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For Iran's Visiting Legislators, A Useful, Low-Key Exchange

By BARBARA CROSSETTE

A group of Iranian legislators, in New York for a meeting of parliamentary speakers from around the world, encountered some unusual guests at a reception on Wednesday evening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Representative Bob Ney of Ohio, both Republicans, who were there to open a dialogue with their counterparts from a country with which the United States has no direct relations.

"I went because I think it's very important to have a dialogue with Iran, and the idea of parliamentarians meeting is one step removed from government-to-government," Senator Specter said in an interview today. "I think it is something that ought to be promoted."

Senator Specter, who said he had been trying to visit Iran since 1989, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, added: "I've always had a strong sense that if members of Congress met with foreign leaders where our relations were not the best, we could open up the dialogue and relations would improve. They ought to hear what we think, and we ought to listen to what they think."

It was no chance encounter. The Iranian lawmakers had been told by one of the reception's organizers, Hooshang Amirahmadi, who is president of the American Iranian Council, to expect several members of Congress and leaders of American Jewish groups concerned about the recent espionage convictions of a group of Iranian Jews.

Mr. Amirahmadi had invited the Americans, who included two New York Democratic representatives, Gary L. Ackerman and Eliot L. Engel, and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Mehdi Karroubi, speaker of the Iranian Parliament and leader of his delegation, told reporters today that the conversations had been cordial despite apprehensions on both sides. He said he had told the congressmen of Iran's objections to the continuing American embargo and had raised other issues, like the denial of visas to two members of his party.

Mr. Karroubi is considered a compromise speaker who was chosen to preside over a reformist Parliament aligned with President Mohammad Khatami against a very conservative Islamic hierarchy. He is in New York to attend the first international conference of legislative leaders,

with delegates from more than 150 countries. The meeting, organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, is being held just before a summit meeting of government leaders next week at the United Nations.

"We were not supposed to have such talks during our visit to the museum," Mr. Karroubi said. But he added that after an exchange of pleasantries, the two sides got down to some tough questions on issues that Mr. Karroubi said were "poisoning relations."

Mr. Ackerman said he had accepted the invitation because "strong messages have to be delivered to the Iranians." He said he had seen very little action in Iran to give credence to reports of a more moderate political climate. But he described the conversations as "extraordinary," in that the Iranians advocated more cultural exchanges and dialogues between the people of the two countries.

Mr. Ackerman was also impressed by the inclusion of a woman and the only Jewish member of Parliament in the five-member Iranian delegation.

"They were trying to show inclusiveness," Mr. Ackerman said, interpreting the gesture as a response to "the noise we were making."

The sole Jewish member of the Iranian Parliament, Mouris Motamed, told reporters today that he had tried to reassure the Americans that the Jews in Iran -- numbering 25,000 to 30,000, down from a high of 80,000 to 100,000 before the 1979 revolution, he said -- were living as well as their Muslim neighbors.

Mr. Motamed added, however, that it was reassuring to Iranian Jews that others outside the country were concerned about their fate. "Of course, we value this kind of solidarity, this sympathy that exists," he said.

At the reception, Mr. Ackerman said, he asked the Iranians to consider how more formal exchanges of legislators could be arranged, a request members of Congress made in a letter to Iran this spring that was never answered. Mr. Motamed said today that the idea would be discussed, but would have to be presented first to President Khatami, who will be in New York next week for the summit talks.

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