



Quoting poetry at nuclear talks: State Department official uses literature to reach Iranians



By [Carol Morello](#) March 21 at 4:24 AM [Follow @CMorelloWP](#)

LAUSANNE, Switzerland — Most spokesmen for the U.S. government come armed with thick briefing books and talking points. Then there's Alan Eyre, the State Department's official Persian-language spokesman.

Part of the delegation at the [Iran nuclear talks](#), Eyre carries in his suit pocket a small ring journal filled with quotes from Persian poetry and literature. The jottings scribbled in the Persian-Arabic alphabet are in hues of blue, black, orange and purple, reflecting the pens he had on hand over the years.



Alan Eyre, left, the Persian language spokesman for the U.S. State Department. (Carol Morello/The Post)

If he wants to make the point to Iranian reporters covering the talks that time is of the essence in reaching an agreement on Iran's nuclear program by a March 31 deadline, he may crib a line from "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam": "Be happy in the present, and don't put your life in the wind."

Or, instead of giving a blunt "no comment," he sometimes quotes from the 13th-century poet Saadi's seminal work, "The Gulistan": "A knowing man will not utter every word which occurs to him. It is not proper to endanger one's head for the king's secret."

Though florid to American ears, they are familiar and respectful phrases to a people whose culture is dated in millennia instead of centuries, says Eyre, who is equally adept at plunging into modern-day Persian rap.

As unconventional as he is in his approach, Eyre plays an important role at the nuclear talks with Iran. He briefs U.S. negotiators twice a day on how the talks are being reported in the Iranian media and is on hand to translate a possible written framework agreement to ensure that the Persian, or Farsi, version matches what is written in English.

Equally significant, he is part of a State Department outreach to Iranian citizens to provide the American perspective on the nuclear talks and other issues. If there is an agreement, Iranians will hear about it from Eyre, who is well known in Iran because of his frequent media appearances and his explainers on [Twitter](#) and Instagram.

“Ultimately, I try to give an objective recounting of our positions, our policies and what we do,” said Eyre, 56, a 17-year veteran of the State Department who taught himself to speak Farsi and has more than 100,000 followers on his [Facebook page](#). “I work to dispel the myths that exist.”

Few officials at the talks seem to be having as much fun as Eyre, who wanders through the Beau-Rivage Palace conversing with Iranian reporters.

“Iranians love Alan,” said Arash Azizi, a reporter for the London-based satellite station Manoto, which beams into Iran and reaches more than 10 million viewers nightly. “People know he speaks for America. But he does it with poetry.”

Eyre has been readying himself for this role most of his adult life.

He grew up on Long Island. His interest in Persian came at Dartmouth, where he studied American literature and became interested in Sufi poetry. Because poetry loses something in translation, he taught himself Persian.

He lived for a few years in Los Angeles or, as he calls it, Tehrangeles. He made friends in the city’s large Iranian expatriate community, picking up colloquialisms from friends and from watching videos of a pre-revolutionary Iranian soap opera called “My Uncle Napoleon.”

“Don’t put watermelons under my armpits” is one of his favorite idioms for a huge burden.

He said his Persian was decent but far from fluent when he joined the State Department in 1998. During a posting in Damascus, he burnished his Farsi in dealings with Iranians seeking visas at the U.S. Embassy. An assignment to Afghanistan helped because Dari, one of two official languages, is close to Persian.

As his fluency grew and he reported on Iran from neighboring Dubai, he worked alongside veteran State Department officials steeped in knowledge of Iran, including some former hostages at the U.S. Embassy. The old Iran hands, known in the State Department as Iranosaurs, eventually moved on. So in 2006, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice started the Iran Watchers with a new generation keeping tabs on Tehran. Eyre was named head of the Dubai office.

In 2011, he became the State Department's first — and so far only — Persian-language spokesman. He built a following with [Ask Alan](#), a You Tube video in which he answered questions posed by Iranians. He has since expanded into other forms of social media, fielding questions on the nuclear talks, sanctions, visas and American pop culture. He leavens his U.S. policy postings with musings on soccer and pop music. He recently put up a link to Stevie Wonder's "I Was Made to Love Her" and photos of the optical illusion around a blue or gold dress.

Initially, the only journalists who sought a comment from Eyre were those from the Persian-language broadcasts by the BBC and Voice of America. Then, the expatriate stations came calling. Today, he's a regular on Iranian state television.

When Iranians ask him about the nuclear talks, his focus is different from what his English-language counterparts stress for Americans. "For the average Iranian, what's important is not assuring the international community of the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program," he said. "What resonates with them is getting sanctions lifted."

Oddly enough for a man who has a personal Persian-language library of 1,500 books and who sometimes prefaces his remarks with, "As we say in Persian," Eyre has never visited Iran. "I'd love to go if we ever have an embassy or just as tourist," he said. "I have a real love of Iranian culture, language and literature. It sings to me."

In the meantime, he contents himself with bantering with Iranian journalists.

As he walked past a group of Iranians at the Beau-Rivage, he used a common greeting that he translated as: “Hey, everyone’s gathered except me. Take pity on my loneliness.”

“Like all things,” he said, “it sounds better in Persian.”



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