

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

An Itinerant in Iran: Part Two

by: Thomas Goltz

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Farzin and Afshin picked me up at 0630 for the drive to the Behesht-e Zahra, the vast cemetery south of Tehran where hundreds of thousands of dead from the Iran-Iraq Gulf War lie buried, their numbers supplemented by martyrs of the Islamic Revolution, cut down by the Shah before he fled the country. Appropriately, it is also where Imam Khomeini has taken his final rest.

We were trying to beat the traffic but as soon as we turned the first corner from the hotel we ran into a log-jam of hundreds, maybe a thousand, high school students lining up for university exams and we stalled in the pedestrian traffic. Happily, the brothers had brought along a thermos of hot water; I provided the instant coffee, and we had a leisurely look at the crowd while getting our caffeine-kick without juggling cups in a moving car. I even thought I was starting to like the manto/hijab combo for exactly the opposite reasons that the mullahs had imposed it: confronted with just a little female charm, the male imagination starts to run wild; a topless beach could never be so interesting or evocative as a street full of girls sending love letters by revealing a lock of hair.

Breaking free of the students, we sped south through the equivalent of a Sunday-morning street in New York or LA. The pot-holes prevented more consumption of coffee, but we were now thoroughly awake. While Farzin maintained a steady monologue from the back seat, Afshin punched the accelerator to the floor, periodically cranking his head around to comment on what his younger brother had just said. It was unnerving, and I was grateful there was so little on-coming traffic.

But Farzin did have an interesting tale to tell.

It seemed that after dropping me at the hotel the night before he had run into a number of youths ripping down the billboard signs advertising the Armenian memorial parade. After he had established his bonafides as an Azeri, he asked what the group was up to. They explained to Farzin that they were part of an Azeri Turkish culture group at the university and, in addition to reading Azeri poetry and publishing of a couple of quasi-legal newspapers--Yol ('The Way/Road') and Varlik ('Presence')--they were devoted to promoting the Azeri position on Nagorno Karabakh.

Specifically, they were incensed that the largely state-controlled press had written so little about the Khodjali Massacre. They had applied to the authorities for the right to hold a rally but had been denied--and were thus reduced to venting their anger by desecrating the Armenians posters pertaining to April 24th, 1915.

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We were driving through the southern suburb/slums of the city which, according to most of the literature dealing with the Islamic Revolution, was the seething area of the disenfranchised proletariat that turned into the core group supporting Khomeini during the time of the Shah.

Well, the southern suburbs actually appeared docile and even well-organized, if compared with the low-end neighborhoods of Cairo, Jakarta and even Istanbul. The mullahs knew a problem area when they saw one, and had apparently dumped a lot of money into much needed housing projects in order to please and pacify the population. The residents also benefited from the financial rewards accruing to families of martyrs, of which the district could boast quite a few. Afshin, ever with his ear to the ground, remarked that the area also benefited from the not-incidental profits of black-market activities, to which the authorities turned a pious, blind eye.

He then began relating various Mullah & Imam anecdotes in Azeri. Much had to be rendered for me into English by Farzin because his brother's accent was rather thick and a lot of Persian had gotten mixed into the basic Azeri Turkish, but I followed along. One fine limerick-like jingle had to do with the fact that Khomeini never had never gone to Mashhad--the Holy City of the Eighth Imam in north-eastern Iran. This was almost a denial of faith; more curious was the fact that the non-pilgrimage had become a running joke and even a song.

It was also a curious way to approach the Behesht-e Zahra and the mosque and theological seminary complex dedicated to the memory of the Imam, and Afshin was still relating new anecdotes about Khomeini when we pulled into the parking lot in front of the mosque. He made sure to fasten a steering-wheel lock before we entered; there were thieves in the precinct.

Khomeini's mosque is a large, imposing but not really very imaginative or impressive structure consisting of a gilded dome above the Imam's tomb, two gilded minarets and two dormitory structures off to either side of the entrance: the brick work looked ancient but was really brand new, and only reflected the unfinished nature of the complex.

Indeed, that was the main impression made by the mosque: incompleteness.

Air-ducts were exposed beneath absent ceiling paneling, the internal columns stood without pedestals or heads, wires sprouted out of walls. The only finished part of the structure seemed to be the Imam's tomb in the center, located behind a steel grating beneath the central dome. A couple dozen believers, mainly women, but also including a few soldiers, were saying their prayers at the eastern side of the box, thus keeping Khomeini between themselves and Mecca, and maybe half a dozen others were circumambulating the tomb and kissing the grill work in different places. There might have been one or two hundred others snoozing near the walls or preparing for their morning ablutions. Despite the fact that the place was so new, there was already a lingering odor of mosque-musk: the smell of socks and sweaty feet exposed to the air when removed from shoes.

As suggested, the mosque was virtually empty--a fact exaggerated by unused capacity: the mosque was allegedly built to the exact volume specifications of the huge Prophet's Mosque in the Saudi Arabian city of Medina, and designed to hold tens of thousands.

But there were at most five hundred people milling around--and the day of our visitation was the Muslim Sabbath, Friday.

From what I could tell, most of the pilgrims tended to be of the bootless variety: peasants and soldiers and even green-grocery truckers who were using the mosque as a free hotel. This made it very doubtful that the Khomeini mosque and medrese complex will be completed any time soon, because it is being built exclusively from pious donations--like mine--and these clearly were not enough to buy the rugs, gold-leaf and light bulbs necessary to finish it.

As suggested above, the Imam's mosque is supposed to have exactly the same space capacity as the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque in Medina. But there is another would-be similarity as well. Throughout the Muslim world, and especially in the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, major mosques have also quite naturally become the hub of the cities in which they are found. Rulers have traditionally built bazaar complexes next to their namesake mosques, with rents from the bazaar paying for the up-keep of the mosque. Thus, those who decided to build the Imam's mosque south of the city were in effect making a bold effort to define the future urban and commercial development of Tehran.

But if this is so, the pious planners have failed miserably.

The jury is still out, but all the signs of the negative verdict are already apparent: despite the establishment of decent infrastructure--good roads and even a Behesht-e Zahra metro station in progress--none of the bazaar merchants who supported Khomeini's revolution have yet to move their businesses to the cemetery area.

One might see the triumph of commercial judgement over pious devotion here: the bazaar merchants only want to support revolutions when they are making money--and they can only make money where there are customers.

And at the Behesht-e Zahra, there are only paupers to buy Khomeini kitsch.



A woman sprinkles grain on her son's grave in the Behesht-e Zahra

From the Imam's mosque we proceeded to the real object of our pilgrimage--the sprawling cemetery area devoted to the memory of those fallen in the Path of God during the long years of war between Iraq and Iran; one might say the war between Saddam and the Imam.

Actually, the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery was founded during the time of the Shah, leading to a famous remark by Khomeini that it was the only public work made by the Shah that was actually for the people.

Typically, the people of Tehran had turned the gratuitous venom back on the Imam by noting that if true, the good Imam had greatly expanded on the theme: the majority of the graves were those belonging to the military men--either the professional soldiers who chose to stay and fight for the Islamic Republic or the masses of volunteers--some only 13 years old--who made up the famous human waves who washed across the sands into Saddam's fortified defensive positions to be mowed down, row after row, like so many tin soldiers.

Words like 'Faw' leapt at the eye from the tombstones of youths who probably couldn't pick the place out on a 1/1,000,000 map.

Additionally, there were tombstones dating to the anti-Shah street protests of 1978 and 1979, the graves of political leaders assassinated by the Mujahidin-i Khalq after the establishment of the Islamic Republic as well as a couple of hundred graves of nameless Kurds gassed by Saddam Hussein at Halabja in northern Iraq, whose presence in the cemetery gave it an international flavor. There was also a pathetic section of unmarked and desecrated graves of the Mujahidin-i Khalq, whose bodies were allowed in the cemetery, but whose memory was to be effaced.

But it was the war martyrs' graves that caught the eye.

There were so many.

The graves were marked by flagstones, where the name, age, place of death and other pertinent information were carved, along with a pious epithet or verse from the Quran. Above this stood curious, box-like edifices made of glass and aluminium that usually contained a picture of the dead man (or woman) plus personal mementos--flowers, beads, a miniature Quran, a picture of the Imam or a lesser imam (frequently posing with the deceased in pictures strangely reminiscent of Santa Claus with a child at a department store). Most of the tombstone display cases came in two or three standard sizes, and were clearly state issues like the flags that fluttered above them. Those that fell early in the conflict (1981 or 1982) usually had more variety, presumably because the death-edifice industry had not yet sprung up as a virtual factory.

There were so very many.

Here and there, family members and friends gathered to remember the fallen. They washed the flagstones with bottles of water, swishing the encrusted dust out of the stone; sometimes they sprinkled grains or placed fruit and vegetables on the stones, or made small, silent picnics with those who were no longer there.

It was all so sad.

There were so very, many.

I will avoid maudlin poetry over the matter, but have to ask:

Who were you when you were 15 or 20 or 25 and who are you now?

The majority of those cluttered in the ground never had a chance to change, never a chance to think.

Martyrs for a life they didn't even understand and, at the end of the day, total losers--save for the devilish American smart

bombs which gave them the victory they were incapable of achieving through their faith.

And then a bizarre thought occurred to me, linking my reception in Tehran to the fact that literally everyone in the country had a relative killed in the course of the eight year conflict, and rejoiced as only the vengeance-filled can at the second Gulf War over Kuwait.

Forget about the public rhetoric of the regime.

Iranians loved me because I represented smart bombs raining down on Baghdad because it vindicated their terrible sacrifice and fulfilled a sense of revenge for the men in the cemetery.

There were so many, very many.

After meandering through the forest of war graves, we went over to the oldest part of the cemetery--that established by the Shah--to make a brief visit to the grave of Farzin and Afshin's father. He had been killed along with his driver in the mid-1970s in a freak avalanche that had crushed his car.

The two flagstones, without the memorial box, were next to each other in a long row of simple graves. Afshin produced a bottle of water to wash away the dust and dirt from the two slabs. Then we left the cemetery.

Our route back to Tehran took us through Shahr-i Rayy, usually referred to as Old Tehran, and then the eastern part of the city along a concourse punctuated by traffic circles. One was the Jalal Meydan, now called Meydan-e Shohada, or 'Martyrs' Circle', notable because it was here that the protests against the Shah began to spiral out of control. On September 8th, 1979--the Black Friday of the Iranian revolution--the army fired on protestors, killing hundreds; some say thousands. Driving through the circle, it seemed too small for such a slaughter; looking at pictures taken over the shoulders' of the soldiers and guardsmen, one understood that the massacre was effected at point-blank range.

Eventually, we ended up at another traffic square (I believe it was Meydan-e Emam Hosein, or Imam Hussein Circle) where we parked the car and wandered into a market favored by Azeris: there were Chiquita bananas and ten different types of rice as well as meats and cheeses and everything else you could possibly want to buy from a Baku perspective.

And I was not the only individual from the former Soviet Union.

There were also a number of Russians wandering around with wide eyes and shopping bag held open.

We stopped one with a 'Kak-Dela', and entered into a short, friendly discussion that in retrospect seemed almost amazing or merely a reflection of the changing times.

The happy shopper was from Moscow, but had come to Tehran on special assignment in connection with some military assistance program. He did not specify which one, nor did I think to ask: the new T-72 tank deal from Czechoslovakia? The MIG-29s recently purchased from Moscow?

We might be brand-new friends and partners in peace and all that, but the encounter was almost surreally weird: A Muscovite and a Montanan, chewing the fat--bananas, actually--in a bazaar in Tehran, Iran.

Well, Sasha, do ya really think these here Ay-ranians can run yer gear?

Well, Bob, we stole enuf a' yer high tech gizmos over the years ta know a bit about 'em, but wer sellin' ar own stuff now at fire sale prices. Care for a T-72?

Well, the Ruskie military man had to go and so did we if we didn't want to miss the second part of the day: either the Friday Sermon at Tehran University's mosque, or the Armenian march marking the 77th anniversary of April 24th, 1915.

I elected the latter.

April 24th, 1915 is the day Armenians throughout the world say the Ottoman Turks began a systematic attempt to exterminate them as a race, and as such has become their national day of mourning.

There are some 200,000 Armenians in Iran, most of whom live in Tehran. Some 20,000 took part in the dirge-march in the capital, and it was a rather impressive sight because it was so well organized. Parade marshalls split the demonstrators into blocks of about 1,000 apiece, and conducted well-rehearsed chants and shouts called out from portable megaphones. The chants were also written on banners carried aloft by marchers. Not surprisingly, most were variations on the theme of Down with Fascist Turkey!

But there were several other banners and chants of note--like Death To America! and When Palestine Will Be, Israel Will Not!

Presumably, these were made as a concession to the politics of the Islamic Republic, as were the great number of portraits of the Imam Khomeini, President Khameni and Prime Minister Rafsanjani, but it gave the impression that the Armenians had embraced exactly those issues that everyone else in the country was busy rejecting.

To be fair, the volume of such chants as 'The Islamic Republic of Iran is The Greatest Sponsor of the Oppressed Throughout The World' and 'Death to Imperialist America!' were at a lesser decible level than the 'Down With Fascist Turkey' shouting, and it was not exactly clear whether the Armenians had been instructed to carry such banners as a condition for holding their march--as I initially assumed--or whether they had felt that they should as a gesture of friendship and loyalty to the regime.

I decided to press the issue with an elderly, English-speaking gentleman standing next to me on the pedestrian walk-way over the avenue, as the long line of demonstrators passed below.

Why the pictures of Khomeini?

He is the founder of our country and we must show respect.

What about the anti-American banners?

We have to carry them.

Who said?

The authorities.

Did they tell you to carry other banners, like the one about Fascist Turkey?

No, Turkey is Fascist and we wanted that one--that's the point of the march. We want justice.

What does that mean?

Our land.

Which land?

Armenia.

But you said you are citizens of Iran.

Yes, but we want Armenia.

The one from before Byzantium or the one after?

The one of 1915.

There was no Armenia then.

The land they took from us. The land where we were living in Turkey and Georgia, and Karabakh.

Another anti-American chant rose up, and, noticing that the lips of my interlocutor were moving, I rather unfairly pointed out that he was the first person I had met in Iran who did not claim to like America.

He said there were plenty of people in Africa who did not like America.

I conceded that while that might be true, I was referring to citizens of Iran. I also noted that I was an American.

He grew flustered, and drew away.

Another banner came by that pronounced that Iran's peace-efforts in Karabakh were being sabotaged by Turkey in consort with Imperial America, sending Farzin into a fit of rage.

"It is not the marching--let them march!--it is the hypocrisy that pisses me off," he seethed, "You know very well that the Armenians in Los Angeles are probably carrying anti-Iran banners along with their American flags and the Armenians in Jerusalem are probably chanting 'down with the PLO.'"

Now, I know perfectly well the reasons the Armenians modulate their tune to please different audiences in different places: in Iran, they link Armenian nationalism with the policies of the Islamic Republic; in the US, they link up with Islamophobia while in Israel they buy into the resonance of the Holocaust.

It is an inconsistent but effective policy, this having it all ways. But don't expect me not to note it when the wires cross.

Still, it was rather impressive: the signs, the banners, the parade marshalls--even the high fidelity speakers set up around Argentina Square, where the rally was to culminate with a demonstration in front of the United Nations building.

Although it might sound stupid, it was pretty clear why the Armenians were and are beating the crap out of the Azeris in Karabakh: they are organized.

So we followed the parade uptown and beat it to Argentina Square, and while waiting for the rally to start we ducked into a near-by Pizza shop for a bite to eat.

Typically, it was staffed entirely by Azeris, and I wondered whether I should take off my Down With Fascist Turkey/Genocide Day button for safety's sake.

No need.

The restaurant was soon swamped with dozens and dozens of young, laughing Tehrani Armenians, who had decided to get out of the intermittent rain.

Then something weird happened.

A man walked up and said a whispered hello to Farzin.

He was one of the Azeri Culture Club lads my host had found tearing down Armenian posters the night before.

He looked at me and then the Genocide Day button on my pocket.

Don't worry, Farzin reassured the man, I'm wearing one too.

So the man sat down and we were introduced and we began to chat in Azeri. And as we chatted we began to attract attention from all the Armenian youths crowded into the restaurant.

Many clearly understood Turkish, and they listened intently as the volume at our table rose.

"They have a right to march but so do we," said Burhan, the young man from the Azeri Culture Club, "Let them march about April 24, 1915 but we also have the right to march about the massacre in Khodjali of February 26th, 1992."

A couple of other members of the Culture Club joined us; Burhan said there were others outside, monitoring the parade and anti-Turkish demonstration.

"This has gone far too far," said Burhan, "We are second class citizens here. We have not only been deprived of our cultural identity as Turks, but do not even enjoy the same rights as these Christians who are killing our brothers in Karabakh."

If the government didn't wake up, he said, there was going to be a problem.

The next action planned by the group was to turn in Armenian moonshine makers because the suspicion was that the profits from the illegal manufacture and sale of booze was being funneled up to the Armenians of Karabakh to buy guns. The plan was for the Azeris to take control over the alcohol trade themselves, and send the profits to their brethren in (northern) Azerbaijan.

When I inquired about the propriety of making alcohol in the Islamic Republic for good Muslims like the Azeris, Burhan merely laughed: the decision by the mullahs to deny them the right to march was the last straw. The mullahs had proven themselves to be traitors to Islam by siding with the Christians, and they were not to be listened to anymore.

A silence had settled over the restaurant as the Armenian youths eavesdropped on our conversation.

"To Khodjali," said Burhan, taking a Genocide Day button from a kid and writing in a sentence commemorating the place.

"Absolutely," said Farzin, taking off his Genocide button and penciling in the same sentence.

I did the same, and so did Afshin.

Afshin then asked the Armenian kids sitting next to us to add the note to their buttons as well.

They declined.

Afshin was insistent.

Burhan started talking with the waiters in loud Azeri.

I was afraid an incident might break out.

Then the rally started across the square and the Armenian youths left, followed by Burhan and his Culture Club fellows, who had more posters to rip down before the demo came to an end.

Farzin, Afshin and I stayed in the restaurant and meditated on the events and their implications. A largely assimilated Azeri himself, Farzin's self-appointed task of serving as my guide to the city was leading him into some uncomfortable discoveries of his own: his kinsmen were emerging from the the Iranian woodwork with an inchoate Azeri Turkish consciousness that he had previously dismissed as impossible.

"I wouldn't have believed it a year ago," said Farzin, shaking his head. The mullahs are so dumb--and it is all because of Karabakh. It is going to rip this country apart."

Out on the street, an Armenian lady in high-heels had slipped and fallen on the slick pavement and so we helped her up; then we were approached by an Uzbek from Afghanistan who was looking for some POWs who had been put to labor in Iran, whom he wanted to take back to Afghanistan to put to work there unless I could provide him with a visa to the United States first, in which case he would drop the project of repatriating the POWs...

The Afghan war was over, and the mujahideen had to order their new priorities.

We got in the car and drove back to the hotel.

It had been a long day, and it was only two in the afternoon.

Coming Next: A day in the life of an information officer

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