

Inside Iran: First-person encounters

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

Early in my visit to Iran I was introduced to Nesa, 24, who was eager for contact with Americans. A recent university graduate who hopes to get a doctorate in English literature, she was also eager to explain her nation. “Iran is a complex country,” she said. “And so are the people.”

Indeed, the country is as complex as a Persian rug, and full of contradictions. Emblematically, perhaps, Iran produces sweet lemons and sour oranges. Women have second-class status, yet nearly 65 percent of university graduates are women. Iran has the world’s third largest supply of oil, but it is intent on developing nuclear energy. Our tour group saw energy-conserving light bulbs everywhere, but Iranians drive cars with no emissions controls, and they still use leaded gas. The country is run principally by fundamentalist Muslim clerics, but, in the cities especially, many middle class and professional people are open to Western ideas and culture.

In his second inaugural address President Bush designated Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” lumping the country in with Iraq and North Korea. Despite this labeling, many people I encountered in Iran still admire the U.S., and some are even Bush supporters.

Nowhere in Iran did I or my traveling companions feel threatened by the authorities. Still, it was unsettling to walk past the former U.S. embassy in Tehran where Americans were taken hostage in 1979 and held for 444 days. The embassy walls are covered with anti-American signs and slogans from the time of the Islamic Revolution, and it was evident that the signs are periodically freshened up.

Despite the official anti-American rhetoric, Iranians themselves are remarkably hospitable. Everywhere we went people approached us on the streets, asking us where we were from. At first we were reluctant to tell them, but we soon learned that identifying ourselves presented no problem. “We have no problem with the U.S.,” many said, “just your government.”

Some even admitted to us that their own government is part of the problem. Some wanted to know why Americans hate Iranians or why Christians hate Muslims. We assured them that we don't hate Iranians or Muslims, and that our trip, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee, was in fact an attempt to build bridges between us—something they were always gratified to hear. But Iranians mainly wanted to know whether we were having a good time in their country and were getting a favorable impression.

Our tour included a trip to see the spartan, two-bedroom apartment where the Ayatollah Khomeini lived after the revolution that made him the country's supreme leader. This stop was immediately followed by a visit to the opulent palace where the shah of Iran had lived prior to his overthrow. By showing us these contrasting domiciles back-to-back, our hosts were clearly making a point about the virtues of Khomeini and the excesses of the shah.

Nesa told me that seeing Khomeini's apartment is a deeply spiritual experience for her. Though too young to remember the revolution of 1978-1979, she regards Khomeini as a remarkable historical and religious figure, a person who feared no person or nation, but only God. Remembering his fiery rhetoric against the U.S. and his oppressive rule—which included the execution of some political enemies—I have a different image of Khomeini, of course. But I had to accept the fact that for Nesa and many other Iranians, the ayatollah is their Mandela or George Washington. From their perspective, Khomeini liberated them from the repressive regime of the shah and eliminated unwanted foreign influence.

Nesa's devotion to Khomeini reminded me of Shirin Ebadi's comment that Iranians are at heart hero worshipers. Ebadi, who won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts in behalf of human rights, wrote that Iranians "cling to the notion that one lofty, iconic figure can sweep through their lives, slay their enemies, and turn their world around. Perhaps other cultures also believe in heroes, but Iranians do so with a unique devotion. Not only do they fall in love with heroes, but they are in love with their love for them" (*Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*).

Human rights organizations have long criticized Iran for its harsh prison conditions, repression of political dissent, use of arbitrary arrests and manipulation of elections. A recent Human Rights Watch report says that the number of Iranians imprisoned on vague charges has increased since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 and that Iranians with foreign contacts are particularly vulnerable to

government retaliation.

When we met government leaders in Tehran, university professors in Shiraz and Islamic clerics in Qom, they said hardly anything publicly about human rights issues. In private our Iranian hosts were willing to acknowledge in a general way that there are human rights problems in their country. As their guests, our group was reluctant to push them on the topic.

When we visited Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran, he told us that whether the country has religious freedom depends on what is meant by freedom. It also depends on which religious body you're talking about. The Armenian Orthodox Church doesn't pose much of a threat to the government because it is a "national church," identified with an ethnic population. And the Orthodox are not inclined to proselytize. Their church, whose membership is about 100,000, is losing 2,000 to 3,000 members every year to emigration.

Outside a museum in Esfahan that keeps alive the memory of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, I asked an Armenian student what life is like for him in Iran as a non-Muslim. He responded, "That's a dangerous question."

The situation is even more difficult for the Armenian Evangelical Church (it's Presbyterian, but it doesn't use that word because it's associated with the West). In Tehran this group has one church building, plus two house churches. Its pastor left the country for the United States, and his predecessor was killed in the 1990s, apparently because he was too critical of the government. One of the church's leaders told us that its biggest challenge is to maintain a sense of hope. When I asked her what gives her hope for the future, she paused for a long while and then said she was probably the wrong person to ask.

One Friday afternoon we visited a synagogue in Esfahan before Shabbat services. Evidence of a Jewish presence in Esfahan goes back 2,500 years. A lay leader told us that at one time there were 25 synagogues in the city; now there are ten. He predicted that 300 people would attend services that evening, but said there are no more rabbis left in the country; synagogue leadership is totally in the hands of the laity.

A frequent topic of discussion among our tour group was the need for women to wear the hijab—a covering for the head and neck. The women in our group knew ahead of time that they would need to wear a headscarf covering their hair and a

loose-fitting coat that came down at least to their knees. But they said they weren't prepared for the emotional effects of this requirement. "It makes me feel invisible in groups," said one, and "less free to speak up." The only dress code for men is that neckties are banned in government buildings, since they symbolize Western influence (hardly a hardship!).

In the holy city of Qom, which, we were told, has between 40 and 60 Islamic seminaries—no one seems to know how many—and perhaps 100,000 students, we heard a lecture on why it is important for women to wear the hijab. It is necessary, said a professor, because when a woman is covered she is less likely to be misused. The hijab benefits both society and the family, since sexual desire should be limited to the marital relationship. Society has a right to make rules for its benefit, he said, like the mandatory wearing of seat belts—even if not everyone agrees with the rule.

Devout Muslim women wear the hijab willingly, but for more secular-minded women it is a matter of contention. One Iranian mother told us that her five-year-old daughter is already asking her why women in Iran must wear the covering. She also told us that exposure to the wider world through the Internet and satellite television is likely to foment cultural changes in the future—which of course is what some of the country's clerics are worried about. Another thing for them to worry about: on the flight out of Tehran, most of the Iranian women on the plane took off their hijabs as soon as the plane left the ground.

A major Iranian contact for us was Muhammad Legenhausen, who teaches philosophy at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom. As his name suggests, he is not a typical Iranian. He grew up in a German-American Catholic family in Queens, New York. While going through the Catholic parochial school system during the Vietnam War, he became disillusioned with the church because it wouldn't speak out against the war. So he left the church and gave up the faith. Later he taught at a community college in Texas that recruited foreign students, and he was particularly impressed by the religious discipline and devotion of the Muslims among them. So he started studying Islam, first as an academic subject, but eventually as a personal commitment. He became a convert. Legenhausen was later invited as a visiting professor to Tehran for a year and then invited to teach in Qom.

Legenhausen told us that the West does not really understand the Shi'a strand of Islam, which dominates in Iran. Western textbooks introduce Islam by means of the

Sunni perspective, because Western Orientalists first learned about Islam from the Ottoman Empire, which was Sunni, and later from Egypt, which is also Sunni. According to Legenhausen, Westerners are taught about the Five Pillars of Islam, but for Shi'a Islam sometimes there are five, six or even ten. Shi'as and Sunnis both have five prayers each day, but Shi'as have more flexibility for when they can be said. Sunnis and Shi'as also have different understandings about the justice of God: Sunnis believe that God can make laws arbitrarily, Shi'as do not. As a result, Shi'as are more concerned about justice on a human plane—setting wrongs right.

Legenhausen also pointed out that saying prayers in the mosque is not important to many Muslims in Iran. He rarely goes to mosque himself, yet he says his daily prayers. Many devout Muslims belong to religious societies organized around a common cause: they may read and study the Qur'an together or participate in some kind of social service. Some of these religious societies bring in clerics to preach, and some of them have their own buildings.

In Iran, the line between religion and politics is blurred. On Fridays two sermons are given in all the mosques throughout the country. One sermon deals with the state of the country, the other is on international affairs. And what is said on either subject is handed down from the supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. We were told by another American expatriate living in Iran that one can discern how loyal Iranians are to the government by whether or not they listen to the Friday sermons in the mosque.

According to Legenhausen, Bush's "axis of evil" speech baffled most Iranians. Iranians had helped the U.S. against the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11. Also, Bush's speech came at a time when Mohammed Khatami was president of the country. A reform-minded leader, Khatami was open to the West and was trying to advance human rights within Iran, especially for women. When Bush included Iran as part of the axis of evil, a typical Iranian response was: "If this is what we get from the U.S. when we have a reform-minded president, then perhaps what we need is a more aggressive and nationalistic kind of leader." Ahmadinejad was voted in at the next election.

Moreover, many Iranians think that the U.S. and its allies are inconsistent in their approach to Iran. When Khatami was president, Western leaders said that he wasn't the real power in Iran; the real power rests with the supreme leader. But now that the radical Ahmadinejad is in power, Western countries are treating him as though

he, not the supreme leader, is the one with ultimate power.

Behind all discussions of Iran are some inconvenient truths about U.S. foreign policy. First among them is the fact that in 1953 a CIA-sponsored coup brought down the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, a popular and democratically elected leader. Mossadeq's crime in U.S. eyes was to nationalize Iran's petroleum industry. But Mossadeq had reasons for doing so: the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company—predecessor to British Petroleum (BP)—was paying the British government more tax money on Iranian oil than it was paying Iran for the oil itself.

The U.S. helped put the shah in power and for 25 years supported the monarch, who ruled with an iron fist, suppressing or killing his opponents. The shah's notorious secret police, Savak, were aided by American and Israeli intelligence. The shah's opponents included religious radicals, merchants and left-wing intellectuals. Resistance to the shah coalesced in 1978, and many demonstrators opposing him were killed. Soon thereafter, President Carter showed up in Tehran for a state dinner. Though Carter pressed the shah on human rights in Iran, he made a public statement in support of the ruler. When the shah was forced into exile, the U.S. admitted him for medical treatment, which triggered the taking of hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

Americans also tend to forget that the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein and Iraq in that country's eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s. Thanks to U.S. aid, Iraq acquired superior weaponry. Iran tried to make up for that deficiency by the sheer number of its armed forces. At least 500,000 Iranians died in the war with Iraq. Those who gave their lives are considered martyrs, and throughout Iran one finds large murals honoring them. Iranians have not forgotten that the U.S. backed Iraq in this effort, nor that Saddam used chemical and biological weapons against their people.

When countries' governments won't talk to each other, their citizens sometimes still have opportunities for communication. Such an opportunity fell into our laps when we were the guests of the Institute for Political and International Studies, an adjunct of Iran's foreign ministry, in Tehran. The leaders of the institute told us that they wanted to work with the Mennonite Central Committee on sponsoring two events in Iran: a workshop on peace studies programs, and a roundtable discussion on how religion contributes both to international hostilities and to peace.

At a dinner at the institute, I met the director of the school that trains Iran's diplomats. He showed interest in the Christian Century because his father had been a publisher and bookstore owner before the revolution. At one point he took out a scrap of paper and started drawing a map of the Middle East, with Iran in the center. He said that unlike the Arab countries around it, Iran is a democracy. "Why doesn't the United States want to have diplomatic relations with the largest democratic country in the Middle East?"

There is a problem with the director's analysis. Yes, Iran has elections—but candidates for the presidency and the parliament are vetted by the Guardian Council, which also rules on all laws passed by the parliament. And half the members of the very conservative Guardian Council are chosen by the supreme leader. In any case, democracy involves more than elections; freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the right to assemble are essential to it.

Still, my dinner partner was right that Iran has some history of democratic process, going back at least a century, when a constitutional form of government was first put in place. The larger question is why the U.S. doesn't want a diplomatic relationship with Iran, whether the country is democratic or not. John W. Limbert, one of the last U.S. diplomats in Iran and one of the Americans taken hostage in 1979, argues that Iraq presents a huge issue of mutual interest to the U.S. and Iran. Iran, Limbert says, "shares the American aversion to a divided Iraq, an Iraq dominated by Sunni extremists, or an Iraq under a new version of Saddam Hussein."

While the U.S. has imposed economic sanctions on Iran and has had limited contact with its leaders to press its concerns about Iran's development of nuclear weapons, it seemed clear that the sanctions aren't having the desired effect. Numerous people in Iran said that the sanctions are hurting not the government but the people, especially in view of the country's high unemployment and high inflation. Several times we were told that Iranian companies can no longer obtain necessary supplies from Western countries, so they have to do business with the Chinese, whose products, they said, are inferior.

U.S. policy on Iran has been one of wielding sticks and offering no carrots. The result has been what political scientists call a "rally round the flag" phenomenon: out of a sense of national pride, people who might otherwise resist their government now come to its defense. The aggressive U.S. stance certainly discourages Iranian moderates.

Foreign correspondent Stephen Kinzer argues that an American attack on Iran would be a disaster greater than either the 1953 coup or the preemptive invasion of Iraq. One possible scenario, says Kinzer, is that a U.S. attack would unleash even more radical Islamists. (See the preface to a new edition of *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*.)

One thing seems clear: war with Iran is not necessary and would be a great tragedy. We found a great deal of pro-American sympathy in Iran, especially among the young people and the professional class. But if U.S. bombs were to be dropped on the country, all that good will would dissipate immediately. The repercussions that an attack would set off would be even less predictable and less controllable than those following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.