practice of insincerity — of inviting people to dinner when you don't really want their

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company, for example. Iranians understand such practices as manners and are not offended by them.

But taarof is just one aspect of a whole framework for communication that can put Iranian words in a completely different context from the one Americans are familiar with.

“You have to guess if people are sincere, you are never sure,” said Nasser Hadian, a political science professor at the University of Tehran. “Symbolism and vagueness are inherent in our language.”

This way of communicating is suddenly essential for Americans to understand. Increasingly, it appears that the road to peace, and war, runs through Tehran. And so hearing what Iranians are really saying, not what Americans think they are saying, has become a priority. Iran has outsized influence with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. It has profound influence with the newly empowered Shiites of Iraq. And it is locked in its own fight with the United Nations Security Council over its ambition to develop nuclear technology.

And yet, understanding each other — forget about agreeing — is complicated from the start.

Ask three questions about the text:

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