

Preface

Iran is a long story. It has a complicated history and an old culture. It has a seasoned people whose boldness has grown out of the tragedies they have survived. Contradictions run deep and meet their match only in perseverance. Untangling the strands of this story is as daunting an undertaking as it is compelling.

It is now thirty years since the revolution in Iran. The articles in this collection were written over the course of more than twenty of them. They are accounts of my travels in the years during which the country grew from a revolutionary state to an established regional power. What people have lived through during this time and how they have been shaped by it will undoubtedly emerge at length and from various viewpoints for many years to come. This book is an attempt to record some of those experiences and reflections.

Part I, “Smoldering in Traffic,” was written after my trip to Iran in 2005, as the era of “reform” gave way to the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It is a sketch of everyday encounters and pressing questions during a few weeks of a hot Tehran summer.

Part II, “Returning to Iran,” was written after my first trips home since the revolution, in 1986 and 1987. It is an account of life in the grip of internal terror and war, and the misrepresentation of Iran outside the country. Writing during a particularly dangerous time I did my best to conceal the names and identifying characteristics of people. This period came to an end with the ending of the war with Iraq and the mass executions of 1988.

Part III, “Kashf-e Hejab,” 2007–2008, is a premature account of the end of another period. Here I use actual names and identifying characteristics of several individuals, drawing on their public lives and their publications in Iran—the mark of a welcome change since the early years of the revolution.

When in 1986 I first started writing about my trip I had no idea it would lead to over two decades of observations. This book began with taking notes as a reflexive response to the shock of what I was seeing in Iran. Over the years that initial shock splintered into many other complicated thoughts, but I can’t say it ever wore off.

How in the world did this happen to us?

Perhaps what the non-Iranian reader will get out of this book is a glimpse into *what* has happened to Iranians after the revolution. But far too many Iranians, living inside or outside Iran, will go to their graves wondering *how* this happened to us. I certainly have no answer to the question. I am not even sure if what I am getting at is a real question, let alone whether there is an answer to it. It is just that states of bewilderment are often formulated as questions. What I can say for certain is that I am humbled by the wounded but confident people in Iran and sobered by the magnitude of their sacrifices. And regardless of what exactly happened, or how, what I have come to value over the years, perhaps above all else, are the secrets to survival: defiance, irreverence, and friendship.

Life in Iran, both above and under ground, is rich and unpredictable. My travels these years have been primarily fueled by the pleasure I derive from my connection to this life. As I go to publication with my accounts of these travels I have the lingering fear that I have jeopardized my future returns to Iran.

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