Alireza (“Ali”) Behnejad is a doctoral student in Engineering at the University of Surrey in Guildford, England. He hails from Tehran, Iran, where he still owns an architecture firm and where his wife and daughter still live today. He is an architect, an engineer, and a businessman. Ali visits with his family by flying back and forth between England and Iran at least once per month.

Over the course of three hours, Ali fielded dozens of challenging questions from us (Mark Spring and Sarah Cannon) on a range of topics, including the contemporary state of Iranian politics, the changing roles of women in Iran, the revolutions unfolding throughout the Middle East, and the international ISIS organization, a multidisciplinary group of scholars from around the world devoted to the study of symmetry (one of Ali’s main intellectual interests). He provided photos (see the PDF file below) from an ISIS (International Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Symmetry[[1]](#footnote-0)) conference in Iran; he emphasized that women now outnumber men in Iranian universities.

Ali struck me as a progressive intellectual. He expressed open-minded views about the roles of women in Iranian society, and he spoke of himself as someone who identifies more with the people of the world than with the governments of the world. Throughout the course of our interview, he made an effort to distinguish between Iranian citizens and Iranian government officials. He spoke with admirable detachment about divisive political issues. Only briefly did a stronger emotion show through when he mentioned nuclear energy and when he spoke about the most recent national election.

“Iranians are tired of revolution,” he asserted. Of the revolutions in Egypt, Lybia, Tunisia, and Syria, he said: “Look at those countries. Thousands of people have lost their lives in the revolutions.” I asked Ali about the alleged crackdown on opposition parties in Iran after the disputed outcomes of the last national election and wondered whether the Iranian people might find inspiration to rebel. “After the last election, we suffered smaller losses than in other countries…about three hundred people lost their lives.” I asked how he and his fellow citizens knew about these political murders. Did the media cover it? “No, no the media is not allowed to say anything, but we know it because these are famous people. They disappeared from the society.” I did not press further. However, I later reflected on how Americans might feel if hundreds of leading party members and advocates for one party or another were silenced and killed after a major election.

Over the course of the night, Ali and Sarah and I established trust and developed a rich conversation on several topics. You can see excerpts of the interview in the clips posted here, including the conversation about Iranian politics. I am still in touch with Ali and hope to keep building our friendship through discussions of poetry and politics.

1. http://symmetry-us.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-0)