

Alumni Profile: Amir Farmanesh (G4)

Iran

Amir Farmanesh is modest about his origins and accomplishments. But all the recent media attention and invitations from high-level international organizations Amir receives—from dinner with Nobel Laureate Mohamad ElBaradei of the International Atomic Energy Administration to exclusive meetings with ambassadors—are clearly well deserved. Born in Tehran, Iran, Amir has spent the past few years studying in the United States—first with the APLP in Honolulu, then as a World Bank Scholar at the prestigious Maxwell School at Syracuse University, and now as a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy. His involvement with the United Nations Governing Council and the United Nations’ Environment Program (UNEP) Youth Advisory Council culminated in his co-authoring a report for the UN about youth participation in the Millennium Development Goals. *The Navigator* recently asked Amir about his scholarly pursuits, career goals, and views about politics in the Middle East.



In what ways did the APLP impact your understanding of the Asia-Pacific region?

My focus is usually the Middle East, and the APLP helped me to get a deeper view of the Asia-Pacific region, especially from the Regional Core Issues Seminar we had. I enjoyed the economic and social sections of the class. Our trip to Laos was also very interesting.

Reflecting on your APLP year, what do you think was the most significant outcome for you personally?

It was a smooth transition for me from my past NGO and UN work toward formal education at the graduate, and now doctoral, level. Also, for sure, Hawai’i is a place to be. Much like the human right to freedom, food, etc., I think every human being has the right to visit Hawai’i—and similar places—at least once in his or her lifetime!

Coming from Iran, how did you find adjusting to the East-West Center’s “cultural laboratory” model?

Well, I didn’t really come directly from Iran to the EWC. Being with the UN gave me the chance to visit about 20 countries before the APLP. But I should also say that I found the EWC, and Hawai’i in general, a friendly place for diversity. I didn’t encounter any challenges on that front. On the positive side, I did learn from my classmates and their cultural differences; we had a very diverse cohort not only in terms of nationality but also in terms of personality. It was a great learning experience in that regard.

You have been very active politically, having worked with the UN Youth Council on their Millennium Challenge goals and other significant youth projects. Any plans to enter the political fray in Iran?

Whether I’ll enter politics in its power-competition sense depends on many external factors rather than my own desire. What I know is that I don’t necessarily see political success as an end goal. I will try to be active in any field and country where I can have the maximum positive impact. It’s a simple approach, in my view; either I define the moment or the moment defines me.

What topic do you intend to investigate for your doctoral dissertation?

Although I still have some time to finalize this, for now it would be on econometrics models of economic and political development of the Middle East. The idea is to work on the intersection of economic prosperity and freedom. Do economic progress and growth lead to political development and freedom? What is the effect of Islam on these variables?

What is your take on the current state of U.S.-Iran relations? How can the relationship be rectified?

I think the essence of their current state of relations can be described in two words: mutual mistrust. Both countries’ national interests would be more secure in the presence of a relationship rather than the current distance, “bad cop-bad cop” game, which has made both sides not only perceive but also publicly denounce each other as evil. People often only see what they are prepared to see, and in this case they are only prepared to see evil in each other.

It’s very easy to have a good diplomatic relationship with your “friend” countries; the art of diplomacy is really just for times of hardship. Not having political representation in each other’s capitals has resulted in considerable misunderstanding and distrust. I personally think the idea of a “grand bargain” is the most feasible for normalization of relations, meaning both countries agree to negotiate on a wide range of issues on one table and reach an overall agreement rather than just negotiating on one issue.

What are your long-term career ambitions?

I’ll try to be where I can have the most positive impact, but I will keep my options open when it comes to the long term. It’s important for me to try and expand my horizons constantly and make sure I’m utilizing my lifetime for a worthy cause.