A NEW DAY IN IRAN

The regime may inflame Washington, but young Iranians say they admire, of all places, America

BY AFSHIN MOLAVI

THE POLICE OFFICER stepped into the traffic, blocking our car. Tapping the hood twice, he waved us to the side of the road. My driver, Amir, who had been grinning broadly to the Persian pop his new speaker system thumped out, turned grim. "I don't have a downtown permit," he said, referring to the official sticker allowing cars in central Tehran at rush hour. "It could be a heavy fine."

We stepped out of the car and approached the officer. He was young, not more than 25, with a peach fuzz mustache. "I'm a journalist from America," I said in Persian. "Please write the ticket in my name. It's my fault."

"You have come from America?" the officer asked. "Do you know Car . . . uh . . . Carson City?"

Carson City? In Nevada?

He crinkled his eyebrows. The word "Nevada" seemed unfamiliar to him. "Near Los Angeles," he said.

It's a common reference point. The city hosts the largest Iranian diaspora in the world, and homes across Iran tune in to Persian-language broadcasts from "Tehrangeles" despite regular government efforts to jam the satellite signals. The policeman said his cousin lives in Carson City. Then, after inspecting my press pass, he handed it back to me and ripped up the traffic ticket. "Welcome to Iran," he beamed. "We *love* America."

Back in the car, Amir popped in a new tape, by the American rapper Eminem, and we continued on our way to the former U.S. Embassy. It was there, of course, 25 years ago last November, that radical Iranian students took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days, sparking one of the gravest diplomatic crises in U.S. history. The former embassy compound—now a "university" for Iran's most elite military unit, the Revolutionary Guards—was an important stop on my itinerary. I'd gone to Iran to peel back some of the layers of its shifting, sometimes contradictory relations with the United States. America has played an outsized role in Iran over the past century, and is locking horns with Tehran once again over the country's nuclear program.

Perhaps the most striking thing about anti-Americanism in Iran today is how little of it actually exists. After the September 11 attacks, a large, spontaneous candlelight vigil took place in Tehran, where the thousands gathered shouted "Down with terrorists." Nearly three-fourths of the Iranians polled in a 2002 survey said they would like their government to restore dialogue with the United States. (The pollsters—one a 1970s firebrand and participant in the hostage-taking who now advocates reform—were arrested and convicted in January 2003 of "making propaganda against the Islamic regime," and they remain imprisoned.) Though hard-line officials urge "Death to America" during Friday prayers, most Iranians seem to ignore the propaganda. "The paradox of Iran is that it just might be the most pro-American—or, perhaps, least anti-American—populace in the Muslim world," says Karim Sadjadpour, an analyst in Tehran for the International Crisis Group, an advocacy organization for conflict resolution based in Brussels.

He is hardly alone. Traveling across Iran over the past five years, I've met many Iranians who said they welcomed the ouster of the American-backed Shah 26 years ago but who were now frustrated by the revolutionary regime's failure to make good on promised political freedoms and economic prosperity. More recently, I've seen Iranians who supported a newer reform movement grow disillusioned after its defeat by hard-liners. Government mismanagement, chronic inflation and unemployment have also contributed to mistrust of the regime and, with it, its anti-Americanism. "I struggle to make a living," a Tehran engineer told me. "The government stifles us, and they want us to believe it is America's fault. I'm not a fool."

Amir, who is 30, feels the same way. "In my school, the teachers gathered us in the playground and told us to chant 'Death to America.' It was a chore. Naturally, it became boring. Our government has failed to deliver what we want: a

normal life, with good jobs and basic freedoms. So I stopped listening to them. America is not the problem. *They* are."

It's increasingly apparent that Iran's young are tuning out a preachy government for an alternative world of personal Web logs (Persian is the third most commonly used language on the Internet, after English and Chinese), private parties, movies, study, and dreams of emigrating to the West. These disenchanted "children of the revolution" make up the bulk of Iran's population, 70 percent of which is under 30. Too young to remember the anti-American sentiment of the '70s, they share little of their parents' ideology. While young Iranians of an earlier generation once revered Che Guevara and romanticized guerrilla movements, students on today's college campuses tend to shun politics and embrace practical goals such as getting a job or admission into a foreign graduate school. Some 150,000 Iranian professionals leave the country each year—one of the highest rates of brain drain in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Iranian intellectuals are quietly rediscovering American authors and embracing values familiar to any American civics student—separation of church and state, an independent judiciary and a strong presidency.

But intellectuals are not running the show, and the government continues to clash with the United States. In a January interview, Vice President Dick Cheney said Iran was "right at the top of the list" of potential trouble spots. The most recent crisis is Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. At issue is whether Iran has the right to enrich uranium—important for a civilian nuclear energy program, but also crucial to creating an atomic bomb.

Recent news reports suggest the Bush administration has not ruled out military action, including an airstrike on the nuclear facility by Israeli or American forces. It wouldn't be the first in the region—in 1981, Israeli jets bombed a nuclear reactor at Osirak in Iraq, prompting condemnation from the U.N. and the United States. Iranian president Mohammad Khatami described the idea of an American strike in Iran as "madness," noting that Iran had "plans" to defend itself. A strike would likely provoke Iran's government to retaliate, possibly against Americans in nearby Iraq or Afghanistan, setting off a cycle of violence with uncertain consequences. One thing's for sure: Iran's government would use an attack as an excuse to crack down once again, perhaps even declaring martial law.

AFTER A FEW DAYS IN TEHRAN, I headed for Tabriz, known for its cool mountain air, succulent stews and reformist politics. It was a homecoming for me: I was born in Tabriz in 1970, when thousands of American businessmen, teachers, Peace Corps volunteers and military contractors called Iran home. I left with my parents for the United States when I was almost 2 years old. It wasn't until the late 1990s that I got to know the place again—first while reporting for Reuters and the *Washington Post*, then while researching a book on contemporary Iran. I was the only "American" that many Iranians had ever met. "Why do the Americans hate us?" they often asked me. After my book was published in 2002, I received dozens of letters from Americans who'd worked in Iran before the 1979 revolution and who remembered the country and its people with deep fondness. Clearly, there remained a lot of goodwill as well as misunderstanding between Iranians and Americans.

Situated on the northern route from Tehran to Europe, Tabriz has long been an incubator for new ideas. In the late 19th century, intellectuals, merchants and reformist clergy in both Tehran and Tabriz had begun openly criticizing Iran's corrupt Qajar monarchs, who mismanaged the state's resources and gave large concessions to foreign powers. Iran was a vital piece in the geopolitical struggle between Russia and Britain to gain influence in Asia, and the two powers carved the country into spheres of influence in a 1907 agreement. At the time, Iranian reformers, frustrated by royal privilege and foreign interference, advocated a written constitution and a representative Parliament, and they sparked Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11.

The affection that many liberal Iranians have for America has roots in Tabriz, where a Nebraskan missionary named Howard Baskerville was martyred. Baskerville was a teacher in the American School, one of many such institutions created by the American missionaries who'd worked in the city since the mid-19th century. He arrived in 1908, fresh out of Princeton and, swept up in the revolutionary mood, fought a royalist blockade that was starving the city. On April 19, 1909, he led a contingent of 150 nationalist fighters into battle against the royalist forces. A single bullet tore through his heart, killing him instantly nine days after his 24th birthday.

Many Iranian nationalists still revere Baskerville as an exemplar of an America that they saw as a welcome ally and a useful "third force" that might break the power of London and Moscow in Tehran. Yet I found few signs of America's historic presence in Tabriz. One day, I tried to pay a visit to Baskerville's tomb, which is at a local church. Blocking my way was a beefy woman with blue eyes and a red head scarf. She told me I needed a permit. Why? "Don't ask me, ask the government," she said, and closed the door.

I WENT TO AHMAD ABAD, a farming town 60 miles west of Tehran, to meet the grandson of Mohammad Mossadegh, whose legacy still towers over U.S.-Iran relations nearly 40 years after his death.

Mossadegh, a Swiss-educated descendant of the Qajar dynasty, was elected prime minister in 1951 on a nationalist platform, and he soon became a hero for defying the British, whose influence in Iran had aroused resentment and anger for more than half a century. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which monopolized Iran's oil production, treated Iranians with imperial disdain, regularly paying more in taxes to the British government than they did in royalties to Iran. Mossadegh, after fruitless attempts to renegotiate the terms of the oil concession, stood up in Parliament in 1951 and de-

cared that he was nationalizing Iran's oil industry. Overnight he emerged as a paragon of resistance to imperialism. *Time* magazine celebrated him as 1951's "Man of the Year," describing him as a "strange old wizard" who "gabbled a defiant challenge that sprang out of a hatred and envy almost incomprehensible to the west."

Mossadegh's move so frightened the United States and Britain that Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt and FDR's distant cousin, turned up in Tehran in 1953 on a secret CIA mission to overthrow the Mossadegh government. Together with royalist generals, Iranian merchants on London's payroll and mobs for hire, Roosevelt organized a coup that managed to overwhelm Mossadegh's supporters in the army and among the people in a street battle that ebbed and flowed for several days. Mohammad Reza Shah, only the second shah in the Pahlavi dynasty, had fled to Rome when the fighting began. When it stopped, he returned to Tehran and reclaimed his power from Parliament. The coup, which Iranians later learned had been engineered by the United States, turned many Iranians against America. It was no longer viewed as a bulwark against British and Russian encroachment but the newest foreign meddler. Mossadegh was tried for treason in a military court, and in 1953 was sentenced to three years in jail. He remained under house arrest in Ahmad Abad, quietly tending his garden, until his death in 1967.

In the 1960s, the Shah began an aggressive, U.S.-backed modernization effort, from antimalaria programs to creating the SAVAK, the country's feared internal security service. As Britain pulled out of the region in the 1960s, Iran became the guardian of the Persian Gulf. Iran-U.S. relations were never better. Yet while Iran's economy boomed, democracy withered. The Shah stifled all political opposition, dismissing or repressing opponents as enemies of the state. The 1979 revolution, led by religious fundamentalists, took him by surprise. Today, Iranians look back on the Shah's era with a mingling of nostalgia, regret and anger. "He certainly ran the economy better than these mullahs," one Tehran resident told me. "But he was too arrogant and too unwilling to share political power."

Mossadegh, in contrast, was more of a democrat at heart. Even though his reforms were modest, he is respected today for his nationalism and tough stance against foreign interlopers. Today, his admirers regularly make the trek (some call it a pilgrimage) to his tomb. I went there early one Friday morning with Ali Mossadegh, the prime minister's great-grandson. As we toured the worn, creaking house, I asked Ali, who is in his late 20s, what he considered his great-grandfather's legacy. "He showed Iranians that they, too, deserve independence and democracy and prosperity," he said. He then led me to an adjoining annex where Mossadegh's tombstone rests amid a mound of Persian carpets. The walls were covered with photographs of the prime minister: making fiery speeches in Parliament; defending himself in a military court after the coup; gardening in Ahmad Abad. Ali pointed to an inscription taken from one of Mossadegh's speeches: "If, in our home, we will not have freedom and foreigners will dominate us, then down with this existence."

THE HIGH WALL surrounding the former U.S. Embassy, which occupies two Tehran blocks, bears numerous slogans. "On that day when the U.S. of A will praise us, we should mourn." "Down with USA." The seizing of the hostages here in 1979 was only the beginning of a crisis that shook American politics to its core.

After a six-month standoff, President Jimmy Carter authorized a rescue mission that ended disastrously after a helicopter collided with a transport plane in the Dasht-e-Kavir desert in north-central Iran, killing eight Americans. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who had opposed the operation, resigned. Carter, shaken by the failure, was defeated in the 1980 election by Ronald Reagan. The hostages were freed on the day of Reagan's inauguration. Still, Iran was regarded by the United States and others as an outlaw state.

Adjacent to the compound, a bookstore sells religious literature, anti-American screeds and bound copies of American diplomatic files painstakingly rebuilt from shredded documents. The place is usually empty of customers. When I bought a series of books entitled *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den*, the chador-clad woman behind the desk looked surprised. The books were covered with a thin film of dust, which she wiped away with a wet napkin.

Mohsen Mirdamadi, who was a student in Tehran in the 1970s, was one of the hostage-takers. "When I entered university in 1973, there was a lot of political tension," he told me. "Most students, like me, were anti-Shah and, as a result, we were anti-American, because the U.S. was supporting the Shah's dictatorship." I asked him if he regretted his actions. "Clearly, our actions might have hurt us economically because it led to a disruption of relations, but I don't regret it," he said. "I think it was necessary for that time. After all, America had overthrown one Iranian government. Why wouldn't they try again?"

Bruce Laingen, who was the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy when he was taken as a hostage, said he had no orders to work to destabilize the new government, contrary to what the revolutionaries alleged. "Quite the contrary," the now-retired diplomat told me. "My mandate was to make clear that we had accepted the revolution and were ready to move on." One hostage-taker, he remembers, told him angrily: "You complain about being a hostage, but your government took an entire country hostage in 1953."

The passage of time has cooled Mirdamadi's zeal, and today he is an informal adviser to Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, who inspired Iranians in 1997 with his calls

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for greater openness. Elected by landslides in both 1997 and 2001 despite clerics' efforts to influence the outcome, Khatami has lost much of his popularity as religious conservatives have blocked his reforms. In any event, Khatami's power is limited. Real authority is wielded by a group of six clerics and six Islamic jurists called the Guardian Council, which oversaw the selection of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the country's supreme spiritual leader in 1989. The council has the power to block the passage of laws as well as prevent candidates from running for the presidency or the Parliament. Mirdamadi, like Khatami, says Iran deserves a government that combines democratic and Islamic principles. "We need real democracy," he told me, "not authoritarian dictates from above." He advocates the resumption of dialogue with the United States, though specifics are unclear. His reformist views won him a parliamentary seat five years ago, but in the 2004 elections he was among the 2,500 candidates the Guardian Council barred.

A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION is scheduled for June, and social critics in Iran as well as international analysts say a free and fair contest is unlikely. With many Iranians expected to stay away from the polls in protest, a conservative victory is almost guaranteed. But what flavor of conservative? A religious hard-liner close to current supreme leader Khamenei? Or someone advocating a "China-style" approach, with limited cultural, social and economic liberalization coupled with continued political repression? No matter what, neither is likely to share power with secular democrats or even Islamist reformers like Mirdamadi. And the clerics' grasp on power is firm: Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the U.S. State Department have all sharply criticized Iranian officials for their use of torture and arbitrary imprisonment.

There's ample evidence that many ordinary Iranians are fed up with the involvement of Muslim clerics in government. "During the Constitutional Revolution, we talked about the separation of religion and state, without really knowing what that means," historian Kaveh Bayat told me in his book-filled Tehran study. "Our understanding today is much deeper. Now we know that it is neither in our interests nor the clergy's interest to rule the state." Or, as a physician in Tehran put it to me: "The mullahs, by failing, did what Ataturk could not even do in Turkey: secularize the populace thoroughly. Nobody wants to experiment with religion and politics anymore."

Ramin Jahanbegloo, one of Iran's leading secular intellectuals, agrees. "I am constantly being invited by university students to speak at their events," he told me over mounds of saffron-flecked rice and turmeric-soaked chicken at a Tehran cafeteria. "Just a few years ago they invited predominantly religious reformers. Now, they want secular democrats."

In Qom, Iran's holy city and home of the largest collection of religious seminaries in Iran, I spoke with a shopkeeper who sold religious trinkets and prayer stones just outside the stunning blue-tiled mosque of Hazrat-e-Masoumeh. He was a religious man, he said, and that's precisely why he felt religion should stay out of politics. "Politics is dirty," he said. "It only corrupts people."

I browsed several seminary bookstores in Qom, where I spotted titles ranging from Islamic jurisprudence to Khomeini's legacy. A bookstore owner told me that the ideas of reformist clergy are much more popular than the pronouncements of conservative mullahs. And translated American self-help books by the likes of motivational guru Anthony Robbins outsell political tracts. But the owner keeps the hottest commodities discreetly in a back corner. There I saw technical texts on sex and female anatomy. He just smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders.

IRAN TODAY is at a turning point. Either the Islamic revolution must mellow and embrace political change, or face a reckoning down the road when hard-line clerics come into conflict with the secular, democratic ideals of the younger generation. But though the influence of religion in politics is under assault in Iran, national pride remains a potent force. In a recent poll of dozens of countries published in *Foreign Policy* magazine, 92 percent of Iranians claimed to be "very proud" of their nationality (compared with 72 percent of Americans).

To get a glimpse of raw Iranian patriotism, a good place to go is a soccer stadium. Back in Tehran, I went to a Germany-Iran exhibition game at the Azadi stadium with my friend Hossein, a veteran of Iran's brutal 1980-88 war with Iraq, and his sons and brother. The atmosphere gave me a new appreciation for Iran's reality: a fierce tension between a populace ready for change and a regime so shackled by ideological zeal and anti-American sentiment it can't compromise.

Hossein, like many Iranians who served in the war, resents America for supporting Iraq in the conflict: Washington provided Saddam Hussein's regime with satellite images of Iranian troop movements and cities, looked the other way as Iraq used chemical weapons on Iranian soldiers and, in 1983, sent then-businessman Donald Rumsfeld as a presidential envoy to Iraq, where he greeted Saddam Hussein with a handshake. But Hossein, who served as a frontline soldier, said he's willing to forgive and forget "as long as America does not attack Iran."

In the traffic jam leading to the stadium, young men leaned out of car windows and chanted "Iran! Iran! Iran!" Once inside, several doors to the arena were blocked. Crowds grew antsy, and a few hurled insults at police patrols. When a group of bearded young men—members of the Basij volunteer militia, linked to conservative religious figures—sauntered to the front of the line and passed through the gate, the crowd roared its disapproval. (I saw this frustration again later, when a parking attendant outside the stadium demanded a fee. "You are killing us with your fees!" Hossein's brother shouted at the man. "Don't the mullahs have enough money?")

Finally, the gates flew open and we stampeded into the stadium, clutching Hossein's young sons by the hands. At halftime, the chairman of the German football federation presented a check to the mayor of Bam, a city in southeast-

ern Iran devastated by an earthquake that killed 30,000 people in 2003. "That will help the mayor pay for his new Benz," one man near me joked.

Throughout the game, which Germany won, 2-0, large loudspeakers blasted government-approved techno music. The mostly young men filling the 100,000 seats swayed to the beat. A small group near us banged on drums. The music stopped, and an announcer recited from the Koran, but most people continued chatting with one another, appearing to ignore the verses. When the music came back on, the crowd cheered.