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The State of the Theocracy After 21 Years in Power

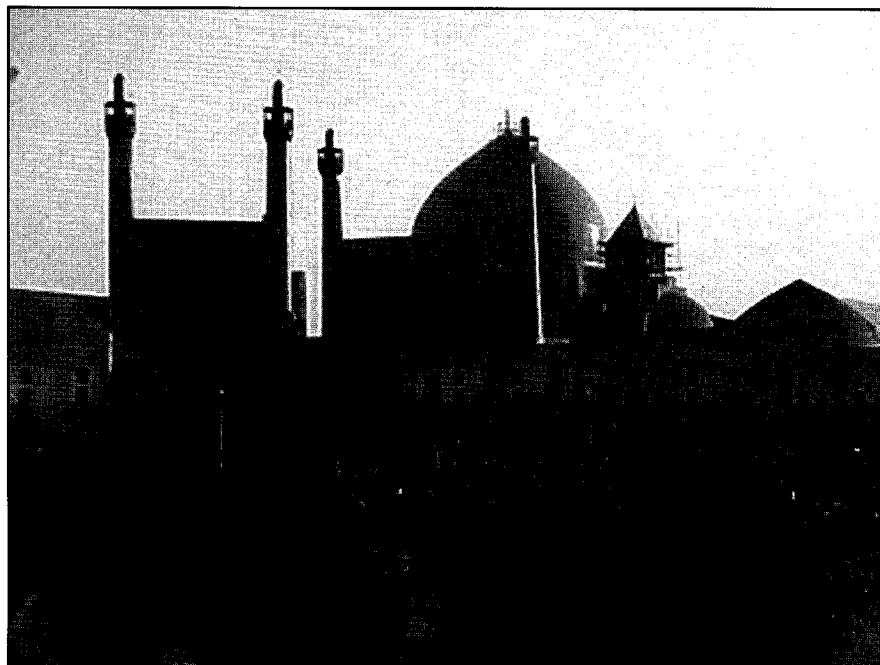
By Whitney Mason

TEHRAN—The name had a magical effect on my guide. Mohammed Askerbu had approached me as I was breakfasting on fresh *nan* bread with honey and tea on a rooftop overlooking a deep green valley. I was in the steeply terraced village of Masule, nestled in Iran's Alborz mountains behind the Caspian Sea. With a few words of English he offered to take me on a hike, led me by the two-room house he shared with his parents — who tried to sell me hand-knit socks — and armed me with a scythe-tipped club to be used against wolves. For half an hour we had been walking along a wooded slope toward a waterfall, exchanging what little information our language barrier would allow.

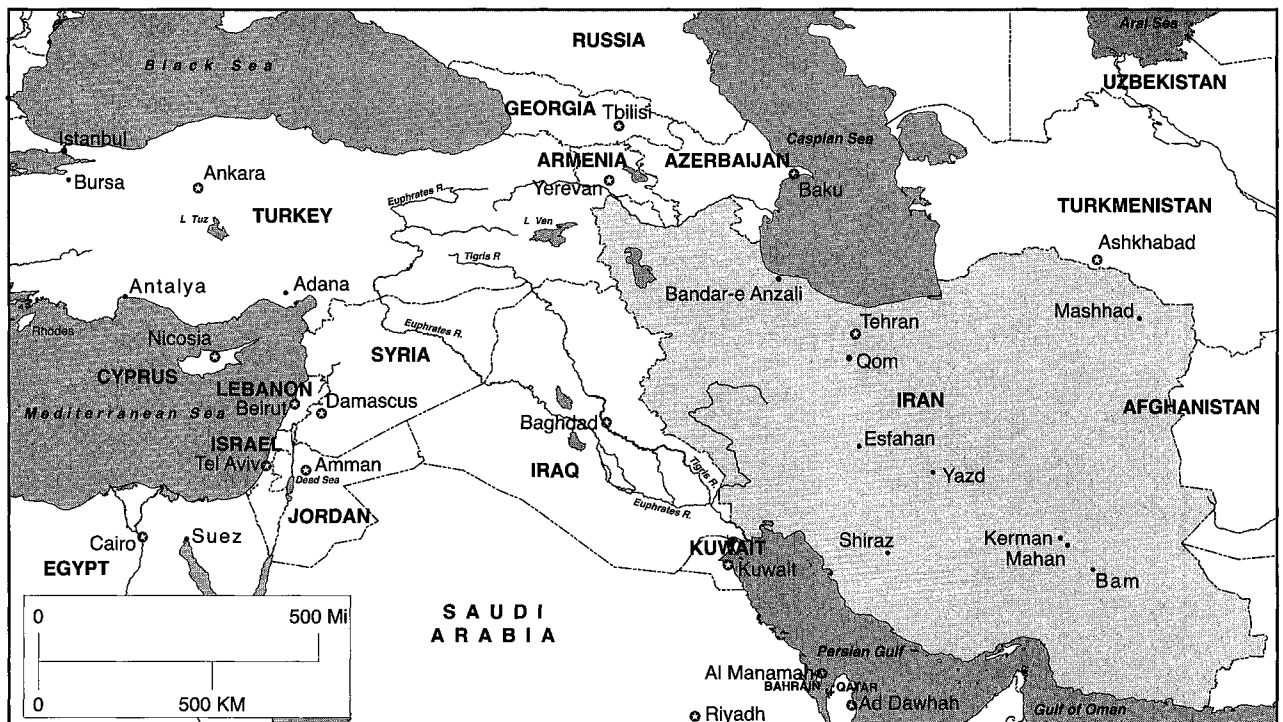
Then I had pronounced "Shariati". Askerbu stopped in his tracks and turned around toward me. "You know Shariati?" he said, glowering and jabbing his finger at me at me. From his expression, I had no idea what the name meant to him.

"Yes, I know him," I said, raising my eyebrows and shrugging my shoulders to convey an air of innocent neutrality.

Suddenly a broad smile lit up his meaty, weathered face. "Shariati my friend," he exclaimed, jerking his cocked thumb toward himself. "Shariati very good." He looked down at his open palms, indicating that he'd read a lot of Shariati's books,



The mosques of Esfahan, the Florence of Persia, embody 17-century Iran's celebration of beauty.



then pointed questioningly at me. I replied by putting my index finger and thumb together. "Mullahs" he said, referring to the religious scholars who rule Iran, making a nasty face and gleefully pantomiming kicking them out. Through some miracle of non-verbal communication, Askerbu conveyed that he used to work at Masule's post office before being fired for supporting Iran's reformist president, Mohammad Khatami. He pointed back down the trail toward the village. "Shariati my home," he said, nodding enthusiastically. Since I knew Shariati, he said, there was no question of my paying for his guiding; any friend of Shariati's was a friend of his.

The truth was that I'd first heard of Ali Shariati just a week before from a group of female university students in Tehran. The girls came from all over the country and were staying at my two-star hotel near Tehran University while attending a youth conference on social and political issues and we managed to talk for a few minutes away from the chaperones while eating breakfast in the hotel tea room.

I said the conference must be fascinating. Staying in a hotel together was fun, they said, (which I already knew from hearing them laughing until late into the night), but the conference itself was pretty dull. The problem was that they weren't allowed to talk about the ideas and figures they really cared about. "Ah," I said, pulling up my background reading. "You must mean Abdolkarim Soroush," [a popular philosopher whose defense of individual interpretation of religious truth has earned him the moniker "the Martin Luther of Islam".]

They hadn't been allowed to mention Soroush's name, but he wasn't the one they had in mind. One young

woman leaned forward, looking at me intently. "Do you know Ali Shariati?" she asked, while half a dozen young faces peering out of black sheets beamed adoringly, the way American girls might have 40 years ago about Elvis.

Ali Shariati, as I soon learned, was a French-educated sociologist who had preached a blend of Iran's Shiite Islam, liberation theology and modernism that had electrified Iranians in the late sixties and seventies. Though he was forced into exile and killed by the Shah's henchmen in London in 1977, from exchanges I had with Iranians all over the country, Shariati seemed to be far and away the most popular religious figure in Iran today; if you want to know most Iranians' vision of Islam, it seems, you should look to the voluminous tracts Shariati wrote and speeches he gave. And that's bad news for the mullahs, the Shiite scholars who rule Iran.

A leading exponent of Islamic humanism, Shariati emphasized the distinction between the Shiism of Imam Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, whom Shiis consider God's vice-regent on earth, and the Shiism of the Safavid dynasty who with their ascendance in 1502 made it Iran's state religion. As historian Nikki Keddie wrote: "Aliid Shi'ism [according to Shariati] represents original Islam and is a movement of progress and revolution with no division between intellectuals and the people — Islam in its progressive and dynamic phase. The Safavids, by making Shi'ism the state religion, degraded it into an institution, making it a means of political enslavement and turning it from its original aim — the search for justice and sacred duties... Shariati's Safavid Shi'ism is also [Shah] Pahlavi Shi'ism, and today's "Safavid" ulama

[mullahs] are those who play games of power.”¹

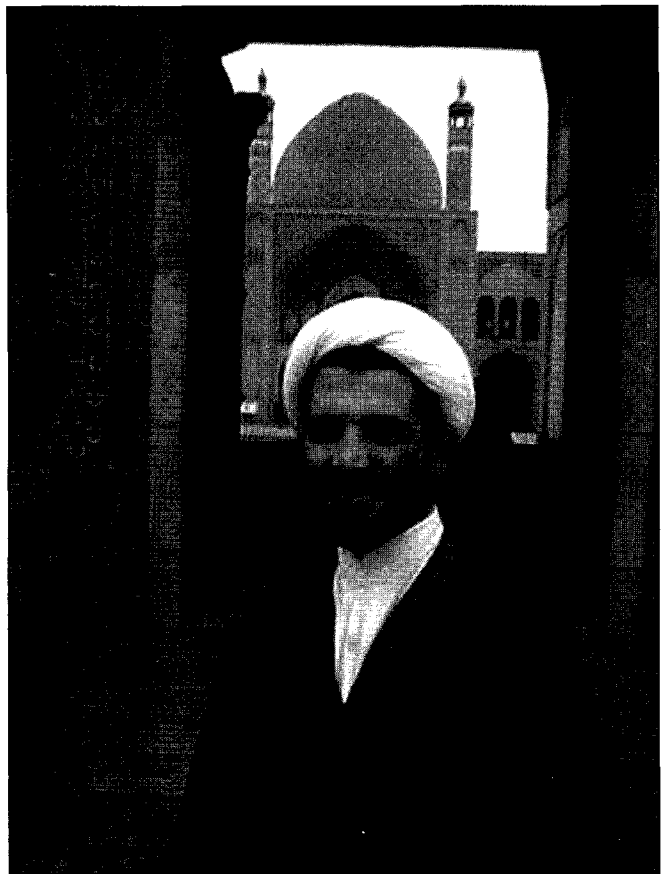
In one essay, “Reflections of a Concerned Muslim On the Plight of Oppressed People”, Shariati writes: “Where should I go? Should I go to the Mobedans (priests of pre-Islamic Persia)? How could I return to those temples which were built to enslave me? Should I join those who claim to be examples of our national freedom but in essence are attempting to gain their inhuman privileges of the past? The mosques are no better than those temples! [the pyramids, used here as symbols of authoritarianism.]”²

When I first arrived in Iran, I vaguely imagined that Iranians were divided between religious people who supported the theocratic regime, and better-educated, non-religious people who read the reformist newspapers that have been closed down in droves over the past year. I soon discovered that this is a false dichotomy. It’s no accident that Shariati, the most popular modern thinker in Iran, was someone who had tried to reconcile Shiite tradition with modernity. Iranians’ faith in Shiite Islam, centered on a line of savior figures descended from Imam Ali, is real, broad and deep. But it is not the religion that outsiders would infer from looking at Iran’s laws and institutions. Quite the contrary: in many ways, Iranians’ faith is deeply hostile toward both the reigning religious authorities and toward the Sunni Muslim world with which the government often expresses fraternal solidarity.

Islam and Nationhood

The Safavids’ introduction of Shiism as Iran’s state religion has left so deep a mark on Iranian society that today it’s difficult for many Iranians to conceive of their national identity apart from the religion. And yet Iranians are constantly reminded that their forebears were monotheists who ruled half the known world at a time when the people who brought Islam to Iran, the Arabs, were worshipping idols and living off banditry. The result is a schizophrenic combination of intense devotion to the Shiite version of the religion of the Prophet Mohammad as revealed in Arabic and a visceral loathing for Arabs themselves.

I once made the error of referring to Iran’s pre-Islamic period as “Jahaliya”, the period before Mohammed known in Muslim history as the “time of ignorance”. “Jahaliya is only for Arabs,” a devout Iranian man told me rather tersely. “We Persians had civilization before Islam.” In Iran’s National Museum I saw a monolith called the Hamurabi Stone, inscribed with “all the laws necessary for a small community.” The sign called it “the



Iran’s mullahs, who are first and foremost supposed to be experts on Shiite Islamic law, enjoy both the power and popularity of their secular American counterparts.

world’s first writing on human rights.”³

Iran’s national epic, the *Shahnameh* or Book of Kings, calls Arabs “lizard-eaters”. Iranian names come from either from Arabic or the *Shahnameh*, which although written in the 11th century recounts mostly the glories of pre-Islamic Iran. Very often Iranians with Arabic names would tell me they hated them, and ask me to call them by a Persian name. Many Iranians I met described the Arab conquest of 642 as a tragedy that had ruined their culture. And yet, when the Shah had tried to weaken the power-religion by promoting a pre-Islamic nationalism, the effort was a bitter failure.

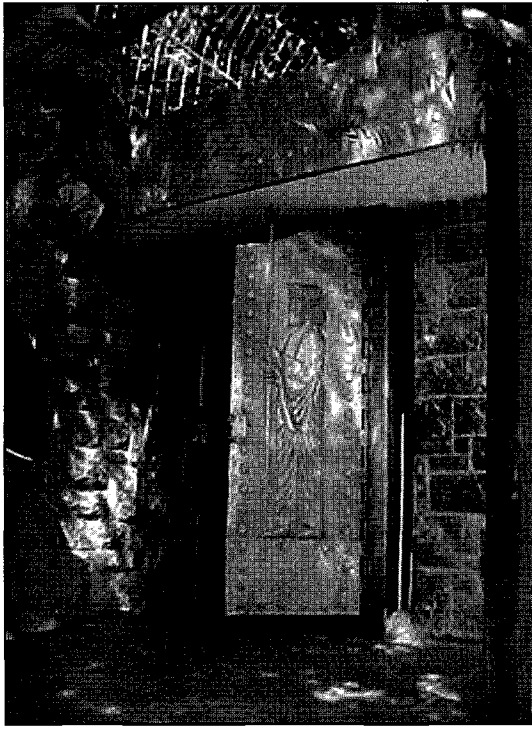
The spiritual heart of Iran’s pre-Islamic civilization was the monotheistic religion founded by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster some five centuries before Christ. The greatest concentration of Zoroastrians today can be found in the ancient oasis city of Yazd where, according to one elderly Zoroastrian I talked to, there are about 10,000 Zoroastrians left out of 140,000 Zoroastrians in all of Iran.

¹ *Roots of Revolution*, Nikki R. Keddie, pgs 217,218.

² *Reflections of a Concerned Muslim On the Plight of Oppressed Peoples* by Ali Shariati, pg. 8.

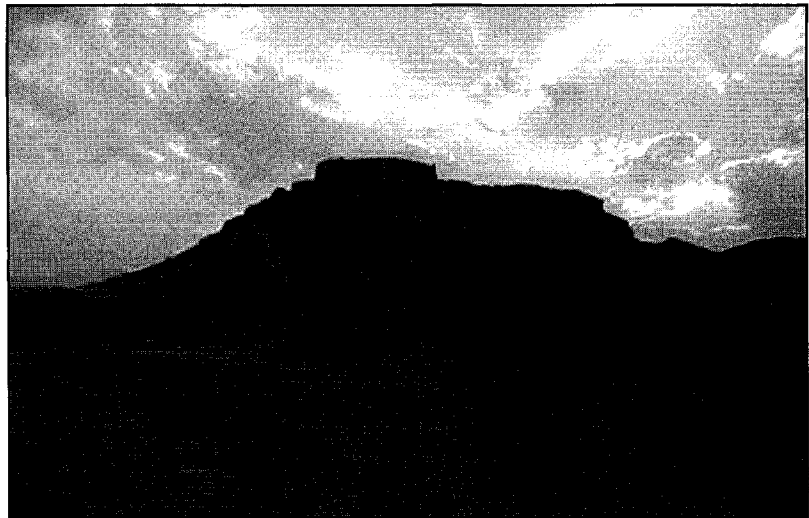
³ The stone was carved in 1160 by order of a Babylonian king who moved his capital to what is now western Iran. The French took the stone from Iran in 1901 and “returned” it before World War II. It was discovered to be a fake made of plastic when some sophisticated antiquarian tried to stub out his cigarette on it and it burned. The original remains in the Louvre.

Zoroastrian monuments: Until the coming of Islam with the Arab conquest in the seventh century, Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Sassanid Persia. Unlike the Arabs, who refer to the pre-Islamic period as "the time of ignorance," today's Iranians express enormous pride in their ancient history.



The temple known as "Chak Chak," built around a desert spring the Zoroastrians regard as sacred, marks the last gasp of Iran's pre-Islamic civilization.

In order to avoid contaminating any of the sacred elements of fire, water or earth, Zoroastrians disposed of their dead by leaving them atop "towers of silence," like these in Yazd, where birds would pick their bones clean.



(There are more in northern India, where they're known as Parsis.) The number is shrinking because Zoroastrians don't allow intermarriage, and since the Revolution, the government hasn't allowed Muslim women to marry Zoroastrian men. The principal Zoroastrian monument in Yazd is a temple housing a fire that has been burning continuously for over 400 years. The elderly Zoroastrians explained that they don't worship fire, as some ignorantly accuse them of doing, but they regard light as a sign of God and goodness. Zoroastrians pray facing natural light, standing upright, because God — Ahura Mazda

— is everywhere. Outside Yazd, two steep, cone-shaped mounds of reddish clay rise a couple hundred feet into the air. They are called "towers of silence", and Zoroastrians used to leave the corpses of their dead on the top, where they would be picked clean by vultures and crows without contaminating any of the sacred elements of earth, water or fire.

The most important Zoroastrian site in Iran today is a place northeast of Yazd that seems to have more to do with national pride than religion. Known as Chak Chak,

it is a shrine in the desert that memorializes the last gasp of Iranian independence before the country was overrun by the Arabs. To reach it my guide and driver and I drove our rattling Peykan sedan twenty kilometers north of Yazd, turned right into the Dasht-e Lut desert and drove another 20 kilometers in the direction of Tabas, where 20 years ago the American attempt to rescue the hostages from the US embassy had ended in a fiery collision between two helicopters. Another 20 kilometers past mountains blue-gray in the desert haze along an unpaved road brought us to our destination. About a 150 feet above us on a shelf of rock, surrounded by the desolation of the desert, a small complex of yellow brick buildings was built around a huge chenar tree. Two magnificent brass doors adorned with reliefs of ancient Persian warriors opened onto a cool sanctuary built around the tree and the gurgling spring that feeds it, as well as a sacred flame.

Zoroastrians believe the tree was planted by Nikh Banu, "Good Lady", the youngest daughter of the last Sassanid king, Yazdgerd III. According to the story, after the Arabs invaded Persia in 636, Yazdgerd, whose kingdom was already weakened by an internal rebellion led by a proto-communist named Mazdak, moved his court to Yazd, which was as far away from the Arabs as possible. When the Arabs finally caught up with him, the royal family fled the city in small groups. When Nikh Banu collapsed from exhaustion in the mountains nearby, she planted her walking stick beside a spring and fell asleep. From that walking stick, Zoroastrians believe, grew the sacred tree.

What allows Iranians to cherish their faith while despising the conquest that first brought Islam to their country is, of course, that Iranians are Shiite. Iranians believe that they, and not the Sunnis who represent 90 percent of the Islamic world, carry on the authentic Muslim tradition as bequeathed by the Prophet Mohammad. Shia's point of departure from the Sunni is disagreement about the succession of the leaders of Islam, the Khalifs, after the death of Mohammad. The majority of Muslims supported candidates from Mecca's leading family, the Umayyids, despite the fact that they had been late to accept the new faith. But Shiis believe that the Prophet had elected his son-in-law and cousin Ali to be his successor and most of the Shiis of Iran, known as "twelvers", believe that God's vice-regency on earth passed from Ali through a succession of infallible men until the twelfth and last one disappeared under mysterious circumstances in the ninth century. Sunnis consider the first four Khalifs "the rightly guided" ones who presided over the golden age of Islam. Iranians believe Ali, who eventually became the third Khalif, should have succeeded Mohammad and that Ali should have been succeeded by his male descendants. Shiis view the other "rightly guided Khalifs" as evil usurpers. Abu Lo'Lo', the man who murdered the second Khalif, 'Umar, is buried in a large complex on the edge of Kashan that's a popular pilgrimage site.

Iran's most violent clash with the Arabs since the original invasion was its eight-year war with Iraq, in
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which about a million people were killed. In Iran it's known as "the imposed war" to emphasize that it was Iraq that started it when it tried to take advantage of turmoil during the Revolution to seize Iran's main oil-producing region. Alluding to the fact that the Sassanid kingdom was already weakened by the proto-Marxist insurrection, a veteran of the war — who is also religious — told me it was the second time the Arabs had tried to take advantage of internal instability to conquer Iran. Said the veteran: "I fought to defend Persepolis," the awesome ruins of the city that was the religious center of the Persian dynasty of Cyrus and Darius before being sacked by Alexander the Great.

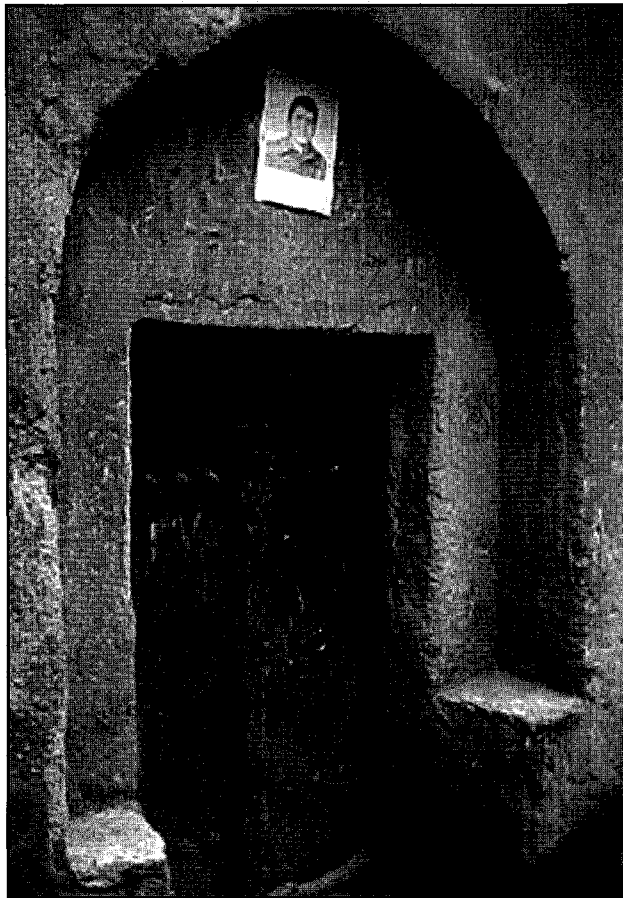
In Behesht-e Zahra, the enormous, sprawling cemetery in south Tehran, I was shocked to come across a monument to some 400 Iranians who had been killed while making the hajj to Mecca. A sign at the monument explains that the pilgrims were shot by Saudi security forces while marching in a peaceful "pro-unity" demonstration. Such a demonstration hardly seemed objectionable, given that fostering brotherhood is the main point of the hajj and all hajjis chant "Oh all Muslims, unity, unity!" But photos at the monument show the marchers carrying signs with Khomeini's picture — which must have been a most unwelcome incitement in reactionary Saudi Arabia. (Turkish hajjis have also told me that Iranians in Mecca and Medina hold themselves arrogantly aloof from the other pilgrims.) At the edge of the raised plaza covered in headstones, is Khomeini's own verdict on the massacre: "Even if we forget about Qods (Jerusalem), even if we forgive Saddam and all our other enemies, we will never forget or forgive the Saudis." Despite the leader's damnation, Iran's government has lately been improving relations with both Saudi Arabia and even Iraq. Several moderate Iranians told me the rapprochement made them sick.

The government also provides aid to another group of Sunni Muslims toward whom many Iranians have hard feelings: the 1.5 million Afghan refugees settled in Iran, many of them since the Soviet invasion of their country, in 1979. I met Mozafar Daudi, a dazzlingly bright 23-year-old from Kabul, in an internet café in Yazd. Over a water pipe at a tea house near the bazaar, he described his lot as a refugee. He is one of 11 kids. His father is a religious fanatic. As a refugee, not only can he never become a citizen, he can't get a driver's license and wasn't even allowed to play basketball on his high-school team. Nor are the Afghans allowed to build Sunni mosques. Since 1992, the refugees haven't even been documented. When an Afghan leader in exile is murdered by a hitman sent by the Taliban, the Iranian media describe it simply as an "Afghan-on-Afghan killing." In the five weeks I was there, I heard many Iranians make derisive remarks about their Muslim brothers from the east. Once, when I'd descended a long staircase leading to an underground water channel, known as a *qanat*, someone turned out the lights, plunging me and several Italian tourists in darkness. "It must have been Afghan boys who did that," an

Iranian guide said apologetically. "Local boys are well-behaved."

The Cult of Martyrdom

My progress through Iran was measured in cups of tea drunk and graves visited; Iran often felt like a vast necropolis where the ghosts of the country's vaunted millennia of history dominate not only the minds of the living but their real estate as well. Probably the densest concentration of tombs in Iran is to be found in south Tehran, the maze of higgledy piggledy streets that during the Revolution was a bastion of support for the Ayatollah Khomeini and the mullahs. The Tomb of Sheikh Sadough is one of many housed in its own enclosed building, surrounded by graves of lesser mortals, many of which are splattered rather gruesomely with red paint, signifying the violence of their deaths. People say that the Sheikh was buried prematurely and woke up in his coffin. He promised God that if he could escape, he'd write a detailed commentary on an already existing translation of the Koran into Persian. Just then, a grave robber dug up his coffin and liberated him and the Sheikh went on to



The picture above this doorway in the ancient village of Abyaneh, where residents speak an archaic form of Persian called Parthian Pahlavi, marks this as the home of one of the hundreds of thousands of martyrs in Iran's war with Iraq.

keep his promise by writing one of Iran's most famous Koranic commentaries.

In the same cemetery lies the tomb of a champion wrestler named Takhti, who was one of the most popular martyrs of the struggle against the Shah. Iranians believe he was murdered by the Shah's brother, Gholam Reza. At 37 the sporting hero had attended a public ceremony with the royal and received a much bigger ovation than he. Takhti himself snubbed the prince. A couple of weeks later the wrestler was dead. He was declared a suicide but because he was very religious and suicide is one of the worst sins in Islam, Iranians were sure he'd been killed by the Shah's secret police. A couple of kilometers away lies the biggest cemetery I've ever seen, the Behesht-e Zahra or Zahra's Paradise — miles and miles of graves, thousands of them war martyrs', marked by glass cases containing flowers and photos of the deceased.

Like the Russians across the Caspian, Iranians seem to pride themselves on being able to suffer more deeply and nobly than anyone else. For the most important Shiite holiday, Ashura, Iranians stage a passion play reenacting the killing of Ali's son Hossein by the Khalif Yazid, who is depicted as the incarnation of evil. I visited all the holiest sites in the country — the great shrines of Shiraz, Qom and Mashad — and all of them are built around the tombs of the imam and his siblings. Besides these grand shrines, Iran is sprinkled with hundreds of "Imamzadeh," shrines built around the tombs of more distant relatives of imams. Highways, especially in Tehran, are lined with billboards and buildings covered with dramatic murals depicting the ordeals and deaths of martyrs great and small. The greatest monument to the Revolution is the enormous tomb-mosque complex of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Martyrs' Museum, a collection of photos, short biographies and personal effects of men killed in the service of the Revolution, is the closest the Islamic Republic has yet come to establishing a museum dedicated to its own history. The youngest martyr in the museum was a 14-year-old boy who strapped grenades to his body and threw himself under an Iraqi tank. Ayatollah Khomeini himself exalted the young suicide as a paragon.

So deeply embedded in Shiism is the ideal of self-sacrifice that the standard Persian phrase for "you're welcome", "ghorbane shomaa", means "I sacrifice myself for you." When I remarked to Iranians that I found this expression strangely melodramatic, they would assure me that it's empty perfunctory. Most Iranians, they said, were no more anxious to sacrifice themselves than anyone else — especially now, 20 years after the Revolution. During the war with Iraq, all Iranian soldiers heading to the front wore headbands proclaiming their readiness to be martyrs (as over half a million were). But a popular film from the early 90s, "Leyla Is With Me", told a different story. The protagonist, a TV reporter, makes a great show of wanting to fight but is actually terrified of the war. To his horror, he is assigned to cover a story at a rear



This burnt out jeep, in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, commemorates Iran's apocalyptic eight-year war with Iraq. The monument behind it recalls the hundreds of Iranians shot by Saudi security forces while performing the Hajj in Mecca.

base. Through a series of accidents he then finds himself being dragged closer and closer to the front. At last he winds up actually at the front and his tough-looking producer admits that he's terrified himself and can only marvel at his colleague's courage. All at once the anti-hero finds himself in a trench facing an Iraqi tank with nothing but a rocket-propelled grenade with which to defend himself. Petrified, he fires blindly and destroys the tank. Back in Tehran he's given a hero's welcome and only we, the audience, know what a coward he really was. The film was a great success; many Iranians, it seemed, could relate to it.

Popular Islam vs. Mullah Islam

In public men's rooms in Iran there are never any urinals. One day I asked my guide, who'd spent 5 years living in the US, about this. "Of course," he said. "Our religion forbids us to urinate standing up." According to him, Iranian Muslim men believe their religion enjoins them to urinate while squatting and even stipulates that

they should rub their urethra three times in three different places to ensure all the urine is out. "We Iranians never have urinary disorders," he said proudly. (I doubt Mohammad can be blamed for another peculiarity of Iranian toilets: they don't have toilet paper. Instead they have a small articulated hose. Exactly how the whole process works is something your correspondent never managed to figure out.)

It's on this very personal level that most Muslims have experienced their faith throughout the centuries. Historically, the strict, austere and legalistic vision of Islam espoused by most of the mullahs has never appealed to more than a small minority of believers; their exercise of supreme political authority is unprecedented. Many Iranian (and Turkish) Muslims have been more influenced by the various mystical practices collectively known as Sufism, which are anathema to the orthodox religious scholars. A complex and varied tradition, experts on Islamic history often say that it resists succinct description. But my guide offered an explanation that struck me as very apposite: "Mullahs believe man *belongs to* God, Sufis that we are *part of* God."

In the green oasis of Mahan, on the desert highway between Kerman and Bam, I stopped at the elaborate tomb complex of one of Iran's most famous Sufis, Shah Nematollah Vali.⁴ The colonnaded garden was more crowded than any big city mosque I'd visited. As I approached the mosque where Nematollah Vali is buried, a young man standing near the door handed me a cookie. It was the Sufi's birthday, he explained, and also, by chance, the anniversary of his "wedding night" with God, better known as death. Like other Sufis, he would often subject himself to 40 days and nights of meditation, called Chelleh Neh-Shirn, during which he would eat just one date per day.

A guide at the tomb told me a teaching story that emphasizes the Sufi belief that God is unknowable — so different from the conviction of many mullahs that they are privy to all Allah's intentions:

Shams of Tabriz, the spiritual mentor of the great Sufi mystic Jelaluddin Rumi, could walk on water. Rumi asks him to teach him the trick. Shams tells Rumi he can too — he just has to follow him repeating "Oh Shams." Rumi does so and it works. Then Rumi hears that Shams has started repeating "Oh Ali." Rumi switches to saying "Oh Ali", whereupon he immediately sinks. Shams turns around and smiles. "You don't even know me completely and you think you can know Ali?"

The following story, which I was told by a bazaari

⁴ "Shah" means "master" and in this context refers to Nematollah Vali as a master of mysticism.

in Esfahan, illustrates the teasing, folksy side of Iranians' attitude toward authority:

Shah Abbas, the greatest Safavid ruler and the builder of much of Esfahan, would dress up as a dervish and walk around his capital, observing how his subjects felt and behaved. One night he heard music from a big, handsome house. He knocked on the door and said, "You're rich, I'm a poor dervish, please help me." The people invited him in and Shah Abbas discovered that his host was a successful shopkeeper.

Shah Abbas asked him whether he'd ever considered trying to save some money, rather than entertaining so lavishly.

"Why should I?" asked the shopkeeper.

Shah Abbas: "Because tomorrow your shop may be closed by order of the Shah."

"Nah," said the shopkeeper, "the Shah's a good man, he'd never shut my shop for no reason."

"But what if?" pressed the disguised Shah.

"God is great – he'd show me another way to provide for my family."

The next day Shah Abbas ordered the shop closed. That night he returned to the shopkeeper's house and, much to his surprise, found another party going on. Again the shopkeeper invited him in and showed him perfect hospitality. He explained that his shop was indeed shut by order of the Shah but they'd managed to put aside a bit which they were now spending on this party.

"What if the Shah takes everything you have left?" asks Shah Abbas.

"Ah, he would never do that," answered the shopkeeper.

"But what if?" repeated the Shah.

The shopkeeper said again that God is great and would provide a way for him to carry on.

The next day Shah Abbas ordered the shopkeeper's remaining property confiscated and that night returned again disguised as a dervish. Once again he was invited in and asked the shopkeeper what he was going to do. He told Shah Abbas that he'd go to the Shah and ask for a good job. The next day he went to the court and was hired as the Shah's executioner. That night the Shah again dropped by the man's house and to his amazement found yet another party in progress. He said to the man,

"I know you have a new job, but you haven't been paid yet, so how can you afford all this?"

The man explained that he'd sold the official sword he'd been given just that day.

"But what if the Shah orders you to execute someone tomorrow?"

The man shrugs. The next day at court Shah Abbas ordered him to execute someone. The former shopkeeper approached the Shah and said, "I know that guy and can promise you he's not so bad. Please spare him."

Shah Abbas ordered him to proceed with the execution.

The shopkeeper raised his hands to heaven. "Dear God, if this man is really guilty, let his life be taken by my blade. But if he is innocent, please spare my shah the sin of unjustly condemning him and turn my sword into wood." Whereupon the shopkeeper theatrically pulled out a wooden sword. Shah Abbas burst out laughing and returned all the shopkeeper's belongings.

Anticlericalism

To visit Iran today is to know what Barcelona must have been like when it was the hotbed of Republicanism on the eve of Spain's Civil War. Iranians told me they have felt safe criticizing the theocracy since the reformists' overwhelming victory in last February's parliamentary elections. Everywhere I went in Iran — from the green mountains above the Caspian to the sun-baked mud fortress of Bam on the road to Pakistan — people went out of their way to tell me how much they despised the mullahs. A senior western diplomat told me "The regime is isolating itself". Tehranis confirmed this, saying that while in the old days you might at least see the Shah on the ski slopes, for instance, nowadays the senior mullahs inhabit a world completely separate from that of the normal people.

The mullahs' aloofness offends many Iranians' keen sense of social justice. While touring Bam, I ran across a group of mullahs. From the solicitous attitude of their guide, I guessed they were VIPs. When I'd left the fortress and was about to climb into my humble Peykan, Iran's homely national car, my driver pointed disgustingly to the portal from which the mullahs were emerging and walking toward a gleaming white Land Rover pulled up to the curb.

"When Imam Ali was Khalif," he said, "and his relatives would come to visit, he would refuse to use fuel to light extra lamps, so concerned was he about abusing his position. When Imam Hossein was struggling against the Umayyid usurpers, he could have had the number two

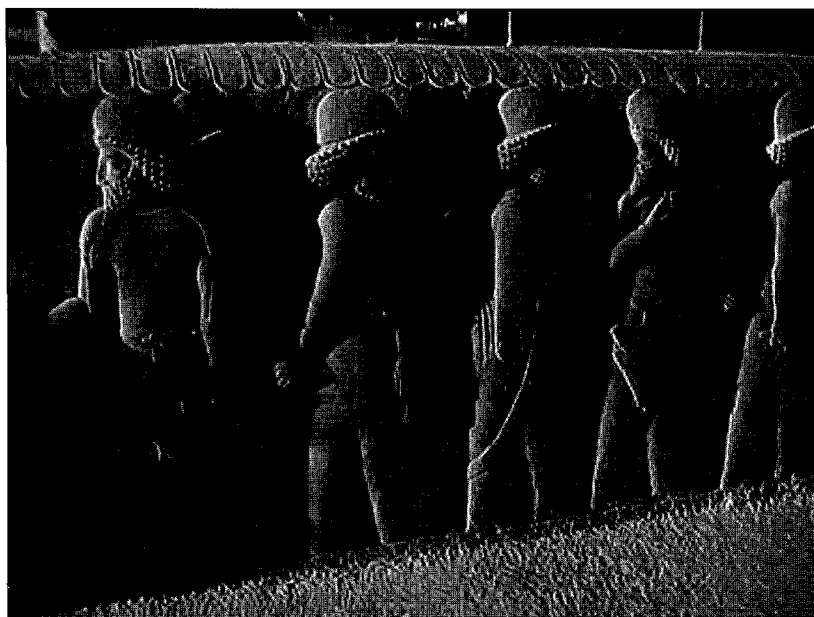
position in the empire if he had simply acknowledged Yazid [his rival and killer] as Khalif. But instead he chose a heavenly kingdom. Compared to the imams," he said disgustedly, "just look at these mullahs in their fancy car!"

The lyrically elegant city of Esfahan, which I thought of as the Florence of the East, is home to some of the most beautiful religious buildings in the Islamic world. But the locals' attitude toward the mullahs who live and pray in them could hardly have been more irreverent. One afternoon I was sharing a taxi with a young woman who was a graduate student in history and mentioned that I was heading to the city's central plaza, now called Imam Square. "Call it 'Shah's Square,' she commanded as she got out.

When I was leaving the beautiful eighteenth-century Chahar Bagh Madrasedh, an Iranian tourist I'd been chatting with said the gatekeeper of the madrasedh must be a mullah himself. I asked how he could tell. "Because," he said, "he wouldn't get off his hairy ass to talk to me." Locals later told me that the Madrasedh, or seminary, is known colloquially as "the queer club." The popular suspicion that the insulated, all-male compounds supposedly devoted to religious study are actually the scene of illicit homosexual activity is not new. In the 14th Century, the renowned Esfahani poet Hafez — who himself had attained the distinction of memorizing the entire Koran — penned these lines:

Those preachers who in prayer-arch and pulpit
imposingly parade,
When they to their chamber go — another kind of
act perform.
A problem, sir! Please ask the assembly's learned
man:
Why do those who command us to repent so
seldom themselves repentance make?
You might say they put no faith in the Day of
Judgment
Since when they act for the "Judge," they employ
all this deceit and fraud.⁵

In Tehran, the longest road in the city, running some 30 kilometers from the foothills of the Alborz in the affluent north to the city limits in the south is now named Vali Asr. The name has an interesting provenance. Before 1979 it was called "Pahlavi Boulevard" after the reigning dynasty. After the Revolution it was renamed



The reliefs of Persepolis, the religious capital of the Achaemenian dynasty, show the refined Persians who succumbed to the Greeks under Alexander the Great.

"Mossadegh", in honor of the popular prime minister who nationalized the oil industry and was deposed in a coup organized by the CIA. When mullahs took control of the Revolution from the liberals of the National Front, they renamed the street "Kashani", after a conservative mullah. But even in those days of revolutionary fervor, there were enough opponents of the theocrats that the Kashani street signs were being continuously vandalized. Finally the government gave the street the name of the 12th Imam, revered as the "Mahdi" or Messiah, whom Iranian Shiis believe to be in "occultation" and destined to return to the world to herald Judgment Day.⁶

Tehran's most popular football team is officially called "Paroozi" — "Victorious" — in honor of the Revolution. But its thousands of adoring fans still call it by its pre-Revolutionary — and pre-Islamic — name of "Persepolis."

One day I was touring the Green Palace, a horribly gaudy building that was home to Reza Shah, the late Shah's father, who had founded the dynasty after commanding a brigade of Cossacks. As I was looking at a case containing some of Reza Shah's personal effects, an Iranian visitor pointed at a pair of reading glasses. "Revolutionaries say Reza Shah couldn't read a single line," he said to a female guide.

"We should beat the people who say that," she said with surprising savagery.

"Yes," agreed the visitor, "let's see what future gen-

⁵ The Mantle of the Prophet, Roy Mottahedeh, pg. 180.

⁶ There are other sects of Shiis who believe in different successions of imams, ending with either the fifth ("Fivers") or the seventh ("Sevens"), who include the Ismailis.

erations write about them.”

Wither the Revolution?

In any sort of democracy, of course, such widespread contempt for the ruling class would mean its days were numbered. But Iran, despite its freely elected parliament, is no democracy. Command of the army, the police and Revolutionary Guards and control of the courts — in other words, the monopoly of violence that Weber said defines the state — belongs to the unelected Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini.

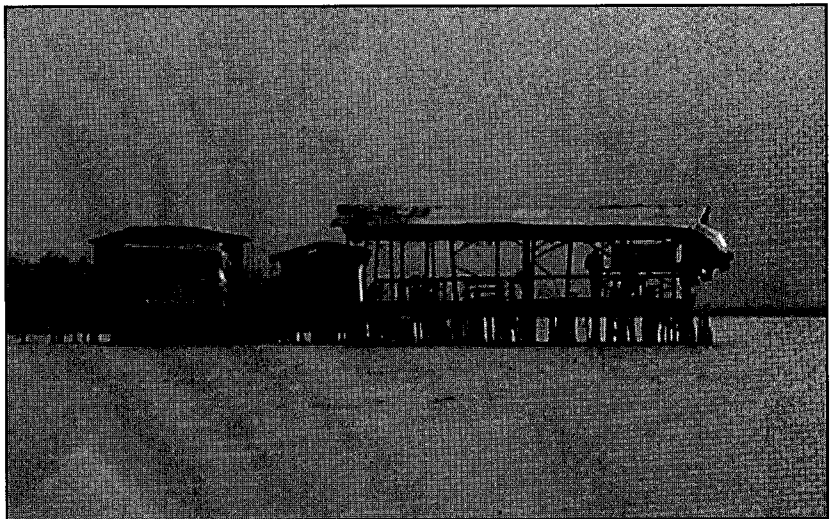
Peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations are broken up violently. In the past year conservative mullahs have shut down dozens of pro-reform newspapers, licensed by the Ministry of Culture, which is under President Khatami's authority. The mullahs ushered in the new millennium by convicting six intellectuals of acting against the principles of the Revolution. Their offense had been to attend a conference in Berlin last winter, organized by the Green Party of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. A video of the conference that was aired on Iranian TV showed a woman not just dancing, not just unveiled, but with her arms bared (!). For being associated with such smut, the intellectuals' sentences ranged up to 10 years in prison and five years' exile for reformist journalist Akbar Ganji.

A reformist mullah who attended the conference, Hasan Yousefi Eskevari, 51, had already been convicted of apostasy for daring to suggest that religious scholars should not wield supreme worldly authority. He is not alone: during the Revolution many prominent mullahs argued that secular power would corrupt their religious vocation. Today in the seminaries that argument is being fortified by the growing recognition that the theocratic rule is turning Iranians against the mullahs.

But with all the physical power in the hands of powerful mullahs, the question is: Who's going to challenge them and how? President Khatami, the great hope of reformers when he was elected with a 70 percent majority in 1997, and now backed by an equally reformist parliament, appears impotent. A student group at a prestigious medical school in



These donation boxes(above), ubiquitous and almost entirely unused, represent the official face of Iran's theocracy; at this platform (below) on stilts in a lagoon off the Caspian Sea, I was offered a drink of illegal vodka.



Shiraz recently drafted this protest to Khatami:

You enjoy the support of 20 million voters as well as the harmony of the state-leadership. How could you say that you lack the authority?

If there are truly some persons who create obstacles against you behind the scenes, why are you not exposing them to the people?

How was it possible to imprison the students who were injured during the attack on Tehran University's dormitory, whereas their attackers were charged with theft only?

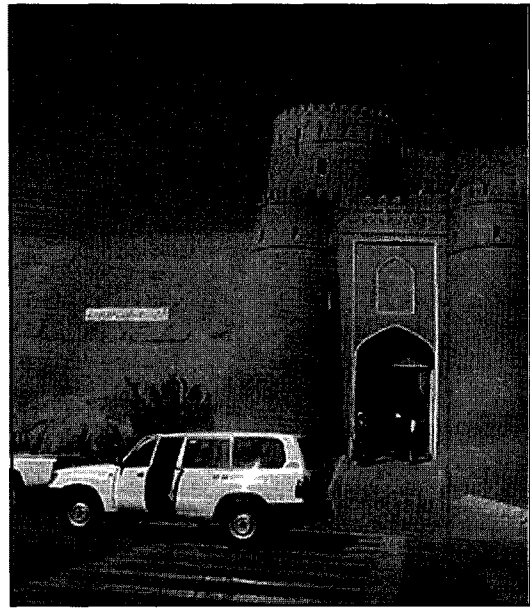
In accordance with the law, the Majlis deputies are free to express their views. How come they

are being prosecuted for exercising this right?

How come the independent popular press, which are the only link between the nation and the government, are banned?

You are calling on the world to begin a dialogue; how come we are not even able to resolve our problems through talks and constructive criticism in an atmosphere of understanding and tranquillity?⁷

If the reformists' cries were purely cerebral, the mullahs might prevail against them indefinitely. But Iranians' demands for change are fueled by religious fervor and the conviction that mullahs are not just corrupt worldly despots, like the dynasties before the Revolution; Iranians have traditionally accepted authoritarian rule in the view that they can't expect any better of this world until the cleansing reappearance of the Mahdi. But the mullahs' offense is incomparably worse than the Shahs': They are betraying the sacred tradition of Iranians' beloved imams. And that, most Iranians seem to agree, is the ultimate apostasy. □



This new Land Cruiser waits to pick up a group of VIP mullahs who are touring the mud-walled fortress town of Bam. Many Iranians are deeply offended by the mullahs' aloofness and self-indulgence.

⁷ SDDC web page

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. 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 Farnelo (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 Ecker McCall 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 a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican 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 2001-2003) • **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 1998-2000) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whitney 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 1998-2000) • **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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