

*Travels around Iran:
Searching for Islam in the Islamic Republic*

The noses. Something is not quite right about them. They are all too much alike: small, pretty and characterless.

There are *nose places* in Tehran, for example around Vanak Square, where there are especially many doctors' signs for "Skin, hair, beauty. Plastic surgery". Young women with plasters on their noses go window shopping. It is nothing to be ashamed of, a corrected nose. On the contrary, the plaster says: look at me! I could afford it! A new nose costs as much as a teacher earns in two or three months.

"Jaam-e-jam" is a nose place, a collection of restaurants under one roof; a food court for Japanese cuisine and café latte. Here, the *jeunesse dorée* of prosperous north Tehran meet; stylish and terribly bored. The girls smoke and wear tight coat dresses over clam-digger jeans, strappy pink shoes and little snub noses. Little escapes, 1001 little escapes. A nose is easier to correct than a system. And the desire for beauty, flawless beauty, is great in this country. Even from under a black chador, perfectly manicured hands may emerge.

Is it acceptable to tell of the need for beauty when the world is talking about Iran's atomic programme? Maybe now is just the right time to talk about it. So that with the approaching new ice age, this country does not once again disappear behind the curtain which kept it hidden for long enough.

Tehran, in the 26th year of the Islamic Revolution. The green iron door of the former US embassy is locked; diplomacy ceased a quarter of a century ago. On 4 November 1979, revolutionary students stormed the embassy; the hostage affair lasted 444 days. Contemporary history, ossified in slogans and paintings on a high brick wall. One slogan has been freshly repainted in awkward English, at odds with the Imperialist grammar: after Israel, America is the most hated enemy of the Iranian nation.

A question to two police officers controlling the traffic in front of the embassy: How real is the hatred? "Ask the nation. I personally don't believe it," says one. The other answers with a line from a poem: Violence has no place in the essence of Islam. Then he says, "See you!" Nothing is certain here, with every step my expectations are countered.

How un-Islamic Tehran seems! Hardly a call to prayer to be heard in this city of 14 million, rarely a spontaneous religious gesture to be seen. Friday prayers take place on the university campus, a political place; whoever goes there wants to be seen. From the women's sector the preacher can only be heard; a politically high-ranking cleric, he defends Iran's nuclear programme. The men call out: "God greet Mohammed and his family," a formula that signifies agreement. Where the women are, all is quiet. An elderly supervisor goes with the author to the exit and says: "If I did not have a responsibility to my family, I would pack a piece of dry bread, travel and see the world."

The piercing, dark eyes of Imam Khomeini look down from the high walls of houses on to the apparently heedless passers-by. The late founder of the Islamic Republic grows on murals

like a giant out of fields of red tulips, red like the blood of the martyrs. After the Conservatives secured the majority of seats in Parliament half a year ago, foreign observers began to count the martyr pictures; they are regarded as a barometer of the regime's assertion of power over society. "Oh those," says one Tehran woman, "We don't see those pictures any more. They are like trees for us."

All contact counters my expectations. A nation of individualists is tuned in here. It cloaks the leaden times in poetic words. Many can never live completely free of fear, and yet the country has not reverted to whispers. The air is full of protest. If you know you are in the majority, you complain. Who is to blame for the state of Iranian football? The Mullahs. Who is to blame for the traffic jam? The Mullahs. In a bakery, the baker kneads dough with a cigarette in his mouth, dripping ash. A customer complains, the baker shouts back: "There really is no freedom in this country!"

Complaining is an outlet, an expression of helplessness too, and mockery a weapon where others are lacking. As much as most Iranians would like to see fundamental reforms, it is concern for their own survival that preoccupies them.

The young man at the wheel of the taxi puts an unlabelled CD into his player. Provocatively loud pop music starts up, we drive like this through the city centre, windows open, right past policemen. For a moment, the tingling, adolescent thrill of ersatz freedom kicks in. This is how youngsters drive up and down the boulevards in the evenings, provided they can afford a car. Officially, pop music is still banned, but every household with a computer downloads music from the internet, mostly Persian pop recorded in California.

Doing what is forbidden or taboo is part of everyday life for the urban middle classes; rule-breaking is a mass phenomenon. Only the most timid still hide their satellite dishes in their apartments in the morning and drag them back out on to the balcony in the evening. The guards of the Revolution, once feared, are now seen as frustrated and corrupt. If a party is planned, they are given money so that they forget to check and the female guests can wear low-cut dresses. Alcohol is surprisingly easy to get hold of. Not that everybody drinks, but whoever wants to can find a way.

Double lives. The public and private sphere are distinctly separate worlds; different values, norms, patterns of behaviour apply in each. Nearly every family has secrets. In order to keep them, many children learn to lie early on, learn to differentiate between what they can say in school and which friend they can tell what to. "Antenna", spies, is schoolyard slang for the children of government-loyal parents.

A Tehran girls' grammar school opens its doors for a parent afternoon. Four fathers and three dozen mothers have come. This is a special school, a kind of pilot private school, called "Creative Thinking". Today a psychologist has been invited to talk. Abdurrazah Kordi works at a private advisory centre, he talks to the parents about the effect that the adults' double lives has on the souls of the children. "We do not embody any stable values," he says. "The children cannot identify with us. They don't know what is right or wrong. Therefore, they are stressed and inhibited in their achievement."

This family psychologist is one of the very few in Iran to scientifically research what the stagnating Islamic Republic does to people. "Paradoxical identities" he diagnoses, speaks of "being twofold", of "double characters". The Iranians swallow more than a billion painkillers each

year, many women become depressed. "We have heard too many slogans. We haven't learned how to live."

After the lecture, one father cries out: "Our country is a monologue country! One side talks, the other has to listen. Our children have to learn to talk. We have to stand each child up once a week and tell them to talk! Talk!!"

In Iranian society, having "multiple personalities" has become second nature, writes sociologist Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi. "For many young people the most important question today is: who am I?" They only find mirrors that reflect a distorted picture. They escape from a public domain that specifies how your headscarf is tied and what colour your coat is into an artificial domain, the virtual. 64,000 young Iranians write weblogs, diaries in the internet, mostly under false names. A lot of it is non-political, searching for identity or playing with trial identities: who could I be? The movement began three years ago; today Persian is one of the most frequently used weblog languages in the world. "Sometimes you forget who you are. When I read my weblog and see myself there, it reassures me and I feel better," writes one female weblogger.

Some webloggers have just been arrested. The religious state security filters through the internet. "Banned phrase found" then appears on the white screen.

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Whispering. Giggling. Crisp packets rustling. In the almost-dark of the cinema, here and there the silhouettes of two heads move up closer, centimetre for centimetre, until the headscarfed silhouette is horizontal, on the shoulder of the boy. The film is called "Candles in the Wind", it is the story of a young man whose desperate search for inner peace, for inner balance, leads him to all imaginable drugs. A true story, it says in the opening credits.

All the problems of the young urban middle classes come together in this film: divorce, suicide, depression, the search for meaning. A doctor who plies his patients with drugs instead of healing them jumps off the highest building in Tehran into an imaginary bed of flowers that mockingly resembles the blood tulips of the martyr paintings. In this kaleidoscope of decaying morals only one rule is observed: wear a headscarf. As if the moral fate of the Islamic Republic hung on this one issue. Girls dancing at a private party, high on ecstasy, wriggle like half-dead fish but wear discreet headscarves for the film. Merriment in the cinema.

In Iran, 44 people per hour are arrested for drug offences, the State President's drugs expert recently announced; mostly they are addicted drug users. That adds up to over a million arrests in the last three years. A shot of heroin costs 60 Cents. Drug use runs through all strata, links village and city, rich and poor, hangs like a sigh of resignation over the country's youth.

Youthful the country seems; two thirds of the Iranian population are under 25, born after the Revolution. And many young people are well educated. The Islamic Republic increased the number of university students tenfold, got the girls out of the dark valley of illiteracy. Today they even form the majority at university. But this progress leads to a dead end: no jobs for the 100,000 new academics each year, no intellectual freedom for the educated, not even entertainment for the bored.

For a short time everything seemed different. "We felt like we were a big wave," says 20 year-old actress Pegah Ahangarani. "We stormed ahead, we had so many plans." That was a good three years ago; at 17, Pegah was the youngest member of President Khatami's election

campaign team. The hope of reforms roused many young people from their lethargy. "It was incredible how people changed, some suddenly read books instead of turning up the volume on their speakers!"

This euphoria is now also history, Khatami has failed as a reformer. "We noticed we had stormed off on our own, the leader stayed behind. Now everyone is completely frustrated." Pegah puts her hands to her head. "Why are politicians so stupid? Why don't they use our energy?" She plays cello, wanted to give a classical concert with a group - no authorisation. "We always come up against a wall, a wall! They don't want us to believe in ourselves." Most of her friends, she says, don't believe in anything anymore.

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Looking for Islam in the Islamic Republic. Some days it seems as if the theocracy had driven God out of people's hearts. "Under the Shah, we drank on the streets and prayed at home, now it is the other way round." An Iranian saying describing the double life under two systems. Yet it is not quite true. The search for religiousness leads me away from the street, into the private sphere, to people who live their very own personal faith.

A small apartment in a suburban district of Tehran. Facing the front door is a big calligraphic symbol, gold on black, a boldly sweeping Bismillah, "in the name of God", the merciful. The lettering has a piece missing - stylised religious art. The furnishings are simple, modern.

This is the home of a woman who has rebuilt her life after divorce in her mid-forties. Nilofar Ruzbeh (not her real name) professed no religion when the Islamic Revolution came. She became religious later, when her mother miraculously survived a serious accident. "My faith," says the teacher, "has absolutely nothing to do with this state. We religious Iranians are furious with the government because it has done so much damage to the reputation of Islam." She prays five times a day, but only when nobody can see her. She would prefer to go out without a headscarf but more than this minor detail it depresses her to have to keep her divorce secret. She still wears her wedding ring. A woman who lives alone is regarded with suspicion, as unprotected and bad.

Three years ago her youngest son confessed that he was gay. The 18 year-old was amazed how calmly his religious mother reacted. Homosexuality is forbidden in the Koran; in Iran, the penalty is death, although it has not been enforced for ten years. "My main concern was what effect it would have on the boy if he always has to lie, to pretend," says Nilofar Ruzbeh. "I was afraid he would become a liar for the rest of his life." On the Koran's prohibition of homosexuality she says: "God gave me a mind so that I can think independently. At the time of the Prophet it was a matter of the sexual practices of hetero-men, not gays who love each other." Suddenly she starts to cry. Her husband, she says, still forced her to have sex shortly before their divorce. "Isn't that a much bigger taboo? But the Koran says nothing about that." She lights a cigarette, busies herself at the window in order to hide her face.

Her son Avesta (the name has been changed) is now 21. "Five years ago," he says, "the first cautious communication between gays on the internet began. Four years ago we had the first party. 20 people came, I'll never forget it! After that everything went incredibly quickly, every day five, six more people came along. Today I am nodding acquaintances with at least

500 gays in Tehran." Avesta's partner is three years older; for him Avesta already embodies a "new generation", because he still went through the internet-less era of stifling isolation as an adolescent, his feelings locked away in the black box of religious taboo. The scene, parties, partners - all unthinkable.

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Journey to Qom, the holy town, two hours' drive from Tehran. A desert town. The climate is hot and dry, the houses flat, the water salty. Whoever comes here does it because of their faith. 40,000 clerics study at Qom's religious colleges. Mullahs with leather slippers and women in black chadors dominate the street scene.

In Qom's conservative teaching programme, the private Mofid college holds a special position. The students are introduced to modern material, even study Western philosophy. The imam Mohammed Taqi Fazel Meybodi receives guests in a narrow office that betrays nothing of his prominence. This 50 year-old man in a white turban is one of Iran's small team of reform theologians, religious educators who are rethinking Islam, who want to free it from the state's suffocating grip. Meybodi is a self-confident man, he greets me affably, with a joke, while an assistant writes down every word the master says. Discussing the future of Islam in the Islamic Republic with a foreign woman journalist, that is politically dangerous ground.

"Religious posts must be separated from state ones," says Meybodi. "The state may be neither interpreter nor guard over religious things. And religion may not be misused as a bulwark against the struggle for freedom." A general criticism of Iran's religious state doctrine, the so-called divine rule of jurists. For Meybodi, as for modern Christians, religion is primarily a framework of values. He is nevertheless not a secularist in the Western sense; Islam is not restricted to private life. "Islam is political, but it should not rule, no!" Rather, a new definition of the place of religion in people's lives must be sought.

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The editors' office of the newspaper "Jumhuriat". A depressed cheerfulness prevails, as when a group of intimates meets at the bedside of a sick friend. The newspaper was banned four weeks ago, you might say it is dead, but editor-in-chief Emadeddin Baghi still hopes it is only "in a coma", that reanimation is still possible. Jumhuriat (Republic) only appeared for two weeks, 13 precious issues, stored away in a blue file. Good photos, clear lay-out. "Number of girl runaways rising" runs one headline. The newspaper was socially oriented, set up by reformers after the Conservative election victory.

Sixty journalists have come to the editors' office today to hear that their wages can no longer be paid while the patient is in a coma. They sit around the now empty white tables, just a few encyclopaedias and filing trays remain, photos are taken for posterity. Many of the staff have gone from newspaper to newspaper, moving on with each publication ban.

And like anywhere where Iranians with courage and staying power work for change, the people here are not the trendy, stylish, cool, but the moderately religious. The women conservatively dressed, faces sparingly made-up and tightly framed by the black Maghna'e, a

scarf that reaches to the breast. The Maghna'e is the little black dress, so to speak, of determined young Iranian women.

Baghi, the editor-in-chief, a thoughtful, stocky man with a greying beard, spent three years in prison for disclosing the names of the men behind the murders of regime opponents. Of his many books, one in three is banned. Like most reformers, Baghi was an activist of the Revolution as a young man. He defends its original motives, freedom and social justice, against their later "corruption". His eldest daughter, 23, is here at the discussion, and when I ask her if she criticises her father for his actions at that time, the two look at each other in embarrassment for a moment, and Baghi blushes. Yes, that is an issue in the family, as in many families. In the Baghi family, however, more criticism comes from the younger daughters, says the father.

In an Iranian home, this is a typical coffee table situation: "How could educated people believe those kinds of slogans: Justice, independence! Empty words!" a young engineer exclaims excitedly. His sister, a student of economics, adds: "They brought the Revolution and we are left still stuck with all that nonsense today!" The older generation sits on the other side of the table in silence.

A family discussion in the city of Isfahan: doctors, engineers, every one of them upper middle class, educated and not politically active. "Iranians are offended by the image that is drawn of our country in the West. Everything that is wrong or bad here is exaggerated over there," a paediatrician resolutely opens the conversation. Everyone gathered around the table defends Iran, its culture, its family-mindedness - and only when all this has been noted with due respect, the conversation suddenly takes a different turn.

Now there are complaints everywhere, coming from all sides. This system has more in common with dictatorial Communism than with Islam, says one. Someone else remembers the Islamic conquest of Persia 1400 years ago and says: The Mullah government is the second Arab invasion. Calling the government's version of Islam Arabic serves to distance oneself from the Mullahs and to clear the name of Persia. Imams who wear a black turban trace their lineage back to the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. That their oldest known ancestors must therefore have come from the Arab peninsula becomes an argument for regarding the governing clerics as a kind of foreign rule. They don't have any sense of Persian culture, their rule is essentially foreign to Iran.

Relief and romanticising the past: the aversion to the Mullahs has created a new fashion, popularised symbols from the pre-Islamic era. Zoroastrian motifs are enjoying a renaissance as design elements; young webloggers draw on this ancient Persian religion and take their aliases from it.

A large, quiet living room. A characteristic feature of the bourgeois Persian lifestyle: a fleet of family photos in little picture frames on a round table. Five sons, all grown up now. Diploma, doctor's cap, marriage. All five live abroad, their mother urged them to do so herself: what prospects would they have here? Now she is alone in this too quiet, too large house, with 156 satellite channels and a packet of anti-depressants.

An invitation to a private Isfahan party: Ladies only. The youngest is 20, the eldest 68. A feast for the senses, everything is opulent. Mountains of flowers for the hostess spill through the door accompanied by clouds of intense perfume. Heavy make-up, tight dresses, exuberant and

sexy dancing; meanwhile fruit and confectionery is constantly passed around on overflowing bowls, insinuating jokes are told, a singer performs, and when after four hours the noise level drops and they all cover up again in coats and headscarves, one woman says to the visitor from Germany with deep contentment; "You see, we in Iran, we just have everything."

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In Tehran, autumn has begun, a melancholy autumn. In young peoples` s weblogs the leaves are falling, the metaphors are ponderous, as if Iran's youth were constantly nursing a broken heart. "Street of longing" one youth magazine calls its readers' letters page. And a verse from Sohrab Sepehri always crops up somewhere. The painter and poet died of leukaemia when this generation was born; in the hearts of his followers he remains eternally young.

His verses are sold on street-corners, everyone knows the inscription on their idol's grave: "Approach slowly, so that you do not break my fragile loneliness." Iran's youth finds something rare in Sohrab's simple, sentimental lines: intimacy. A world far removed from political and religious slogans, far removed from their emptiness and falseness. A world in which praying has again become pure and intimate, and not contradicting the love of beauty. "My Mecca is a red rose", says the poet.

Translated by Charlotte Hughes-Kreutzmüller