

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

An Itinerant in Iran: Part Three

25.4.92 Saturday (Iranian Monday)

I was all set to go down to the bazaar to shoot a series of b/w pix with my new camera but got tied up in an edit of a story about abductions of Armenians married to Azeris in Baku. I had promised myself to finish the story before I came to Iran but it didn't happen like that. It seldom happens the way you plan it.

So I took the morning off from Iran and returned to Baku to finish the story and then went out to make arrangements to print the document at a nearby computer shop so I could fax it out from the hotel office at about a buck a page.

Try that in Baku!

While on the street I bought a white, collarless 'mullah' shirt just in case I ran into my host, Dr Ali Akbar Velayati over at the Foreign Ministry, which was my destination for the day.

Actually, there was little hope of seeing the man who had offered me the visa. With Afghanistan falling apart (or coming together; it was a matter of perspective) the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran was pretty busy, and so I settled for a chat with a young official in the information department.

We had met twice before--once outside the Iranian embassy in Baku and once at Post 19 outside of Agdam.

'Good to see you again,' Mr Hakbin had said outside the embassy, which happens to be right down the street from my house, 'Please come and see me when you get to Tehran and I will give you lots of good information about Iran.'

But it was our first meeting at Post 19 that had determined the friendly nature of the second and opened the way for the third. We were, in a sense, both Karabakh veterans. More to the point, I was one of the very few people that knew that Hakbin was a very brave man: he had been one of the six Iranian negotiators crammed into the back seat of a car I had run into around ten o'clock at night on the edge of the no-man's-land dividing Armenian and Azeri forces in Karabakh as the Iranians returned from a cease-fire mission to Stepanakert in mid March.

It was a rather bizarre encounter, our little road-side interview at Post 19.

Cyrus Vance had visited Stepanakert that day with the aid of two (former) Soviet APCs, both of which flew blue U.N. flags.

Aside from quite literally allowing an Armenian fighter to tie his unstrung shoelaces, Vance had not accomplished much in the way of making any permanent peace, and so he left the way he came: in the APC, by day.

But the Iranians who had arranged the cease-fire that let Vance in had no such armored protection--they were traveling in a white Lada, six men packed in the back. And they were traveling at night--even while their cease-fire was falling apart.

I think our after-hours encounter had something to do with my getting a visa: bonding, I think they call it--even if it was between a Yankee hack and Iranian diplomat weirdly met in no-man's-land on the fringes of Nagorno Karabakh.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Anyway, when I arrived in Tehran, I called Hakbin to set up a Saturday (Monday) date so as to expand the dialogue begun that shell-shocked night in March, and he was very receptive despite being swamped with foreign-affairs related work.

He especially liked my collarless mullah-shirt, and even asked who cut my clothes.

Hakbin, of course, was wearing a similar costume as well as the right trim of beard for a man of public piety. A dapper man in his early or mid-30s, he deported himself with an almost haughty, holier-than-thou attitude that was at the same time not aggressive or unfriendly. He spoke an excellent, if incredibly slow, precise and considered English but was capable of chuckling at the occasional joke. He had studied mathematics and computer science in London, but had abandoned his studies to return to Iran and volunteer for duty on the Iraqi front. He was, in a sense, exactly the sort of representative of the Islamic Republic you always wanted to buttonhole at a cocktail party but never could because the Iranians do not attend cocktail parties.

But there I was in his office, less as a quotation-conscious journalist than as a guest and almost comrade-in-arms.

As a gesture of solidarity and gratitude, I asked Hakbin to include Farzin in our chat; Hakbin had thought Farzin was my translator and had left him sitting in the lobby but he was allowed in upon my explanation and request.

It was an altogether excellent conversation, and ranged over everything from the alleged 'rivalry' between Turkey and Iran for the hearts and minds of Azerbaijan and Central Asia to Iran's role as a mediator in the Karabakh crisis and Iranian foreign and domestic policy in general. I am sorry I did not take notes or tape it but doing either of those reporter-like things would have spoiled the moment, and so the following is all from memory.

Hakbin asked me how I liked Tehran.

I remarked that I was very pleasantly surprised, that I had somehow been expecting something much more down at heel.

Yes, he reflected, he wished that I had been here 15 years ago, so that I could make a legitimate assessment of change. The government had not done badly in the two and a half years since freed of the massive defense expenditure on the war with Iraq, he said in his slow, precise way, Perhaps after Kuwait, the world had finally gained an inkling of the military might of the enemy they had been obliged to fight for eight long and exhausting years.

Yes, I agreed, the initial impression was not that of a country recovering from war. It almost looked too good.

Yes, said Hakbin, continuing like a steam-roller, Now things were on the right track. The government had recently taken the decision to stop prioritizing the infrastructural development of Tehran and place the emphasis elsewhere, in cities like Isfahan, Mashhad and Shiraz which had long been neglected--and thus forced people to move toward the capital to seek their fortunes. This would end now, and Tehran would become a more livable, reasonable city as would the other urban centers of Iran. Had I been to Isfahan?

No.

I should go--there was a lot of development there now.

Truly, I said, it is impressive right here in Tehran. I didn't know what to expect, but after Tashkent, Baku seemed like the first world; after Baku, well--Tehran!

Why compare us with Baku?

It was only a relative comparison, I hastened to add, predicated on the fact that I have been living in Azerbaijan for six months and had forgotten about the Real World. Computers, electronics, the bazaar...No, he was right in saying it was wrong comparing Baku and Tehran.

What about other regional centers?

Well, there are aspects of Istanbul that are more developed than Tehran and other aspects that apparently are not so developed, I said carefully. I had only dashed through the southern suburbs, but they appeared to be in better shape than Istanbul's slums.

We all know about Istanbul, said Hakbin, what about Moscow?

I didn't quite understand the implication at first, but then it sunk in: Hakbin was implying that Tehran was on par with Moscow--and not just in terms of how many baubles and beads one could buy in the bazaar.

I said I didn't have enough experience in Moscow to make a real comparison between the two cities, but certainly on the level of mercantilism and consumer happiness, Tehran had much to offer that the Russian capital did not.

This pleased Hakbin, although he was talking politics and I was talking trade.

I then went through some of my thoughts about Tehran being the natural regional center for Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kirgizia and Kazakhstan.

Hakbin went way out of his verbal way to pronounce the last 'Qazaqistan,' clicking the 'ques' with relish and extending the 'ays' into the familiar sing-song vowels: Qaazaqistaan.

Ineluctably, the conversation turned toward a discussion of the much-touted Turkish/Iranian 'rivalry' for the hearts and minds of the Turkic-speaking 'Muslim' states of the former USSR.

My host denied any rivalry existed because Iran wasn't playing the same game as Turkey. If there was any race, it should be compared to the story of the tortoise and the hare.

The Turks are investing all sorts of money in television, the press and high-profile visits in an effort to dominate the new republics, Hakbin said. But this was a short-term policy that would explode in their faces when the local cultures decided to define their own place in the sun. The Turks were likely to lose a lot of money--and respect--when that happened.

Iran's policy, in contrast, was one based on regional stability and allowing the new republics to make up their own minds about where their long-term interests and identities lay. There was no competition in this, it wasn't an either/or, zero/sum game: Iran had things to offer and Turkey had things to offer; so did Pakistan, and even Afghanistan once it recovered from its decade-long civil war.

Let the Azeris and the Central Asians come and take a look and decide for themselves what they wanted to take from Iran's material, moral and political culture. Iran wasn't in the business of beating people over the head with this ideology or that. What you see is what you get.

Hakbin said that he had already seen the positive development of this policy among (northern) Azeris who had visited Tehran. He said his government explained to them the difference between Iran's incrementalist, what-you-see-is-what-you-get policy and the grand promises of eternal friendship and fraternity between the Turkic people now being made in Ankara, and that the Azeri guests had walked away wary of Turkey's nefarious intentions and convinced of Tehran's good deeds.

The soft-spread of influence was also happening on a very human level due to the new border regime, instituted in 1990, that allows families split by the frontier to visit the other side with minimal control.

There have been more than 300 marriages this year between Azeris from what you call the North and the South, said Hakbin, Do you see the same human, person-to-person relationship between the Turks and the Muslims of Azerbaijan?

All in all, it was pretty clear that Hakbin assumed that tortoise was winning the race already; in the instance of the mixed marriages, it was also pretty clear that he believed that the 'Iranian' component would prevail over the 'Azeri' component.

My impression, in contrast, was that such unions meant an incremental 'infection' of Azeriness into Iran: in the South, Iranian/Islamic consciousness was at a nadir, while in the North, Azeri/Turkish national consciousness was at a zenith because of the crisis over Nagorno Karabakh.

And the vehicle for this reverse cultural penetration is language--Azeri Turkish.

Turkey, of course, has capitalized on the idea that modern Turkish is close enough to make an impact on the average Turkic speaker of the new republics, although I had to agree with my host that Ankara's famous media blitz of the region might backfire due to local resentment over the level of sheer arrogance involved in Ankara dictating what is and what is not standard 'Turkic.'

But Iran literally has its tongue tied.

Persian is about as useful in Central Asia and Azerbaijan as Latin is in London: people might respect you for your cultural and intellectual acumen, but it doesn't help much when you want to order fish and chips or belly-up to a bar.

But Iran does have its own Turkic language card to play--and with potentially far more resonance in Central Asia and Azerbaijan than Anatolia Turkish.

This is, of course Azeri Turkish--or more specifically, 'southern' Azeri.

Not only is it much closer to the Azeri spoken in Baku than Anatolian Turkish, but because of substantial Persian accretions, Southern Azeri is also much closer to the Central Asia Turkic tongues, which are also thoroughly permeated with Persian phrases and constructions.

But Tehran is reluctant to play the Azeri card because of domestic political consideration: while tolerant of Azeri as a 'folk' language--there are a few newspapers and the odd collection of poems printed in Azeri--Tehran is not ready to promote the tongue to the level of becoming a proper language to be studied in schools and used for broadcasting, lest it become a vehicle for separatist tendencies.

We nosed around this sensitive subject for awhile, with Farzin adding his two bits in colloquial American English.

Jesus, man, he said, Our ambassador in Baku can't even speak Azeri! Send in a mullah, for Christ's sake--but let him know a thing or two about the country! We have to do more because the Turks are walking all over us, man...

More curious than the delivery was Farzin's assumption of such possessive structures like 'our ambassador,' which although natural--he was an Iranian citizen--seemed to add a strange wrinkle to the Azeri puzzle by suggesting that Iranian Azeris like himself take a more active role in claiming Azerbaijan for Iran, but of that, later.

Hakbin begged to differ.

The new ambassador to Baku spoke Azeri because he was one. So was President Khamenei. So was Hakbin's wife. As Farzin knew perfectly well, there were Azeris everywhere in government and commerce in Iran. The Azeris had participated in the Revolution and Azeris were now engaged in reconstruction. There was, pronounced Hakbin with finality, no difference between Fars and Azeri in Iran; it was almost a cultural coincidence that Persian was the language of the state.

Farzin agreed, and then the two slipped into Persian for awhile leaving me to dwell on the similarities between the arguments used to describe the happy, assimilated lot of the millions of Azeris in the country and suspiciously similar words used to describe the lot of the Kurds in Turkey: they are ministers, businessmen and have no barriers to social advancement put in their way--so long as they act like good Turks and accept Turkish as the language of the state.

If not a perfect comparison, it seemed to me that unless there is a active embrace of 'Azeriness' as distinct part of the Iranian identity, the Azeris are bound to drift away just as the Kurds continue to drift away from Turkey. And as it impacts on Iranian policy toward Central Asia and Azerbaijan, without playing its own Azeri Turkish card Tehran will only be able to attract those who are pre-disposed to Iranian/Persian culture, individuals inclined toward piety or those who find the Turkish cultural sledge-hammer so heavy-handed that they revolt at having their identity determined in Ankara.

In other words, Iran will be left with literate lovers of Ferdowsi, religious fanatics (even as fundamentalism goes out of style in Iran itself) and disgruntled folks who, having rejected first pan-Sovietism and then pan-Turkicism, want to give pan-Iranism a whirl.

Not very many people at all.

If 'Iranism' did not catch on during the salad days of Khomeini's Persian language/Shi'ite religious venture, it doesn't seem too likely that it will catch on now. One might even dare speculate that unless modern Iranism does not redefine itself and become a vibrant culture, it will join its old Iranian antecedents like the Sasanids and Parthians and Achemenids before them in the famous 'syncretic' tar-pit of history. The scribes will remark on how Persian influenced this language this way and how Shiism influenced that culture or country, but there will be very little Persian/Shi'ite culture left around to identify, save for a few hold-out pockets here and there.

The steam-roller of ethno-centric nationalism will prevail.

And in the context of southern and northern Azerbaijan, that means Azeriness--which, although closely related, is not identical with Turkishness.

There are already signs of this for anyone with eyes to see. In (northern) Azerbaijan, for example, following all their excitement of self-discovery as reborn Turks, many Azeris feel snubbed as poor, cultureless cousins by their new Older Brother.

(Indeed, to interject a parathetical line a month after I drafted this epistle, I witnessed the strange spectacle of the new, acting President of Azerbaijan, Isa Gamberov, literally be shoved aside by an aggressive Turkish television team who clearly didn't know--and didn't care to know--who he was. The event they were covering was the visit to Nakhchivan of Turkish Premier Suleyman Demirel to see Nakhchivan leader Haydar Aliiev. The sheer

ignorance and arrogance of Turkey Turks in this instance was incredible.'

Finally, we moved on to Nagorno Karabakh and the Iranian peace initiatives in which Hakbin was thoroughly involved.

He was pessimistic about the prospects for peace.

Both sides, he felt, still thought they had more to gain than to lose by continued fighting and were jockeying for position.

At present, the Iranians were still waiting for the written declaration of both sides on their pre-conditions for face-to-face talks. Hakbin was not sure if and when that meeting would ever take place. Both sides were stiffening and there was chaos in leadership in Baku and intrigue in Yerevan and Stepanakert. Ominously, the hard-line leader of the Karabakh Armenians, Artur Mikirtchian, had been shot dead a week before, two days after Hakbin's last visit with the man. Hakbin speculated that the assassination had been the work of either supporters of Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan (who had despaired of any other way of bringing the more radical Karabakh crowd back in line) or had been the work of the KGB who just wanted to stir the political pot a few more strokes.

The Armenians had initially blamed the assassination on the Azeris, which Hakbin discounted on the compelling logic that the Azeris could scarcely defend themselves--let alone organize a hit team deep inside enemy territory.

It was likely that Hakbin would be going back to Karabakh soon.

Keep your head down, I said, Its a nasty little war out there. Hakbin almost laughed.

That's no war, he chuckled, you have no idea what war is.

I had, in fact, forgotten: Hakbin was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq blood-bath, one of those nameless young men who wore the black martyr's band as they charged at Iraqi positions. But for the grace of Allah, he might have been lying in the Behesht-e Zahra with the others I had visited the day before.

Well, the interview--if that is what it was--over. But before leaving, I asked him out to dinner--I almost made the faux pas of suggesting a drink.

He agreed in principle, but said he would have to 'check it with the boss' first.

Velayati? I asked, wondering if Big Brother controlled contact with foreigners.

No, my wife, Hakbin said.

She's one of your people, Hakbin informed Farzin with a smile. Another Azeri.

The buggers were everywhere.

We shook hands and I promised to call him tomorrow.

26.4.92 Sunday (Iranian Tuesday)

A bureaucratic day of extending my week long visa that was about to run out. As instructed by Hakbin, I went over to the Ministry of Guidance Press Department where I discovered I was not in Iran on a press visa. The Guidance people had never heard of me, and wondered how I had managed to get into Iran and for a moment I thought they were about to have me thrown out. Then I told them Velayati had invited me, which made them moderately nervous and a little angry: they were turf conscious bureaucrats, and the Foreign Minister had clearly stomped on their turf. Accordingly, they would not help me--aside from telling me how I

should have gotten a press visa in the first place. Gratuitously, they assured me that I probably would not have received one.

I thought a thanks to the consular official in Baku who must have known he was bending the rules when he stamped my passport. I guess he just wanted to get me to his country.

Staying there was my problem.

So the next stop was back at Hakbin's office to see if there was anything to be done there about the extending the visa.

I'll be with you in a minute, he said, I almost forgot my prayers.

So he kicked off his shoes and ran down to the ministry's toilet to perform his ablutions; returning, he reached for the Want-Ad section of a local newspaper to use as his prayer mat.

I have found a new use for these, he said with a wry grin, Most people just throw them away.

Then, taking advantage of an arrow painted on the ceiling, he pointed the Used Cars and Household Goods section of the paper toward Mecca to make a qibla and placed a block of baked clay to touch his forehead on as he proceeded through his riqas.

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim and all that.

It was a curious moment and I wasn't sure if I should watch or turn away, so I did both.

When he was finished I asked him about the piece of clay, or mohr (literally, 'seal'). I had only seen it used in Azerbaijan and assumed that it was part of Shi'ite and not Sunna prayer ritual. Hakbin confirmed this, but couldn't specify why.

And then just as I was about to bring up the business of the visa Hakbin was called away to a meeting with UN Secretary General Butros Ghali, leaving me with his assistant.

The only way to solve your problem is to go to the Foreigners' Section of the Ministry of the Interior, he said.

I was being fobbed off, I was sure.

It was almost five o'clock and the bureaucratic day was gone and I was starting to get mad at Hakbin for having deserted me, although I knew he didn't really owe me anything. There was nothing to do but go on down to the cop-shop, where I was sure to be told that I had to leave the country the day my visa expired.

As expected, the police office was closed for the day.

But with the announcement that I was an American in need, the doors were thrown open. Within half an hour, and for a dollar's worth of Tomans the colonel in charge stamped a week extension into my passport. I could have had a month if I had asked.

We never see any American passports here, said the colonel in perfect English, why don't more of you come to Iran?

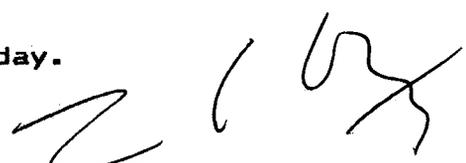
Then I had some of the world's best ice-cream, got lost in the Hijab and underwear market and then in the zither and tar market before getting really lost in the used car/parts/tires and sheet-rock/paint and plywood market before finally finding my way back to the printers market to collect some visiting cards I had ordered the day before. There was some Muslim holiday stationery on display that depicted Leila and Majnoon in a lewd pose, and others portraying Ali, the spiritual source of modern Shiism and finally a poster that would be heretical anywhere else in the Muslim world: the Prophet of God (May Peace and Blessing be upon Him!) holding the Quran and smiling full face out at the camera.

Made in Japan.

Only in Iran.

Enough for now, tomorrow is a travel day.

COMING NEXT: THE TRAIL TO TABRIZ





An Islamic Holiday Greeting Card Picturing The Prophet Muhammad
Received in Hanover June 18, 1992