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*Whitney Mason is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.*

## Iran and Turkey: The Yin and Yang of the Islamic World

By Whitney Mason

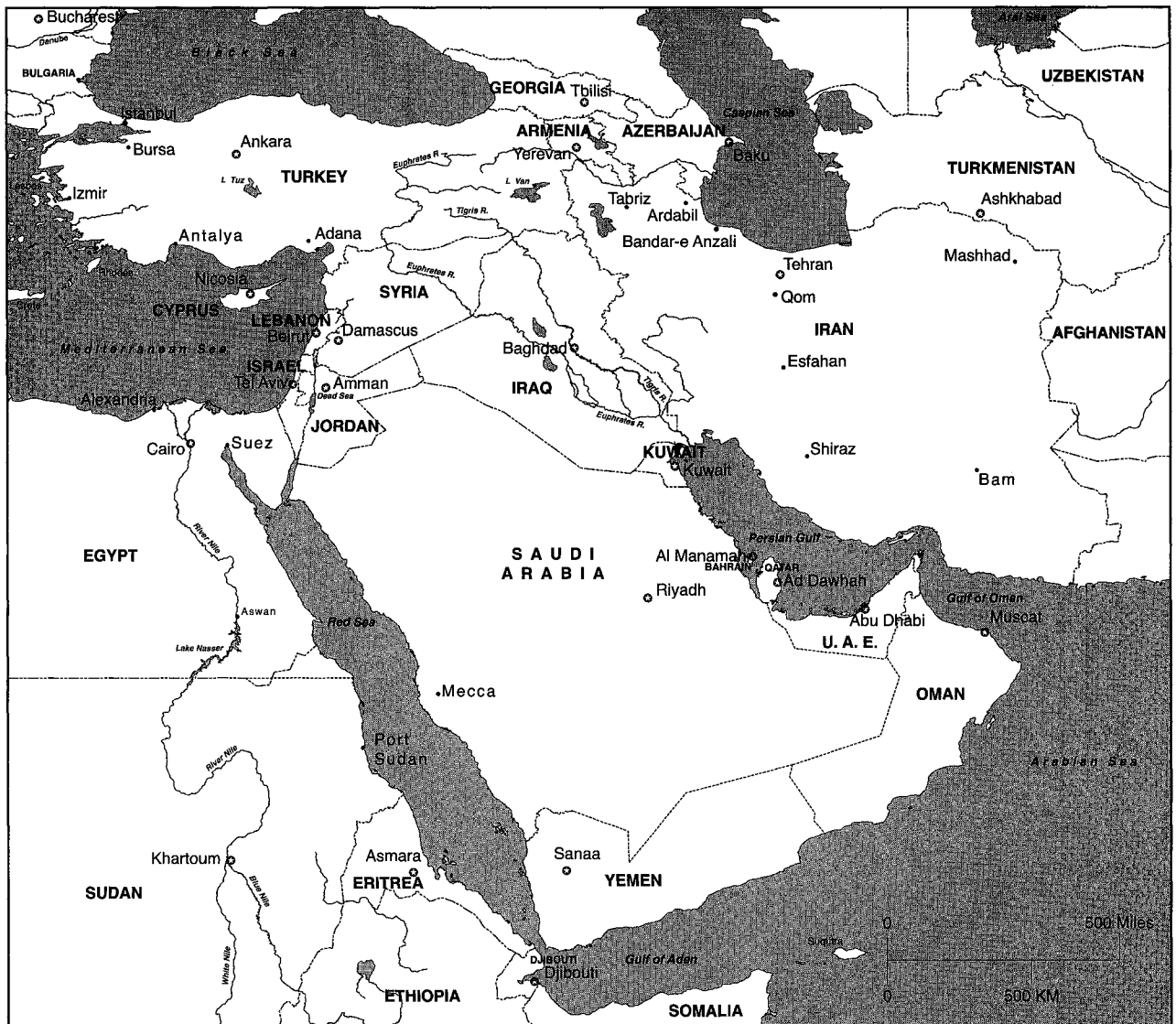
Since the zenith of Arab power in the tenth century, it's been a perennial contender for leadership of the entire Islamic world. A vast country of snow-capped mountains, high grazing lands and wind-whipped deserts bestriding a strategic land bridge between two seas, two worlds. A country of bewildering diversity often riven by localized insurrections yet ruled through most of its long history by a single hereditary monarch. A country torn between its fierce pride in its unique culture and its determination to escape servitude to the West by adopting the institutions and technologies that for the last few centuries have allowed Europeans to dominate the world. A country that for centuries made painful sacrifices of sovereign rights in exchange for protection from its predatory neighbor to the north, Russia. A country where the ideological ferment of the 1920s swept the traditional monarchy from power and replaced it with an autocrat bent on westernizing his country at any cost — including breaking the back of the religious establishment. A country where a progressive president committed to pluralism is now vying with entrenched interests whose power depends on the monopolization of ideas in general and religion in particular.

This description applies equally to two countries and to two countries alone: Turkey and Iran.

Indeed, Turkey and Iran — who represent, along with Egypt, the great powers of the Middle East — are mirror images of one another. Each regards the other as an apostate from a faith they once shared in common. Both were once sprawling empires and defenders of the faith followed by ignominious centuries of defeat by the infidels. Both embraced in a rare alliance in the middle of the twentieth century. Both were committed to radical westernization and both were tied to the patronage of the United States. That alliance was shattered in 1979 with Iran's Islamic Revolution. The two chose radically divergent paths, Turkey pursuing a wholesale appropriation of Western culture and institutions while Iran attempted a radical reinterpretation of its own. Now they have met at the same crossroads, where they must either surmount their authoritarian traditions or be condemned to the ranks of post-colonial also-rans. The result of Iran and Turkey's race to reconcile Islam and pluralism will determine the leadership of the Islamic heartland for years to come.

To some the comparison may seem invidious. Turkey, after all, has most of the trappings of a western-style democracy, is a long-standing member of NATO and even a candidate for membership in the European Union. Iran, meanwhile, lacks even the pretence of emulating the West and has enshrined the power of a religious elite in a way inimical to pluralism and democracy. Far from racing to reconcile Islam and civil society, one could conclude, Iran seems to be racing away from the norms of the civilized world.

But closer inspection reveals that Turkey is not as close to achieving this reconciliation as might be imagined and Iran may not be as far. In Turkey the westernization process, having been imposed from above, has still not reached the



masses, many of whom feel alienated by western influences associated in their experience with an authoritarian state, memories of exploitation by the western powers and the repression of local traditions. Turkey's minorities, most importantly the Kurds who represent some 25 percent of the population, feel disenfranchised by an ideology that denies their existence. Even among Turkey's elite, 150 years of westernization has not managed to destroy a social structure based on personal connections and coercion: in the last few years relatives and cronies of top politicians have stolen millions from state-insured banks while journalists who dare to challenge the Republic's foundational myths languish in prison.

Iran too, to be sure, has a long road to travel before it can open up its current system, topped by unaccountable clerics chosen by their peers rather than the public. In the last year, progressive writers have been murdered by "rogue" agents from the state intelligence agency. Student demonstrators have been beaten, and dozens of intellectuals have been jailed for daring to question the clerics' monopoly on power. But the Revolution has given Iran one major advantage over Turkey: Speaking to Ira-

nians in a familiar cultural idiom, the Revolution has enfranchised Iranians psychologically and intellectually, if not yet politically, prompting people from all backgrounds to reflect on fundamental questions about what sort of society they want to create. If Iranians manage to make their leaders accountable and open their political system to diverse points of view, it seems likely that many Iranians will be prepared to play independent roles in the competition of interests and ideas that is the essence of liberalism.

Ankara complains about Iran's support for, or at least tolerance of, the presence of Kurdish separatists near Iran's border with Turkey. Iran, for its part, objects to Turkey's occasional bombing of suspected PKK bases in the area. Turkey has also accused Iran of being behind the murders of prominent Turkish secularist intellectuals and a broader killing spree at the hands of the Turkish version of Hizbullah. Iran returns the compliment by condemning Turkey's close cooperation with Israel.

The rivalry is also reflected in the attitudes of common people in both countries as became evident as soon

as I began looking into traveling to Iran from Istanbul. To get a visa, the Iranian consulate in Istanbul informed me that I had to have "my travel agency" submit a detailed itinerary. As I found out later, Americans have to get a special approval from Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and can enter Iran only as part of a tour, meaning that I would have a guide with me at all times despite the fact that I was traveling alone. At that point I hadn't talked to any travel agency about Iran but I set out to find one, feeling sure that there would be plenty of places arranging travel to Turkey's biggest neighbor. How wrong I was.

I began the search by calling my regular travel agent. Sorry, she said, they didn't deal with Iran. Did she know of an agency that would? After asking around the office she reported that no one knew of any agency dealing with Iran. Strange, I thought, still not feeling worried. I called a couple of friends who'd worked in the travel business. They'd never heard of an agency that handled tours to Iran.

Feeling the first hint of frustration, I spent a day inquiring at dozens of agencies in three different parts of the city. Not one of them could get me to Iran nor showed any eagerness to help me find someone who could.

At one agency, the receptionist raised my hopes by leading me to a woman who she said could help me. When I repeated, smiling, that I wanted to go to Iran, the woman glared at me as if I'd inquired about a pedophile tour to Thailand. "Why do you want to go there?" she demanded with her lip curled.

I was taken aback. "Because it interests me," I said rather meekly.

"Well we organize travel to Europe and the United States and East Asia — *not* Iran. We *hate* that place!" she said, spitting out the words to make clear that her animosity extended to anyone who wanted to visit it.<sup>1</sup>

This was extreme. Usually when I told Turks I was headed to Iran they would wrinkle their noses and repeat, with stunning consistency, "We don't like that place." More conservative people would shake their heads with an expression more of sadness than of hostility and say that the Shiite form of Islam practiced in Iran was "wrong." When my wife Amanda got passport photos taken of her in a chador, people in the photo lab and others she showed them to in our neighborhood laughed heartily.

Iranians, for their part, seem to disdain Turks rather

than hate them. Many Iranians, even progressives who were critical of their own regime's conservatism, told me they despised Turks' pretensions of being more civilized than Iranians "simply because their girls are more naked." The Turks, in Iranians' view, are still suffering from the condition known in Persian as "*gharbzadegi*", "Westoxification", which the Iranian sociologist Jalal Al-e Ahmad had diagnosed in the 1960s and Iranians had attempted to purge through the purifying ordeal of revolution. The Turks, meanwhile, still don't even accept that they're sick.

A couple of Persian-speaking university students I met hiking described Turks as being "like wild animals. They're probably not dangerous, but they're completely uncivilized." More commonly, Turks, both Azeri Iranians and those in Turkey, are seen as crude and dim-witted compared to the sophisticated Persians; even a couple of Anglo-Iranians I had dinner with asked me, "Is it true what they say about Turks being thick?"

The students told me the following joke, which they found hilarious:

A bunch of construction workers are complaining about their wives always packing the same food for lunch. At the end of their wits one day, several of them agree that if they're given the same food one more time, they'll jump off the tall building they're working on. Sure enough, the next day they find the same old grub in their lunch boxes and they follow through on their pact. When the tragedy is reported, television news reporters ask their wives how they feel. All but one are crying, saying if they'd had any idea how tired their husbands had been of their lunches, they would have been only too happy to fix something different. The one woman who isn't crying is the wife of an Azeri. "Just last night," she says, "I was watching him make his usual lunch. I always thought he liked it."

My first impression of Iran, after the alcohol-free flight on Iran Air, the disappearance of women's hair and the blanket of pollution that hung over Tehran like a sepia-toned thunderhead, was the taxi ride from the airport into the city. Even coming from Istanbul, I found the driving astounding. Turkish and Iranian driving are horrible in different ways. While Turks drive far too fast, Iranians are much more erratic. In a country where it's illegal for the 98 percent of the population who are Muslim to drink alcohol, most Iranians nevertheless manage to drive as if they've just downed two or three of Peter Martin's martinis. The general rule seems to be that you should drive as if there are no cars behind you, devoting your full atten-

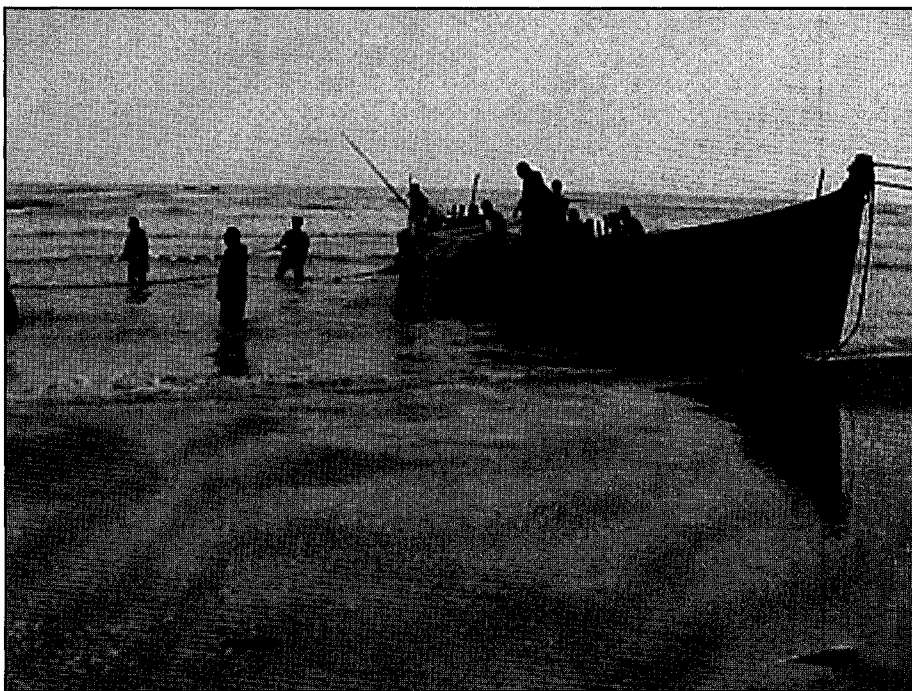
<sup>1</sup> I finally got my visa by hailing a taxi driven by a man with a long beard, which in Turkey indicates that he's religious. I told him about the trouble I'd had with anti-Islamist tour operators who hate Iran and asked whether he could help me find a religious travel agent who might be more sympathetic to the Islamic Republic. It worked: the driver's own cousin was a travel agent and had previously worked in the Iranian consulate. With a quick call on his mobile phone, he confirmed that his cousin could help me and after a couple of months he did succeed in securing a visa to visit Iran as a tourist for ten days, after which I got two extensions for a total of five weeks.

tion to not hitting the cars ahead of you — who are driven by people with the same attitude. If you want to take a right-hand turn from the left lane of a four-lane road (in which there are actually six lanes of cars), for instance, Iranians consider it perfectly normal to make a 90-degree turn and drive at right-angles across the oncoming traffic, hoping that, God willing, all of them will manage to slam on their breaks before they smash into your passenger's door.

The next difference that struck me was the prominence of religion in public life: in some respects Islam is more conspicuous in the secular Republic of Turkey than in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Turkish towns mosques are everywhere. The hills of Istanbul are spiked with minarets and at the five daily prayer times you can hear the *ezan*, the call to prayer, from virtually anywhere. In most small towns and many neighborhoods in bigger cities the *ezan* is followed by a stream of men headed to the mosque. In Tehran, on the other hand, you could walk for half an hour without coming across a mosque and I seldom heard the *ezan*, except for on car radios. Sometimes there actually seemed to be more churches than mosques. On the other hand, mosques may be less important in Iran because there, Islam represents the status quo. Every public speech — including the safety instructions on Iran Air — begins with the invocation "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." All big public buildings have rooms for prayer. Hotel rooms have signs indicating the direction of Mecca, which Muslims should face during prayer. In Iran you often see dervishes, mystical Muslim mendicants with long beards and outlandishly threadbare costumes; they are banned in Turkey.

In Turkey, traditionally religious people greet each other, like others in the Muslim world, by saying "*Aselam aleykoom*", "Peace be upon you", to which the standard response is "*Aleykoom aselam*." But if a foreigner offers the traditional Muslim greeting in Turkey, he will invariably be answered with "*merhaba*", which simply means "hi". For religious Turks, living in the shadow of the sometimes heavy-handed secular state, the traditional greeting is not to be used with all Muslims, but only with other traditional Turks. In Iran, by contrast, everyone, whether religious or not, uses the traditional greeting and response even with foreigners.

On my second night in Tehran I went to a small out-



*These fisherman ply the waters of the world's biggest lake, and it's hottest new oil frontier, the Caspian Sea.*

door mall full of trendy cafés where I'd arranged to meet the *Time* correspondent. Seeing that she hadn't arrived yet, I sat down at a table with a couple of intelligent-looking guys in their twenties who turned out to be medical students. After establishing that I didn't speak Farsi, they introduced themselves in excellent English.

"We were just discussing the fact that our generation no longer knows what it means to be Iranian," one them said casually. "Before the Revolution," he continued, "we used to take pride in our ancient culture and our intellectual sophistication." We talked for almost half an hour about the conflation of Shiism and the Islamic Revolution with Iranian nationhood. "After twenty years of Revolution," he said, "we're no different from any of our neighbors." I had to smile, thinking of the conversations about new computer games and football that occupy so many guys their age.

This was merely the first of dozens of such exchanges I had with Iranians. For the whole five weeks I traveled around the country, Iranians' interest in discussing abstruse questions of history, religion and culture was a constant source of delight and astonishment to me. From the prominence of poetry and religious scholarship in Iranian history and the success of the tens of thousands of Iranians who went to university in Europe and North America over the past 50 years or so, it's clear that intellectualism — particularly science and mystical speculation — has been a hallmark of the Persian character for centuries, if not millennia. But dozens of conversations about the current state of Iranian society convinced me that the Revolution itself had made its own salutary contribution to stimulating Iranians' thinking. Unlike most

countries in the world, including the US and Turkey, Iranians, including young people, devote enormous energy to considering the most profound questions about the purpose of life and the proper relationship between the individual and society.

The other thing that immediately struck me about Iran, especially in contrast to Turkey where cultural and linguistic uniformity is considered a matter of state security, was the acknowledgment and even the celebration of the country's ethnic and religious diversity. From my first day in Tehran, when a young boy in my hotel cracked a joke in what turned out to be Lur, a language of western Iran, I heard minority languages and saw reminders of religions other than Islam every day. Official literature highlights Iran's minority ethnic and religious groups, as do national museums. Children belonging to ethnic minorities can study in their own language. In the Islamic tradition, the state guarantees the right to worship for other "people of the book," including Jews, Armenian Christians, and adherents of Iran's pre-Islamic national religion, Zoroastrianism, all of whom have their own representatives in Iran's parliament, the *Majlis*. (The one religious group who are heavily persecuted, because they are considered Muslim apostates, are Bahais.)

Iranian history has always been intertwined with the Armenians'. One Sunday afternoon in the Caspian port city of Bandar-e Anzali I stepped into an Armenian church where I found one older couple and two young women sitting quietly in the pews listening to recorded organ music. The couple were Armenians, while the young women turned out to be Muslims who often came to the church just for the music and the soothing atmosphere. Seeing my surprise, they pointed out that one of the most famous love stories in Iranian folklore is about a romance between Khosro, an Iranian king, and Shireen, an Armenian girl.

Today Armenians are concentrated in the northwest and in the central city of Esfahan. One of the most visited buildings in this city of great architecture is the Vanq Church in the old Armenian quarter of Jolfa. The designs inside the dome of the church combine the theatrical figurative oil painting of baroque European churches and the abstract designs of Islam. The church itself is used five or six times a year by the 10,000 or so Armenians remaining in Esfahan. Many more people visit the museum alongside the church, which includes a prominent display about the 1915 slaughter of Armenians at the hands of Ottoman troops. Claiming 1.5 million were killed — a figure often cited by Armenians but double that acknowledged by Turks — a sign inside the display case says:

In 1915 the then government of Turkey, for the realization of its political purposes, decided to annihilate the entire Armenian population of western Armenia, which was then under Turkish rule, forming the eastern provinces of Turkey. This decision was implemented through government

planning and by military and paramilitary forces organized for this very purpose.

In addition to grisly photos of victims, the most impressive exhibit is a cable dated 29 September, 1915, from Talaat Pasha, then Minister of the Interior, to the governor of Aleppo in northern Syria:

As informed earlier... the Government has decided to exterminate the entire population of Armenians in Turkey. Those opposing the orders will not be considered Government servants. Children, women and the sick are not to be spared. The modes of extermination are not to be differentiated. Without listening to the voice of conscience, remove them all and put an end to their existence.

(I strongly doubt the authenticity of this supposed cable and include it as an illustration of Iranian attitudes toward Turkey and Armenia.)

One of the two Armenian members of the *Majlis*, Leon Davidian, is now calling for Iran to follow the example of France and Italy in declaring April 24 an official day of recognition of the Armenian genocide.

The Armenians had first settled in Esfahan along with Azeris from northwestern Iran when the Safavid dynasty established in 1502 made the city its capital. But the birthplace of the dynasty was Ardabil, a small city on Iran's northeastern frontier with the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, which I visited in October. Today the highlight of this pleasant little city is the tomb of Sheikh Safi, the patriarch and namesake of the dynasty, an impressive complex of domes and towers approached through a serene garden. Few tourists make it as far as Ardabil and the museum guide spent some 20 minutes telling me about the dynasty. Sheikh Safi, who died in 1334 at the age of 85, had been the hereditary leader of a gnostic Sufi brotherhood who claimed to be descendants of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad whom Shiites revere as the Prophet's chosen successor. In a smaller chamber within the same complex is the resting place of Shah Ismail, a descendent of Sheikh Safi's who six generations and 172 years later, at the tender age of 14, declared himself Shah and established a rule that would continue for over 200 years. His first act after assuming the throne was to declare Shiism the state religion, which led to the slaughter of countless Sunnis. Until the early 1500s, the Shiites were a minority sect in Iran with just a few islands of believers in places such as the shrine city of Qom. The Safavids' decision to make Shiite Islam Iran's national religion was prompted by the rise of two great Muslim empires to Iran's east and west, the Moghuls of northern India and the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia. Before the Safavids, Iranian Shiis hadn't had a strong tradition of learning, so the Safavids brought in mullahs, as Shiite scholars are known, from Shiite strongholds in southern Iraq and Lebanon. For the last 500 years Iran has been the center of Shiite Islam and Shiite Islam the



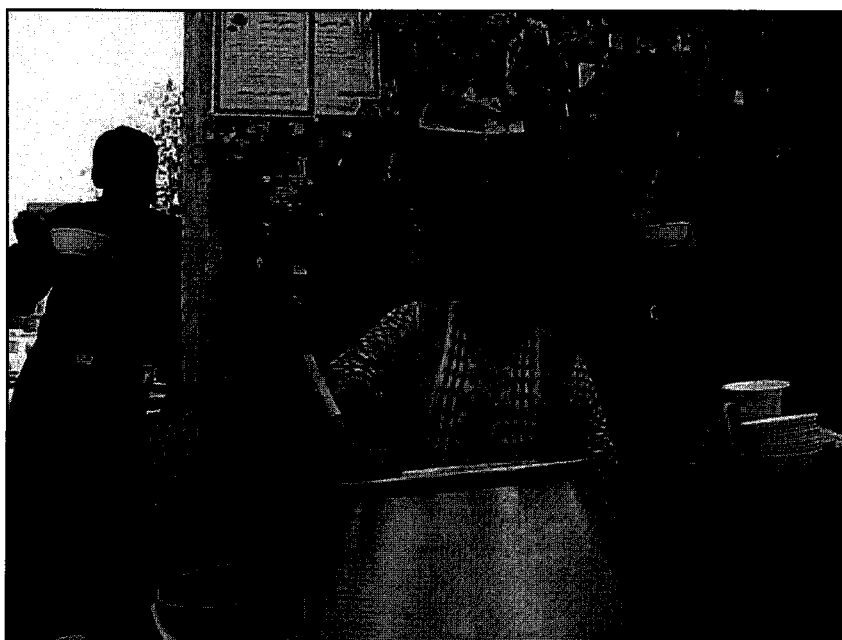
center of what it means to be Iranian. Yet national profiles at the time didn't correspond to today's: Ismail Shah spoke Turkish while his Ottoman counterpart, Selim Sultan, spoke Persian.

Today, Azeris, representing an estimated 20 percent of Iran's population, still speak a dialect of Turkish that's fairly easily understood by Turks from Istanbul. Anxious to see the people who shared the Turks' language but carried the passport of their inveterate rival, I spent my first full day in Iran crammed in the back of a Paykan sedan driving northwest to the capital of Azerbaijan province, Tabriz. My only association with the city was poetically tragic: Shams of Tabriz had been the mentor of the renowned Sufi Jalaludin Rumi, one of my favorite poets, and had been mysteriously murdered by people jealous of his influence over the mystic.

The city we arrived at this cool and drizzly evening felt safe but prosaic. After checking into our hotel, Massoud and I asked the man at the reception to recommend a place for dinner. We were in luck, he told us dourly: the only restaurant in the city still open at the ungodly hour of 10:30 was just around the corner. The restaurant wasn't exactly the refreshing sanctuary I'd been hoping for after ten hours on the road. With halogen bulbs reflected off wall-to-wall mirrors, it was as brightly lit as a surgical theater. On offer was a choice between half a chicken on a mound of rice or a chicken kebab on a mound of rice, washed down with a choice of "cola" — brown (regular cola) or yellow (orange soda.) My first night in Azerbaijan, a study in unaesthetic functionality, suggested that the Iranian Azeris partook more of the Turks' familiar rough-and-ready sensibility than of the passion for elaborate design I associated with Persian architecture and poetry.

The next morning we went to one of Tabriz's few tourist sights, an ancient citadel called Arg-e Tabriz: a decrepit brick monolith of perhaps five stories whose function couldn't be inferred from its shape. A rough sign informed us that at various times the structure had been used as a dance hall, a place for executions, a saloon, a mosque, a cemetery. Now it was closed for renovation. As we crossed the road outside the mosque Massoud warned me to be careful. "Remember," he said, "until recently the Turks have been driving donkeys."

Historically, Azerbaijan was far from a podunk backwater, at least relative to the Farsi-speaking heartland. On the contrary, thanks to exposure to the intellectual



*Azerbaijan's rough-and-ready charm: across from the police station in Ardabil, This man was selling delicious yogurt soup.*

developments in both Russia and Istanbul, for centuries Azerbaijan has represented Iran's cutting edge.

*Ever since the eleventh-century Seljuk conquest of Iran, Turkic languages were predominant among rulers, who were all of nomadic origin or, in the Safavid case, brought to power by nomads. The center of postwar leftist activity, Azerbaijan, was the province with the most radical traditions, and resentment against the central government was strong for many reasons. Azerbaijan paid more taxes than any other Iranian province without receiving commensurate benefits. The Azerbaijani Turki language was not taught or permitted for official business, and there was resentment against Persianization. Russian presence in the province encouraged leftist forces and discouraged the right, especially as many large landlords fled when the Russians came in. In 1918 a democratic movement flowered in Azerbaijan and trade unions were formed in Tehran and Tabriz. Two years later Sheikh Mohammed Khiabani's democratic movement expelled government agents and renamed Azerbaijan "Azadistan."*<sup>2</sup>

In 1945 a new Democrat party took the place of the traditionally strong communist party and incorporated a broader coalition demanding autonomy. The party took over military posts and a provincial assembly was elected. Provincial officials were to be elected locally, rather than appointed by Tehran, and Azerbaijan would retain much of its tax revenue. Turkish was to be used in schools, including the newly founded University of Tabriz, and a land-reform program was initiated.

When Tabriz saw the first big demonstrations against

<sup>2</sup>*Roots of Revolution*, Nikki Keddie, page 119

the Shah, Ayatollah Shariatmadari, an Azeri mullah in Qom who was the senior religious scholar in Iran, refused to support them. But when police in Tabriz opened fire on student demonstrators, killing several of them, Shariatmadari condemned the massacre on the BBC Persian service. It was considered a decisive blow to the monarchy. But later, as the Revolution coalesced, Shariatmadari led the opposition to the dominant role of the religious scholars envisaged in the new constitution. Azerbaijanis heavily boycotted the Constitutional referendum that ushered in the Islamic Republic a few months later.

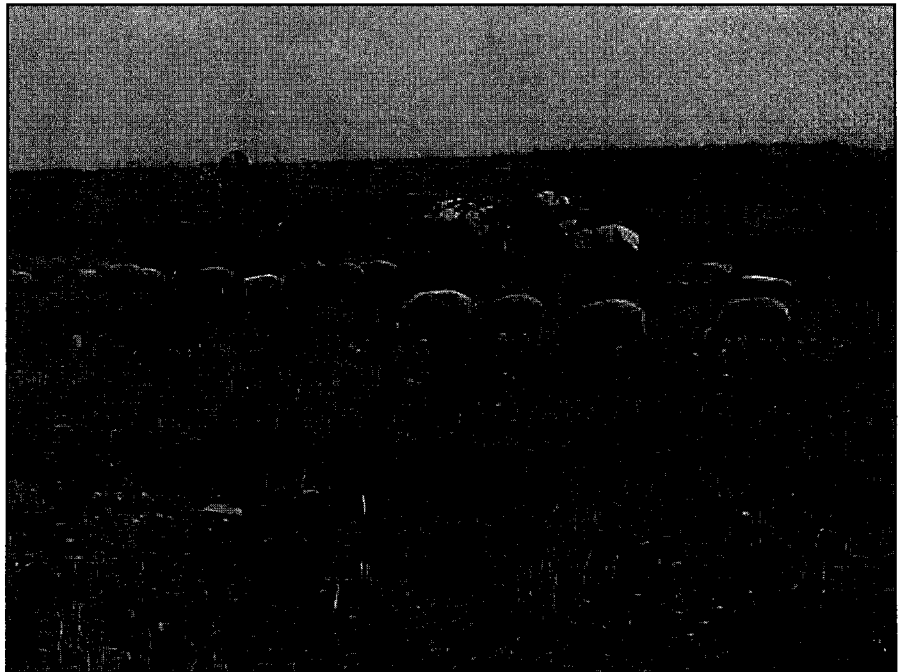
*Meantime, discontent was growing in Azerbaijan, Shariatmadari's native province. It came to a boil over the new constitution. In early December, members of the IPRP [Islamic People's Republican Party] and Shariatmadari's followers in the provincial capital, Tabriz, took to the streets, seized the television station, and began to broadcast demands and grievances. For a moment, it appeared that the opposition had found a powerful base from which to check the spreading power of the IRP and the Khomeini party. Tabriz was Iran's second biggest city; it was here that the first massive riots had taken place that eventually toppled the Shah. The Azerbaijanis were numerous and influential in the Tehran bazaar and in the capital's retail trade. In Azerbaijan, the opposition had a geographical base, strongly committed to Shariatmadari; and in Shariatmadari it had a religious leader who might give legitimacy to the movement.<sup>3</sup>*

The Revolutionary Guard prevailed in the end thanks to their own effective tactics and wavering on the part of Shariatmadari. But the incipient rebellion against the clerocracy at the beginning of the Islamic Republic, since when all opposition has been forced underground, suggests that at least until 20 years ago Azerbaijan remained the most rebellious of Iran's provinces. Many Iranian Azeris never master Persian. Even those Azeris who do, traditionally by memorizing a classic poem such as Sadi's *Gulestan*, generally retain a readily recognized accent. Marked by language and by the trades they usually work in, the Fars who lend their name to Iran's principal national language and the Azeris who lend theirs to its wealthiest province, always know who is who. Even in

*faiziyehs*, Shiite seminaries, Azeri and Persian-speaking students generally stick together.

Given the enduring segregation between Azeris and Farsi-speakers and the derisive comments I heard from many Farsi-speakers, it seemed to me that the Azeris must think occasionally of going their own way, or joining their fellow Turkish-speakers over the border in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan or in Turkey. On the surface at least there hasn't been any separatist movement visible since the Revolution. My guide Massoud insisted that Azeris are too thoroughly mixed with other groups throughout the country to think of separating. But an Azeri Iranian friend in Istanbul, who prefers not to be named, suggested another intriguing explanation for Azeris' loyalty to Iran: they want to dominate it. As my friend put it: "They don't want to cut the head from the body, they want the head to command the body."

Azeris still dominate many of the most lucrative trades in Iran, especially the bazaar. Even Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader himself, hail from Azerbaijan. Several Farsi-speaking Iranians grudgingly acknowledged that the Azeris' success in both business and governance reflects their superior pragmatism compared to the Persians' otherworldliness. Azeris, too, have taken pride in their more down-to-earth perspective. One example was Ahmad Kasravi, a Tabriz mullah famed as the most outspoken critic of the Shiite establishment, who wrote a book called *Hasan is Burning His Book of Hafez*, in which "he attacked the cult of Persian poetry, since he felt that Iranians used poetic quotations to avoid serious thinking."<sup>4</sup> [Kasravi was killed by a religious fanatic now



*These nomads are literally heading for greener pastures*

<sup>3</sup> *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, Shaul Bakhash, page 89.

<sup>4</sup> *The Mantle of the Prophet*, by Roy Mottahedeh, page 104.

memorialized in Tehran's Museum of Martyrdom.]

Despite its impressive history, though, present day Tabriz left me thoroughly underwhelmed. From the Arg-e Tabriz we went to Tabriz's Blue Mosque, an extremely pale shadow of the magnificent building of the same name in Istanbul. The exterior was mud-colored brick. The interior walls had some blue tiles whose color was impressively rich, but the building was neither particularly big nor beautifully proportioned and most of it was under reconstruction. After a quick walk around, we stopped at the gift shop, where three young women were working.

"Look," said Massoud, "they have books by Iran's greatest poets — Hafez, Sadi and Shahriar."

The girls beamed. As Azeris, they explained, they were surprised and delighted that Massoud, who they could tell by his accent was a Persian, would put Shahriar, the greatest contemporary Iranian Azeri poet, in the same class as the more famous Persian masters Hafez and Sadi.

From the mosque we went to Tabriz's bazaar and walked through its brick lanes for a while looking at cheap household goods, gaudy gold jewelry and bad carpets before stopping for tea in a small shop. About a dozen men were sitting around smoking water pipes, which Iranians call *galeons* and Turks call *nargiles*. When a new man arrived or left the group, the men noted the moment by chanting in unison a verse of praise for the Prophet Mohammed. As Massoud had told me we'd see, most of the men wore coats and ties, a distinctive habit of Tabrizis.

Having seen the mosque, the monolith, the bazaar (and skipped the provincial museums), we had exhausted

the main attractions in the city center. Depressed at the thought of passing the long afternoon and evening in this bleak place, I suggested to Massoud that we leave as soon as possible and look for someplace more promising. There was a young woman working at reception when we checked out. "Have you seen all the historic sights of Tabriz?" she asked with the unsmiling expression and uninflected tone of an automaton.

"Uh, I've seen a few things, but maybe not everything," I said and assured her we wouldn't leave the city without seeing every last one of Tabriz's glories.

Out on the street, Massoud turned to me with a smirk. "You know Iranians used to say '*Esfahan, nesf-e jahan*' — 'Esfahan is half the world'. But Azeris would always add 'Half the world — except Tabriz'." After seeing the spectacular cities down south, the Azeris' provincial pride did indeed seem ridiculous.

On the way out of town, we stopped by a monument honoring some 407 Azeri poets buried thereabouts. Their poetry may be sublime, but the memorial — several interlocking white concrete arches over a kind of bunker on the walls of which were several framed fragments of poetry — looked like a compromise between a Soviet architect and a small-town PTA committee.

Our last stop before quitting Tabriz was Elgoli Park. When Azerbaijan was one of Iran's wealthiest and most strategically important provinces, crown princes of the Qajar dynasty (1794-1923) had trained for the top job as governors of Azerbaijan. In the middle of a large artificial pond in the center of the park sat its *raison d'être*, a rather homely, two-story square building of yellow brick that had been home to a sickly prince. A film about this would-be monarch that showed him in an unflattering light while speaking Persian with a pronounced Azeri accent so enraged Azeris that they burned down the cinema in Tabriz that screened it.



*Tabriz's Poets' Mausoleum houses the remains of some of Iran's reknowned Azeri poets, but its architecture might look more at home just over the border in the old Soviet Union.*

As I was getting tea from a stand in the park, a man approached Massoud offering to sell him a simple, decent carpet made of felt. The seller asked \$50 for it. When the offering price had fallen to \$20 and Massoud still declined, the seller affected a look of disgust and said Massoud obviously wasn't a serious man and wouldn't buy his carpet at any price. The seller was sure, he added theatrically, that Massoud wouldn't buy even at a price of 3,000 tuman, less than four dollars. On the contrary, Massoud said, if the seller were really a man, he'd make good on his offer to sell it for 3,000 tuman and Massoud would buy it. Unable to resist the challenge to "prove he was a man," the seller agreed and the transaction was done. When Massoud told the story to





*Iranians told me that Shahsevan women are famous for their beauty. Among the nomads we visited, this old woman was the only female I was allowed to see.*

Hemnati, also an Azeri, and said this illustrated why Persians sometimes said Azeris were stupid, Hemnati looked dismayed. "He wasn't stupid," Hemnati said, "he just wanted to prove he was a man." For the next five weeks Massoud was continuously repeating that this was the most brilliant illustration he'd ever seen of the Azeri mentality.

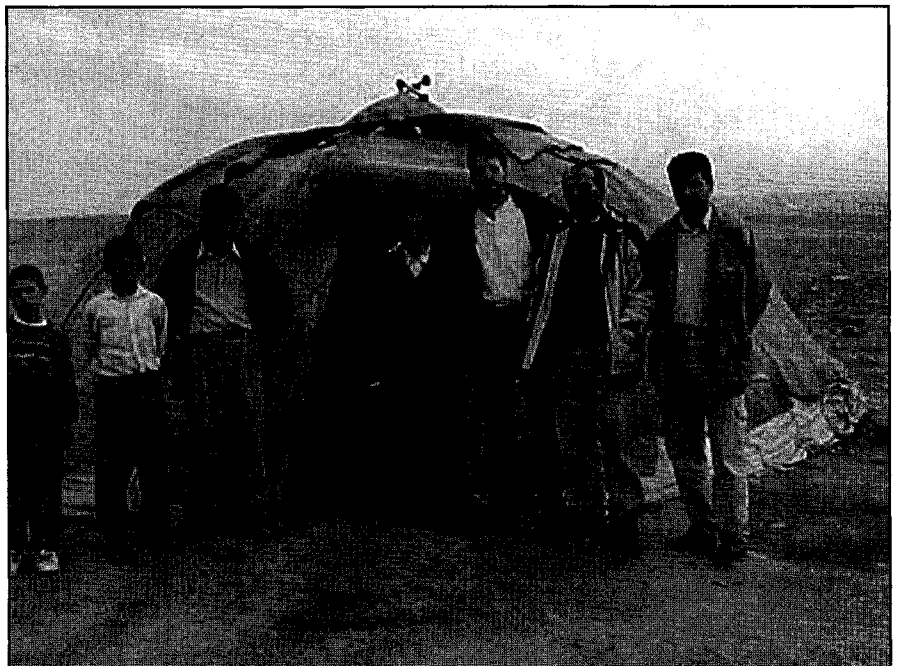
We stopped for the night in Hemnati's home town, a brutish-looking place called Meshginshar. Surprised, he claimed, by our premature departure from Tabriz, Hemnati had neglected to reserve a room for me and Massoud — a fact which seemed not to have occurred to him until I asked where our hotel was. We pulled over to the side of the main road through town and Hemnati jumped out, assuring us all was well. Massoud and I went to a tea house, actually a kind of shack illuminated by a single bare bulb, where about 15 men sat on rough wooden benches drinking cups of tea and sucking away on galeons. When the waiter brought us our tea, he slammed the glass onto the saucer with as much force as possible without shattering it. A few minutes later Hemnati arrived with a small, elderly man who showed us to an austere apartment owned by the town where we could sleep. After unloading our bags, we drove to the far end of town for what Hemnati assured us would be a memorable kebab meal. True to his word, he delivered us to a butcher shop

with carcasses hanging around us where we gamely tried to eat a few mouthfuls of meat so tough it seemed the poor beast had been worked to death.

The next morning we rose early, drove a few miles out of town and stopped near a large traditional yurt belonging to some nomads who were relatives of Hemnati's. Made of animal hides pulled taut by the torque of the wooden poles that formed its skeleton, the dome, some fifteen feet across, had a solidity that would have been a credit to Buckminster Fuller. As usual in this part of the world, a few young boys were hanging about the entrance and they announced our arrival. That we had been expected was evident from the absence of any females, apart from the oldest woman of the family. An older man with a thin face invited us to sit down on the carpets that covered the ground inside the yurt and the boys and the older woman passed us cups of tea and fresh-baked bread with butter and jam.

This visit was the whole reason that Hemnati, the older brother of the man who ran the tour agency that had arranged my visa, had accompanied us to Azerbaijan for four days. The old man, it emerged, was related to both to Hemnati and the nomads. He himself had started life as a nomad, migrating twice a year between summer grazing lands in the north and warmer pasturage in the south but then had married a town girl and settled in Meshginshahr. He still maintained close links to his nomad relatives and spent long hours drinking tea and smoking in their yurts whenever they passed through the area as they were now, stopping for about a week to rest and resupply from local markets on their way south.

The old man explained that the people encamped there belonged to a clan called the Khordapai, which is



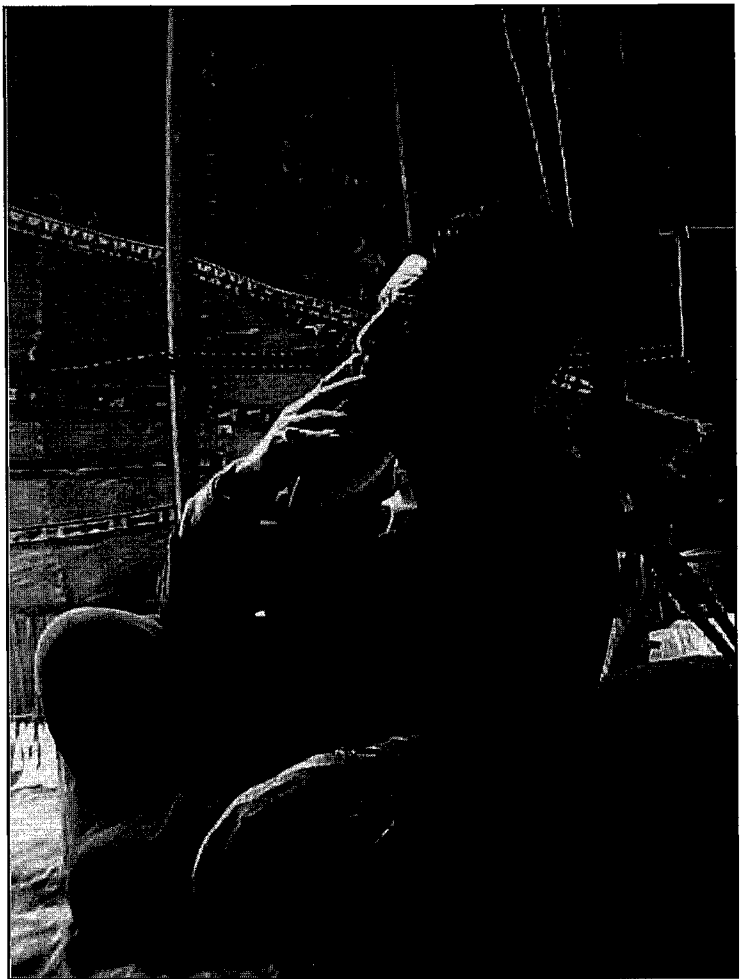
*My guide Massoud and I with our nomad hosts in front of their yurt.*

comprised of about ten families. The clan in turn belongs to a Turkmen tribe called the Moghanloo, which the old man claimed to number about 20,000. The clan in turn belongs to the biggest group of Azeri-speaking nomads, known as the Shahsevan. Massoud said he thought the number was exaggerated to increase the nomads' political power. Thanks to their expert horsemanship and the introduction of handguns, which could be fired from the saddle, the nomads had been the best fighters in Iran and had held the balance of power in Iran for centuries. "Every important Iranian dynasty from the Buyids (945-1055) through the Qajars (1796-1925) was either tribal in origin or relied on tribal armies to take power. According to one estimate, nomadic tribes made up about half the Iranian population in the early nineteenth century and a quarter at the end of the century."<sup>5</sup>

Judging from the family I visited, the Islamic regime is doing pretty well in instilling a sense of national identity in the nomads. Government teachers who travel with the clan teach the standard national curriculum. The oldest son of the family, 18, was preparing to do his two years of mandatory military service. Afterwards, he said, he supposed he'd return to the nomadic life, but wasn't sure.

After sitting on the ground inside the yurt for a couple of hours, we stepped outside to stretch our legs. I heard a squeal and turned to see two young boys running after a small puppy, trying to kick it. I asked Massoud to tell them that Islam required them to be kind to animals. The old man's face darkened. "You criticize us for the way we treat our pets, but you don't have anything to say when your government shoots down a plane with 400 innocent people on board."

His reference to the accidental shooting down of a Iran Air passenger jet over the Persian Gulf in 1987 took me aback. I told him that I'd been horrified by the tragedy, as had many Americans. The case had been widely aired in the US press and the ship captain held responsible had been cashiered. In any case, I argued, the shooting down of the Iranian plane and kicking a puppy reflected the same moral problem: the arrogance of power. Both the American military and the little boys did what they did because they could do so with impunity. And finally, I said, when I told the little boys they should be kind to animals I was not speaking as an American trying to impose an alien value on them, but as an adult conveying a lesson with which I was sure he would agree.



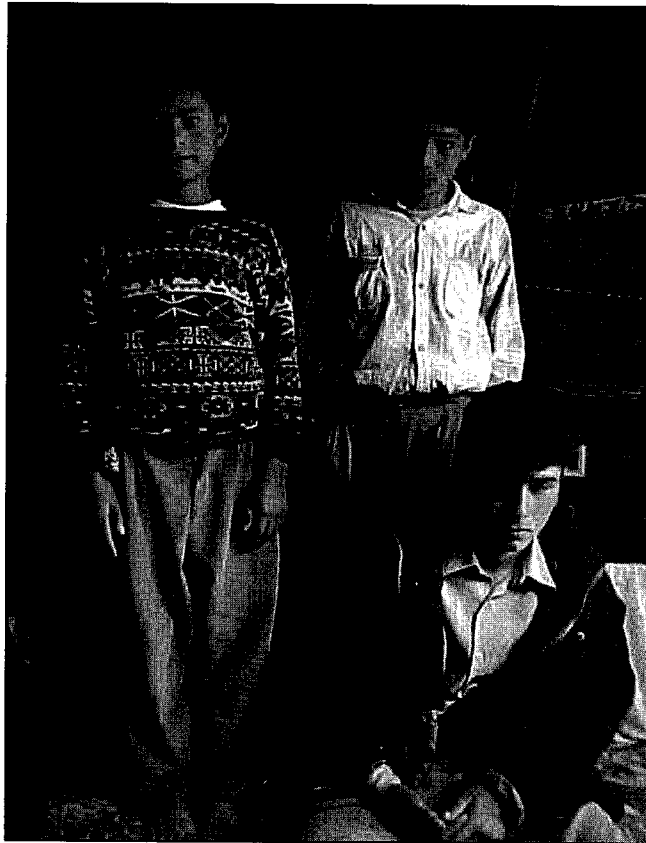
*This man started life as a nomad but, like many, married and settled in a town along their annual migration route. I'd never seen a man get so much from a cigarette: he seemed to smoke with his entire body.*

To my relief, the old man smiled. "You're right," he said. "They should be gentle with the animals."

When it was time to take our leave, I wanted to express my respect for the old man by performing the ritual Turkish obeisance toward one's elders of kissing his hand then touching it to my forehead. I took his hand and began to bend forward. But when the man saw I was drawing his hand toward my mouth, he jumped back as if I were about to kiss him on the lips. After a embarrassed moment, Massoud explained that this was done very rarely in Iran and the old man protested that he wasn't nearly grand enough to demand such a gesture.

I can't say that this awkward moment is emblematic of Turkish-Iranian relations. On the contrary, for now there's little danger of many such awkward misunderstandings anytime in the near future. They're just too close for that. □

<sup>5</sup> Keddie, page 25



*These nomad kids study the standard national curriculum  
with a teacher who travels with the clan.*

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

### **Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

### **Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

### **Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

### **Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

### **Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • EAST TIMOR**

With an M.I.T. degree in science education, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching a new nation whose previous education system had been erased, create a new one. Since finishing at M.I.T. in 1993 (he took his last semester at Berkeley's education department), Curt has focused on enabling minority and low-income students to invent their own science education using "found" materials on the Tibetan plateau at Qinghai Normal University and Middle/High School, in San Francisco and in a low-income community in the agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

### **Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

### **Leena Khan (April 2001-2002) • PAKISTAN**

A lawyer dealing with immigration and international-business law with a firm in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "Islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

### **Whitney Mason (January 1999-2001) • TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

### **Jean Benoît Nadeau (December 1999-2000) • FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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