Word on the Tehran street: Dispatch from Iran

by Noreen Herzfeld in the October 3, 2006 issue

The taxi drove past a mural of the American flag. There were skulls where the stars should have been and the words Death to America! scrawled across the stripes. It was the only such sign I'd seen in Iran, but at ten stories tall, it made a strong impression. Just then the taxi driver asked me, "Madam, you German?" "No," I replied hesitantly. "U.S.A."

"Amrika? Amrika! We love Amrika!" he responded. Really? I thought to myself. The mural and the words of your president could have fooled me. But from Tehran to Shiraz to Isfahan the word I heard on the Iranian street was—we love America.

I was in Tehran to speak at a conference on science and religion. Since I was interested in what Iranians were thinking, I often slipped out into the marketplaces of Tehran. It wasn't hard to find conversation. My red hair and blue eyes—and the way my headscarf kept sliding off the back of my head—marked me as a Westerner and an object of curiosity.

What did they think of a nuclear Iran? Everyone I spoke to said it was a good and necessary thing. But they weren't thinking of bombs. "It's the economy," they explained.

After a surge in oil prices during the '90s, the economy is limping. Unemployment, officially at 11 percent, is estimated on the street to be closer to 30 percent. The oil sector fuels the government, which directly or indirectly provides 90 percent of the country's jobs, and Iran has enough oil and natural gas to sustain itself for a long time to come. Gasoline costs 10 cents a liter. But the Iranians are also aware that, excluding a small market in carpets and pistachios, oil and gas are their only exportable commodities. If Iran has nuclear power, it can save the oil for export. More oil for export, more jobs.

What about a bomb? The Iranians want “respect,” some say. As one taxi driver put it, “America treats North Korea better than us. If we had the bomb they’d have to talk to us.” But others are not so sure. A teacher of the Qur’an was skeptical: “If we go nuclear and some terrorists use a bomb, no matter where . . . we’ll get blamed. Israel will dump everything they have on us.”

I was assigned two guides to help me navigate Tehran—Amin and Amir, 22-year-old twins with dark curly hair and laughing brown eyes. They represent the 70 percent of Iran’s population that is under 30. Like most young people in the middle class, both finished university, where enrollment has increased from 30,000 before the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979 to 300,000 today. Amin has a degree in business management and hopes some day to take over his father’s textile plant, which specializes in winter coats. But business is not booming. “It’s hard to compete with the flood of cheap clothes from China. We used to employ 70 people, now it’s 40, and in the future, who knows?” His situation is typical. Unemployment across Iran is increasing. Each year 1 million young people join the workforce, but only half of them find jobs.

Those who are employed may work at jobs that have little to do with their educational training. Amir’s friend Reza holds a degree in electrical engineering, but works part-time as a flight attendant for the Iranian national airline and part-time as a tour guide. He complained to me that the government is not providing enough opportunities for the young. I asked why this is up to the government and learned that 60-70 percent of Iran’s economy is publicly owned. Entrepreneurship is risky. Those who lived through the revolution remember when shops, newspapers and schools were shut down by the government.

Unemployment and underemployment lead to restlessness and discontent among the youth. There is a second factor in their discontent. I asked each of the young men I met if he had a girlfriend. Despite their good looks and charm, none did. They assured me that it was easy to meet girls, but when I asked how, they hesitated, “Well, in class.” But with classes over, prospects seem restricted to friends of the family or the sisters of friends. In a country where it’s technically illegal for women to be out on the streets alone or with men to whom they are not related, dating is relegated to clandestine meetings in “safe apartments” (if one is wealthy) or on walks in the hills above North Tehran, where couples can escape the eyes of the police or the mullahs on a sunny afternoon. When I hiked these hills, I saw bands of young men but only a few couples furtively holding hands.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked Amin. He replied that he generally gets together with his friends in the evening. They drink sodas (alcohol is illegal) and listen to bootleg CDs. I had noticed that there is no music in Iran’s public spaces—no Muzak in the hotel lobby, no radio during taxi rides. Music is frowned upon and considered frivolous and un-Islamic. Even the restaurants have no background music, although one or two have recently introduced a floor show of traditional Persian poetry and song. But when I asked Amin if I could get CDs, he said, “No problem,” and brought me three homemade disks. Apparently the technology for burning CDs is readily available and inexpensive.

The same situation applies to television. Although they’re illegal, I saw rooftops bristling with satellite dishes—and no wonder. Official Iranian TV broadcasts mostly documentaries interspersed with exhortations by earnest-looking mullahs. During the conference, I was interviewed by Iranian television. To my surprise, the questions addressed my understanding of Muhammad, Islam and the divine nature of the Qur’an. Officially, everything in Iran begins and ends with religion. Unofficially, Amin and Amir listen to music with a decided Euro-beat and dream of a good job and a beautiful girlfriend, both off in a hazy future.

The conference I attended was organized by a small circle of academics in Tehran—until the week before the conference, when the government stepped in, claiming that the academics were disorganized and needed help. Suddenly American and British researchers who had been invited to give keynote speeches were moved into parallel sessions, their time cut from an hour to 20 minutes. The keynote speeches were given instead by people such as the speaker of parliament and the minister of health and education.

The gender politics of Iran were quite obvious at the conference. I’d had an encounter or two on the street, including being turned away from the door of a mosque because I was insufficiently dressed. It wasn’t frightening—the guard tapped me on the arm with a feather duster. At the conference, few men spoke to me, except during the formal question session after my paper.

On the streets of Tehran, the most common garb for women was a headscarf and manteau. The older women wore shapeless manteaus that went below the knee, while several young women pushed the limits with manteaus that were skin tight and ended midthigh. When I mentioned to a guide that there didn’t seem to be much choice in fashion, he replied, “Oh, our women have lots of choices. They can

wear the black manteau or the gray manteau or the brown manteau.” I looked for a sly grin on his face as he said this, but I didn’t see one.

At the conference, the Iranian women wore the chador, a black garment that falls from head to toe like a bed sheet. I tried the chador and found it hot and awkward. Since it has no closure, one must hold it shut with one hand. Women on the street who had grocery bags in both hands held their chador closed with their teeth.

Only at the closing ceremonies of the conference did the true significance of the chador strike me. In the final session, student awards were given, and most went to women—perhaps no surprise given that women make up over 60 percent of the student body in Iran’s universities. The young women who went forward to receive their awards were swathed from head to toe in black, one hand grasping the chador under a lowered chin. We could not see their faces or forms—each one was only a silent, anonymous black ghost. The minister of education handed them the awards but did not shake their hands. Then these brilliant young women disappeared back into the crowd.