
FROM SILK TO SATELLITE: A LETTER FROM CENTRAL ASIA¹

— DR. MAJID TEHRANIAN —

“For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.”

So sang James Elroy Flecker, the man who made Samarkand a fixture of the English imagination surrounding Central Asia during the nineteenth century. Following the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991, however, the Golden Road to Central Asia has opened up considerably. Whereas the main route to the five republics of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) used to be through Moscow, it is now possible to get there by way of China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, as well as Russia. Of course, this does not mean that you can get air reservations easily for those remote corners of the world. While you can reach some destinations such as Almaty and Tashkent by one of several international airlines, connections within Central Asia are still primarily managed by Aeroflot, the floundering Soviet airline. But Aeroflot itself has now been broken up into several different national airlines proudly bearing the names of the five independent republics. None of these airlines appears on the computer screens of the international airline reservation system, and they all face the same problems: shortages of fuel and pilots, overbooking, overloading, erratic schedules, and frequent accidents. The safer gates to Central Asia still seem to be through the airlines of the neighboring countries.

Two years ago, in the summer of 1992, I traveled the ancient Silk Road through Beijing, Xianjang, and Urumchi to Almaty. From Urumchi, the lively and colorful capital of Sinking, I took a newly established train to Almaty. The new line is nostalgically called *The Silk Road*. It was filled with Chinese businessmen and women, Japanese journalists and anthropologists, and a mosaic of Central Asian faces from Sinking, all of them seeking their fortunes in this legendary corridor of world civilizations. When we crossed the border, I noticed

¹ This article differs from the papers usually published in *The Forum*. It combines Mr. Tehranian's academic expertise with colorful, personal, ground-level observations of the modern lands and people of the ancient silk route. In presenting his experiences, Dr. Tehranian structures a subtle analysis and opens a visual window to portray the region in a way that more traditional articles are not able to do.

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that while the Chinese side had been developed into farms and lush fields of sunflowers, the ex-Soviet Central Asian side was dry as dust. My friend, a Japanese anthropologist who has been traveling in the area for the past twenty years, informed me that Chinese immigrants from the East had developed their once dry and dusty land into its present green pastures.

This year I decided to approach Central Asia from another gateway—Tehran. Iran Air now has regular flights to Ashkabad and Almaty and is trying to establish flights to the three other capitals—Bishkek, Tashkent, and Dushanbe—as well. For China and Iran, the Central Asian corridor was historically a vital trade link. It connected the East and the West through the Silk and Spice Roads. From the sixteenth century onward, however, the discovery of ocean routes to East Asia and the development of ocean-worthy ships led to a decline of the land routes. The economic, political, and cultural decline of Central and West Asia can be attributed in part to their decline as trading centers. It was not until the Suez Canal was built in the nineteenth century, and the discovery of oil in the twentieth century, that West Asia once again became an important strategic and economic thoroughfare. In the meantime, the area was labeled “the Middle East” by Captain Mahan who, in his treatise, *The Influence of Sea Power in History*, considered it an important piece of real estate in the hands of anyone interested in global power through control of the seas and strategic land masses.

This was not the first time in history that geography had brought about a new configuration of power. Similar to the Occidental term “the Middle East,” the term “Central Asia” suggests the region’s centrality to the competing ambitions of the two imperial powers of the nineteenth century, Russia and Britain. The struggle for Central Asia in the latter half of the nineteenth century assumed a cloak and dagger character as Russia and Britain encroached on one another’s Asian borders. Played out as a series of intrigues by the Russian and British spies and diplomats to gain the favor of the local potentates, the emirs of Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand, Kipling named this competition “The Great Game.” Through the tragic consequences of this game, such as the imprisonment, torture, and humiliation of the emissaries, Russia and Britain came to an understanding that Iran and Afghanistan would be employed as buffer zones between their respective Asian empires. That understanding was formalized in the secret Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907, which divided Iran into three spheres of influence—the northern provinces under Russia, the southern provinces under Britain, and the central provinces as a buffer between the two.

As a Russian colonial possession, “Central Asia” was severed from its neighboring lands with which it had considerable historical and cultural ties. During 100 years of Russian colonialism the land became Russified and Sovietized but never lost its cultural resilience. Following their independence, the new republics have entered into a process of cultural and political reconstruction. New identities are being organized around national and religious imaginaries that employ a complex variety of historical memories, moral geographies, cultural identities, and mobilization strategies to pursue competing instrumentalities of power. Under these conditions, the very term “Central Asia” has lost its fixity. Although the five republics still constitute its core, it can no longer be strictly

limited to them alone. For reasons of historical ties, geographic contiguity, cultural affinity, economic viability, and political destiny, Greater Central Asia could now reasonably include Iran, Afghanistan, and Xianjiang, as well as the five former Soviet republics. Borders will probably not change, but the emerging moral geographies are already setting competing economic and political forces into motion.

Iran

My visit to Iran in 1992 was a brief one occasioned by a conference on Central Asia. I had last left Tehran in 1978 before the revolution to go on a sabbatical at St. Antony's College, Oxford. Fourteen years later, my original homeland looked and felt like another planet. Monarchical Iran was Westernized, Islamic Iran has been Arabized and Islamicized. Going from one extreme to another seems to be the fate of a resilient historical entity situated at the crossroads of world invasions. Iranians have learned how to survive by adapting themselves to radically changing circumstances. The semiotics of changing circumstances between the monarchical and Islamic eras is most visibly witnessed by the transition from women's short skirts under the monarchical regime to Islamic *hejab*, the black veil. The veil has been somewhat modernized in a compromise with practicality. Instead of the long one-piece cloth, it now includes a headcover and manteau that free the hands. Similarly, the men have foregone clean-shaven faces, coats, and ties, vestiges of the monarchical era, in exchange for short beards, black trousers, and all buttoned-down shirts with long sleeves of the Islamic regime. In both cases, cultural resistance to the puritanical demands of the regime includes a display of colors other than black, as well as some ingenious variations in style that attract attention.

A flood of wall paintings and slogans in Tehran also tell the tale of a revolution that has constructed its own angels, demons, and temptresses. The angels are represented by the twin faces of the Supreme Faghihs (Jurists) Khomeini and Khamenei. The demon is clearly identified by the slogan, "Death to America—the Great Satan." In the meantime, the Little Satan (the former Soviet Union) has disappeared from the face of history. The temptresses are made explicit by another flood of slogans focusing on the necessity of *hejab*. Some forms of cultural resistance also appear on the walls. They are most often manifest in such English messages as "Fuck you," and "Pink Floyd," intelligible only to the connoisseurs. The thought police, however, catch up with such inanities and wipe them out, only to be faced with another round of free expression a few days later. The walls are thus the battlegrounds of competing cultural expressions, sometimes leading to works of art in murals that draw upon considerable imagination, a feast of colors, and a combination of traditional calligraphy and modern iconography.

Were it not for a persistent Iranian proclivity toward merriment, just below the surface and waiting to burst into a celebration of life, the official social atmosphere would resemble a wake—black garb, mourning, and deadly seriousness. But life in the parks, restaurants, and hiking paths in Tehran's northern

mountains, and above all in private homes, goes on with all of its traditional Iranian ways of animated conversation, cynicism, humor, and free-roaming children. Yet a reservoir of resentment persists against the high cost of living and the incompetence, corruption, and tyranny of the *mullas*. I heard this resentment most often articulated by my taxi drivers (over 90 percent of whom were mildly or wildly critical of the regime) and the secular intellectuals.

My colleague and research collaborator, Dru Gladney, accompanied me on this second trip to Tehran. We requested a visa for him about a week before our departure. The Institute for Political and International Studies, part of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expedited the visa, and we received it in record time enabling us to fly from Honolulu to Tehran via London and Istanbul. Given the sour state of U.S.-Iranian relations, we were both pleasantly surprised by the expeditious handling of the visa. I was even more pleasantly surprised by the warm reception Dru received at the Institute and, more generally, in our encounters with ordinary Iranians. We met with Mr. Abbas Maleki, the Institute Director, and his colleagues and explored the possibilities for mutual collaboration. Dru stayed in Tehran for one week during which he gave a colloquium at the Institute on the Chinese Muslim community. Although hastily assembled, the colloquium was attended by several knowledgeable Iranian scholars. It was followed by a luncheon at which, among others, Mr. Boroujerdi (Imam Khomeini's son-in-law and director of Central Asian studies at the Institute) was present. Mild of manners and scholarly in appearance, he attentively inspected every slide by walking over to the screen as if to verify the authenticity of every map.

Following Dru's departure, I began my search for Central Asian visas. This proved more difficult than I had anticipated. I already had a visa for Kirgizstan, which I obtained in Washington. But despite valiant efforts, it proved difficult to secure visas for the other republics. I gambled that Tehran would be a suitable place for visa hunting. While Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have established embassies in Tehran, the affairs of Tajikistan and Kirgizstan continue to be handled by the Russian embassy. My first visit was therefore to the old Russian Embassy in central Tehran. I was accompanied on this visit by my Iranian research collaborator, Changuiz Pahlavan. A crowd of visa seekers and visa brokers were gathered at the back door of the consulate; it was closed and no information could be obtained. This was perhaps by design, because we were immediately approached by visa brokers who told us we could get a CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) visa for a brokerage fee of 170,000 Rials (\$97 at the official rate of exchange). When we inquired about the value of such a visa for entry into the Central Asian republics, we were informed that it is only good for Moscow. However, it would give us an "edge" for entering other CIS states by paying their visa fees at other points of entry. The entire affair sounded like a scam.

We then tried to enlist the assistance of the Institute and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I spent a few days obtaining letters requesting visas, one from the Institute Director addressed to the Ministry and one from the Ministry addressed to the Central Asian embassies. The letter from the Ministry intro-

duced me as a businessman. The old Ministry official issuing the letter knowingly explained that introducing me as a "researcher" would raise all kinds of suspicions. I soon became resigned to my new profession which, after all, was the business of trading information and knowledge.

My next project was to find the embassies in the chaos of Tehran without the benefit of a telephone or embassy directory. The Uzbek Embassy was just beginning to establish its headquarters. Their response was terse: "No visas can be issued; get a CIS visa, and a three-day transit visa will be issued to you at your point of entry into Uzbekistan." The Kazakh Embassy was well-established in Darrous, an upper middle class northern suburb of Tehran. Its doors were closed until 11 a.m., when a small window opened and a Russian face, barely visible, tried to communicate in broken English. The official informed me that the consulate issued visas only on two days of the week and only after a one-week waiting period. The price tag for a three day stay was \$50. Higher rates applied for longer stays. I had already obtained a note from the Ministry that promised me a visa for Turkmenistan upon entry at Ashkabad, but it was valid for only one week. Waiting for the Kazakh visa I would have lost the Turkmen visa, so I decided to move on.

Visa hunting provided me with a new index for comparing levels of development. The hurdles to travel seemed to correlate inversely with the stages of economic and political development. Kirgizstan is reputed to be the most open and democratic of the Central Asian polities. I managed to obtain my visa in Washington within a couple of days by submitting an application form, finger prints, three pictures, and a \$50 visa fee. As a bonus, I also obtained an interview with Kirgizstan's charming and knowledgeable ambassador, who later became the Foreign Minister. At the opposite pole, the Uzbek Embassy in Washington was rather uncommunicative and uncooperative. No visa could be obtained because there was no consulate either in Washington or in Tehran! Nevertheless, I had to submit a letter explaining the purpose of my journey in addition to supporting documents. In the other republics the rule of thumb also seemed to be the greater the number of forms, pictures, finger prints, and official signatures required, the greater the degree of underdevelopment!

The hunt for visas also inadvertently led to a more pleasant learning experience. As soon as my presence in Tehran became known, my long-lost friends and former students began seeking me out. Some invited me to social gatherings, while others invited me to their institutes or universities for talks and lectures. During the short period of my stay, I spoke twice each at the Center for Strategic Studies and the Center for Radio-Television Audience Research, and I also gave a formal lecture at Imam Sadeq University—a university designed to educate a new ruling elite well-versed in traditional Islamic and modern sciences. All these occasions proved to be opportunities for dialogue between an expatriate and insiders eager to learn, as well as educate.

My talks focused generally on the problems of modernization in a postmodern world, and more particularly on Iran. I did not have to look far to find an example for my central points. Recently, Tehran's rooftops have been flooded by satellite dishes; the talk of the town centers on whether they represent

something sinister or liberating. They are seen by traditionalists as a cultural assault on the Islamic Republic's puritanical values. A regime that for eight years fought off Saddam Hussein's onslaught in a war that cost a million lives, another million maimed, and over \$120 billion in damages is now quivering before a new adversary: MTV. A debate has been raging in the media and the *Majlis* regarding an appropriate response. The Muslim puritans want to stamp it out. In May 1994, Iran's highest-ranking cleric, the 105-year-old Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Araki, issued a *fatwa*, or religious decree, banning the installation of satellite dishes. Satellite dishes infect Islam, his office wrote, with "cheap alien culture" and spread "the family devastating diseases of the West."² Ever since the *fatwa*, the dishes have mushroomed on Tehran's rooftops at a conservatively estimated rate of 400 per day.³ The secularists love them and see them as a respite from the regime's dull and preachy radio and television programs, while the Muslim pragmatists (including President Rafsanjani) are willing to tolerate them. During a heated debate in the *Majilis*, some proclaimed the dishes "a cultural invasion by the enemies of Islam," while others admitted that they could not do much about the dishes. A formal law was passed in September 1994 outlawing them. As dishes become smaller and smaller, however, enforcement will prove increasingly difficult.⁴

Such a dilemma is a classic one for developing countries. Historically, periods of primitive accumulation have been accompanied by puritanical revolutions. These ideological revolutions pave the way for frugality, savings, and investment—the *sine qua non* of building the necessary infrastructure for an industrial economy. The Puritan Revolution in England may be considered the harbinger of such revolutions in the modern world, but the Puritan society in colonial New England, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Communist Revolution in China, and now the Islamic Revolution in Iran present other prototypes. Despite their ideological diversity, all of these social revolutions called for a "purist" society based on strict moral codes demanding discipline, hard work, abstinence from consumption, and devotion to the state's development goals and plans. With the rise of European capitalism, Max Weber identified this constellation of rules as the "Protestant ethics." Peter Berger, Tu WeiMing, and other contemporary scholars now point to analogous Confucian ethics as the secret of economic successes in the East Asian nations.

² *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 1994, A6.

³ *Salam*, 10 July 1994.

⁴ In November 1994, Ayatollah Araki passed away at the tender age of 105. A debate on who should succeed him as the chief Shi'a *marja taqlid* (source of imitation) was politicized by Ayatollah Khamenei's candidacy. He first accepted the nomination by his supporters, but subsequently declined "due to the heavy responsibilities of his office." Opposition to his candidacy came from inside as well as outside Iran. Some considered him too junior for the position; others felt that an Iranian political leader should not be at the head of an international Shi'a organization; still others believed that a fusion of religious and political authorities in him would weaken both powers.

Unwittingly, I was caught in the crosscurrents of this political struggle. A VOA interview with me on Central Asia was broadcast right in the middle of this turmoil. In response to my report of Soroush's advocacy of a separation of mosque and the state, the daily *Kayhan*, Ayatollah Khamenei's mouthpiece, ran a scathing editorial against the interview while reproaching those in the government who allow such renegades to visit Iran.

Developing countries face the formidable task of achieving modernity and autonomy in a postmodern world without borders. Global telecommunication has obliterated the state boundaries, weakened cultural sovereignty, and undermined the puritanical resolve and discipline which call for simplicity, frugality, and cultural conformity. On the one hand, global communication has made the task of development easier by providing rapid and efficient access to sources of information on science, technology, and markets. On the other hand, it has made the control of human behavior that much more difficult for the centralized and mobilized states focused on strict moral codes and national development goals. The example of an eighteen-year-old boy from the northern Iranian town of Behshahr might be enlightening. His newly acquired addiction to Western television, beamed into his home via satellite, is creating some serious problems for him and the state. The young addict writes in the newspaper *Resalat*: "Six months ago, the symptoms didn't seem so serious: a little fatigue, occasional absent-mindedness. Now I can't study any more. I have become impatient, weak, and nervous. I feel crippled. The dancing, singing, and films are so vulgar and stimulating that, even with the TV off, the images stay in my head." Another example is Mehdi, an eighteen-year-old shop clerk, who has been arrested seven or eight times by the religious vice squad. "It is usually for being caught alone with a girl, which is strictly forbidden for unmarried Iranians. Twice, the police shaved his head as punishment. Most recently, Mehdi was detained with a female friend who had ventured into the streets without the compulsory veil and dressed as her favorite MTV announcer: in bellbottoms, T-shirt, denim vest, and baseball cap. She wanted to get arrested to show she wasn't afraid. More than a few were saying, 'If there were only three more girls like her, we could change the whole country'."⁵

Some of these issues are indirectly reflected in the public discourse among intellectuals. Abdol-Karim Soroush, a thoughtful critic of the prevailing ideology of unity of religion and politics, is gently calling for a separation of the two. He argues that a theocratic state tends to ideologize religion, depreciating its essential value as a spiritual guide to virtue and salvation. Since power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, he argues, a theocratic state would corrupt both religion and politics. Religion is distracted from the existential problems of finitude, fragility, and morality of the human condition, while politics is narrowly focused on the trappings of power. Such arguments undermine the way the Islamic republic is organized. According to these arguments, the *mullas* would be taken out of positions of state responsibility and sent back to the mosque, thus ensuring a separation of religion and politics. Such views implicitly call for greater cultural diversity, political freedom, and ethical pluralism. They are more in tune with postmodern conditions, but they pose a problem for a neotraditionalist, slowly modernizing, puritanical revolution. The tensions between religion and politics would remain, but they might become more corrective than corrosive. They might also release greater intellectual and moral energies for social development.

⁵ *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 1994, A6.

Cultural survival is ultimately a matter of creative adaptation to changing natural, technological, and social environments. The cultural options before a theocracy such as Iran's are basically three: (1) to withdraw from the profane world into the sanctity of a strictly controlled monastic society, (2) to open the gates of cultural exchange widely and freely and thereby risk assimilation into a pastiche, relativist, and postmodern world, or (3) to maintain its own moral ground while engaging in selective cultural exchanges with the profane world. Currently, the Islamic republic is fluctuating between the first and the last policy options, while the second option is being imposed upon it. Cultural boundaries are notoriously porous in the age of direct broadcast satellites. Most upper income, and increasingly, middle income families in Tehran are now getting access to a variety of television networks ranging from CNN and BBC, to Thai, Burmese, Indian, Pakistani, and Arabic (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf States) networks. The boundaries of the permissible and the verboten are matters of intense dispute. Traditionalists argue that Western cultural imports undermine the integrity of the Islamic revolution, contaminate society, and allow the counterrevolutionaries to come back. In protest, the modernists argue that if the Islamic republic refuses to acknowledge the challenges of the West by ducking its head in the sand, blocking the channels of international communication, and continuing with its dull and monotonous programming, it will lose the cultural game. Modern telecommunications technologies have torpedoed all walls, including the Berlin Wall, Kremlin Wall, and Great Wall. Building walls will not protect anyone. Competing culturally with the aid of equally entertaining, educational, and informative programs might safeguard one's own cultural identity.

In this raging debate between traditionalists and modernists, the postmodernists mock both camps. By pointing to the futility of all discourse on cultural purity in the age of "virtual reality" and make-believe, they suggest that cultural identity is itself a social construction molded by the struggles for power and hegemony. Under the monarchical regime, the Iranian pre-Islamic past was glorified and mythologized. Under the Islamic regime, it is the Shi'a myths of martyrdom and resistance that are being propagated. Each regime attempted to construct its own version of an "authentic" cultural identity. Popular cultural resistance against each regime has also effectively taken the opposite route. Under the monarchical regime, the most popular books and audiocassettes were religious in content. Under the Islamic regime, it is the secular poets, writers, and skeptics who seem to dominate the market. Numerous editions of such delegitimizing literature have appeared and sold out. The best-selling poets are Ferdowsi (the tenth century epic poet who revived the pre-Islamic lore of Persian kingdom), Hafez (the thirteenth century mystic poet who scorned the hypocrisy of the *mullas*), and Khayyam (the twelfth century Epicurean mathematician-poet who celebrated wine, women, and songs). I searched in vain for copies of the nationalist poet Muhammad Taghi Bahar's collected works and, his son, Mehrdad Bahar's *Iranian Mythology*, and was told they were out of print. The most widely read religious theorist today is Soroush, a critic of Ali Shari'ati and the regime's doctrine of *velayat-i-faghih* (the trusteeship of the jurists) that

legitimated a theocratic state in Iran.

Crises of legitimacy may be considered a permanent condition of postmodernism throughout the world. But coming so soon after a bloody revolution and an agonizing war, the crisis is proving to be a deep cultural shock for the Islamic regime in Iran. Is the Islamic regime demythologizing Islam as effectively as the monarchical regime demythologized the monarchy? An alarming sign was the bomb explosion that took place inside Imam Reza's shrine in Mashhad in June 1994, just before I arrived in Tehran. Since this is the holiest of the Shi'a shrines in Iran, its violation was all the more shocking. As if to make a point, the terrorists planned for the bombs to explode during Tasua-Ashura, the holiest of the Shi'a anniversaries, that of Imam Hussein's martyrdom. Except for a Russian bombing of the shrine during World War II, this was the first time in recent memory that the shrine was violated. The government immediately blamed the incident on the *Mujahedeen E-Khalq*, the opposition guerrilla group that has gathered its forces in Iraq for skirmishes with the Islamic Republic. This was immediately denied by the *Mujahedeen* who, in turn, blamed the government for staging the incident. Some of my informants speculated that a Sunni group in Mashhad might be responsible for the incident. Some months ago, a Sunni mosque in a Mashhad neighborhood, where Ayatollah Khamenei used to live, had been demolished by the government. It was possible that the Sunnis were retaliating.

I probably became an unwitting victim of the Mashhad incident. When I arrived at the city's airport from Ashkabad, a month after the incident, my passport was confiscated. An entire planeload of passengers from Turkmenistan was kept waiting for over three hours before passport control officials appeared. Upon arrival in Mashhad, the visa officer respectfully but insistently asked me to fill out a long questionnaire, including a question about the design of my house, my salary, my wife's salary, and the names and addresses of five close friends. This was obviously a questionnaire designed for subversives.

On the plane to Tehran I sat next to a 35-year-old man who is president of his own rock chemical company focusing on import and export of chemical materials for the leather industry. He was bright and talkative and gave me a good analysis of the economic policies of the government in the postrevolutionary period. He also presented me with a book on Imam Ali's sayings which he was reading. Early in the revolution, he confided in me, he was a *hezbollahia* zealot who served as the eyes, ears, hands, and feet of the revolution, but not its head. He then turned to the subject of business, an area in which he seems to have succeeded. He told me that, at the time of the revolution, he was accepted to MIT and Puna University, but he decided to stay in Iran and serve the revolution. His praise of Khomeini was combined with a critical assessment of the extremist regimes of Mousavi ("a virtual communist regime") and Rafsanjani ("a permissive regime"). He was optimistic about the future; he felt that the government has decided to take a middle course out of necessity.

His analysis of the growth and decline of the Iranian economy during the revolutionary period was thoughtful and dispassionate. I was impressed enough with his wit and wisdom to tell him about some of the skeletons in my

own closet. In particular, I told him about my activist days as a student in the United States and of my experience with several fellow activists who subsequently emerged as Islamic revolutionary leaders. I offered my impressions of Bani-Sadr, Ghotbzadeh, and Yazdi—the “three musketeers” who accompanied Khomeini on his return from exile in 1979. Bani-Sadr became the first president of the young republic, while Ghotbzadeh and Yazdi served as Head of Radio-Television and Foreign Minister, respectively. All three, however, soon fell out of favor; as compromising liberals, they were removed from power. Bani-Sadr escaped into exile, Ghotbzadeh was executed, and Yazdi went into political retirement. My “revelations” could have prompted my new friend to forewarn the passport control officials of my arrival. Alternatively, the passport officials may have considered my U.S. residency as a sufficient cause for alarm. Whatever the cause, I was the only one among some fifty passengers to have my passport confiscated. I was asked to fill out a twenty-page questionnaire detailing my past, present, and future. Among its 100 questions, it asked my name, addresses, marital status, friends, employment history, salaries, memberships, travel, arms in possession, names and addresses of people I wish to target, and a detailed plan of my house. This was well beyond my patience. I called the passport official back and told him my thoughts in no uncertain terms. “What use is there for you in having a plan of my house in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I understand your anxiety about security, but where is your judgment? The previous regime also engaged in such harassments of ordinary citizens and look where they ended up.” The passport official was patient with my impatience. He remained calm, but when I told him that this kind of harassment might discourage Iranians abroad from visiting their homeland, he was nonchalant and retorted, “Good riddance!”

Regardless of who was responsible, the bombing incident in the Shrine was clearly an act of desperation. It brought to mind another incident in the struggle between the religious and secularist forces in Mashhad. Early in the revolution, the hanging judge Khalkhali made a profession out of summary executions and destruction of historic sites in any way related to the *ancien regime*. Following the jubilant destruction of Reza Shah’s mausoleum in Tehran, Khalkhali and his band of Revolutionary Guards set out to destroy Ferdowsi’s tomb in the ancient city of Tus, near Mashhad. Upon hearing of his plans, however, thousands of ordinary people from the surrounding towns and villages took whatever arms they could find (old swords, hammers, sickles, sticks, and stones) to stop Khalkhali. Confronted by such a popular “uprising,” the revolutionary regime instructed Khalkhali to withdraw. The depth of such nationalist feelings, prompting such a spontaneous defense of the tomb of a tenth-century poet, was not apparent to the Islamic revolutionaries in the early days.

These feelings have become better known to them since the patriotic war against Saddam Hussein and the continuing observance of pre-Islamic cultural festivals such as Charshanbeh Suri and Noruz, the Persian New Year dating back to Zoroastrian times. An effect of this recognition is a clear shift in the direction of Iranian foreign policy. Whereas in the early revolutionary years the regime’s foreign policy focused on the Arab world, particularly “the liberation

of Palestine," it has increasingly moved toward a preoccupation with Iran's more traditional geopolitical sphere of influence in Central Asia. This is where, in the ninth century, the modern Persian language and culture emerged as a civilization distinct from that of the Arabian culture. In subsequent centuries, the influence of that civilization spread from Central Asia into the emerging Saljuq, Mongol, Ottoman, and Safavid empires. In the sixteenth century, Persian became the *lingua franca* of imperial systems from New Delhi to Isfahan and Istanbul.

In our skeptical postmodern age, creation of legitimacy is one of the most demanding, and subtle jobs facing any government in the world. In the Islamic republic, that task has been relegated to numerous research centers, institutes, and universities. My visits, dialogues, and lectures at a few of these institutions gave me an opportunity to look into the agonizing process of legitimation facing a neotraditionalist regime struggling to survive in a post-modern world.

Tajikistan

Yet another benefit of my visit to Tehran was the opportunity to meet with the government and opposition delegations from Tajikistan who were attending the second round of a series of peace conferences. Earlier, in April 1994, the first round of the series had been held in Moscow. The second took place in Tehran from 18-28 June. It was attended by delegations from both sides of the Tajik Civil War, as well as U.N. mediators and observers from Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Pakistan, Russia, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Uzbekistan, which had sent observers to the Moscow conference, was conspicuously absent in Tehran.

Aside from attending a formal dinner given by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, in honor of the conference attendees, I also had lunch with some members of the government and opposition delegations. The government delegates were extraordinarily reticent on the question of conference discussions. Part of the problem was that the government had chosen to send a low-level delegation headed by Mr. S. Zukhurov, Minister of Labor and Employment. Although I became acquainted with a member of the government delegation who happened to be a brother of my friend Dr. Kamal Aboudalaev, I could not learn much from them. By contrast, the opposition members were forthcoming with their opinions. I had long interviews with Khodadeh Khaleqnazar, the former Foreign Minister, Shadman Yusef, leader of the Democratic Party, and Professor Musalmanian at Tajikistan University and member of the Democratic Party leadership. I also had an opportunity to meet again with Ali Mujtahedi Shabestari, the Iranian Ambassador to Tajikistan, who has been a leading architect of the Iranian policies in that country.

Shabestari, whom I met in 1992 during my visit to Dushanbe, was properly diplomatic about the peace conference. He had served in the Iranian Consulate in New York under the monarchical regime. Although he now wears a revolutionary Islamic beard and an unassuming attire without a tie, he has been tutored in the arts of diplomacy. The last few years of turmoil in Tajikistan must

have also taught him that Iran's options in Tajikistan are constrained by the presence of Russia. Early hopes for an "Islamic," or at least truly independent, "nationalist," regime in Tajikistan have faded with the Russian intervention. Contrary to his enthusiasm for the opposition two years ago, he was now very circumspect. He claimed Iranian neutrality in the current civil war. "Our interest is," he said, "to maintain peace and security in this region. We are committed to the independence of Tajikistan and would like to see it prosper. We have long-standing historical and cultural ties with the Tajik people, and we would like to see the country at peace again. We are serving only as observers in the conference, but we fervently hope that the two sides can come to a peaceful resolution of the civil war."

Khaleqnazar was far more outspoken. No more than forty-five years in age, he appeared thoroughly Russified (but spoke in a fluent and literate Persian acquired during his student years at Tehran University), charming, and likable. He was very appreciative of the Iranian mediation efforts but held little hope for the conference. "The Tajik government," he asserted, "has chosen to send a low-level delegation. The leaders of the opposition have consequently decided not to come. The Russians and their Tajik clients perhaps do not wish to have a peace agreement signed in Tehran. Maybe the next round of discussions scheduled for Islamabad might produce some results." "What are the most important issues before the conference?" I asked. "There are three basic issues," he replied, "including a ceasefire, amnesty for return of the refugees, and a lifting of the ban on political parties, movements, and the mass media. The conference has not been able to get past first base on the issue of a ceasefire, let alone the other two issues."

The U.N. Secretary-General's report on the peace conference subsequently confirmed all of this. "During the 10 days of intensive negotiations, the two parties were able to work out a concept for a ceasefire and the cessation of other hostile acts. They also agreed on the need to create a mechanism which monitors the implementation of the agreement on a ceasefire and the cessation of other hostile acts. The issue was discussed at length and, based on the views expressed, my Special Envoy submitted to the two sides a draft protocol on the monitoring mechanism. At the insistence of the opposition delegation, the two sides agreed on the temporary nature of the agreement on a ceasefire, although the delegation of the Government strongly advocated the idea of establishing a permanent ceasefire. However, the issue of when the agreement on a ceasefire should come into effect turned out to be the most difficult and controversial problem."

"This situation," the Secretary-General concluded, "has led me to reconsider the wisdom, at this stage, of continuing preparations for the third round of negotiations at Islamabad. I have, therefore, decided to suspend the activities of my Special Envoy in that regard until the parties take new and substantive steps that will give unequivocal proof of their sincerity and their commitment to pursue the negotiations in the context of the agenda agreed to in Moscow and in line with the course of action outlined in Tehran."

Shadman Yusef, the founding leader of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan,

provided me with a more thorough and impassioned account of the civil war. I tried to see him in 1992 when I was in Dushanbe. Our rendezvous at the Hotel October, however, had turned out to be a nonstarter. He assumed over the phone that I was a member of the Iranian embassy confirming his appointment with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Maleki. When Maleki and I arrived at the meeting place simultaneously, I realized the misunderstanding and excused myself. Clearly, Maleki wanted to see him alone and I was a third wheel. When I learned that he lives in exile in Tehran, I jumped at the opportunity and called him. He was extremely friendly and met me without any hesitation. He has clearly set a mission for himself to tell the story of the Tajik "freedom fighters." We met a couple of times, and at the second meeting he gave me a copy of his recently published book, *Tajikistan: Bahayi-Azadi* (Tajikistan: The Price of Freedom). Written in Persian, the book is perhaps the single most important source on the opposition's perspective on the civil war. It claims that fears of a "fundamentalist Islamic revolution" in Tajikistan, Russia, and the West have been fanned by a reactionary communist elite in order to justify its repression of independence and democracy in Tajikistan. He cites events during 1991 and 1992, when *agents provocateurs* were sent into the crowds to call for the immediate establishment of an Islamic republic, while reviling Russia and pulling down the statues of Lenin. He believes, however, that with the Russian intervention to support a narrowly based government, the opposition is going to be increasingly drawn into the radical camp.

Independent observers estimate that some 10,000 people have died so far in the Tajik Civil War, while another 10,000 are camped in Afghanistan. Roughly 10 percent of the population has fled the country. In the south, nearly one third of the country's industrial base has been destroyed, and perhaps half of what remains is located in one northern *oblast* (province) around Khojand. If the Tajik Civil War does not end soon, it could spill over into a regional war involving Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Like the other four Central Asian republics, in the Soviet era, Tajikistan was divided into a variety of *oblasts* that were each assigned special functions. Khojand was greatly industrialized, Dushanbe provided government services, Kulyab provided a source of manpower for the military, Badakhshan was the site of uranium mining, and Garm was left to its own backward and rural life. Divide and conquer had been the perennial rule of the Soviet game. It is no wonder that, with independence, localism has become an explosive issue particularly in Tajikistan. A sense of cultural pride in Tajik historical achievements combines with fears of domination from the rest of Turkic Central Asia to give rise to a collision between nationalism and localism.

Recent news indicates the Russians are assuming a more neutral posture in the civil war, being fearful of repeating the mistakes they made in Afghanistan. There are vast differences between the positions of the Russian military and Russian diplomats. While diplomats argue for disengagement, the military seems anxious to regain control of the lost empire. Russia is now maintaining that its responsibility is to defend the Tajik-Afghan border and not to interfere in internal political and military struggles. Some recent Tajik victories also

persuaded the government to resume peace negotiations with the opposition. On 17 September 1994, in Tehran, an agreement on a ceasefire was reached between the government and opposition forces. However, military engagements continued the very next day outside of Dushanbe. As a result of further agreement subsequently reached in Tehran, a precarious ceasefire was achieved during the fall of 1994.

Turkmenistan

Relations between Iran and Turkmenistan are so friendly that all I needed to do for a visa was to obtain a note from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, I also had to pay a visa fee of \$30 upon arrival at the Ashkabad airport for a three-day transit stay. It took about an hour and a half to fly from Tehran over a barren desert to Ashkabad. There were long delays going through the visa process, but Turkmenistan seems to be the most relaxed of the Central Asian republics regarding visas; it grants visas to anyone who arrives at its borders. The plane was filled with an economic delegation from the Iranian Ministry of Commerce, whose bearded and heavyset Deputy Minister came through the aisles to shake hands with everyone.

The social contrast between Iran and Turkmenistan is striking. A smiling picture of President Separmurad Niazoff greets the arriving passengers. It was refreshing for me once again to see smiles, men without beards, and women without veils. A Russian lady at the airport offered to exchange currency at a rate of 80 manats for one dollar, but Mr. Sobhani, a young man from the Iranian Embassy, advised me against it. He gave me a ride to the Intourist Hotel where I stayed for the next three days, and there I exchanged my money at a rate of 90 manats for one dollar.

Thanks to a canal dug by the Soviets, the City of Ashkabad is dry but green. The KaraKum Canal draws water from the Amu-Darya to irrigate the cotton fields and quench the thirst of cities along the way—Ashkabad, Mary (the old Marv), and Bairam Ali. Despite some grotesquely designed government buildings, Soviet city planning in Central Asia has its virtues, including broad boulevards, fountains, museums, and heroic statues. Walking down the broad and shaded sidewalks in Ashkabad was a pleasure. The museums are often well-built though neglected. I managed to visit three of them in my three days, focusing on the fine arts, flora and fauna, and history. At the Fine Arts Museum, three young Turkmen ladies protected me from the old, sourfaced Russian women who were suspiciously watching me all the time. One of the young ladies played the piano and sang beautifully. According to the guidebook, this particular museum was supposed to be full of Lenin and Stalin memorabilia. Fortunately, everything seemed to have been replaced with modern Turkmen paintings of variable merit. The Flora and Fauna Museum was less interesting, but gave me an idea of the type of animals unlucky enough to roam around here. They all looked somewhat starved.

Searching for the History Museum was like “looking” for Godot. People either had not heard of it or would give me wrong directions. The guidebook

also was vague. It simply said, look behind the statue of Lenin. This statue of Lenin is the funniest in the world; the birds constantly decorate his head, and the pedestal is clad in a ceramic version of a Turkmen rug. This meeting between a Soviet icon and Turkmen decorative arts has a most disingenuous effect. I passed by the statue several times looking in vain for the History Museum that was supposed to be behind it. I even asked directions of a group of friendly, mostly Russian, architectural students who were drawing park scenes as part of their assignments. They had never heard of a History Museum. So much for history. I asked them about their favorite Russian President of the Soviet period. They answered me whimsically, "Clinton and Reagan!" Finally, I spotted an inconspicuous building in the back of the park. This was the History Museum; it included some fascinating pre-Islamic, Ashkanid (Parthian) relics such as ivory wine holders with animal carvings. I was also intrigued by the Exhibition of Economic Achievements shown on the map in the guidebook. It was located on the outskirts of the city, but it had nothing to show for itself other than forlorn furniture, which included one of the largest Turkmen rugs I have seen anywhere. The entire basement was also filled with Iranian imports of fancy office furniture displaying the Islamic flag on every desk. There were no visitors in sight.

Visiting the bazaar was far more interesting. It is located at the center of the city, directly in front of the bus station, and so attracts thousands of vendors, many of them women in colorful Turkmen clothes, and old men wearing huge turbaned hats and long floating beards. I bought a piece of fresh Turkmen bread, a barbecued chicken leg, and a Fontana and had my lunch watching the scene. I then visited the Al-Huda Bookshop, one in a chain of Iranian government bookstores established throughout Central Asia. The holdings are primarily of a religious nature, mostly in Persian, some in Arabic, a few in English. I picked up Sa'adi's *Golistan* and *Bustan* plus an English and Arabic text comparing the political philosophies of Khomeini and Khamenei. The English translation was extremely poor and the prose could not be any less persuasive.

"Today, one may point out to the most prominent and most critically possibilities in all social and political domains especially in our own society as follows:

- a) U. S. seeking domination at the central position of arrogance and our confrontational role from the position of making efforts to protect our independence and the historical freedom of a people.
- b) The problem of the institutionalized and naked hostility of Israel in the domain of Zionism.
- c) Taking measures against deviations, separate actions, and negligences affecting the continuation of the Islamic Revolution and the proliferation of activism in the world.
- d) To overcome the American Islam which is a harmful alternative to the purely Mohammadan Islam.
- e) To drive to the sidelines the alien idea of modern capitalism (which is a mask on the face of concealed atheism) by confronting it and consequently to defend the oppressed and deprived people.

- f) To purge fine arts from the plague of pseudoartistic propaganda and to strengthen ideological and Islamic movements in line with the ideas of the Imam and his way.
- g) To expose the culture of wearing no *hejab* to retrieve the real personality of woman and her active role in social works and thought and finally to tackle the decisive problem of *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and the ceremonies of the disavowal from close nonbrothers and distant non-Muslims."

Television broadcasting in Turkmenistan did not seem to be any more exciting than it was in Iran. The long hours of programming dominated by President Niazoff and his "development" news. For an ex-Communist leader, however, he seemed less forbidding and more fatherly and benign. He even had a smile or two for the television audiences, but the manner of the meeting over which he presided was royal and dictatorial. His subordinates remained at a respectful distance ready to do his bidding. Some development news was followed by a monotonous, one-man *tar* (a popular string instrument) concert, a homage to local music. The rest of the television programs seemed to be dominated by Russian shows and movies.

To get two assessments of the situation in Turkmenistan, my next project was to visit the U.S. and Iranian embassies. In Ashkabad I met with Hussein Karimi of the Iranian Embassy and Douglas Archard of the U.S. Embassy. Karimi is a typical functionary of the Islamic regime—soft-spoken, skeptical, and moralistic. He considered the Turkmens beyond Islamic salvation; they have been corrupted by the Soviet system into crass materialism. He considers their economic prospects dubious; their natural gas resources are still underdeveloped, and before the gas can reach consumer markets, billions of dollars have to be invested in order to provide pipelines to China either through Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or other sister republics. On economic matters, he said that Soviet-style secrecy has continued and statistics are hard to come by. World Bank statistics also should be considered unreliable, because they are provided primarily by government authorities. Trade with Iran is expanding; the current delegation of Iranian government and business leaders is focusing on importing foodstuffs from Iran. Prospects for an Islamic movement are not great, because the people are irreligious. A large mosque, Al-Aqsa, is being built with Saudi money. Karimi added that one-man, one-party rule has encouraged corruption, and, moreover, there is no accountability in the government.

Archard was far more optimistic. A former Peace Corps man, he served in Pakistan, Turkey, and Sudan. He also served at the South Asian desk in Washington. Going beyond the call of duty, he agreed to see me after work while his wife waited for him to have dinner. Turkmenistan's greatest asset, he said, is its people. He affirmed my own observations about conditions in the region. Economically, Turkmenistan is neither a rich nor a poor country: the Soviet system has provided these people with basic health and education; the United States is providing food through Public Law 480; prospects for growth are good because of the abundance of natural gas; cotton is moving into downstream

operations; and some cotton land is being transformed for wheat and barley production. Politically, Turkmenistan also experience moderate conditions: Niazov is a benevolent dictator; there is no evidence of a strong Islamic movement; Iran asserts itself primarily through private trade, not political agitation; and corruption and mismanagement are no greater here than elsewhere in the Islamic world.

I spent my last day in Ashkabad sightseeing. Turkmenistan's moment of glory in history came under the Parthians (the Ashkanids) who overthrew the Greek Seleucid domination of two centuries and established their own empire from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. They presented the greatest challenge to the Roman Empire and effectively prevented it from expanding into Central Asia. Their capital, Nisa, lies some fifteen kilometers outside of Ashkabad. At the height of its power, Nisa was the capital of an empire stretching as far west as Iraq and Syria. Though the ruins today are not much to see, the site at the foot of the Kope Dogh Mountains, which divide Iran and Turkmenistan, is rather imposing. It is situated in a dramatic spot in a green valley at the foot of the mountains. Next to Nisa is the medieval city of Nadim, the New Nadim. Even less is left of the New Nadim than is left of Nisa, but both cities tell us that Turkmenistan was once the seat of power of an eastern empire.

In contrast to the dreary government stores in Ashkabad, the Sunday Bazaar held beyond the KaraKum Canal on the edge of the desert is lively, colorful, and bustling with trade. Camels, cattle, sheep, goats, poultry, carpets, rugs, spare parts, jewelry, fruits, vegetables, garments, scarves—everything under the sun—was for sale. The place was jammed with cars and every other conceivable vehicle. Nazar, my driver, who I kept calling Nazarmaev, took a side road to reach the bazaar, since the main road was controlled by the police. We had a magnificent time.

Here you can witness why the centralized Soviet economic system failed: it could not provide the enormous vitality and spontaneity that the pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace generates. No *Gosplan* could have accounted for, let alone understood, the myriad decisions routinely made by the sophisticated haggling men and women of the Bazaar. Despite the heavy hand of the Soviet system, the Bazaar here as well as in the other Central Asian states has survived to show us why at one time this region was the hub of the global marketplace known as the Silk Road.

Uzbekistan

Unfortunately, buying an air ticket to Tashkent was not something I could handle in the Bazaar. I had to go to a modern travel agency that charged me a \$20 handling fee. This included bribes that had to be paid to get a seat on the next available Uzbekistan Airlines flight.

The wait at the airport was long and tiresome, but we finally managed to leave on time. I met a middle-aged Iranian businessman by the name of Behrooz Mina, a former police officer under the Shah's regime. He now imports and exports foodstuffs. He offered some pessimistic views on the Iranian economy,

surprisingly from a more scholarly than business-oriented perspective. His relatives live in Canada, and he too was entertaining the possibility of emigration. We reached Tashkent in good time after two and a half hours. The process of getting a visa at the airport and a hotel room in town, however, was extremely tiresome. Three and a half hours later we were settled. A dour official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed us that we could not get a transit visa until we showed him a ticket for our next destination, and we could not get a ticket to our next destination because it was past midnight and no airline offices were open. We returned to the first building with our heavy luggage to meet again with the young and friendly visa officer at the airport. He handed us a notice of arrival, which he wrote on a small piece of paper torn from the corner of his newspaper. That constituted our transit visa! Our Afghani friend who speaks a little Russian led the way in negotiating the deal. It proved once again that bureaucratic problems can be solved with a human touch. He also negotiated for rooms at the chaotic registration desk of the Hotel Tashkent.

We began the next day watching the Tashkent television showing a Russian "cultural" program followed by an MTV-style music video and a series of American programs. There is a great admiration and envy of American culture everywhere in Central Asia that I have visited.

The decision to go on to Almaty and Bishkek had to be made as early as possible. There were no flights to Bishkek and only weekly flights to Almaty. We started by chasing tickets at the airport. Nina, the friendly Russian travel agent, tried but failed to get us tickets for Almaty. In both cases, I would have had to spend the three days of my transit visa for Tashkent chasing visas and tickets, all for an uncertain outcome. The decision had been made for me. Life in the East is slave to destiny. I decided to spend the time seeing the city and return to Tehran.

Behrooz and I paid a visit to the Iranian Embassy and met with the economic *chargé d'affaires*, Mr. Charmi, a Dickensian character. I had asked to meet with the ambassador, Mr. Hashemi, but Mr. Charmi showed up for the meeting. He was kind enough to sit for a conversation with us, uninformed enough to leave most of our questions unanswered, and suspicious enough to look into my papers to see if I was who I said. He seemed to be completely out of touch with his environment, though he promised to put Behrooz Mina in touch with some Uzbek counterparts the following Monday.

Lunch was served at a stand staffed by a few giggling Uzbek girls. To be on the safe side, we ate only bread and yogurt. We then came back to the hotel and strolled around for a while. The hotel is situated next to the Independence Square complex of concert halls, fountains, a canal, the tomb of the unknown soldier, and a vast garden. Tashkent was very attractively designed by the Soviets to impress Third World leaders who frequently visited it for official conferences during the Cold War. The city represented what the Soviet system could do for the Third World. In our excursion, we also ran into a very attractive old building built by the czars for their Foreign Ministry. It is now used for ceremonial purposes. The master of the building spoke fluent Persian. A graduate of the Oriental Institute, he will soon go to Tehran for an embassy post. He

was serious and full of nationalist pride.

That night, Professor Hamidjan Hamedî came to the hotel for a visit. I had been given his name by Professor Musalmanian and was told that he is Chairman of the Department of Persian Literature at the University. He brought some bread and berries from his garden to share with us. We drank tea, and ate *tut* (dried berries), bread, and grapes. The conversation focused on the Tajiks in Uzbekistan. He claimed that there are anywhere from one and a half to five million Tajiks concentrated in Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, Namangan, and Ferghane. Hamedî is from Namangan. He is a Ferdowsi specialist, has translated the *Shahnameh* into Uzbek Turkish, and claims that it has made an impact on Turkish epic poetry.

Professor Hamedî did not have any particular complaints about the way Tajiks are treated in Uzbekistan, but he had plenty to complain about his salary. He receives 400 *soms* per month while policemen are paid up to 1.5 million *soms*. Clearly, this shows the current scandalous scale of values in Uzbekistan. But in the course of the conversation it became clear that he owns a house on the outskirts of Tashkent, with a farm where he raises fruits, vegetables, cattle, sheep, and poultry. His wife, daughter, and son also work and thus they lead a communal, semirural family life. I gave him a souvenir pen and my copies of *Sa'adi's Gulistan* and *Bustan* as gifts. His appreciation of the books was profuse. We also talked about the possibility of inviting him to a conference on Ferdowsi.

That night a commotion in the hotel woke me up. The police were arresting prostitutes who were also doubling as floor attendants in the hotel. Rising inflation and low government salaries were clearly leading to moonlighting. Behrooz told me that the Islamic regime in Iran has found a creative solution to the problem; it controls prostitution by recruiting them into the female cadre of the secret police.

Behrooz Mina was a great travel companion to have, but it was now time for us to say goodbye. He was going on to Almaty next week to seek his fortune in trade, and I was heading back to Tehran.

Back to Iran

On the way back to Ashkabad, I got to know a couple of young American Peace Corps volunteers, Melony and Margot. These two women represent all that is admirable about Peace Corps volunteers: youth, idealism, and a sense of service and adventure. They had been working in a small Turkmen town teaching English while learning Russian and Turkmen. However, they were clearly homesick and anxious to talk. They had just returned from a holiday in India, which they had immensely enjoyed. India contrasted well with the monotony of life in Turkmenistan, where there is nothing but "camels, deserts, and no fun."

I also met two young men from Pakistan and Ferganeh. Afzal, a Pakistani merchant, is bearded and devout. He believes that women should not be prime ministers. According to him, although Benazir Bhutto is capable and clever, she has no business being in politics, especially as her husband is running a business

mafia in Pakistan. He concluded that Pakistan's situation is not good politically but promising economically. Both men agreed, however, that the future holds promise for Uzbekistan. Tulik, the Tajik-Uzbek young man, speaks a smattering of Persian and a good bit of colloquial English that he had learned on the job. He was twenty-three years old and wanted to make his fortune in joint ventures. There seemed to be a mutual dislike between the devout and altogether serious Pakistani boss and his young *bon vivant* interpreter.

I decided to forego another day in Ashkabad and instead seek my fortune in Mashhad. What a fortune! After spending over seven hours in both airports, my passport was confiscated in Mashhad by the SAVAMAK (secret police) authorities. On the way to Mashhad, I met a young Afghan woman who is studying medicine in Dushanbe. She represented the mass movements of population that have taken place in this part of the world during the past few years. Due to the civil war in Afghanistan, some five million Afghans have had to take refuge in Iran, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. Now Tajikistan experiences such an emigration. The regional impact of these large population movements is still unfolding.

Following the passport confiscation incident, it was a relief to reach the privately owned Hotel Asia, by far the best hotel in which I have stayed in Central Asia, built and run by a private firm. No wonder that I am now a confirmed capitalist! My starvation in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had prepared me to appreciate especially the *zereshk polo* at the Hotel Asia. In the evening, I went to a cinema across from the hotel and saw an interesting film (made in 1371/1992) named "Satanic Connection," based on the foreign intrigues in Tehran during World War II. A Russian actress, Catherine, is murdered by British agents because Mr. Faroughi, her former husband, was the ring leader of the Nazi sympathizers in Tehran. The owner of the hotel turns out to be a British agent involved in the double murder of the husband and wife. In the meantime, the director of the theater where Catherine works gets romantically involved with Mr. Faroughi's daughter, who gives the Nazi plans to him to be sent to Russia. The story was somewhat overstretched, and the acting was at times strained. Because of the constraints of Islamic attire for women, the costumes also were out of character for the period. But the film was entertaining enough to keep me in the theater for its duration. It also told me something about the current reconstructions of Iranian history. The country was portrayed as a den of spies in prerevolutionary days.

I managed to discover the phone number of my cousin, Jalil, who used to be the publisher of *Khorisan*, the major daily newspaper outside of Tehran before it was confiscated by the revolutionary authorities. He came to pick me up at the hotel and was the second person to tell me that he had heard my interview regarding Central Asia on the Voice of America. BBC, VOA, and Radio Israel seem to be popular in Iran.

The thought of my impending rendezvous with the SAVAMAK and the passport office must have been on my mind that night because my dreams reflected my fears. I dreamed that I was being tried for all of my writings, including ones that might have hinted at critical sentiments. I was rather embarrassed but defended myself by saying that a writer has the right to

experiment with ideas, including some in which he does not fully believe. But the thought police were merciless.

I spent the next day with a dear friend. He has aged. His face was worn and deeply wrinkled due to his suffering during the first few years of the revolution. In the first year, he had continued managing a newspaper, but with the *mulla's* coup in November 1979 when the Hostage Crisis began, he was attacked and shot at some thirty times. Fortunately, the Revolutionary Guards were still amateur marksmen and only one of the shots reached his head. He escaped to Tehran, where he was pursued, arrested, and incarcerated in Evin Prison—a place reserved for political prisoners subject to the death penalty. Following a death sentence, he was finally rescued by a cleric and former classmate whom he had saved from the Shah's prisons. He decided to come back to Mashhad to resume his normal life, but all of his family property had been confiscated. Some of that property subsequently has been restored.

In the evening, we visited the Shrine. It is glorious. Around it, however, they have built an underpass and a wall that violates its beauty and majesty. In its preoccupation with "progress," this regime is in some ways more "westoxicated" than the previous one.

The most interesting part of the day consisted of sporadic conversations with my old friend. Similar to the Iranian conspiratorial views, his view is that the regime is a creature of the British. He believes that Khomeini made significant concessions in granting uranium and oil mining rights in order to be allowed to come back to Tehran. He is also pessimistic about the regime's longevity. He believes that their economic mismanagement will soon bring them down. "Iran is sitting on a time bomb," he said. Like many others, he views the June bombing incident in the Shrine as a plot engineered by the regime. He had many interesting stories about the way the former regime worked, claiming that there are two SAVAMAKs under the Islamic regime as there were two SAVAKs under the Shah's regime. The higher SAVAMAK is directly connected with the Supreme Jurist.

Listening to radio and television in Mashhad, I was struck by the idea of ideology as the politics of narrative. A culture, however, is a field of narrative from which ideology picks and chooses. Iranian culture, for instance, contains a vast field of many narratives, most notably the Pre-Islamic and Islamic. Other subnarrative fields can also be identified as the narratives of Zoroastrian and Islamic monarchies, as well as Sunni and Shi'a Islam. The national field of narratives also converges with world narratives. Ideological configurations thus can be drawn from vast cultural resources. The ones on which the current regime has chosen to focus are the stories of the Prophet, his daughter Fatemeh, the twelve Imams from her marriage to Ali, and the modern Shi'a revolutionary movements—a rich harvest. These symbolic stories focus on the human struggle for justice. By contrast, the monarchical narratives focused on the mighty and powerful, i.e., the imperial project. There are nonetheless hints of the imperial project in the Shi'a narrative as well—witness the pamphlet on the political philosophies of Khomeini and Khamenei.

The ideological debates today in Iran seem to focus on four competing

positions and camps which include (1) the government party that follows the doctrine of *velayat-i-faghih*, emphasizing the unity of the mosque and the state and the leadership responsibilities of the organized Shi'a clerics, (2) the revisionist Islamists such as Abdol-Karim Soroush and Ali Akbar Saidi Sirjani (who died in jail in December 1994) who have implicitly or explicitly criticized the regime for corrupting religion with politics, (3) the secular nationalists, led by Changuiz Pahlavan, who maintain there is a necessity for the separation of the mosque and state and for a shift of attention in foreign policy toward Iran's historical and geocultural zones of influence, away from the Arab world toward Central Asia, and 4) the postmodernists such as Dariush Shayegan who view neotraditionalist, religious movements as a desperate and schizophrenic cultural response to the challenges of modernity.

Similarly, cultural resistance in Iran to the dominant ideology historically seems to have taken four basic forms focused on the four archetypal Iranian heroes—the Shah, Imam, Rind (the Jester), and Javanmard (the Chivalrous). The ways of Rumi (retreat within), Sa'adi (retreat without), Ferdowsi (epic struggle), and Hafez (a jestful resistance) represent the complex varieties of cultural resistance in classical Persian literature.

My last few days in Tehran had a few side benefits. I managed to enter into a few informal agreements for the translation of my two most recent books, *Technologies of Power* and *Restructuring for World Peace*, as well as the collection and publication of my essays in Persian. I was also called back to meet for a second time with a team of radio and television executives who are working on a project named *simayematlub*, The Ideal Image. The project concerns the future of broadcasting in the face of today's cultural challenges. We talked about the conditions for good radio-television programming. I took up the issue of the cultural clashes between Pre-Islamic, Islamic, and modernist world views and the need for synthesis and reconciliation. I also charged that the regime has made three major mistakes with respect to the rights of women, hostage taking, and Salman Rushdie. The Director defended the regime by suggesting that I was intellectualizing the problems too much.

That evening, my former students came to say farewell. One of them parodied all of the Iranian political leaders with such comical effect that the loud laughter was worrisome. I suggested that the best remedy against MTV's cultural invasion and, incidentally, the regime's crisis of legitimacy would be to provide my student with his own show on television! I knew, alas, that my suggestion would not be taken up soon. However, I left Tehran with a warm feeling that the traditional Persian humor has survived the trials of history.