



## **ENCYCLOPÆDIA IRANICA**

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**OFFICIAL RESPONSE OF THE *ENCYCLOPÆDIA IRANICA*  
TO THE *ASSOCIATED PRESS* ARTICLE OF MARCH 25, 2007 ENTITLED  
“U.S.-FUNDED ENCYCLOPEDIA REVELS IN IRAN’S GREATNESS”**

Mr. Michael Silverman,  
Managing Editor  
Associated Press  
450 W. 33rd St.  
New York, NY 10001

Dear Mr. Silverman,

On March 25, 2007, *Associated Press* issued a press release on the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* project that was picked up by a number of news outlets, including CNN, which published the article on its website. As of today’s date, copies of this article (with the same inflammatory header) can be found on over 600 websites. As editors of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, we are bewildered that a reputable news organization such as the Associated Press would release such an inaccurate and libelous report without making any effort to check the accuracy of its assertions—thus violating a most fundamental canon of the profession. At no time, for example, did Jim Krane, the writer of the article, contact the Editorial office of the *Encyclopaedia* at Columbia University in New York to check the accuracy of his “facts.” By not taking such a step, the *Associated Press* has published a defamatory article about a major scholarly project at a prominent American university based on unsubstantiated rumors and hearsay at a social fundraising event in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates!

Please consider some of the following gross inaccuracies:

Your Statement: “the Iranian government bitterly opposes the Encyclopaedia, while the United States government backs it.”

FACT: The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is a non-partisan, non-political, non-religious, non-ideological, and entirely independent compendium of objective, documented, and reliable information that draws on the expertise of the best scholars world wide, wherever they may reside, including within Iran. While the National Endowment for the Humanities does indeed support the project as one of the major research tools for the advancement of the humanities, this differs widely from your statement that “the United States

government backs it.” The National Endowment for the Humanities is an independent federal agency whose many projects are reviewed and decided upon by independent panels of scholars. Furthermore, your statement that “more than half of the encyclopedia’s budget comes from the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities” is incorrect. In fact, in recent years the Endowment’s grant has only covered **one-third** of the project’s operating budget, with two-thirds of the budget raised independently through generous individual donations.

The Iranian government, on the other hand, has no connection whatsoever with the project, which is completely outside its purview. Furthermore, your statement that most of the work is done outside of Iran because scholars inside Iran face harassment, is entirely incorrect. The *Encyclopaedia* solicits entries from the foremost experts on any given topic, including those who reside in Iran.

Your article then compounds the factual error that the project is opposed by the Iranian Government by conjuring up a religious reason for this “opposition”: “**Yarshater is Baha’i.**”

The truth is that while the chief editor of the *Encyclopaedia*, Professor Ehsan Yarshater, was raised in a Baha’i family, **he has had no affiliation with the organization of the faith as an adult.**

Your article then attempts to politicize matters further by stating that the “National Endowment for the Humanities...has funded it as a project of major cultural significance since 1979 -- the same year Iranian students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran.” While this is not factually incorrect, it gives the impression that the two events were somehow connected. In point of fact, the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* project was conceived at the Center for Iranian Studies of Columbia University in New York in 1973, and the National Endowment for Humanities (again, an independent federal agency) approved its support of the project before the rupture of U.S.-Iran relations following the hostage crisis of 1979-81. In implying a connection between the two events, you have cast totally unwarranted doubt on the scholarly independence and integrity of an academic enterprise that enjoys worldwide recognition in the scholarly community.

Your article also contains the absurd claim that the “*Encyclopaedia Iranica*...seeks to distill 5,000 years of Iranian history...into 45 blue-bound volumes **proclaiming Iran’s greatness.**” It is not the job of a scholarly encyclopedia to tout any country’s greatness, but to present reliable facts and analyses in accordance with the highest standards of scholarship and with full objectivity. Would any reasonable person, for example, describe *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as a propaganda mouthpiece designed to proclaim the United Kingdom’s greatness?

The *Encyclopaedia* has so far published over 7,500 articles on art, literature, history, geography, economics, political relations, archeology, art and architecture, flora & fauna, and entries on every other major topic expected from a comprehensive encyclopaedia. Yet, inexplicably, the only three examples that you chose to highlight were all concerned with religion.

In short, your article creates the impression that the *Encyclopaedia* is a politically inspired project rather than a collective work of scholarship that has received the highest accolades from scores of leading experts in the field throughout the world. From the heading of your piece, to the factual error that the U.S. government backs the project while the Iranian government opposes it, to the factual error that there are those who “oppose” the project due to the religion of its Chief Editor, to the factual error that the National Endowment for the Humanities is responsible for more than half of the *Encyclopaedia*’s budget, to your interviews at a fundraising event with attendees who had little or no connection with the contents or the editorial policies of the *Encyclopaedia* (including Mr. Mark Houshmand), the entire piece is riddled with errors while maintaining an unwarranted political perspective. Your various insinuations, whether intended or not, are highly damaging to the hard-earned reputation of the *Encyclopaedia* as an independent and objective major academic and scholarly enterprise.

As a final note, and indicative of the cavalier attitude of your reporter toward facts, we may point to the inaccurate biographical details that you have given about the *Encyclopaedia*’s Editor. Professor Yarshater does not currently, nor has he ever, suffered from Parkinson’s disease. This “frail 86 year old,” to use your phrase, has, in the last four years alone, attended fundraisers to aid the completion of this project in Los Angeles, Houston, San Francisco, Miami, New York, Washington DC, Toronto, Dubai, Geneva, and London. Indeed, his editorial work is not limited to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* project. He is also working vigorously on a 16-volume *History of Persian Literature* series, which carries contributions from the most eminent literary scholars in the field worldwide.

In accordance with the above points, we ask that you immediately post a formal retraction of the article and publish the **entire text** of this letter.

Sincerely yours,

For the Editorial Staff of *Encyclopaedia Iranica*,



Ahmad Ashraf  
Managing Editor  
Center for Iranian Studies  
Columbia University

CC. Nader Ahari, Esquire