

To the NMA Community:

From the very start of Neuromatch Academy (NMA), we have intended to provide great neuroscience training to all qualified students who want it, regardless of location or nationality. But, devastatingly, a recent review by our lawyers highlighted that we are not allowed to serve the exceptional TAs and students of NMA that are based in Iran. This breaks our heart. We will explore if there is a way of providing this training worldwide in the future. We will also do whatever we can as a group to right this wrong.

There is one thing that we can do and that we are starting immediately: produce political pressure. We are starting a team at NMA to get out the word on how horrible this policy is. We want to find ways of getting the debate of exclusion of countries from the global science system into the news. We want to invite everyone to join us towards this aim. We are particularly asking for any scientists who have the ability to get a discussion of this injustice into the media.

Upon hearing of this news, many people have proposed ideas about this legal problem and we want to briefly share the details of the situation and what we have been told. We apologize for not putting this statement out earlier, but our first course of action was to reach out to the students and TAs that were most affected. We wanted to ensure they heard this news first directly from us, not through other means.

NMA was recently informed by our legal counsel that we cannot operate within Iran or coordinate with Iranian residents. As an organization started and run by US Citizens (no matter where it is based), NMA is not allowed to provide or facilitate the transfer of goods or services to Iran. This law applies to the US citizens who are helping organize NMA, as much as it applies to the NMA nonprofit corporation itself.

The restriction on our activities in Iran is due to existing US trade sanctions against Iran and is not specific to NMA. We had previously enquired with our legal team if participation by Iranian students was allowed. We were made aware of the strict limitations on financial interactions in Iran, but were otherwise given to understand that participation by Iranians was acceptable. However, a recent legal review has provided additional information about the scope of US sanctions. We now know that, if we were to continue to operate within the country of Iran, the resulting fines could cause the entire Academy to be shut down for all students, and individuals associated with the Academy may suffer severe legal repercussions.

This is unfortunately not a case that we can argue against at the moment. The sanctions are broad and severe and have impacted other similar organizations as well; for example large universities in the US have been unable to offer online courses to Iran residents for the same reason. It is possible to apply for a license to work within Iran, but as attempts by previous organizations have shown, approval is a long process and can frequently be denied when sharing of technical knowledge is involved. Nevertheless, we will work as best as we can to fight for the inclusion of Iranian residents in upcoming iterations of NMA. We believe that

operating in good faith now offers us the best chance of obtaining such a license in the future.

This problem is also unfortunately not solvable by simple means, such as registering the Academy elsewhere or not asking students for resident information. The sanctions are based on the fact that many US citizens are involved in the program's organization, not just where the company is officially registered. Intentionally blinding ourselves to nationality is also impractical as there are too many indicators of nationality where payment is concerned; we also needed to collect location information for other purposes, such as offering location-adjusted fees to our students. Furthermore, many of our non-US organizers are from countries that also have certain sanctions against Iran. Even if we could replace every member of the NMA with people from countries without sanctions, the existing structure would likely collapse, as our donors and funders would not be able to negotiate the transition, especially on such a short time scale. Currently, any funds from any foundation or university within the United States cannot be used to support the transfer of services to Iran; funds in this category constitute the vast majority of our funding.

Some have suggested postponing NMA to give us time to reorganize, but this too unfortunately would not work. Postponing the program would have serious negative impacts for many of our students and TAs. We have students who have chosen to forgo jobs and other opportunities to make themselves available full-time for the three weeks of our course. Our TAs are also being paid for their time and many of them are likely depending on this money as part of their summer funding plan. Furthermore, COVID has impacted vulnerable ECRs and students by interrupting career plans and one of the goals of NMA is to provide support for people in this situation. And although we are going to apply for licenses to be able to legally operate in Iran in the future, these applications take so long that the postponement wouldn't be enough to get us to that line -- and our funding from many of our donors would expire.

Some have asked why this issue does not apply to other conferences. The issues are complex and we cannot provide recommendations for other organizations. In broad strokes, the tightly interactive nature of the NMA makes the sanctions more applicable than cases where information is distributed more passively.

We sadly cannot offer the Observer track to Iranian residents either. Simply put, any attempt from NMA itself that could be seen as coordinating our educational activities in Iran would count as a violation of the sanctions.

In essence, we have no good options. We are working closely with our legal team to understand exactly what we can and cannot do, and we will continue to explore every possibility within the confines of the law.

We are incredibly disappointed to have learned of this restriction after months of working many hours to try to make our program available for everyone. The vision behind NMA is to bring together scientists from around the world, to further our collective pursuit of knowledge. We believe that knowledge belongs to all citizens of the world, and we are heartbroken that

political forces currently prevent this. Moreover, we feel a great loss at the absence of our Iranian students and TAs. We cannot truly understand how frustrating it must be for them to receive this news, especially after they have prepared so much for the program. NMA will be less without them.

Again, we are so very sorry. This has all happened very quickly (i.e., over the course of about two days, ten days before the start of the program). We prioritized communicating these issues directly to the students and TAs involved as soon as it became clear to us that we would have to take this devastating action. But we wanted to make sure the whole NMA community received these details as well.

If this news is making you rethink your participation in NMA, we understand that this is a personal choice. Though we hope that our current students, TAs, and mentors will continue to offer their time and effort to make the rest of NMA a success. We are still planning to offer the course to over 1700 Interactive students from 65 countries, many of whom wouldn't have access to such an opportunity otherwise. For example our student body includes students who reside in Nigeria, Palestine, and other countries that are typically underserved by interactive instructional efforts. About $\frac{1}{3}$ of our students (around 500) are at institutions in countries with annual adjusted income less than \$3500 USD---that is less than the cost of attendance for many traditional summer schools. We also hope to continue influencing students through future iterations of the school and we will, as always, be making all our materials freely available online.

In the future we hope we can obtain a license that will allow us to work closely with Iranian residents. As noted, we are talking with our legal team about how to do this as quickly as possible, but the application process is slow and uncertain. We also look forward to the day that relations between the United States and Iran improve to the point that these sanctions are no longer a reality.

To be clear, the organizers of NMA are personally devastated and angered by these needless restrictions. We support the actions of individual citizens to lobby their government for changes to policies they find unjust.

If you have any questions or concerns, please email us at neuromatchacademy@gmail.com.

Sincerely,
the NMA team