



# Peace with Iran Town Hall

American Iranian Friendship Council ([aifcpdx.org](http://aifcpdx.org))



# Background

- Because of the ominous drumbeat to war with Iran, members of the American Iranian community in Portland, Oregon met with Congressmembers Susan Bonamici (OR1) and Earl Blumenauer (OR3) in summer of 2019, to tell personal stories of how the sanctions and threat of war are affecting their families in the U.S. and in Iran.
- Allies with direct experience with Iran were also encouraged to speak. The meeting was held as a town hall format and was open to the public.
- Close to 100 members of diverse communities attended the two meetings based on congressional districts.



# Blumenauer Relations

- The Iranian community's relationship with Congressman Blumenauer has been shaped over the years. One of Congressman Blumenauer's former colleagues, who had served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran in the late 1960s, facilitated the first meetings with him around 2006. At that time, threats of aggression under the Bush Administration were high. The Iranian community and Congressman Blumenauer have maintained close communications since then.



# Positive Aspects

- ▶ Mr. Blumenauer often calls upon the community for updated information, and this time was not any different;
  - ▶ One usually does not expect from a US congressman to allocate two full hours to meet with his/her constituents on a foreign policy issue.
- ▶ In addition, we are very pleased that Cong. Blumenauer has consistently supported peace and diplomacy with Iran, by taking the issue to the floor of the house and other venues
  - ▶ Perhaps the mutual trust has shaped his intimate positions over the years.
- ▶ Both Congress Members Bonamici and Blumenauer called us in January and offered support after escalation of tensions with Iran.



# Objectives

- Bring awareness to the Iranian American community about:
  - Their rights as a citizen
  - Influencing political process
  - Open a channel of connections with congress members
- Providing congress members, a channel of communications with their Iranian constituents so that they can ask their questions and inquire any point they won't be able to acquire in DC belts.
- Offering real life stories of the Iranian American contributions to the country and services they provide professionally and personally to the host community.
  - Provide information from our community to the congress members for their awareness as well as to be transferred to their colleagues who may not have many vocal constituents.



# Objectives

- ▶ Humanize the OTHER image that is created by Mainstream media about Iran and Iranians.
- ▶ Stories of discriminations and biases against Iranians never ever are narrated to the congress members.
- ▶ May be they ask themselves why these people are being treated like this for over four decades despite their services and contributions to our country



# ASKS

- To offer tangible support to their Iranian American constituents;
- To fight against
  - Iran sanctions,
  - Iran inclusion in the travel ban,
  - discriminations based on national origin;
- Prevent use of War Authorization Act to attack Iran;
- Transfer these demands to their party presidential platform during primary elections campaign
- How we as a community can help them in afore mentioned issues;
- Can we count on them to push for re-entry of the US back in the JCPOA?



# Townhall Format

- Target Audience

- Iranian Americans

- NIAC meet ups

- Iran Peace Corps Volunteers

- Portland Shiraz Sisterhood Community, PSR, Code Pink, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Veterans for Peace, DSA, etc.

- Peace Advocates of all strata

- Two ways conversation

- Moderated






# Program agenda

- Introduction and ground rules of the event
- Congress member's opening remarks
- Story telling
  - The List of speakers were chosen to represent diversity among gender, profession, Iranians, and non-Iranians.
- Q/A
- Congress member's conclusion



# Rundown of the Event

- A brief welcome from the moderator, including ground rules for the event.
- Initial comments by Congressman Blumenauer where he expressed his appreciations for the organizers and explained that he was there to listen.
- Congressman then sat in the front of the hall taking notes and listening to members of the community for the first half of the town hall.
- 15 people have pre-registered to speak, and 14 got the chance to tell their stories for 3-4 minutes each.



# Rundown – continue

- After the testimonial session, 40 minutes were given to the Q/A,
  - Questions from the audience were collected throughout the program.
  - They were read aloud by the moderator and answered in detail by Congressman Blumenauer.
  - All questions that were not answered, submitted to congressman's staff for potential follow up.
- In order to prevent any disruption in the meeting volunteer Peace keepers were invited to be present at the town hall.



## Why it was successful:

- Delivered firsthand stories about how current hostilities with Iran are affecting Iranian Americans, the religious community and the advocates of peace.
- Sought input from community members and planned together.
  - We trusted each other because we had worked together for years in the Peace Movement.
- We shaped the event by having a moderator that was well respected by and part of the Iranian American Community.
- We created a front-loaded list of speakers that fairly reflected the concerns of the Iranian Americans, peace advocates and combined religious organizations.



## The Testimonials:

- ▶ We sought and recruited a long list of potential expertise and encouraged them to speak freely and narrate personal stories.
  - ▶ We did not coach them, and no one shared their opinion with us prior to the event.
- ▶ The experiences of the Combination of storytellers showed the trust the community has bestowed upon us over the years, from very distinguished scholars, high tech professionals and academics to artists and fathers and mothers with personal narratives of recent experiences of the Iranian Americans with travel ban.



# Travel Reports

- Several of the attendees were Americans who had recently travelled to Iran to visit personally or with a Peace delegation.
- These contained reports about their experience with Iranians in the country and even a visit with the Iranian Foreign Minister and how they were announced by name and welcomed at a formal session of the Iranian Parliament.



## Q/A Session

- ▶ We feel that the process of having audience write their questions on a card to be read by the moderator avoided the too often experience of lengthy comments instead of actual questions.
- ▶ The moderator had the opportunity to have them collected, read them, and combined duplicates and related questions.
  - ▶ She did not screen out any questions, concerns.
  - ▶ We encouraged audience to put their contacts on question cards, if they wanted to receive direct response.
  - ▶ When time ran out, all remaining question cards were given to the Congressman's staff for potential follow up.



# Finale

- ▶ The congressman wrapped up the Q/A session. He made some suggestions as to what we should do next:
  - ▶ American Iranians should run for office.
  - ▶ Rep. Blumenauer stated that he now has stories and this experience to share with members of the Congress and will encourage other colleagues with larger Iranian American communities in California, New York, Texas, DC area and others to follow the suit setting up listening sessions with their constituents of the Iranian descent.



Sweet Surprise;



