

## Preface to Second Edition

Early this summer, the photographer whose work appears on the cover of this book was attacked on the streets in Tehran. He escaped serious injury and arrest but his cameras, including the one that shot this picture, were confiscated. He later emailed his friends a picture of what had remained of his cameras: a lens cover and a piece of cord.

Those confiscated cameras had recorded a great deal over the years. The various accounts of these years, recorded from many perspectives, are crucial in understanding the recent events in Iran. These accounts have borne witness to the past thirty years and not only recorded the darkness of those years but held on to—indeed, detected—the possibility of brighter times to come.

*Returning to Iran* was published in February 2009, in commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. It is not about the events in Iran since June 12, 2009—it is about what led up to these events.

Only a few months have passed since I wrote in the preface to the first edition that the third part of this book is a "premature account" of the end of an era. Little did I know then that the muffled rumbling of the recent years was only months away from manifesting itself as a fast-gathering storm, one that promises to lead to the breaking up of the dark clouds of the past three decades. The dispute over the presidential election has been the spark for the expression of wider and deeper discontent. What is at stake is much greater than the outcome of an election.

The first part of this book, "Smoldering in Traffic," was written after the first election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. It was apparent that the regime's only chance for survival was to resort to the brutality and repression that had peaked in the 1980s. Rumor was already spreading that the victory of the new president was in fact a kind of coup by the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The second part of this book, "Returning to Iran," was written in the mid-1980s. It depicted not just the extent but the particular form and nature of the brutality that the world seems to become aware of for the first time this year. It also traces the creative intelligence that went underground during that time and promises to burst forth in the near future.

Ahmadinejad has made many mistakes. One which it is doubtful he will ever live down is calling this summer's demonstrators "khas-o khashak." *Khas-o khashak* is the term used for clumps of thorny weeds and other debris blown about in the wind. In one respect, khas-o khashak is an improvement over the word that was used for young people in the past, *obash* (riff-raff, hoodlums): It is an acknowledgement that not only "disgruntled youth" but a wide segment of the population are taking part in these protests. And the demonstrators were quick to throw the new epithet back in Ahmadinejad's face. Large banners appeared on the streets declaring the uprising "The Epic of Khas-o Khashak."

The great Mohammad Reza Shajarian, the reigning master of classical Iranian music, angrily objected to the illegal and misleading broadcasting of his voice on state-run media. "Every time I hear my voice broadcast from this venue I am shaken to the core," he said. "Mine is the voice of khas-o khashak and will always belong to them."

One of the most memorable signs that were carried on the streets was this one:

I hack the roots of discrimination.

Khashak is you, lowly one,

I am a *woman*.

Women are no small part of the movement that is taking shape. In the last chapter of this book I refer to the spirit of the women's movement in Iran as not so much, "We shall overcome," but, "We shall overwhelm." It has now become evident that this is the spirit of the uprising at large. People may have for now transformed themselves into a thicket of bramble resisting the attempt to cut them down, but the bramble is fully alive and regenerative. Khas-o khashak is that which is dead. What people will accomplish—sooner perhaps than later—is to overwhelm an edifice that is already crumbling. In the end, it is not going to be the people of Iran who will be dispersed in the wind like tufts of khas-o khashak. It will be the debris from the edifice.

In 2007 when I visited Iran there was a feel of imminence in the air. There was a sense that the regime—not just as a political but as an ideological entity—was simply spent. Whatever may have been the Islamic Republic's victories in regional and international arenas in its thirty years of power, its own people have long since seen through the false claims it has made on grounds of religion, morality, culture, and social justice.

"I have an irrational and nagging feeling that something is close to coming to an end in Iran," I wrote in 2007. "There is hardly any evidence to support this, but I have a feeling that another *kashf-e hejab* is imminent." *Kashf-e Hejab* was the 1935 royal decree by which Iranian women shed their veils. I used "Kashf-e Hejab" for the title of the third section of this book as a symbol of not just the shedding of repressive measures against women but of a new era in which the true face of Iran will be revealed. It expressed my sense of the possibility of finally living in the open.

This book appears under my pen name "Sima Nahan." My original motive for using a pen name was to defer the detection of my identity and its possible repercussions—but that is no longer a concern. I still use the pen name partly in acknowledgement of the underground lives and concealed identities with which we have had to contend since the revolution, and partly because, ultimately, this book was written by the Sima Nahan of the past three decades. This book is a view from behind layers of silence and disguise.

And I once again tip my hat to those teenagers, circa 1940, the picture of some of whom appears on the back cover of this book. They are the mothers and grandmothers of many of the people in the streets today. But this time they are not just beneficiaries of a top-down decree, nor mere participants in a movement. They have been one of the strongest forces behind the next *Kashf-e Hejab*.

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