

Letter from Iran: To Lebanon and back, Part I

by Belen Fernandez - 05/09/2017 12:46



A note from the Editors

Some honest introspection: when The Region has covered Iran, it's been from the viewpoint of the boardrooms, conferences and the occasional prison-cell. It's as if, in our new incursion into the bewildering universe of Journalism, our readers are only to understand the Persian Gulf as an in-between space. A cold-war battlefield pitting the clerics of Persia, against the statesmen of Saudi Arabia.

For, as far as the post-colonial world is concerned, West Asia can only be understood as cyclical. The Sunni's, we are told, are in perpetual war with the Shiite's. The cold war with the Gulf States on one end, and Iran on the other, is merely a dramatic and modern re-enactment of the Ottoman and Safavid Imperial rivalry in earlier times. Iran, it is to be understood, if at all, only as a conniving puppeteer. And thus, Iran is Houthi, Iran is, as of late, Qatar, Iran is Hezbollah, and if we are not too careful, Iran

could become nuclear.

But what about the Iranian people? Even when we try to get to the ground – a difficulty in the absence of a correspondent—we have found it hard to cover stories that go beyond the occasional human rights appeal. We haven't been to the mosques, the schools, the intersections on the highway, and the weekly Bazaar. We're new, and we're just not there yet.

And while we don't discriminate in West Asia, usually siding with any who struggle, wherever they maybe, we only get to know activists and dissidents after their incarceration and solitude. The Region is of course, burdened with the truth; political prisoners need our urgent comradely help and the least we can do is tell their stories. But we are also painfully aware that neo-conservative vultures would want nothing more than for us to promulgate an image of Iran that is nothing but repressive.

This is why we are privileged to introduce this three-part series on Iran. It is a travelogue by Belen Fernandez, but not any random one. This is not just another piece written to appease, a "clichéd desire to convey the humanity of a nation that had for so long occupied US crosshairs and suffered attendant vilification" and it is not another declaration of Iranian Humanity. Part I, is rather, a narration of contradiction interweaved into Iranian space and time. We move from the conference room, to the mosque and Bazaar. Every single one of these spaces carries multiple stories. In every space we visit, there is a secret protocol between the generations of the past and that of our own. We are not only taken to the Bazaar, but we are made to feel the pain of past generations within it, and the piety of its presence. In return for its acquiescence to the ruling regime, embodied in pictures of Khomeini adorning many stalls, we walk into markets of Isfahan which thrive vibrantly. And while the shopkeepers love for the founding fathers of Iran's Islamic revolution could very well be authentic, who is to fault them? There would be no Bazaar under the Shah, whose intelligence agency almost eradicated the market on the basis of its supposed medieval backwardness.

And this is how you, very briefly, meet the characters of Belen's story. Each one, somewhere in between two different worlds sharing only the same coordinates. What she lacks in access, she makes up for with historical situation. In times like this, the outsiders eye is paradoxically revealing, even if, with Belen's humility (and humor) you come to realize that orientalism is an unavoidable facet of every outsider

narration.

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Introduction

A sixteenth-century Persian proverb has it that Esfahan is “half the world.” When I visited the city five or so centuries later, in October of 2016, I was assisted in my appreciation of its charms by a handy volume I came across in a bookshop where I had taken refuge after one of various near-death experiences crossing the street. In *Esfahan: A Tiny Earthly Paradise*, Iranian civil engineer-turned-tour operator and intermittent poet Mahmoud Reza Shayesteh makes the case that any expedition to the half-world necessarily entails a “quest for the second half of this world inside one’s self through a spiritual elevation... perhaps enabling one to embrace a world of perfection.”

Over the centuries, Esfahan has hosted its fair share of guests, some more spiritually inclined than others. Passing from Sassanid to Arab rule, Esfahan became the capital of the Seljuk empire in the eleventh century before being invaded by the Mongols and then Tamerlane, who reportedly presided over the massacre of more than 70,000 Esfahanis on a single day in 1387. As the story goes, towers of decapitated heads were constructed around the city walls, and blood flowed in the Zayandeh Rood—the now-usually-dry river that divides Esfahan on an east-west axis.

The city fared better under the Safavid dynasty and was again appointed imperial command center in 1591 by Shah Abbas I, who relocated the capital from Qazvin for various reasons including, Shayesteh writes, that “the climate of Qazvin did not suit him.” Esfahan was revamped into a gem of architecture, art, and culture—in other words, perhaps, “half the world.”

The day of my arrival to Esfahan, I was operating in my own sort of half-world—a result of having achieved one of the top three hangovers on record thanks to a friend’s birthday festivities in Dubai. The pain was rendered more acute when the Emirati immigration official who stamped me out at the Dubai airport launched into a rendition of the Santana song “Maria Maria,” inspired by my first name. He asked why I was traveling to Iran alone; I said everyone else was busy. He volunteered companionship on the next trip.

The plane ride was characterized by the scent of McDonald’s French fries courtesy of a woman in my row with a collection of takeaway bags. Earlier in the year, [CNN](#)

[Money](#) had in a bout of shrewd sociocultural analysis determined that, while the rest of the world was wondering how the removal of certain sanctions on Iran would affect oil prices, the burning question for Iranians was: “Will Tehran get McDonald’s fries now?” (Answer: no.)

We arrived shortly after 9 p.m. to the quaint Shahid Beheshti airport, named for an Esfahan-born ayatollah assassinated by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) in 1981 when, the *New York Times* [noted](#), he was “widely regarded as the second most powerful figure in Iran.” I had expected a slightly more rigorous entry procedure, or at least a question as to the whereabouts of my ostensible guide—an ever-present guide being one of the requirements for citizens of the Great Satan visiting the Islamic Republic—but all I got from the immigration official was a “welcome.” I got another one when my elderly taxi driver telephoned his daughter to have the sentiment translated into English.

I hadn’t come to Iran with any overly-thought-out purpose. Having fled the US in 2003 in search of more hospitable lands that didn’t give me continuous panic attacks, I continued to eschew a fixed residence in favor of roaming and had developed a habit of manically purchasing cheap plane and ferry tickets while intoxicated or otherwise afflicted, which had over the years landed me in a number of spots from Honduras to Kazakhstan. In Iran I did however have a vague and possibly irreparably clichéd desire to convey the humanity of a nation that had for so long occupied US crosshairs and suffered attendant vilification. As I now write these words in summer 2017, half a year into the reign of Donald Trump, the vitriol unsurprisingly proceeds unabated, with the advocates for [war and regime change](#) blissfully discounting the inevitable human fallout of any bellicose maneuver.

Providing additional motivation for my Iran project, meanwhile, has been my decision to subject myself to a deluge of travelogues penned by men of various nationalities who are apparently under the impression that their every movement abroad—e.g. selfies with African children—is worth preserving and torturing readers with.

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My trip to Esfahan was incidentally my second visit to Iran in as many years, the first having taken place the previous August when I attended a conference in Tehran on the subject of Iranian victims of terrorism. It so happens that my attendance was an utter fluke, as the conference invitation I had received by email earlier in the summer had not been addressed to me but rather to General Mirza Aslam Beg, former commander of the armed forces of Pakistan. By way of concentrated harassment of the conference organizers I finagled an invitation for myself, as well, and was flown to Iran from Istanbul, arriving at an obscene hour of the morning along with another

conference attendee, Jorge Verstryngge, a reformed Spanish fascist politician who had subsequently served as a military adviser to Hugo Chávez and was now in with the Podemos crowd. Verstryngge was friendly with the Iranian ambassador to Madrid, he told me, and had suggested to said ambassador that it was in Iran's interest to procure a nuclear weapon. He had been informed, however, that this was against religious policy.

Since Verstryngge's English was not particularly existent, I got to act as translator when at Imam Khomeini airport we were whisked into an elegant greeting hall to have our bloodshot eyes recorded on camera along with responses to some questions about Iran's terror victims. The victims, tallied as more than 17,000 by the Iranian association spearheading the conference, ranged from the likes of Beheshti to less high-profile civilian casualties of MEK attacks—including children—to the Iranian nuclear scientists assassinated in more recent years with the apparent help of the Mossad. It was in this airport hall that the substandard nature of the conference speaker vetting process became absolutely clear, as Verstryngge announced that he knew nothing of the subject at hand and that furthermore Iran and Israel were natural allies. I translated selectively.

In the past, of course, Iran and Israel were a hell of a team—particularly when the Israelis assisted in the training of SAVAK, the notorious secret police force established by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose other preferred pastimes included frenetically buying up gobs of American military machinery and overseeing a [nuclear program](#) at the encouragement of the U.S., which also assisted with the birth of SAVAK. In the aftermath of the shah's disposal and the advent of the Islamic Republic, Israel has made well known its displeasure with the nation's about-face. In his book *The Iran Wars*, the *Wall Street Journal's* Jay Solomon—himself no friend of Iran—writes of Israel's secret collaboration with the MEK, in the run-up to the Iraq war, in creating a hullabaloo in Washington over Iran's suddenly problematic nuclear pursuits:

“As the world prepared for the invasion of Iraq, Israel's security and intelligence services grew concerned that Iran, which was seen as the far bigger threat, would get lost in the shuffle. They not so subtly joked that the [George W.] Bush administration had misinterpreted their comments and was getting ready to attack the wrong Middle East country that started with the letter *I*.”

In 2012, the MEK was expunged from America's list of terrorist organizations—although given its representatives' relative freedom of movement pre-expunction some observers may have failed to detect any fundamental change of course.

The conference in Tehran involved being confined to a frigid hall for several days, during which time Verstrynge helpfully obtained a blue stretcher mattress cover from the ambulance stationed outside and bestowed it upon me for additional warmth. At the conference I spoke with the father of Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, a PhD student who had worked at the Natanz fuel enrichment plant prior to his assassination in 2012 at the age of 32. According to his dad, the young man had believed in a peaceful nuclear energy program as a means of ensuring Iranian independence. Aiming a string of harsh words at the U.S. for its international meddling and tiresome support of Zionism, the dad emphasized that his scorn was merely for the American government and not the American people—a rather magnanimous distinction I had also often encountered in south Lebanon, where U.S. contributions to human happiness have included [rush shipments](#) of bombs to the Israelis to expedite the decimation of the territory. The U.S. itself has of course exhibited little talent on the distinction front, regularly mistaking [wedding attendees](#) and the like for terrorists.

I also spoke with Shohreh Pirani, the widow of Dariush Rezaeinejad, an academic and deputy at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran who was shot dead in 2011 at the age of 35. The killing was witnessed by Pirani and the couple's young daughter, who, now eight years old, instructed her mother on the matter of which family photos to show me on the cell phone. One was of dad and daughter as a curly-haired child sporting an abundance of lipstick. Pirani had only pity for her husband's assassins, she told me, because terrorist crimes were unquestionably a result of desperation. Other highlights of the conference included a post-it note presented to me by a friendly turbaned cleric containing said cleric's yahoo address, in case I wanted a pen pal.

As guests of the state, the other international conference participants and I were not permitted to venture anywhere on our own and were instead chauffeured around in a high-speed convoy. Destinations aside from the conference hall included the Holy Defense Museum—an expansive facility where one could acquaint oneself with the horrors of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 and dispose of one's rubbish in bins adorned with the Israeli flag—as well as the mall and Shahid Beheshti University, also named for the martyred ayatollah from Esfahan. At the university I was cornered by a student from Mashhad who spoke minimal English and wanted to know, in this order:

1. what I thought of gay marriage,
2. whether I had written any books he could translate to Farsi, and
3. whether Barack Obama was gay.

I was removed from the conversation by one of the conference organizers who apparently deemed it insufficiently supervised, and made up my mind to return to Iran in the near future as something other than a captive.

Acquisition of an Iranian tourist visa the following year was a months-long process overseen by a travel agent in Esfahan who agreed to circumvent the mandatory guide rule and saddle me with an official companion for only one day of my two-week stay. She expressed initial reservations about the Foreign Ministry's willingness to grant a visa to an American writer, after which I made sure to saturate all application forms with references to my attendance at the all-important terrorism conference. After wiring various fees to a bank in Dubai under strict instructions not to mention the word Iran but rather the "import of goods," I was ordered to the Iranian embassy in Beirut to collect my visa.

The embassy compound is located in the southern Beirut suburb of Bir Hassan—part of what is known in reductionist circles as "the Hezbollah stronghold"—and was the site of a double suicide bombing in 2013 by an Al Qaeda-affiliated outfit. Despite regular fearmongering about Iran's tentacles in Lebanon and its vast embassy-cum-command and control center, the diplomatic outpost is far more unassuming than the embassy-fortress belonging to a certain United States on a hill north of Beirut, where diplomatic personnel busy themselves by continuously disrupting local traffic patterns and cell phone communications. A [bigger and better](#) embassy-fortress is currently in the works, to the reported tune of one billion dollars.

I was accompanied to the Iranian embassy one sweltering morning in September by my boyfriend, who chatted out front with a Lebanese guard deploying for Syrian war duty later that day while I proceeded inside to be politely told that my visa could not be issued until October—when I would conveniently no longer be in Lebanon. The issue was resolved via a short breakdown on my part and I was dispatched to a nearby office to obtain the requisite travel insurance, the terms of which specified that it did not apply to injuries sustained "whilst the insured is engaged as competitor in bets, horse races, bike races and any kind of motor races" or to afflictions "directly or indirectly caused by or contributed to by or arising from ionizing radiation or contamination by radioactivity from any irradiated nuclear fuel or the radioactive toxic explosive or other hazardous properties of any explosive nuclear assembly or nuclear component thereof." In other words: the smoking nuclear gun.

I returned to the embassy, where my passport and visa were presented with a smile and the unsolicited assurance from the official that the Iranian embassy was "the most accurate in the world." A few weeks later, I received an email from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to one Nicholas Richard Chirico, who was requested to retrieve his visa from the Iranian embassy in Cairo.

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My hotel in Esfahan was located just off the central boulevard of Chahar Bagh, which

bisects the city from north to south. In his *Tiny Earthly Paradise*, Shayesteh explains that Chahar Bagh means “four gardens” and that it has occasioned some lines in a Farsi poem, translated for us thusly:

*“If the promised heaven enjoys eight garden,
Four of which one finds in the earthly garden.”*

I was a 15-minute walk to Esfahan’s iconic Naghsh-e Jahan Square, pride and joy of the Safavid era. Once officially called Shah Square, its new official name was—one guess—Imam Square. If I leaned out of my hotel window and looked left past the assortment of construction workers balancing precariously on beams on the opposite roof I could see the minarets and turquoise dome of the square’s Imam Mosque, formerly Shah Mosque.

My inaugural expedition to Naghsh-e Jahan took place on my first full day in Esfahan, which I began by attending breakfast in the hotel basement and pilfering all of the puffy bread, boiled eggs, cheese, and cucumbers I could stuff into my bag—a genetic inheritance, apparently, from a grandmother who used to hoard salt shakers and other critical items at restaurants.

I set out walking down Chahar Bagh, a wide and shady thoroughfare lined on this particular stretch with small sportswear stores, sweetshops, fruit vendors, bookstores, and an establishment specializing in Esfahan’s famed biryani—a delightful glob of spiced lamb on bread. Later, I would arouse the pity and then the horror of the waitress there as I endeavored to determine how best to ingest said delicacy.

Seeking confirmation from passersby along the way that my trajectory was correct and that I was indeed Naghsh-e Jahan-bound, I was invariably asked to identify my national origins. Throughout my stay in Esfahan, there were a variety of responses to my American-ness; some people offered a sympathetic smile, some expressed shock that I had been allowed to circulate sans guide. As it was the run-up to the U.S. elections, one older woman asked me to please choose a president that would be “good for Iran” because “we are tired of bad relations.” A young man speculated that Donald Trump was “psychic,” by which I subsequently understood he meant “psychotic.” A smattering of people expressed affection for America—music to the ears, no doubt, of sectors of the regime change crowd infatuated with the notion that Iranians are fundamentally Western-loving consumerists trapped in a tyrannical Islamic Republic. The most satisfying reaction to my nationality was to come from a scarf merchant in the bazaar who burst into hysterical laughter and required several minutes to regain his composure, after which he asked how much my Asics sneakers

cost in the U.S. and said he could procure identical ones for a fraction of the cost.

At first glance Esfahan appeared to be sorely lacking in the politico-religious propaganda department, and I reckoned you could find more images of the Ayatollah Khomeini lining the streets of certain south Lebanese villages. Upon closer inspection, many shops revealed themselves to have on display at least one framed portrait of the revolutionary succession, the Khomeini-Khamenei duo. It was several days, however, before I happened upon the desired photo-op: a series of “Down with U.S.A.” posters appended to the side of a high school. An innocent bystander was roped into making the obligatory souvenir snapshot a reality.

At the intersection of Chahar Bagh and Imam Hussein Square—named for Shia Islam’s revered martyr of the 680 Battle of Karbala—I was pointed east in the direction of Naghsh-e Jahan by an elderly locksmith who spoke no English but managed to establish that I was from America (sympathy smile) and that he was from Iran. The eastward turn required me to cross several lanes of traffic, an activity that left me thinking I ought to consult my travel insurance policy on situations involving being flattened by one or more vehicles. Granted, I was no stranger to the hazards of pedestrian life, having done plenty of walking in Beirut. There, existential threats range from traffic cops who haphazardly contradict traffic lights and walk signals (where such things exist in the first place, that is) to random chasms in the sidewalk (where sidewalks exist) to an apparent opinion among elite car owners that if you’re walking your life isn’t worth anything anyway.

While I didn’t necessarily get the feeling in Esfahan that motorists were actively trying to martyr me on the pavement, I did have a sneaking suspicion that they perhaps viewed whether I lived or died as a matter that was simply out of their hands. In the hopes of increasing my chances of survival, I took to cowering behind geriatrics and women with babies in order to cross the street. I also tended involuntarily to emit a high-pitched squeal for the duration of the crossing, since we all know that helps. The entire procedure was rendered even more enjoyable by the fact that, for the first week of my stay, my go-to article of clothing was a sort of khaki straightjacket that I had acquired in Barcelona prior to the Tehran conference. Coupled with an ineptly and too-tightly-attached headscarf, the ensemble made it impossible for me to turn my head without turning the rest of my body along with it. I eventually broke down and purchased a slightly more loose-fitting blue jacket that was seemingly Star Trek-inspired and bore the brand “Nice Woman.”

I arrived intact to Naghsh-e Jahan, an unabashedly magnificent space described by Shayesteh as having “such a huge physical frame that you find yourself nothing in it because it amounts to ten million times in volume as large as your body.”

Furthermore: “A wise visitor finds himself like a piece of straw wondering about in the ocean of his astonishments.” To be sure, I experienced an especial straw-like nothingness when I proceeded to get hopelessly lost in the adjoining bazaar for no fewer than three hours. Prior to that, I wandered the length of the square, one end of which hosts the gleaming Imam Mosque and the other the main bazaar entrance. In between are loads of other gleaming and glorious things including the mosaicked Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, a Safavid masterpiece named for a Lebanese cleric, and a wide pool and fountain that inspires no shortage of selfies. Families and groups of young people picnicked on the grass, and a number of benches had been commandeered by older men for naptime.

My stroll was briefly interrupted by a near-head-on collision with a mini-drone, whose operator then narrowly avoided crashing into me as well as he chased down the gadget. Once the drone had been grounded, the young man wanted to know whether I was voting Clinton or Trump. I entered the bazaar half-fearing its perversion into a tourist wonderland tailored to the assumed expectations of the Orientalist visitor. To my great joy, I found this to by and large not be the case; in other words, I in my Orientalist role of self-appointed authority on Oriental authenticity determined the bazaar to be pretty damn authentic—or in the very least not cheesy. A minimal number of tour groups were encountered among the mass of bodies, spice stalls, carpet shops, jewelers, ceramics vendors, fruit, makeup, baby clothes, banks, and quite literally everything else under the sun. I acquired a mound of turmeric and a tube of mascara that the merchant assured me was made in Iran, and wandered the bazaar’s passageways beneath religious banners strung from the vaulted ceilings.

In his [book](#) *A History of Modern Iran*, noted historian Ervand Abrahamian delineates the enduring “vital link between mosque and bazaar” with origins in late-nineteenth century Persia. Unsurprisingly, the shah’s effective war on both of these institutions in the 1970s did little in the way of securing him in his post. The regime “talked openly of replacing the ‘flea-infested bazaars’ and the old city centers with new highways and modern state-run markets operated like London’s Covent Garden”—with the shah himself later stating, according to Abrahamian, “that he had moved against the bazaars because they were ‘badly ventilated,’ ‘out-dated,’ and ‘fanatical.’”

Furthermore, an ostensible anti-profiteering campaign targeting the bazaars led SAVAK to erect a “so-called Guilds Court [that] meted out some 250,000 fines, banned 23,000 from their home towns, handed out 8,000 prison sentences ranging from two months to three years, and brought charges against another 180,000.”

On the spiritual front, the shah’s transgressions included an “assault on the clerical establishment” and denunciation of the clergy “as ‘black medieval reactionaries,’”

plus the unveiling of a new monarchy-centric calendar that caused Iran to jump “overnight from the Muslim year 1355 to the imperial year 2535.” This is not to mention, of course, all the ways the shah succeeded in pissing off the left.

I myself encountered no fanaticism or fleas in the Esfahan bazaar, although I did reach a new low in terms of directional capabilities. Believing myself to be merely proceeding in a rectangular pattern around the massive perimeter of Naghsh-e Jahan and thus able to extricate myself at any time, I discovered after more than an hour of walking that this was not at all the case. Unbeknownst to me, I had turned up in a different section of town, where there were of course also squares and mosques and my requests for directions to “the square” and “the mosque” thus did not lessen the confusion.

In an attempt to restart my brain I stopped for tea at a small ice-cream shop across from a building marked with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s Kalashnikov-based logo. As the shop attendant had no tea on hand, he motioned for me to stay where I was and disappeared around the street corner, returning five minutes later with a paper cup containing the requested liquid. I attempted to pay; he wouldn’t hear of it.

Still convinced that I must be just outside Naghsh-e Jahan, I inspected an ornate mosque from every angle, assuming that I’d eventually pass under the right arch and find myself at the fountain surrounded by picnickers and bench-nappers. Instead, I found more and more bazaar and a candy shop worker who emitted the following questions in rapid-fire English:

1. Where are you from?
2. Do you want to ride on my motorcycle?
3. Do you want to ride in my car?
4. What is your marital status?
5. How many babies do you want?
6. Do you want a candy?

While I did appreciate the use of the phrase “marital status,” I took the opportunity to continue on my way sans candy. In my two weeks in Esfahan, the only other instance that might have been construed as a semi-proposition was one in which a young man on a motorcycle cut me off on the street with the announcement: “Hello, I am sexy.”

In the end, I resurfaced at Naghsh-e Jahan thanks to the proprietor of a rug shop who removed me from the bazaar, escorted me across a parking lot to the sidewalk, and pointed me in the proper direction, assuring me that there was no problem whatsoever with high-volume references to my destination as Shah Square. In my ongoing quest to be the most neurotic traveler ever, I descended into a panic and scanned the vicinity for potential informants, but was quickly reminded of more

mundane perils like traffic.