Yet Another Iran Trip Report
– Mohsen Banan's

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1 About This Trip Report

This summarizes my experiences and observations on a recent trip to Iran. I – Mohsen BANAN ¡http://mohsen.banan.1.byname.net/ContactMe¿ – spent June 26, 1999 through July 14, 1999 in Tehran.

After 20 years, I went back to Iran for 20 days and that coincided with the largest uprising and unrest in the past 20 years.

Although the student uprising was clearly the most significant event in the period while I was in Tehran, very little of this report relates to that event. I was in no particular special position to understand those complex events better than anybody else inside or outside of Iran.

For the most part, in this report I do not focus on any particular event. Instead, I try to capture general senses and trends that I noticed.

As this is a report by an Iranian-American, you may find a certain special perspective in my writing. I was 18 when I came to Seattle in 1978. I have lived in Seattle for nearly 21 years. Prior to this trip, last time that I was back in Iran was in early 1980. I speak Farsi as a native without an accent but am more comfortable in writing in English. I am not a politician, not a sociologist, not an economist, not a philosopher, ... I am a simple engineer who occasionally enjoys analyzing large systems that I know I do not fully understand.

2 My Reasons For Writing This Trip Report

My primary reason for writing this report is to encourage others like me to do the same: to go back to Iran for a short visit, to experience it for themselves, to grow from that experience and possibly consider ways of contributing.

President Khatami's administration's efforts in encouraging Iranians living outside of Iran to come back and visit the country are very genuine and very real. My experience was that skepticism and superstition about unreasonable treatment at the airport and elsewhere is no longer justifiable. For me, this short trip to Iran was nearly as convenient as a trip to any European country. Generally speaking, my initial anxiety and fears were baseless.

Further, there is a great deal that the likes of us can contribute to the progress of Iran in economic, social, cultural and political dimensions.

Another important reason for my writing this report is to persuade my American friends that the current American foreign policy towards Iran is wrong. A lot of good for both sides can come from changing that policy.

Beyond encouraging others, I also want to create a point of record for my observations, statements and predictions. I also want feedback and corrections about my observations.

3 Main Purpose Of The Trip

My mother has been living with us in Seattle for a few years. Much of my mother's belongings were still in Iran. Since she is unable to travel by herself, I decided to go back with her and arrange for transfer of her belongings to Seattle. Much of my time in Tehran was spent packing and shipping my mother's personal effects. Visiting family and sightseeing in Tehran were my spare time activities.

4 Preparations For The Trip

My interactions with the Iran interest section in Washington D.C. were very efficient, prompt and reasonable. All the necessary forms are available through the www.daftar.org web site. The fees charged are reasonable and similar to other such consular services.

A few years ago, I could not have made such positive statements. The Khatami administration has made significant progress in making it easy and reasonable for us expatriates to go back for a visit.

5 Departure From Seattle-Tacoma (SeaTac) Airport

My final destination, Tehran, automatically triggered a search of all my bags. The search was explicitly targeted to passengers whose final destination was THR. The search was not conducted or initiated by the airline – British Airways in this case. The search appeared to be execution of the airport's policy – probably a federal directive. It was not clear to me that the purpose of the search was security or export related, or both.

The search was inconvenient and pointless to me: yet another case of misguided Iran-phobia.

6 Arrival At Mehrabad

Upon landing in Tehran, I sensed a fair amount of excitement in myself and more generally in the entire plane. However, everybody was super quiet.

I started clapping my hands and that obviously triggered other's excitement. In no time, most of the other passengers were clapping. Strong emotions over took me.

I was in Tehran.

While waiting in line for traditional airport passport control routine I tried to further analyze the make up of BA-103 flight. It was the only arriving flight at around 7:15 am.

The plane's passengers were mostly Iranians. Roughly half women. Lots of kids. Quite a few grandparents. One Iranian/German family with 3 young kids. A few German businessmen. A couple of Korean business people. A few other Asian businessmen. I saw no sign of American business people.

The lack of Americans was no surprise. Europeans and Asian businessmen are doing business with Iran and Americans are not. This is a pitiful lose-lose arrangement for which there is no good reason – other than the mis-guided agenda of the ghost at the table.

Passport control went extremely smoothly and was really quick. The uniformed officer in the booth just entered what appeared to be our name and passport number and cleared us for entry.

6.1 The Political Interview

Then, at the final immigration exit a non-uniformed well dressed man was, again, looking at the passports. He asked me: "How long have you been out of the country?" I replied: "About 20 years." He then said (in Farsi): "Is it okay if we speak with you for 20 minutes after those 20 years? Can you wait on the side for a few moments, please?" I replied: "We will. That is okay."

The tone of his voice and the choice of his words was such that I did not get any negative vibes from him. I wasn't really worried and didn't think he looked threatening, but I was slightly nervous and also somewhat curious.

My mother and I waited for about 10 minutes. He then led us into a room and left the door open. He sat behind a desk and asked me to sit on the chair opposite him. He looked at my passport and asked why I had not been back to Iran in the past 20 years. I replied that in the early years I was busy with school and that after dropping out of the PhD program I started working right away. Then I got married and had a child, after which I started my business and got real busy. Then we had more kids .... In short my past 20 years have been very full. Also, almost all of my family has already immigrated to the U.S. Up untill now I did not have the time and a good reason to come back for a visit.

He said that my explanation did not make good sense to him. He then added that since I have children, he would use the example of how I would feel if my kids were not to visit me for long periods of time and that the relationship of citizens and the country is similar to that of children and parents.

I replied by saying that one of the first lessons that I teach my children is that the past and history is important to the extent that we can learn from them. However, present and the future are more important than the past. I am in Tehran today. I want to help Iran and Iranians in building a better future. That is what matters most.

He then said that the purpose of this conversation is to let president Khatami's government better understand the concerns of the Iranians living in foreign countries and to encourage them to visit Iran. I said that I am with president Khatami on this and many other issues. I said: "We are on the same side. It is time that we work together towards rebuilding Iran."

In the mean time, he was taking notes. He then asked for my address in Iran. My mother gave him the address.

In the end, I felt comfortable enough that I gave him my U.S. business card.

He then gave us back our passports and wished us a good stay in Iran.

I did not feel any negative vibes from that entire interaction. Since my exit from Iran was uneventful, I am assuming that the interview was truly with good intentions. However, I suspect that now there may well be a small file with my name on it in the Information Ministry. I would not be surprised if this report gets added to that file.

7 Entering Tehran

Well, the first thing that one notices is that more than 90 percent of the cars in the streets are Paykans. Paykan is a crummy old (1970s) design car. But, Paykan is entirely made in Iran and it represents the results of the general policy of self-reliance that I kept seeing. Paykan is not the only Iranian made car.

The city is generally clean. The freeways are efficient, widespread and well maintained. The city is crowded, full of life, vibrant and busy. The traffic is as chaotic as I had remembered and heard. From the American perspective, Iranian driving is totally crazy.

The freeway system has improved immensely compared to when I was there last.

I did not drive at all while I was there. I always took "Agency Taxis" – private taxis, in contrast with shared taxis. It is not that I was afraid of driving in Tehran (I drove without a license in Tehran from 1976 till 78), I just did not want to bother with it. Observing the traffic was enough stimulation for my nervous system.

Tehran is *much* larger and much denser than it was 20 years ago. We are not talking ordinary growth here. We are talking explosive growth. But, there is no particular architectural design to the city. Large high-rises can be found all over the place.

People are busy, stressed, often frustrated and tired. I noticed very little happiness.

8 A Night At The Movies

As my movie, I selected "Do Zan" – Two Woman (deliberately not translated as Two Women).

Outside of Iran's current social, cultural and political context, this movie is probably not all that significant. However, it speaks volumes in the context of today's Iran. To begin, the movie's director is a woman. This movie eloquently communicates the suffering of Iranian women. The social injustice targeted to Iranian women is repeatedly depicted from the woman's perspective throughout the movie.

The beauty that I saw in the movie and in most of my interactions with Iranian women is that they do not need a defender for their interests and rights. Iranian women are well capable of defending their interests and their rights on their own. Simply give them the chance to be heard.

Beyond the movie itself, the experience of going to the movies was most interesting. I got to the theater (at ValiAssr Square) about 15 minutes prior to screen time. The regular price for the tickets was 300 Tomans (30 cents). Tickets were sold out while I was in line. I bought my ticket from a scalper for 600 Toman (70 cents).

The theater was somewhat hot and very crowded. Many families with young kids were at the theater. Once the movie started, I forgot about the discomforts and got absorbed into the story.

I saw a good movie for 1/10th of the U.S. equivalent price in slightly sub-standard environment. In terms of price and quality, that was similar to many other of my experiences in Tehran.

My return trip from ValiAssr Square to Vanak at around mid-night took less than 10 minutes in a shared taxi. It costed me 100 Toman (10 cents). I gave the driver 500 Toman (60 cents). It took him a few minutes to accept the money.

9 A Day At The Bazaar

I spent two half days at the Bazaar.

I saw a big difference in attitude and behavior between the crowd at the Bazaar and that of Vanak (northern Tehran).

Most women at the Bazaar were willingly wearing the Chador. Women in Vanak forcibly wear their fancy scarfs and even turn them into a fashion statement. I saw a certain level of consistency, a sense of unity and agreement and a sense of social cohesion in this arrangement.

Compared to 20 years ago, where the women in the Bazaar were wearing their Chador and the women in Vanak were wearing western-style very revealing dresses – in the summer, and not that there is anything wrong with that –, I noticed more togetherness and unity in the society.

Beyond the religious dimension of the Chador and Hejab, clearly we also have a social conflict. I like Iran's way of dealing with it better than what is happening in Turkey.

While wondering around Vanak, I never saw anyone in clergy clothing. Not even one. While wondering around the Bazaar, I saw many Mullahs.

The Bazaar itself was vibrant and beautiful. It is an out of date distribution system that keeps doing the job in the absence of a more effective one.

Large transactions (say carpets) in the Bazaar can easily and conveniently be conducted in U.S. dollars. For one thing, the largest Iranian bill (10,000 Rials) roughly amounts to 1 dollar. Carrying just $1,000 in Iranian bills often require a good size bag and lots and lots of counting time. Everyone is constantly aware of the open market value of the U.S. dollar.

10 It Is The Economy

What shocked me most in this trip was the level of poverty and weakness of Rial against dollar.

While I was in Iran, the conversion rates that I got were in the 910 to 932 Toman per dollar range. For my convenience, I often used the 1000 Toman equals $1 approximation.

A large loaf of bread sells for about 3 cents. Roughly half of that is government subsidized. A non-subsidized (western style) loaf of bread is about 6 cents.

A gallon of gas is about 20 cents. Not only is it not taxed, it is even still subsidized.

One month phone bill without long distance is less than $1.

One month electric bill is usually no more than $3. I was told that electricity is also subsidized.

An Iranian light bulb sells for about 20 cents. A German light bulb sells for about 35 cents.

A fancy meal for 4 in a fancy restaurant comes to about $9.

A 25 miles private cab ride comes to about $3. I usually tipped at least $1 which always shocked them.

A typical engineer's monthly salary in Iran is about 1 day's pay for an engineer in the U.S. And, the quality of work of that typical engineer in Iran is nothing short of the typical engineer in the U.S.

Based on typical Iranian salaries, everything is extremely expensive and life is very very difficult. Most families have a very difficult time making ends meet.

With American dollars, everything is nearly a fifth of the U.S. prices.

The strength of dollar is totally unreasonable. I am convinced that with the right planning and management, if a single rate currency was to be allowed to float in the free market style, the dollar will go significantly down.

Everywhere I looked, the key problem was the economy. Mismanagement combined with archaic bureaucracy combined with influence of morality on business has made everything inefficient. I also heard about a lot of corruption.

I also noticed that the economy has impacted people in a generally ugly psychological way. I sensed little optimism and hope. People's attitude is often negative. People often lie when they could be telling the truth. The ugly psychology in turn makes the economy suffer more.

Yet, everywhere I looked I saw opportunities of all sorts.

I saw a well educated work force. Many of the cab drivers that I spoke with were university graduates.

I saw a young and energetic work force.

I saw a very weak Rial which makes for extremely low skilled labor rates.

I saw extremely low energy prices.

I also know that a large pool of business, management and technical Iranian elites exists outside of Iran.

If there was a way to combine all of the above under the umbrella of free market rules, a lot of good can come out really quickly.

However, unfortunately, my discussions and conversations with many Iranians convinced me that most Iranians do not understand even the very basics of the principles of free markets. This, in and of itself is an immense problem.

If the likes of Khatami were to now completely focus on creating an environment where creative businessmen in the private sector could be permitted to bring things together, I actually think that Iran's economic outlook could be very promising.

11 My Attempts At Contributing

I specialize in Internet protocols and telecommunications.

Related to my interests, I arranged for a number of meetings with Iranian experts in the academic and research community. After the more private initial meetings, I was invited to give a talk for a larger audience.

I chose the topic of "The Power Of Open Source And Its Ramifications On Computing and Communications in Iran". I managed to directly link the benefits of embracing the Open Source movement to the national goal of general self-reliance.

I gave the talk in Farsi. It was very well received. Being able to engage the audience in Farsi was a big boost for my ego. I hope I did some good as well.

12 The Student Uprising

From my perspective, the student uprising that started on July 9th is primarily a sign of deep rooted discontent which needs to be taken very seriously.

I noted that discontent and frustration was very widespread. However, in my interactions with people the reason for the discontent was nearly always the economy. I was surprised to see how openly and how often strangers (say cab drivers) would complain about the economy and the government.

Nevertheless, interpreting this uprising as the spark for a new revolution is dead wrong.

Clearly, today's Islamic Republic of Iran is NOT a democracy. But, it has been moving towards becoming more and more democratic.

Iranian politics and society today is democratic and open enough to allow for orderly and gradual reform. We don't need another revolution. I detected general consensus in the society that another risky revolution is not wanted.

Fundamental issues the likes of separation of Mosque and State can wait for later.

More pressing issues the likes of: guarantees for the freedom of the press; more liberties for women; more freedom of self expression; more freedom for access to information; less government corruption; a more open economy; ... can all be reasonably progressed through the existing system.

The above list is not all that different from the demands of the students.

13 Departure From Tehran

We left the house for the airport at 5:45 am. On the way to the airport, I noticed lots and lots of police and military types in the street. A big pro-government rally was planned for that day. Clearly, little was being left to chance.

We arrived at the airport 2 hours ahead of our departure time.

Customs went quickly and smoothly. For no good reason, I was worried about passport control. Clearing passport control took all of 2 minutes. The lady at the booth, said: "Having traveled all this distance, you did not stay even a month!" I smiled at her. I interpreted that as another word of encouragement to come, visit, participate and contribute.

14 Return To Seattle

Being back in Seattle was great. I was very glad to be back home.

Immigration and customs in Seattle went very quick as well. Two of our bags had not made the Heathrow connection and were delivered the following day.

For me, this trip was a big personal growth experience. I now realize more how wonderful my life in Seattle is. Life in Iran is very tough. I don't think I am cut out for that life style. After this trip, I now also realize more that my heart is still very Iranian.

To my fellow expatriates, I say:

Plan a trip to Iran.

Don't consider it a vacation.

Consider it a personal growth experience.

15 Moving Forward

Personally, I am already back to my routines – the children, my engineering work and my public service network administration activities. These will continue.

As an Iranian-American, as before this trip, my mind will occasionally be occupied with ways of helping create win-win situations for both sides. Here are some specific steps, which became more obvious as a result of this trip, that make good sense for both sides in my opinion.

15.1 On The Iranian Side

Over the past 20 years, Iran has been transformed from a Neo-Colony of the United States (and of the West in general) into an independent and self-reliant country: an Iran that decides its own destiny, an Iran that has said no, An Iran That Can Say No.

Iran's basic infrastructure (transportation, power grid, telecommunication, gas, water, defense, ...) is now purely Iranian. There is a lot of room for more efficiency and better management. But one can now consider these stable systems that will continuously improve – with or without the involvement of foreigners.

This transformation has been at great cost for the nation. The people of Iran have suffered greatly over the past 20 years. Eight years of imposed war, ugly labels of all sorts, mischievous manipulations of previous masters, weak economy ...

However, I want to think that hard days are behind Iran and better days are ahead.

On the political, religious, social and cultural front, I believe Iran is on the right track. The evolutionary approach being followed is the right recipe. The more than mild debates that we are having in Iran are all healthy. Preservation of the free press and free flow of information is obviously absolutely essential. The choices of the people will eventually take Iran where it should be.

On the billboards and slogans front, Iran needs to cool it. The death-oriented anti-American slogans should now be considered a phase of the past. The strong and independent Iran that I saw is ready to express with confidence its readiness for co-operation with all, when it is in Iran's interest. It is time that all Iranian slogans become life oriented.

On the foreign policy front, I believe that matters are in competent and capable hands. With respect to the U.S. relations in particular, the general policy that has left the ball in the U.S. court needs to be pursued cautiously. More effort needs to be focused on persuasion of the American public that the current lose-lose scenario is silly; that there are lots of win-win opportunities; that if promotion of democracy and free markets in the middle east is truly the U.S. policy, then Iran is most fertile ground.

Further, identification of the ghost at the table to the American public should become a goal and an explicit part of Iranian foreign policy. "Why should American foreign policy towards Iran be determined by Israel?" is one of the questions that President Khatami asked the American public in his CNN interview. Since nobody in the American press followed up on that (for obvious reasons), Iran should see to it that the question is repeated as many times as needed.

The large Iranian-American community in the U.S. can play a significant role in persuasion of the American public. Wouldn't it be great if we could work together towards this particular goal?

On the economic front, there is a lot of room for management and policy improvements. In fact, I believe this is the most important area where we need to focus on.

During these 3 weeks, everywhere I looked in the economy, I saw mismanagement and inefficiencies. There is a lot of room and potential for improving the existing systems.

The economy can improve greatly if the necessary infrastructure for free market interactions are put in place. While continuation of central planning and management of certain industries may still make sense, there clearly is a need for the complete opening of markets in many industries.

Setting the goal of creating a single currency rate in a particular time frame is now realistic. I felt that at 920 Toman to a dollar, the dollar is way over valued. Towards that goal, a number of obvious steps which have been mentioned but not executed aggressively enough need to be pursued. I am refering to the obvious well understood steps which include:

- A smaller public sector
- A larger private sector
- Elimination of government subsidies
- Less restriction on flow of capital
- Clarity and stability of regulations
- More clear and reliable tax laws
- Promotion of merit based management (as opposed to ideology)
- ...

Policies that would be targeted towards attracting the business, management and technical Iranian elites living outside of Iran to co-operate in the development of the economy are likely to be both directly and indirectly beneficial.

15.2 On The American Side

Dealing with American foreign policy towards the middle east is Complex. Like other Complex entities, it consists of a Real and an Imaginary part. The Real part can best be summed up in one word, "Neo-Colonialism." The Imaginary part is lip service to words such as: "support for democracy" and "protection of human rights."

While Neo-Colonialism is well understood in the academic community, it is unknown to most in the mainstream.

Neo-Colonialism is Colonialism by proxy.

First, borders are carved out by the masters such that exploitation is made most convenient. Then a puppet is installed. Then all of the infrastructure and defense is delegated to the master. Then, the society is converted into a pure consumer of the master's goods. Ongoing maintenance amounts to suppression of all movements in the society which promote democratic, independence oriented, self-reliance oriented and anti-master oriented concepts. All opposite elements are labeled fanatics and terrorists.

Current examples of Neo-Colonial countries of the middle east include: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, ... Iran used to be a Neo-Colony.

Over the past 20 years, Iran has posed a serious challenge to the American foreign policy towards the middle east. The challenges have been on both the Real and the Imaginary dimensions. Beyond Iran's direct challenge, there are other related ramifications. The ramifications of the "Threat Of An Example" (of a Neo-Colony that escaped) and the "domino effect."

Moving forward, the key remaining question for the U.S. is: "How should partial transformation of the region from Neo-Colonial entities to economic allies be accommodated?". Attempts at extensive delays in such recognition is likely to backfire in unexpected and unpleasant ways. This is part of the natural evolution and there is no way that it can be stopped. Unless this is done in a proactive way, the masters will lose. The same way that the old masters lost in the transition from Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism.

At some point in time, most Neo-Colonies will demand independence by asking the masters to leave. Or, by throwing them out.

In 1953, the people of Iran through their democratically elected representative, Mohammed Mossadegh, expressed their will for more independence. Their message at that time could partially be summed up as: "Yankee Go Home." In response, the U.S. planned, engineered and executed a coup which overthrew Mossadegh, who was democratically elected by the people, and re-installed the Shah as the puppet. Ongoing maintenance continued for 25 years.

Having learned from the 1953 experience, in 1978, the people of Iran expressed their will for more independence in stronger terms. This time the message was: "Yankee Get Lost." And, they threw out the Americans and saw to it that further interference of the type of 1953 can not be arranged through the American embassy in Tehran.

More than 45 years after the 1953 coup, most of the CIA's records related to U.S.'s direct interference with the will of Iranian people on a massive scale has been documented and is history.

However, at no point in time, no one in the U.S. administration has ever acknowledged the wrong doings, expressed words of regret or apologized to the Iranian people for any of those atrocities. With that history, it is understandable that U.S./Iranian relations have been difficult.

However, all of that is behind us now. It is time that we deal with the realities of today.

I saw, touched, smelled and felt an independent and strong Iran during my 3 weeks there. The U.S. has no choice but to accept that reality. I saw lots of potential and opportunities.

As for the next steps for Iran, I suggest that the way forward is through a narrow focus on trade and economy. The way forward is through a policy of economic engagement.

The U.S. should rapidly remove all economic sanctions against Iran. This could be framed as one-up on Khatami's dialogue between civilizations. The economic relations, will pave the way for lots and lots of improvements in political, social and even religious dimensions.

Continuation of the current failed policies will further isolate the United States. The main cost of lifting the economic restrictions on trade with Iran is the outcry of the powerful pro-Israel lobby. But, shouldn't American interest drive American foreign policy?

Further, America should soften repetition of its 3-pronged demands on Iran. They are simply counter productive and illogical. From the perspective of the rest of the world, the U.S. is making a fool of itself through these unreasonable demands. These demands don't work because they are unreasonable. The way forward is through engagement. These demands should not be a precondition for engagement.

With respect to weapons of mass destruction: An independent Iran will continue to develop its defense systems and policies based on its requirements, the same as any other independent nation. Iran learned a lot from the experience of being hit by Iraqi long range missiles during a period where U.S. was helping Iraq. As a nation against whom chemical weapons were used, Iran has first hand experience about the ugliness of weapons of mass destruction. Iran does not need to be lectured by the only nation on this planet which has ever used nuclear weapons against civilians, about the ugliness of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the U.S.'s reputation as the largest producer and exporter of arms and weapons is not helpful towards its demands. Many view such U.S. demands as yet another case of the superpower which has again confused morality with self-interest. Continuation of such demands from Iran does no good for the U.S.

Specifics of Iran's weapons development program is an Iranian defense policy issue. Today, Iranians define Iran's defense policy. Such demands by the old master emphasize its lack of understanding and its lack of recognition of today's independent Iran.

With respect to state sponsored terrorism: As far as I can tell, that is all in the past. And much of those labels never stuck any how. The simplest and most effective way to make improvements in this area is to support those Iranian decision makers who are completely against all forms of terrorism. There is no shortage of such Iranian decision makers and they can benefit from well directed support.

With respect to Iran's lack of support for the mideast peace process: Why should this be a significant concern in bi-lateral U.S./Iran relations? If there is a real problem there, why should it not be primarily the Palestinian and Israelis who should be voicing their concerns? The Iranian position on this has been soft and indirect. Outside of making the powerful pro-Israel lobby happy, further emphasis and repetition of this demand will bring no good to anyone.

Specifics of Iran's relations with Palestinians and Israelis is an Iranian foreign policy issue. Today, Iranians define Iran's foreign policy. Such demands by the old master emphasizes its lack of understanding and its lack of recognition of today's independent Iran.

The short version is:

"We are all stuck here for a while, let's try to work it out."

Let's stop the lose-lose arrangements.

Let's create win-win arrangements.