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Our Special Correspondent

Geoffrey Wawro

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This “letter” marks the beginning of a new department wherein from time to time Professor Geoffrey Wawro of the Naval War College’s Center for Naval Warfare Studies will report on his research visits to places and events of strategic or technological interest. This relatively informal approach—a departure in style and tone from the articles, essays, and reviews that are this journal’s stock in trade—is an attempt to share a special and valuable kind of insight developed in the normal course of the College’s work.

Geoffrey Wawro is professor of strategic studies in the Naval War College’s Center for Naval Warfare Studies. Specializing in military and naval history, especially European, he earned a doctorate at Yale University in 1992. He has taught at Yale, Oakland University (in Rochester, Michigan), and previously at the Naval War College. Since 2000 he has appeared on cable television as the anchor of the History Channel’s program Hardcover History. His most recent book is Warfare and Society in Europe, 1792–1914 (Routledge, 2000). His shorter publications include journal articles, op-ed pieces, and entries in the Oxford Companion to Military History (2001). Professor Wawro’s travel in Iran occurred in August 2001. Photographs by the author.

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OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

LETTER FROM IRAN

Geoffrey Wawro



In Frankfurt airport, I witnessed an unexpected phenomenon. The Iran Air flight that will carry me to Tehran is disgorging its Frankfurt-bound load of passengers, Iranians all. As they disembark, the women stop in the departure lounge to remove their *hejabs*—*chador*, *rouposh*, and head scarf—and brazenly comb out their hair before applying makeup to face and nails. Already I begin to doubt the severity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Backsliding like this in the early days of the revolution would have been punished by black-shirted “mor-

als police.” When my outbound flight is called, dozens of homeward-bound women irritably unpack their *hejabs* and put them on.

The airliner descends on Tehran through a noxious haze of carbon and nitrogen monoxide, ozone, and sulfur. The classic panorama of the Elborz Mountains and snow-capped Mount Damavand is nowadays seen through a chemical fog that all but bleaches the mountains from view. On the ground, I am confronted with grim-faced women in black *chadors* who scrutinize my passport and then very cordially let me in. I change a hundred dollars at Bank Melli and suddenly have more money than I know what to do with. Wherever one goes in Iran, a fine dinner will cost no more than three dollars, a long cab ride twenty-five cents.

The traffic in Tehran is deadly. Though the city contains the usual array of traffic lights, signs, and crosswalks, no one pays the slightest attention to them. This is not like Rome or Paris, where pushy motorists will clog up the streets or nudge you off the pavement; this is a place where *every* traffic signal is routinely

ignored. Cairo is the only other place I have been that is even remotely like this. On the first day, visitors are frozen with fear. By the last day, they have adjusted and get around the way everyone else does—by wits, eyes in the back of the head, and imploring eye contact with every approaching motorist, at risk of death. Because of drought while I was there, Tehran was cutting off the water in a different part of the city every day. If one's hotel was in such an area, bad luck—no shower, no toilet, no running water.

I visited the former American embassy, a vast, forested compound in the heart of Tehran, now occupied by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, *Sepah* for short). Anyone who thinks the size of the place connotes American neo-imperialism must drive by the British and Russian embassies. Built on land deeded over in the nineteenth century (when Britain and Russia vied for control of Persia), they are much bigger—town-sized, high-walled tracts on Ferdosi Street, the most desirable artery of central Tehran. The wall outside the U.S. embassy is painted with anti-American slogans (“The U.S. will be made to suffer a great defeat”—“America, our most hated enemy after the Qods [Jerusalem] occupier regime”—“We shall mourn on the day that America praises us”) and murals depicting the 1988 USS *Vincennes* shoot-down of Iran Air flight 655. Though 290 Iranian passengers and crew were killed in that incident, no pedestrian or motorist pays the least attention to these incitements; rather, they hurry past without glancing at them, or sit in traffic without looking over. Next to the gate, the seal of the United States of America has been chiseled off, though its traces are still discernible. Peering through a crack in the gate, one sees that the embassy (which will revert to the United States in time) is in a sad state of decay. The fountains are dry, the steps broken up and strewn with gravel, the cypresses parched, the lawns dried up, the building thrown open to the elements. A passerby hazarded to me that the *Pasdarans* (revolutionary guards) are “probably” using the main building as a school. Another thought it might be a military headquarters, which is more likely, for the walls are manned by sentries.

The National Archaeological Museum, built by the Pahlavis in the 1930s to exalt Iran's pre-Islamic past, is a beautiful, French-designed building, now decreasingly visited because of the heroin addicts that lounge around the entrance. Next to it is a horrid, poorly ventilated building put up since the revolution to rival its pagan collection with an Islamic one that, I thought, failed to impress—calligraphy, pots, jugs, scimitars, and so on. The building itself was vintage East German, thin marble facades pasted onto cement, cracked tiles, and plenty of glass to let in the roasting sun.

Waiting on the tarmac at Mehrabad Airport to board the flight that would take me south to Kerman, on the dusty edge of Baluchistan, I studied the plane. It looked like a Boeing 727 but cruder. I looked closer and saw that it was a

Tu-154. Observing my interest, the pilot strolled over and invited me to fly with him in the cockpit. I accepted and sat the whole way on a jump-seat between the pilot and copilot. This was fortunate, because Iranian flights are heavily subsidi-



Hazrat-é Masumeh, Burial place of Fatimah, Qom

dized; a two-hour flight costs no more than twenty dollars, so every seat on every flight is taken, no exceptions. The Tupolev is an uncomfortable plane, only superficially like the Boeing; it has feeble air conditioning, and the seats hardly recline. The flight engineer was a Russian who had come with the aircraft. He was a big, amiable Slav with a ready smile; he winked when I asked what he did for vodka. The pilot had been a lieutenant in the Imperial Iranian Air Force before the

revolution. Trained in Texas, where he had learned to fly F-5 Freedom Fighters, he loved America; indeed, like so many of the shah's veterans, he *seemed* American, having absorbed its ways in the United States and in his dealings with the large American military advisory group based in Iran in the 1970s. However, like everyone I met who had been in the shah's armed forces, he refused to criticize the new regime; rather, he seemed to see himself as an Iranian patriot, whatever the form of government. On our approach to Kerman, we flew at ten thousand feet over "Desert One," a speck in the desert of Dasht-e Kavir between Yazd and Tabas, where the hostage rescue mission came to grief in April 1980.

Deplaning in Kerman, I was shoved aside by a horde of *chador*-clad pilgrims returning from the Shia holy places at Karbala in Iraq. They swarmed into the arrival hall and gazed in awe at the baggage carousel. Clearly they had never seen anything like it. They would shriek and gesticulate wonderingly each time the bags circled the conveyor and reappeared. This was my first glimpse of the gulf between town and country in Iran. In Kerman, I met my guide and interpreter. An Iranian Kurd and another ex-pilot in the IIAF (also F-5s), in the next two weeks he would take me anywhere I wanted to go and translate virtually any conversation I wanted to have. He also had little love for the Islamic Republic, but, like the pilot who had flown me to Kerman, he was an Iranian patriot through and through.

We drove two hundred kilometers to Bam, a sprawling walled city and citadel begun two thousand years ago by the Parthians. Abandoned in the early nineteenth century, it has been a ghost town ever since, baking under a hard sun against a backdrop of craggy, brown mountains. The Pahlavis kept a small garrison here

until 1931, and one can stand in the commandant's lodge in the citadel and look out at the bleak vista of desert and dust, experiencing for a moment the isolation and hopelessness that must have afflicted every soldier posted here. The drive to Bam and back gave a glimpse of the Islamic Republic's war on drugs. Since we were near the Afghan and Pakistani borders, we were continually stopped by heavily armed police looking for heroin and opium. Nowhere was there the least hint of *baksheesh*-seeking corruption; rather, the police would glance at my U.S. passport and wave us on with a smile and without even popping the trunk. There are quite a few Afghans in southeastern Iran, and Gypsies too—whom the Iranians call “Kabuli,” believing them to have originated there. Also, there are many Baluchis; their straw lean-tos and campfires are to be seen along the road. They have returned to their traditional nomadic ways since the Pahlavi years, when they were forcibly settled. Those forced settlements—also visible from the road—bake mostly empty in the sun. Squat, windowless, mud blockhouses, they look as inhospitable as Palestinian camps I once visited on the West Bank.

Most of Iran is desert, though whenever I would say this, my guide would protest. He would wave at a blighted, glistening plain of sand and stone and pronounce it fertile and green. “Desert” to an Iranian is a salt desert, like the Dasht-e



Kavir; everything else can be sown with dates, figs, and pistachios and watered with sprinklers or the ancient subterranean canals called *qanats*. We drove through many small towns and villages. Most are clean and tidy, in a very un-third-world way. Each is placarded with the regime's cult of death—portraits of martyrs everywhere, almost always men killed in the 1980–88 war with Iraq. A typical mural

depicts a martyr lying on a bed of red tulips, blood gushing from a neck wound. Underneath it says, in tall letters, “He is gone; what have *you* done?” No one pays any attention to the bloody pictures or their exhortations—“A martyr is a true man,” “Martyrdom is another word for honesty.” It is interesting that these billboards are not faded and weathered but fresh. The Iraq war has been over for fourteen years, but the Iranian government keeps the memory alive. Death, blood, and suicidal sacrifice are the keynotes of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his hard-liners. The majority of the population, born or matured since the war, resents this morbid cult of blood and tulips.

From Kerman we drove in my guide's Iranian Peugeot for seven hours at high speed to Shiraz. The roads are good. The government has invested heavily in public works, to solve the unemployment problem (25 percent or higher), and the roads reflect it—few potholes and a good surface, though no shoulders. The road crews I saw throughout the trip were state employees or contractors, all with modern equipment. I had read that the *basiji* (paramilitary youth brigades) were being press-ganged into this kind of work but saw no evidence of it anywhere. The drivers are bad. Deadly wrecks litter the roadside; we passed a large truck on its side, steel pipes scattered like matchsticks, the driver hunkered over, grimacing with pain. My driver flew past without stopping, like everyone else on the road. As we sped along, Radio Iran announced a gasoline price hike; the first eight gallons would continue to cost twenty cents a gallon, but every gallon over eight would now cost sixty cents. My driver spat curses and furiously thumped the steering wheel for a full minute—though in fact gasoline is cheaper than bottled water in Iran, which, at twenty-five cents per liter, costs five times more. Having pledged to right the wrongs of the Pahlavis, the Islamic Republic has created a kind of socialism. Gas is subsidized, as are utilities, rents, and food. In the cities, people line up in front of state depots to collect cut-price bread, meat, rice, and cooking oil, for which they are issued monthly coupons.

Shiraz was balm to my tired, dusty soul. It is the most elegant and sophisticated city in Iran. Once famed for its vineyards—the Syrah grape originated here—it is dry now, but it has other charms, namely its gardens, lively streets, and beautiful women. The latter disdain, in much larger numbers than anywhere else but Tehran, the *chador* and appear in what might be called “sexy *hejab*,” a snug-fitting *manteau*, or housecoat, a scarf barely covering their hair and full makeup. They stare and giggle shamelessly and flirt with the young men. Mullah Sada Street, the fashionable zone of Shiraz, is a wonderful place, with restaurants, shops, and handsome young people rummaging with wild, materialistic abandon through clothing and electronic stores. I first saw an Iranian prostitute here, a homely, middle-aged woman in full *hejab* standing on the curb. She would engage men in conversation, which I thought strange in this land of feminine modesty.

My guide put me in the picture. All of this behavior is proscribed by the prim Islamic Republic, but in Shiraz no one seems to care. Shiraz also has more “cafénets”—Internet cafés—than other places. When I called up Yahoo mail in one of them, I found that my Iranian predecessor had forgotten to close his mailbox. I curiously scanned the subjects of *his* messages. They were all about girls, love, and sex: “Where the girls are”—“How to meet single women”—“Sex, sex, sex”—and so on. The mullahs are in a losing battle with human nature and hormones, and they know it. The editors of Tehran's English-language dailies,

the *Iran News* and *Tehran Times*, rail every day against sensuality, decadence, “consumerism,” and “westernization,” and they vow (unconvincingly) to extirpate all four from Islamic life.

Meanwhile, the front pages speak only of the economy, a daily litany of high unemployment, low living standards, and interminable recession. With its young population, Iran needs eight hundred thousand new jobs a year, but it is falling short. Unless they fix the economy—this failed “socialism in one country”—the mullahs are in trouble. But to do that, they must open to the West, which they fear would bury the Islamic Republic under Gaps, Tower Records, Blockbusters, and Burger Kings. So it is that Iran goes nowhere, throttled by its internal contradictions and its dread of the global economy.

On the outskirts of Shiraz I visited the military museum, which is really the last Pahlavi’s gun collection on public display. Shah Muhammed Reza, who reigned from 1941 to 1979, was truly eccentric, obsessed to an unnatural degree with weapons and firearms. We know that he personally ordered every piece of hardware for the imperial armed forces (after hungrily devouring the catalogs and brochures of the foreign manufacturers), but did we know that he collected virtually every rifle and sidearm made in the world from the eighteenth century to 1979? The museum is also interesting for its ideological laziness—labels mentioning and even exalting the shah have not been changed. Like the Krupp howitzers and Bofors guns rusting in the courtyard, the labels are curling and yellowing to dust, fading alongside the photos of Muhammed Reza’s jackbooted colonels supervising construction of the museum in the 1960s.

To stand in the palace of Darius I at Persepolis and look out at the vast sweep of fields and mountains is to grasp the vastness of the ancient Persian Empire. As for Persepolis, a capital built by the Achaemenian dynasty for the purpose of entertaining vassal nations and accepting their tribute, one wonders how Alexander the Great even found the place, let alone conquered it. Today the ruins and tombs fill with a steady stream of Iranians on holiday and large numbers of foreign tourists.



It is a spectacular site; the ruins are better at Ephesus, in Turkey, but nowhere else are bas-reliefs like these to be seen. They are 2,500 years old but as clean as if they were carved yesterday. Most depict envoys of subject nations—Parthians, Bactrians, Arabs, Thracians, and many others—paying homage to the Achaemenian emperors, who ruled Iran from 559 to 330 B.C. and are best

remembered by their first names: Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. All but Cyrus are entombed in the cliffs around Persepolis.

One of the more remarkable aspects of modern Iran is that no statesman entertains irredentist claims to any of the “lost provinces” of the ancient empire, whether in Africa, Europe, or closer to home in Iraq, Turkmenistan, or Afghanistan. Indeed, there was much domestic groaning—and an international outcry—when Shah Muhammed Reza went to Pasargadae in 1971 to visit Cyrus’s tomb. Since his homage to the first Achaemenian—“You are sleeping, we are awake”—seemed to portend a reconquest of the Persian Empire, even the usually solicitous Nixon administration recoiled. (The Saudis went farther, demanding that Washington remove the shah.) But that was the stillborn extent of Iranian irredentism. Contrast this apathy with nationalism like Hungary’s, where even today peddlers do brisk business in the sale of wishful maps depicting a reborn Hungary astride the entire Carpathian Basin.

No less interesting than the ruins of Persepolis are those of the Shah’s notorious “Persepolis party” of October 1971. Held to commemorate “2,500 years of Iranian Empire,” the Persepolis party cost \$500 million at a time when most Iranians lived in grinding poverty. I remember reading at the time that the shah lodged his guests in luxurious tents. Passing through a cut in the barbed wire, I entered the old encampment, which is set up like a Michigan suburban subdivision, semicircular cul-de-sacs thrown out from feeder roads divided by exposed, dried-up fountains and water mains. The tents are still there, rusted steel frames flying forlorn scraps of blue and gold canvas. Inside are cracked tile floors, water and waste pipes (if only camping were really like this!), broken toilets and sinks, and amputated power lines. The tents get bigger as one approaches the grand pavilion, where the infamous royal banquet was held—infamous because malnutrition and disease were still chronic in Iran when the shah sat down to that banquet, the culmination of his three-day spectacle. Although the celebration drew only a “B list” of dignitaries—men like Spiro Agnew, Josip Broz Tito, Haile Selassie, Nicolae Ceaucescu, and Jeremy Thorpe*—no expense was spared. The Pahlavis flew in chefs and 180 staff from Maxim’s of Paris and fed their guests ninety peacocks, stuffed roast lamb and truffles, quail’s eggs, two thousand pounds of golden imperial caviar, mousse of crayfish tails, champagne sorbet made with wine of the 1911 vintage, and creamed figs with raspberries in port wine.

By a marvelous coincidence, the British foreign office was declassifying all documents relating to this bacchanal when I stopped in London on the way

*Vice president of the United States under Nixon, 1969–73; president of Yugoslavia, 1953–80; emperor of Ethiopia, 1935–74; president of Romania, 1965–89; leader of the Liberal Party in Britain, 1967–76.

home from Iran. I looked over some of the documents while engaged in other research at the Public Record Office in Kew. They reveal that Queen Elizabeth, who had considered going to Persepolis, was dissuaded by her minders, who called it “an event too tasteless and dangerous for the Queen of England.” Yet relations between Iran and the United Kingdom were so delicate that the queen felt constrained to offer up the Prince of Wales, so as not to offend the shah at a moment when the Pahlavis were weighing the purchase of 760 Chieftain tanks. Setting a sterling example for war college students everywhere, Prince Charles actually refused, declaring that he could not miss a few days of classes at the Royal Naval College. In the end, Princess Anne and Prince Philip joined what the British foreign office judged “a motley collection of heads of state or, more likely, their representatives.” Anyone who remembers it as a glamorous event was hoodwinked; a foreign office analyst reminds us that “it [was] the greatest nonevent of our time, a creation of royal despotism taking advantage of the bedazzled mass media.”

Today the grand pavilion of the Persepolis camp stands erect and apparently intact, in contrast to the smaller tents. Closer inspection, however, discloses a Potemkin facade. The rear of the pavilion has been crushed, as if by a bomb or tornado. Air conditioning ducts hang crazily, interior doors and walls are smashed in, exposing expensive wallpaper and trim. It is an eerie, evocative place.

Back in Shiraz, I successfully penetrated the Madrasedh-e Khan, a serene seventeenth-century theological college. In my diary I afterward wrote, “I have wondered where all the hard-liners are, and here they are.” The *madrasedhs* are where the mullahs train; most of the novices are seventeen to twenty-one years old. If not exactly the shock troops—most are too dim for that—these are the foot soldiers of the Islamic Republic; they will become the men who intersperse Friday prayers all over Iran with anti-Western, anti-Enlightenment injunctions or flesh out the lower ranks of the civil service. As I strolled around the courtyard, admiring the architecture and mosaics, I felt eyes boring into me. The boys live five or six to a room along the second story of the stone-walled school. They were peering curiously down at me, my interpreter, and two young Frenchmen who had joined us in the bazaar. “Where are you from?” an English-speaker called. “America and France.” Shock! “We don’t let Americans into Iran, how did you get in? Have they reopened the embassy?” There was a burble of excited conversation. The youngsters seemed half-scared and half-interested. Gradually they descended from their rooms to crowd around, many sniffing and coughing despite the summer heat. I was shocked by their appearance; all were dirty and rank, their palms sweaty when they shook hands—and this was the Harvard or Yale of Iranian *madrasedhs*. I was reminded of Nasir-ed Din-Shah, one of the westernizing Qajar kings of the nineteenth century, who deplored “the vermin-

infested priests who lurk in the corners of the *madraseshs*.” They did seem rather lousy, and I was scratching afterward.

It suddenly dawned on me that this might be a truer representation of Iran than the beautiful people whom I had been admiring on Mullah Sada Street. These boys were from the villages and the slums, educated just enough to begin



to take in, along with the Koran, the prejudices of their elders, several of whom approached to glare at us and then stalk away. They brimmed with questions—that is, for me. The French did not exist for them. The questions give insight into the curriculum at the average *madrash*: “Why does America support Israel?” “Why do Americans favor Jews over Palestinians [*philistines*, in Farsi]?” “Why does America arrest people who go to Cuba?” “Why does America accuse Iran of bombing Khobar Towers when everyone knows that it was the English secret service?” “Why did Clinton have sex with Lewinsky?” “Jesse Jackson had a girl like Lewinsky too, didn’t he?” These credulous boys are exempt from military service. They attend state schools until the eighth grade, spend six years in the *madrash*, then three more in Qom, the Vatican of Shi’ism. Their education complete, most return to mosques in their natal villages or neighborhoods. None of the boys could think of

anything to say to the two French visitors, not even thanks for succoring Imam Khomeini after he was expelled from Iraq in 1978. Soccer, however, is as avidly followed in the *madrash* as everywhere else, and as we left the students shouted their only words of French: “Jean-Pierre Papin!” (a retired player) and “Paris St. Germain!” (a team). My two French companions looked rather glum; such is the hypnotic power of America everywhere you go.

The mausoleum of Shah-e Cheragh is a holy place in Shiraz; there the brother of Imam Reza, one of the twelve imams of Shi’ism, is buried. Sitting inside the mirrored great hall, I saw my first revolutionary guards, members of the *Sepah*. Although their uniforms are the same faded khaki as those of the soldiers of the *Artesh* (regular army), they are invariably better turned out and are sometimes armed. These “revolutionary guardians,” or *Pasdarans*, are also recognizable by their beards and mustaches; the *Artesh* are clean shaven. The guards also seem pious. In two weeks in Iran, I never saw an *Artesh* in a mosque, with the sole exception of the Disneylike Imam Khomeini shrine south of Tehran, which is not really a

mosque anyway. Every large mosque had its complement of barefoot *Pasdarans*, fervently bowing and praying, kissing the holy objects, and backing away from the shrines so as not to turn their back on them (few others observe this nicety). This is not to suggest that all guards are zealots. The *Sepah* is manned the same way the *Artesh* is, with twenty-month draftees; many are volunteers from the draft pool who requested assignment to the guards, but others are simply eighteen-year-olds forced into the IRGC to fill quotas.

I met three revolutionary guards of the latter category in the Hafez Gardens of Shiraz. All were from Isfahan, all very nice and oh, so innocent. They thought I was English, because I had said that I speak “*Ingilisi*.” When my guide came up and explained that I was from the United States, one of the boys asked him, “So, does he speak English or United States?” The other two laughed uproariously. These three had been drafted into the IRGC and were unhappy about it: “They make us pray more than the *Artesh*,” one of them told me. All three were delighted to meet a real live American and asked me shyly to write or draw something in their little notebooks, which all Iranians seem to carry. I asked them what they planned to do after military service; all three wanted to go to university, but places there are limited, so one would be an electrician, the other two didn’t know.

In another park I met a nineteen-year-old in army uniform. He hated the service but would soon be done with it. All he was interested in was Western music. Iron Maiden, Back Street Boys—he whispered the forbidden names, as if letting me in on a great conspiracy. I asked him what he knew about America: “At school and from the government we hear bad things, but we believe the opposite of everything we hear. We think America is great!” I asked him if any of his friends studied at *madraseshs*: “Thank God, no!” Who, then, attends the *madraseshs*? “Poor kids, stupid kids, usually from religious families.” What kind of government would you like to see in Iran? “Democracy—but I guess I don’t really know what democracy is. They say that we have ‘democracy’ here, but it’s not democracy, because it never matters what *we* want, things just get decided for us.” Like most other places, Shiraz is full of Afghan laborers, who work like mules for four dollars a day, contributing to the 25 percent unemployment among Iranians.

From Shiraz we flew to Bandar Abbas, Iran’s principal port and naval base. This is a seedy place, the temperature well over a hundred degrees and humid in summer. It is filled with Afghan traders, who buy on the duty-free island of Qeshm, sixty minutes away, and sell on the streets of Bandar at a slight markup. (I bought a toy for my son from a trader and paid seventy cents for it; he had bought it on Qeshm for fifty cents and seemed content with the transaction.) I saw more junkies here, strung out and passed out on the sidewalks. Dealers

would flit past whispering, offering not drugs as I assumed but CDs: “Mariah Carey, Britney Spears, Madonna.” Propaganda murals here were more explicitly anti-American than elsewhere in Iran: a wall-sized rendering of two martyrs downing a U.S. Navy helicopter from a motorboat, a ghostly Koran *rahl* (a wooden rack) hovering above a U.S. guided-missile destroyer to bat away its missiles, or a plump American soldier with his boots straddling the Gulf and something hateful scrawled underneath. I drove eighty-five kilometers west along the coast from Bandar Abbas and passed the naval base, but there was not much to see from the land side, as the base is walled. It is huge, encompassing the navy’s shipyard, where three 1,200-ton corvettes are being laid down.

We crossed to Qeshm, flanking the Strait of Hormuz. One gets there on rental Boston Whalers that blast through high seas, slamming sickeningly up and down. Viewed in the shah’s time as strategically vital, the island seems little valued today (aside from its duty-free privilege), with only a drowsy police presence and a few rusted coils of barbed wire here and there. Still, in a trip in which I was largely left alone, someone thought to send us two gentlemen who claimed to be from the (nonexistent) Ministry of Tourism but looked more like Stasi agents. They accompanied me everywhere and saw me down to the water’s edge when I left. We drove around much of the island but saw little besides gas lines, dhow yards, and the occasional sleepy village, invariably filled with Afghan refugees. The island of Hormuz to the northeast, famous for its ruined Portuguese castle, was largely deserted, with no military or naval presence that I could see. It is ironic that the last shah seized nearby Abu Musa and the Tumbs in 1971 on the pretext that islands like these could be seized in a *coup de main* by “terrorists” to block the flow of Gulf oil. It is no exaggeration to say that I, my guide, and the two Polish tourists we were traveling with that day could have taken Hormuz with our jackknives.

“Isfahan is half the world,” or so the locals boast. I thought it a most disappointing city, but that was probably because it was even hotter than Bandar Abbas. It reminded me of Florence in August, the big central *maidan*, or square, crammed with rug and souvenir shops whose owners were busily dickering with foreign tourists. (Like Florence, Isfahan is famed for its ancient bridges, but the river has been dry for years. It is strange to stroll back and forth across the bridges in the evening as the locals do and not hear the gurgle of water below.) Isfahan is also unexpectedly pious, like one of Stendhal’s provincial capitals, where everyone apes the Bourbons and the clergy. To a woman, females in Isfahan wore the *chador*; only Qom is more severe. I toured Isfahan with an Emirati from Dubai who now teaches at Ohio State. He marveled at the changes here. The last time he had been in Iran was before the revolution, when Arabs

had come here to drink and carouse with legal prostitutes. This straitlaced Iran was as alien to him as a Puritan Las Vegas would be to Americans.

On the road from Isfahan to Qom, we stopped in Kashan. There I had a long conversation with Ansarian, a young mullah who teaches school in the nearby town of Natanz and was supervising a field trip to the famous Fin Gardens. Ansarian was rather frightening; smooth and assured, he gave voice to the worst prejudices of the mullah state. “The American people are not the Great Satan,



Hafez tomb and garden, Shiraz

the American government is the Great Satan—Bush, Carter, and so on.” I asked him why the Islamic Republic represses dissident politicians, scholars, and editors if it is truly a republic. “We are a republic, but we will not tolerate anyone who does not respect our martyrs or Islam. All others, yes.” Why do you restrict the freedom of your people by banning Western films, music, literature, and television? “If it is sunny and you pull a shade across the

window, is that bad? Westernization is like a plague of flies, and we are trying to put screens on our windows. Is that bad?” Are you worried by the prospect of counterrevolution? “There might be some trouble like that, but it would be against God, so it would fail.”

Leaving the gardens, I chatted with an *Artesh* and a policeman on duty at the gate. Both were draftees. Pondering my discussion with Ansarian, I asked them if they would fire on rioting students at Kashan University if ordered. They both twisted uncomfortably for at least thirty seconds before answering. Finally, the policeman said: “Well, they’d never ask us to—they’d get the *basiji* to do that.” There are perhaps three million *basiji* in Iran. They are the “minutemen” of the Islamic Revolution. In a crisis they would be called to arms by the Friday prayer leaders. They tend to be fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds but can be as old as sixty. They are volunteers, paramilitary boy scouts, ultimately controlled by the *Sepah* and used to intimidate or thrash restless students.

Qom has always queered Iranian politics, the mullahs demanding a share of political power even in secularizing times like the Pahlavi era. The city is a bastion of bureaucratic Islam, redolent of Rome in the seventeenth century, full of robed clerics and functionaries in the service of the Supreme Leader. I visited Ayatollah Khomeini’s humble house in a back alley and sat for tea where he had sat before his exile to Iraq and France. The Imam Khomeini Educational and Training Institute is an aggressively political body masquerading as a nongovernmental

organization. When I was there the staff had just folded up an exhibition entitled “The White Coup.” Intended chiefly for the novices and clergy who throng Qom, the exhibit had aimed to dispel “doubts and assaults on sacred truths” and “put viewers on their guard against poison pens and questionable foreigners.” The closed walls of provincial *madraseshs* close even tighter here. Whereas mullahs are a rare sight in most Iranian cities, there are legions of them in Qom. In the 1930s, the wife of Reza Shah, the last shah’s father, was once insulted by a mullah here; the king drove down in an armored car with four hundred troops, motored into the holy shrine of Fatimah, and slapped the offending cleric. Looking at the vast domed shrine with its army of mullahs and pilgrims, I had an inkling of how daring that act had been. Timid Muhammed Reza—the introverted product of a Swiss boarding school, not the Iranian Cossack Brigade—would never have done it.

En route to Tehran we stopped at Behesht-e Zahra, a cemetery of the Iraq war south of the city. It is a heartbreaking place, as grandiose as the Omaha Beach cemetery but even more affecting, because of the way Shias display their dead. Whereas we erect plain white crosses, the Shia builds a glass case with mementos, and in many cases a photograph of the corpse, no matter how badly burned or pummeled. The photos of smiling boys turned to armless or legless trunks, their faces constricted with pain or blasted away entirely, were shocking. My guide, who had served in the war, was reduced to tears. His teenaged son, who had come along, wandered off, bored by the whole thing. I remembered the assumption of Americans during that war that the Iranians were “fanatics.” Here I was reminded of their ordinariness.

The penultimate stop was Mashad, which used to be an important halt on the Silk Road. Once it glittered; today, it chokes under smog and heat. The people here, hard by the border of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, look more like Turkmen than Persians, with broad Asiatic faces. Mashad seemed limitless, an ugly sprawl of shanties and garages out to the horizon. The masses come here on pilgrimages to the shrine of Imam Reza. Inside the shrine, I was reminded again that many Iranians are devout and superstitious; they will travel thousands of miles at great expense to prostrate themselves at this shrine. Infidels are not allowed inside, but I went in anyway; there was nothing else to do in Mashad. No one stopped me or took much interest. Outside, the courtyards were full of Pakistani Shias, sitting in circles, singing prayers and hymns. There were no cafénets anywhere in the city, my guide conjecturing that Khorasan Province—seat of this “place of martyrdom”—might forbid them on cultural grounds. Wanting to contact my wife, I asked the head of the Imam Reza shrine’s library if I could use his Internet connection. Now here was an interesting man—not a mullah but a loyal servant of the theocracy, his desk heaped with the regime’s propaganda.

After forcing me to sit through a lecture on America's ills and the urgent need for a "dialogue of civilizations," he decided that I could not use his e-mail after all.

Two weeks earlier I had thought Tehran a grimy, stinking, third-world city. On my return there, it felt like London, New York, or Paris. Northern Tehran, which rises steeply from the center, is where the shah and the rich people lived during the Pahlavi era, and where the rich people today live as well. The million-dollar villas of the old regime's "petro-bourgeoisie" are now inhabited by bazaar merchants (*bazaari*) and other creatures of the new regime. Threatened by the shah's program of westernization, which was opening their captive markets to foreign competition, the *bazaari* allied with the mullahs to oust the shah in 1979. The "Islamic Association of Bazaar Merchants" remains a principal prop of the Islamic Republic, for all trade great and small passes through its hands—as long as westerners are excluded. To hear the *bazaari* splashing in their swimming pools behind high walls on the heights two thousand feet above the suffocating streets of Tehran is to understand at last their otherwise inexplicable support for the theocracy. (Has there been another case in history where merchants supported priests in a revolution against "secularism"?)

Then there are the Islamic "new men," who cling to this not-so-new government as adeptly as the shah's money-grubbing parvenus clung to the last one. One such is Supreme Leader Khamenei's private physician, who has been made an army general and promoted to chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces despite a complete lack of military experience. Another example, and perhaps the most striking one, is Mohsen Rafiq-Dust, a humble nobody who, beginning as Ayatollah Khomeini's chauffeur in 1979, rose to command the Revolutionary Guards ministry before ending as chairman of the ten-billion-dollar Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled, the most notorious of Iran's extragovernmental *bonyads*, or foundations, which covertly finance terrorism, vigilantism, death squads, black propaganda, and other skullduggery for the Supreme Leader.

Rafiq-Dust's sycamore-shaded mansion is near the shah's old palace complex at Saad Abad, where the Pahlavi White and Green Palaces are now open to the public. To reach them, one passes the ex-Hilton and the ex-Hyatt Hotels. I stopped at the former, to see how it has fared since 1979. It is a time warp, filled with sixties decor and furnishings, like a set from *I Dream of Jeannie* or *The Brady Bunch*: Naugahyde-padded bar, burnt-orange shag rugs, harvest gold curtains, lime chairs. The famous pool patio where American businessmen once sold their wares is crumbling, the pool and sundeck filled with Iranian males in black Speedos who jerk to attention every time a (fully clothed) female crosses to the hotel.

At the palace complex, my guide led me inside with a guilty air. Middle-aged Iranians still do not feel quite right trespassing here, where the “king of kings” once roamed. The White Palace is in the Nazi style favored by its builder, Reza Shah, who was forced to abdicate by the British and Russians in 1941 because of his fondness for Hitler. It resembles nothing so much as Rudolf Hess’s “Brown House” in Munich—which is, of course, not brown but white. Since the revolution, the bronze statue of Reza Shah that once stood at the entrance has been sawn off at the boots. Yet half a boot is still man-tall, which suggests the Brobdingnagian proportions of the vanished monument. If the palace’s exterior reflects the father, however, the interior is the son’s. There are oil portraits of Napoleon, wall-sized paintings of Frederician grenadiers in action, and statuettes of the last shah on horseback with toga and broadsword, à la Marcus Aurelius.

Every guidebook I consulted deplored the shah’s lack of taste, and rightly so. The elegant wood-paneled billiard room was ruined by the addition of a Space Invaders machine, which squats odiously between leather club chairs. Upstairs were only two memorable sights, the first of them the last shah’s bedroom, which is a frilly, feminine place modeled on Marie Antoinette’s Versailles boudoir. Since the shah and his queen kept separate bedrooms, this is a revealing detail. (In the Green Palace, favored by Muhammed Reza’s father, there is no bed in the shah’s bedroom; the old Cossack preferred to sleep on the floor.) The other is a cheap-looking nineteen-inch Zenith television on a steel cart in Queen Farah’s bedroom. It was easy to picture Farah sprawled on the bed watching *Dallas* reruns while the air conditioners roared and her husband, fifty yards down the hall, sat up in his own bed looking at the pictures in *Jane’s Defence Weekly*.

I sat in a tearoom by the palace-complex guardhouse, puffing on a hubble-bubble pipe—moist, spiced Egyptian tobacco inhaled through water—and reflecting on what I had seen and heard in the last two weeks. I had met dozens of Iranians and joined briefly in the whirl of their lives. My deepest impression was of a gulf between the Iranian government and its people. Educated Iranians seem tired of the mullah state, with its pieties and hypocrisies. How can a self-styled “religious democracy” wield oppressive powers of “public supervision” and still expect the support of its citizens? Young and middle-aged Iranians—96 percent of the population—chafe at the restrictions and often defy them. The “sexy *hejab*” in northern Tehran is even more advanced than in Shiraz, and cars there sometimes pull alongside playing forbidden Western music.

As yet, no one talks about a counterrevolution, because of the likely bloodshed and the absence of any counterrevolutionary organization. A coup by secular, pro-Western officers seems out of the question; the military has been effectively “coup proofed” by its division into competing forces, the *Artesh* and

Sepah. Nor is there a conspicuous political alternative to the Islamic Republic. Iran's first constitutional movement, in the early 1900s, was snuffed out by the military. The country's last monarchy disgraced itself through waste, corruption, and a secret police that maintained sixty thousand agents and three million informers in a country of just thirty million. The liberal movement led by Mohammad Mossadeq in the 1950s was brought down by its own irrational flailing, but also by the mullahs, who feared Mossadeq's irreligiousness and so joined with the British and Americans in Operation AJAX, the coup that restored full powers to the last shah.

In Iran today there is no obvious answer to Lenin's famous question, "What is to be done?" Hence people watch and wait, enduring their gloomy government for want of an alternative. What seems clear is that Iranians are anything but "fundamentalists." They are weary economic refugees with no place to go and few prospects. They judge their government corrupt and insincere, interested only in clinging to power. Most rate the mullahs better than the last shah, but that is not saying much, and Iran's refusal even to consider supporting a restoration in Afghanistan of the eighty-seven-year-old former king, Zahir Shah, suggests that the theocracy is more than a little concerned about the possibility of a Pahlavi restoration. Their concern can only have been deepened by the "soccer riots" of October 2001, when more than a million Iranians assembled after each of three World Cup qualifying matches to denounce the clerical regime and demand an easier, more secular government and way of life. If oil prices—down 33 percent—continue their fall, public pressure for jobs and relief may become unbearable. The street mobs that chanted "death to the Islamic republic" in October 2001 will collide with *Sepah* and *basiji* units ordered to defend the revolution. The martyrs may yet have their day of blood and tulips, or the whole regime may pass peacefully away like Honecker's East Germany or De Klerk's South Africa. Or the Islamic Republic may right itself, pulling just enough support from the slums and villages, the *Sepah*, and the *bazaari* to get it through this crisis and the next. Iran is that unpredictable.