

# Letter from Iran: Red Shi'ism at the underground bookfair, Part II

by Belen Fernandez - 09/09/2017 13:52



## *A Note from the editors*

*This is the second part to a three part series by Belen Fernandez. Our notes on the [first essay](#) were introduced in part I, but we decided for the next two parts that it would be best to just let this magnificent work speak for itself. If you would like to read part 1: Letter from Iran: To Lebanon and Back, [follow this link](#).*

## Letter from Iran: Red Shi'ism at the underground bookfair, Part II

Every Friday morning in Esfahan, a used book fair is held in an underground parking lot on Taleghani Avenue, named for an ayatollah described by Abrahamian as “the most popular cleric in Tehran” during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Had he not perished shortly thereafter, he “might have provided a liberal counterweight to Khomeini.”

Prior to his revolutionary activity in the 1970s, Taleghani was a supporter of the secular nationalist Mohammad Mossadegh, victim of that infamous coup jointly perpetrated by the Americans and British in 1953 to make the world safe for imperial control over the oil business. Nowadays, imperial representatives up in arms over the contemporary orientation of the Iranian state would do well to contemplate Abrahamian's observation that this very coup—in destroying Mossadegh's National Front and the communist Tudeh Party (literally the Party of the Masses) via arrests, executions, and the like—"paved the way for the eventual emergence of a religious movement." Abrahamian explains: "In other words, the coup helped replace nationalism, socialism, and liberalism with Islamic 'fundamentalism.'... One can argue that the real roots of the 1979 revolution go back to 1953."

The post-coup years, however, hardly made a run-of-the-mill "fundamentalist" out of Taleghani, who, Abrahamian [writes](#) in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, produced an important work arguing that "socialism and religion were compatible because God had created the world for mankind and had no intention of dividing humanity in to exploiting and exploited classes." Far more appealing, no doubt, than Gods who tell George Bush to invade Iraq.

I ended up at the used book fair on Taleghani Avenue as an indirect result of my decision to attempt a morning jog on Chahar Bagh. The jog required some preparations, as I was unsure what to do with my hair and my requests for a solution were met with blank stares from employees of all sportswear shops at which I inquired. One employee tactfully suggested that it might be "strange" for someone to run on Chahar Bagh, but his colleague shot him down. I would later discover that there were plenty of joggers in Esfahan but that they wisely confined their movements to the banks of the Zayandeh Rood, the currently waterless river. In the meantime, I concluded that the most sensible course of action was to purchase a cheap black headscarf for running purposes, and proceeded to a headscarf vendor one block over from my hotel.

As no English was spoken I was assisted in my selection by the vendor's friend, a man in his early thirties named Hadi who asked what I did for a living. I said I wrote opinion pieces. He nodded vaguely and sought further clarification: "The opinions of your country?"

Hadi told me that he himself had a bookshop between Imam Hussein Square and Naghsh-e Jahan but that he wouldn't be at the shop the following day because he had to attend to his tables at the used book fair on Taleghani, just past Imam Hussein Square off Chahar Bagh. He drew me a map and said he would bring a box of English books.

I arrived at 9 a.m. after an uneventful morning jog to the appointed underground parking lot to find people streaming out of the entrance with garbage bags full of books. I descended into the space and stood gaping at the crowd until Hadi appeared beside me and conducted me to his domain along the far wall, where customers were combing through stacks of everything from religious texts to Kafka to astrology to stock-purchasing guides. According to Hadi, uncensored books were in high demand, and he showed me a few censored manuscripts along with their older, unabridged counterparts for purposes of size comparison. I asked him what would happen if this component of his operation were discovered; he shrugged and said he didn't think it would be that huge a deal. Of course, censorship was hardly a singular pastime of the Islamic Republic; the phenomenon was endemic under the West's favorite shah, who had also presided over an apparatus of torture as well as rampant political imprisonment including such stunts as the criminalization of Dr. Ghulam Hussein Sa'edi, a psychologist who, Abrahamian writes, "had become the country's leading playwright and had been arrested in 1975 for publishing depressing literature."

Hadi had worked for twelve years in the book business, having abandoned pursuit of a university degree in accounting to do so. He gave thanks to his poor eyesight for exempting him from military service. He was a religious person but privately so, he specified, and while he wasn't particularly thrilled with the whole concept of theocracy he speculated that the Iranian regime was at least better than the American one at meeting the basic needs of a majority of the population. He said he tried "not to engage in politics" and to focus instead on his job, which he loved. He sold some 3,000 used books per month, most of them at the Friday fair, and made regular trips to Tehran to pack thousands more into his car.

The box of English books that had been promised me turned out to be several boxes, with some French and German titles thrown in as well. There was Ayn Rand, a book on hypertension, one on Haiti's Papa Doc, *Peg Bracken's Instant Etiquette Book*, plus *KGB: The Secret Work of Soviet Secret Agents*, the cover of which promised "photographs of agents, assassins, seductresses and victims." On 14 July 1975, the final title had apparently belonged to one P. Pirouz, whose name was scrawled across the inner cover along with the date.

With the occasional interruption from book-buyers wanting to know my prediction for the U.S. elections, I perused the pile of treasures and selected six for purchase, all the while fighting the horrifying urge to pen imitations of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* based on my new acquisitions. *Reading Mao Tse-tung in Esfahan* was a possibility, as was *Reading Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*. I added a 1965 title by theologian

Harvey Cox to my stack and with it the potential for a *Reading The Secular City in Esfahan*.

Of course, there had been plenty of secular components to the Islamic Revolution. In fact, Abrahamian describes how Ali Shariati—credited as the “real ideologue” of the revolution despite unexpectedly perishing in 1977—continued the work of radical believers like Taleghani in “formulating a secular religion that would appeal to the modern intelligentsia without alienating the traditional bazaaris and the religious masses.” Shariati, who “aimed to transform Shi’ism from a conservative apolitical religion into a highly revolutionary political ideology competing with Leninism and Maoism,” ultimately produced a “radical layman’s religion that disassociated itself from the traditional clergy and associated itself with the secular trinity of social revolution, technological innovation, and cultural self-assertion.” In Shariati’s conceptualization, Imam Hussein—martyred in 680 at the hand of the oppressive Umayyad caliph Yazid—was a veritable forerunner of Che Guevara.

In the run-up to the revolution, Khomeini took care not to alienate Shariati’s followers and instead intermittently harnessed the late ideologue’s own lingo to appeal to the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist crowd agitating for the vanquishment of ghastly inequality and the dawn of a classless society. Obviously, the ensuing Islamic Republic was not exactly one in which Guevara himself would have thrived. But in terms of resistance to empire the regime’s credentials were rather sound. Gone, for example, were the ignominious policies of a monarch bent on serving as client extraordinaire for the American weapons industry via multibillion-dollar deals while the Iranian poor enjoyed their poverty. Abrahamian reports: “Arms dealers joked that the shah devoured their manuals in much the same way as other men read Playboy.”

Furthermore, under the new system, a range of services arrived to rural villages, significant subsidies were provided to impoverished sectors of the population, and tracts of confiscated land were redistributed to peasant farmers in certain areas. Notable advancements were made in rural health care as well as literacy and education. Granted, all of these projects were undertaken with the sole aim of raining death and destruction upon America.

Back at the Friday book fair I attempted to pay Hadi for my items, which would have amounted to fifty cents per book, but payment was categorically refused. A rotund cleric in a white turban bounded over to try to get in on the free book action, but was informed by Hadi that he was ineligible and bounded cheerily off again.

I emerged from the underground parking lot with my bag of books and wandered over to the nearby Safavid-era palace Hasht Behesht, meaning “eight heavens,” located within a breezy park that also contained various pools, fountains, and groups

of old men playing chess at small tables. One old man group had taken over a long bench and was singing in chorus, directed by a white-haired ringleader on foot. Picnickers and tea-drinkers lounged on the grass, while others snoozed on fuzzy blankets. Envious of their preparedness, I sat on a plastic bag and perused my tattered copy of Ho Chi Minh's selected writings, published in 1967. At the far end of the long pool in front of Hasht Behesht palace was a plaque honoring the shared Silk Road legacy of Esfahan, "Capital of Culture & Civilization in the Islamic Iran," and Korea's Gyeongsangbuk-do province, "reconfirm[ing] their historical exchanges and pledg[ing] to promote their friendship and exchanges in a new silk road era."

Safavid Shah Abbas I, in relocating his imperial capital from Qazvin to Esfahan in the late sixteenth century, had rerouted Silk Road travel through the new hub. Traveling through the city now, I found my own movements to be far less obstructed than in other former Silk Road outposts like Uzbekistan, where during a visit the previous year I had been repeatedly stopped by police and made to present my passport as well as evidence that my presence in the country had been registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Inside the Kosmonavtlar metro station in Tashkent, I unwittingly attempted to subvert law and order by trying to photograph the station's intriguing décor: oversized renderings of cosmonauts in space gear arranged against a backdrop of decreasing shades of blue. Female station guards were immediately upon me, and the photo was thwarted. On another occasion, I was detained in the subway by three policemen, one of whom went off to investigate my claim that I was staying at a particular hotel while the other two interrogated me in pidgin English as to why a woman over 30 years of age had not yet reproduced.

No such disruptions to my trajectory or mental tranquility were made by authorities in Esfahan, nor had the Iranians opted for the Uzbek aesthetic of uniformed security forces on every block. Not once was I asked for any form of identification or to identify my prescribed guide. I was nonetheless grateful for the [State Department warning](#) regarding the "risks of travel to Iran," including the "arrest and detention of U.S. citizens"—which, the State Department reasoned, was reason enough for Americans to "consider postponing their travel" to the hostile nation.

From the park I meandered down Chahar Bagh to the famed Si-o-se pol pedestrian bridge with its 33 arches. The lack of water in the Zayandeh Rood meant it wasn't technically necessary to utilize this or any other of Esfahan's bridges to cross from one riverbank to the other, but under nearly every arch and in every alcove of the structure were one or more persons putting public space to use. Groups of high school students played instruments and sang. Others focused on the art of selfie-taking.

I crossed the bridge and took a seat on a bench on the southern bank near some clunky outdoor exercise equipment being cautiously experimented on by elderly men in formal attire. A woman eventually sat down next to me with her five-year-old son, who was in possession of a small plastic gun and proceeded to shoot each passerby in the head.