

Letter from Iran: Under the shadow of the Assassins' castle, part III

by Belen Fernandez - 13/09/2017 14:24



A Note From the Editors

This is the third and final part to the letter from Iran 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](#). And if you would like to read part 2: [Letter from Iran: red Shi'ism at the underground bookfair](#), [follow this link](#)

Letter from Iran part III: Under the shadow of the Assassins' castle

I returned to Si-o-se pol a few days later in the company of a young man called Hamid, an employee at a carpet shop next to the Imam Mosque at Naghsh-e Jahan

whom I had met after circumventing the entrance fee to said mosque by slipping in with a tour group. I had told Hamid about my morning jogs on Chahar Bagh and he had pledged to take me to a “normal” place to run: the parks along the riverbank.

I first made the acquaintance of Hamid’s colleague Hussein when I exited the magnificence of the mosque and was busy congratulating myself on having saved six dollars. Hussein approached, asked where I was from and why I didn’t have a guide, and gave me a high five when I told him about the six dollars. Some small talk ensued, with Hussein complaining that the Iranian government was “suffocating” its people; he then backtracked to assert that there was in fact room to breathe despite the rules and that the mullahs had at least charitably refrained from blocking the VPNs that were necessary to access Facebook.

Having presumably guessed from my stunt at the mosque that I was not the ideal carpet customer, Hussein nevertheless invited me to the shop where he worked with Hamid and several other young men. As it was lunchtime, we sat on the floor and shared a vat of rice made with saffron and pomegranate plus a smaller vat of yogurt on the side. Over successive servings of tea afterward, the boys showed me some of their more unique wares including two carpets woven by Afghan refugees in Iran who had incorporated patterns involving warplanes, guns, and tanks. Hamid, a former volleyball player with pronounced upper body muscles and curly hair, lamented what he termed “Iranian racism” toward Afghans, and poured me another cup of tea despite my protests that I was already orbiting.

All of the young men present were involved in the phenomenon known as couchsurfing, by which they and their couches or spare rooms hosted foreign visitors to the land—one of whom, a European, had reportedly written the definitive account of couchsurfing in Iran. As Hussein described it, the couchsurfing business was another earthly luxury that—while certainly not condoned by the mullahs—was not actively thwarted. He speculated that my exemption thus far from the permanent guide rule was also a government ploy to give me “just enough freedom.”

Hamid, who professed to have learned English from couchsurfers, announced that he was taking me to the “hipster café” at the other end of Naghsh-e Jahan. Passing in front of the Imam Mosque, we paused so that Hamid could show me photographs on his cell phone of the winemaking process currently underway at his house. He estimated that the final product would be ready for consumption in 35 days, which meant I would miss out.

Hamid had abandoned his volleyball career because of sanctions, he said, which had caused funding for sports teams to plummet. Indeed, the S-word could be invoked to explain a variety of predicaments on the contemporary Iranian scene, from the

decidedly trivial—when I was unable to change my plane ticket online the Turkish Airlines office staff in Esfahan shrugged: “Sanctions”—to the more life-threatening. In a November 2013 *New York Times* [post](#), Beheshteh Farshneshani listed some of the repercussions of sanctions over the past year and a half alone: “[F]amilies living in poverty rose from 22 to more than 40 percent... and the price of food regularly consumed by Iranians—for example, milk, tea, fruits and vegetables—skyrocketed. Moreover, the health of millions of Iranians has been compromised due to the shortage of western medical drugs and supplies.”

That same year, the *Guardian* [reported](#) that the waivers built into the sanctions regime “to ensure that essential medicines get through... are not functioning, as they conflict with blanket restrictions on banking, as well as bans on ‘dual-use’ chemicals which might have a military application.” As for past examples of dual-use items, these might have included the chemical weapons utilized in the 1980s by Saddam Hussein in his war on Iran—with the [complicity](#) of none other than the United States. Predictably, such history has not interfered with America’s self-appointed role as arbiter of international justice and decider of what weapons countries can and can’t have. Israel, for one, is permitted a vast [nuclear arsenal](#) in rather blatant contravention of the very nonproliferation treaty that is trotted out to justify punishment of the Iranians—who, [according to](#) the United States’ own National Intelligence Estimate, halted their nuclear weapons program in 2003. Obviously, the Israelis are also permitted to perennially bitch and moan about Iran’s alleged nuclear ambitions, and to periodically threaten attacks.

In *The Iran Wars*, the *Wall Street Journal*’s Jay Solomon writes of the “financial war on Iran,” a nation that had “emerged as a laboratory for concocting innovative ways to inflict economic damage.” Some of the products of innovation, apparently, were the “collapse of the Iranian currency” in 2012 and a situation in which “factories and plants [were] firing employees by the hundreds of thousands.” Now, for all the rightwing hullabaloo over Barack Obama’s globally imperiling mullah-appeasement scheme—read: the nuclear deal and allegedly attendant sanctions relief—the sanctions regime has [hardly](#) been disappeared. When I asked Hamid about the deal, he threw up his hands and said he couldn’t keep track of which sanctions had been lifted, which had remained, and which had been newly imposed. On the bright side, he said, his volleyball training had meant that, when the time had come for his military service, he’d been able to serve as a sports instructor rather than a combatant.

We passed through a section of the bazaar to reach the “hipster café” off Naghsh-e Jahan, which was not readily identifiable as a hipster café or at least not to me. I had

saffron tea; Hamid had strawberry juice and conveyed to me his thoughts on the Iranian government, which largely consisted of expletives that he said also applied to the American, Russian, and Australian governments—the last on account of the recent self-immolation of an Iranian refugee on Australia’s preferred island-prison of Nauru. He spoke unreservedly except for when he got to the part about Iran’s 2009 presidential elections and [reports](#) that certain protesters had been raped in detention for demonstrating against the results; for this segment, Hamid lowered his voice, placed his finger over the camera lens on his phone, and explained that these were precautionary measures against “getting hung by my balls. Sorry for my language.” Criticisms of the homeland aside, he had plenty of spare expletives for Western Iranophobes who, he contended, would in fact be much safer in Iran than in their own countries—unless, he added on second thought, they were to get run over by a car. (No doubt visits to the region would have been less perilous in that respect in the early twentieth century, when Abrahamian notes “[t]he shah was the proud owner of the only motorcar in all of Iran.”)

Hamid paid for my tea, assured me that I could pay for something else in the future—“I’m not that nice of a guy”—and promised to pick me up from my hotel the next morning for a run by the Zayandeh Rood, which he did, complete with Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” blasting from the car stereo. Other parts of the car did not work as well—“sanctions”—but the vehicle got us to the riverside park where, like before, there was a contingent of elderly well-dressed men hoisting themselves up and down on cumbersome public exercise equipment. Midway through our jog a rose peddler turned up alongside us to try to make a sale and was politely sent on his way. When we had finished and Hamid had put the old men and me to shame by performing a series of upper body feats on some bars, he headed to the carpet shop and I decided there was nothing wrong with visiting an Armenian church in one’s makeshift running costume.

Vank Cathedral is located in Esfahan’s Armenian quarter of New Julfa on the south side of the Zayandeh Rood. Christians are one of Iran’s main recognized religious minorities, the others being Zoroastrians and Jews (Shayesteh lists 17 synagogues in Esfahan alone, the first conveniently located at Palestine Crossroad). The cathedral dates from the seventeenth century, when Shah Abbas I forcibly evacuated the population of the province of Nakhichevan—now an exclave of Azerbaijan—as part of an ongoing tussle with the Ottoman Empire, deporting many of the Armenian inhabitants of the original town of Julfa in Nakhichevan to his new capital of Esfahan in the hopes of putting their reputed mercantile capabilities to good use.

Informed at the church entrance that the fee was 200,000 Iranian rials—again,

roughly six dollars—I shamelessly headed off to assess the perimeter of the structure and prospects for surreptitious entry. As I was turning a corner on the sidewalk, I was accosted by a young man who turned out to be an employee of a nearby shop and who assured me I'd find no way to sneak in. He welcomed me to the Armenian quarter; I asked if he was Armenian and was told that he was not but that he liked Armenians and that anyway “they've been here for 400 years.” In turn, he inquired after my national origins, thus initiating an exchange in which I was reduced to standing on a street corner in Esfahan loudly insisting that I was American:

HIM: You're not American.

ME: I am, in fact.

HIM: American from where?

ME: I was born in Washington, D.C.

HIM: But you don't have a guide. You must have another passport.

ME: I do not.

HIM: You must be from one of the Minor Outlying Islands or something.

ME: ... *[makes mental note to Google this concept later on]*

HIM: They [the Iranians] actually gave you a visa?

ME: Yes they gave me a visa; that is why I am here.

HIM: But Americans have to have a guide.

ME: *[draws his attention to the presence of a middle-aged man frozen in position approximately 1.5 meters away and conspicuously attending to the conversation]*

HIM (*upbeat*): Maybe he's from intelligence.

In the end, it emerged that my interlocutor's great interest in the subject at hand was on account of the fact that he had some American internet-comrades intent on couchsurfing in Iran but unable to circumvent the guide requirement. I concluded that I could spare six dollars for the Vank Cathedral experience, which entailed an onslaught of gilded splendor and vibrant depictions of heaven, earth, hell, and Armenians being tortured by Ottomans. In the price was also included the entrance fee for the museum and library across the courtyard that housed copious artifacts and manuscripts along with a giant light-up map commemorating the Armenian genocide.

Another collection of Armenian martyrs was on display just across the river at Esfahan's martyrs' museum, located on Shamsabadi Avenue—itsself named for yet another martyr, an influential Esfahani cleric murdered in 1976 not long after publicly denouncing the imperial calendar that had spontaneously replaced the Islamic one. Following the Shamsabadi murder, a general strike took place in the Esfahan bazaar, which had also participated in previous episodes of protest including a massive 1951 strike in Esfahan organized in sympathy with striking oil industry workers in Khuzestan province and in support of the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. In 1978, the Esfahan bazaar played host to another strike—this time against martial law bloodily imposed on the city in response to anti-shah riots.

The museum, a two-story affair with mildly disconcerting life-size cutout figures of Iranian militants from bygone eras squatting out front among a smattering of flower bushes and fruit trees, was locked when I arrived. The curator was eventually summoned and proceeded to bestow on me a series of gifts which he brought out one by one from an office while I waited in front of a photograph of Khomeini. First came a box of candy, followed by a notebook featuring troops marching through sand against a background of planet and stars, followed by a miniature address book with shiny gold cover and the museum logo, and finally an imported “cocoa-coated biscuit.” The man spoke no English, but made a motion indicating that I should show myself around and then disappeared into another room to pray and, from what I could hear, sing his heart out.

The museum collection focused on victims of the Iran-Iraq War and the MEK. Many were arranged by category: there were the martyred Armenians, martyred women, martyred poets, martyred artists, martyred athletes (practitioners of judo, incidentally, were well represented), martyrs of terrorism, martyrs of chemical weapons, and even a section for “Martyred Staff of Martyrs Foundation.” Some martyrs had posters of the sort I was accustomed to seeing in south Lebanon—the individual's image superimposed over serene landscape or mosque with a combination of armaments and flowers in the foreground. English translations were provided for certain photo captions, ranging from the observation “It is worthy of attention for those who cannot sleep like a log in beds of eiderdowns!”, which appeared below a photograph of a cemetery, to the note accompanying one of the chemical martyrs displays: “Many a thing can be seen in your chemically-injured eyes, and many a mystery can be eyed in your blistered hands.” Some of the captions were less intelligible, even prompting one to wonder whether there hadn't been some deliberate acts of sabotage during the translating process, as perhaps suggested by an image of a man lying in a pool of blood which came equipped with the comment: “Bloody prostrate: Visiting that ‘Single friend’ is much more pleasing in this position.”

Now, nearly three decades after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the advent of Donald Trump has meant that there's no shortage of folks in positions of power itching to expand Iran's martyr inventory—not that Hillary Clinton wasn't open to the idea of Iranian “obliteration.” Beyond predictable [news flashes](#) about which of the members of Trump's circle have received how many tens of thousands of dollars from the MEK over the years, there's also the matter of regular inflammatory ruckus over encounters in the Persian Gulf between the Iranian navy and U.S. military forces, with the Iranians inevitably cast as the aggressors despite the seemingly operative word “Persian.” Meanwhile, White House minions do their best to preserve the peace by [inventing](#) Iranian attacks on U.S. vessels that turn out to be Yemeni Houthi attacks on Saudi vessels. And while the present administration has made no secret of its view of the nuclear deal with Iran as something inferior to excrement, Obama's pseudo-negotiations in fact constitute a blessing for this new crop of ruling sociopaths, who can henceforth point to any perceived Iranian infraction as proof that diplomacy has conclusively failed.

My Esfahan martyrs tour did not end with the museum. Early one morning, I headed to a gigantic cemetery for war martyrs lying south of the Zayandeh Rood and east of the Armenian quarter. I crossed the river this time at the double-decker Khaju Bridge, known for its colorful tiles and other artwork. In his guidebook section on the Khaju Bridge, the ever-upbeat Shayesteh notes that, on the occasion of the pre-Islamic Ab Pashan festival, “held in the mid-summer of every year... people gathered on the river banks and settled next to the bridge for a couple of days, splashed water on each other, and believed it would safeguard their health against harms (what an ideal insurance without spending money and so pleasurable!).”

I myself encountered various packs of middle-aged men in tracksuits performing stretching exercises on the bridge, each group with its own portable radio and motivational soundtrack. Some older women were out for a brisk stroll, and a few lone female joggers made their way along a trail on the riverbank. At the cemetery down the road, the magnitude of the loss experienced by the country over the eight-year conflict—estimated by some to have killed a million Iranians—was driven home by the sea of tombs bearing images of the deceased. Many of the faces belonged to young boys. A woman read a Quran over a line of graves, and people passing through the cemetery grounds on their way to work knelt down beside one tomb or another before continuing on.

When I met up later on with Hadi, the used bookseller who had gifted me the stack of manuscripts at the Friday book fair, he complained about the government's tradition of forcible recollection of the war via ubiquitous martyr posters and other tactics. As

Hadi saw it, life was not meant to be lived with ever-present reminders of death—although he did allow that, given death’s relative centrality to contemporary Iranian landscapes, there was probably more to the story than simply an official exploitation of suffering in the interest of God and country. Hadi had been born during the war; his family, he said, had fled Esfahan for two years on account of aerial bombing. I, too, had been born during the war—but in a country working to fuel the carnage. My own mercurial homeland had, of course, then lost interest in Saddam Hussein as a partner in crime, eventually promoting both Iraq and Iran to a single “axis of evil” designed to help maximize lucrative flows of oil and weapons in the Middle East while setting the stage for a further surplus of regional bloodshed. But God forbid anyone say “Death to America.”

Hadi had summoned me to his bookshop, a dusty basement room between Imam Hussein Square and Naghsh-e Jahan, to contribute another hefty addition to my traveling library: a hardback Farsi-English translation of the great Persian poet Sa’di. He had also pledged to escort me to Soffeh Mountain just south of Esfahan, which he said I could not leave Iran without visiting. Walking from my hotel to the shop, I was intercepted by an exuberant young man in an orange shirt who commenced to spout the following trivia:

1. American cars were the best despite his father’s preference for Japanese ones.
2. Electronics assembled in America were fundamentally superior in quality to electronics assembled in China.
3. No one really believed in “Death to America” anymore no matter how many times they said it.

When he suddenly claimed to recognize me from the couchsurfing network, I took the opportunity to flee. At the shop, Hadi presented me with the volume of Sa’di and threw in a book of Persian miniatures, as well. He had just made an offer on a collection of 1,500 used books, some of which were 70 years old, which meant, he said with a laugh, that they were uncensored. While Hadi fielded a phone call from one of his regular customers—a cleric wanting a heads up re: any new good stuff at the upcoming Friday fair—I perused a stack of English books, including *American History Before 1877*, marked as the property of Kamrouz Pirouz in Oshkosh, Wisconsin on 6 November 1964. Also on offer was an old copy of *Jewish Conspiracy: The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, printed by the Islamic Propagation Organization, plus *The Fragrance of Beauty*, originally published in 1973 and promising “[p]ractical ways to charm, focusing on the inner you.” The charm guide was penned by Joyce Landorf, whose author bio listed her as a “radiant beauty [and] both a homemaker and a career woman” as well as a “singer who has recorded several albums—‘Peace Through the Lord,’ ‘It’s Great To Be Alive,’ and her newest, ‘Joyce.’” Among other credentials were “numerous Outstanding Service Awards from

the U.S. Military for appearances around the world.”

Hadi hung up with the cleric, dismissed the “Jewish conspiracy” with a wave of his hand and the remark that he had plenty of Jewish friends, and ushered me out the door for the excursion to Soffeh. We caught the public bus south over the Zayandeh Rood as the sun was setting, passing a series of Iran-Iraq War martyr posters and a Hezbollah flag swaying in the breeze. As we continued south, Hadi advised me that we were entering a “high-level” area, by which he meant upper class—as evidenced, perhaps, by the appearance of shops like Benetton, Mango, and other bastions of Western consumerist decadence. Somewhere in the vicinity of the University of Esfahan Hadi received a text message from a friend currently on a walking pilgrimage to the Iraqi city of Karbala, site of Imam Hussein’s seventh-century martyrdom; the friend reported that the Iraqis he had encountered had been most hospitable, offering free accommodations, food, and in some cases even massages to the travelers.

According to Shayesteh, Soffeh Mountain—which I could see from my hotel window at night when it was illuminated and sometimes during the day, depending on the level of air pollution—had formerly hosted a castle captured by the Shiite Nizari Ismaili sect (otherwise known as the Assassins) during Seljuk rule in the eleventh century. Now, over nine centuries later, it was clearly the place to be. Descending from the public bus, I proceeded to nearly get us slaughtered via a deer-in-headlights maneuver in the middle of the highway, whereupon we took a short taxi ride to the base of the mountain. Hadi acquired a large bag of a product called Cheetoz and we began a slow descent up the path, stopping to admire pools of water, martyr memorials, and the glittering lights of Esfahan stretching into the distance. Hadi expressed surprise at the quantity of people trekking, barbecuing meat, singing, being romantic, and otherwise utilizing the mountain on a weeknight, and speculated that it was a necessary escape from the tumult of the city.

As I returned to my hotel later that night, an orangeish figure in my peripheral field of vision shouted: “Hey, U.S.A.!” Shuddering, I turned to find the anti-Death-to-America character from earlier in the day giving me a double thumbs-up. Having apparently overcome any shame I might have once felt at overtly sociopathic behavior, I darted inside.

* * *

Approximately three days before my scheduled departure from Esfahan, I received an email from the travel agent who had arranged for my visa to Iran and had abruptly recalled that I had committed to being guided for a day. I responded asking where it was that the guide should take me. She suggested the ancient Zoroastrian village of

Abyaneh, located a few hours' drive from Esfahan in Natanz county and known for its picturesque red clay architecture and distinct language and style of dress. The word Natanz, of course, occupies a special place in rightwing and Zionist lexicons, having been effectively contorted into a synonym for impending nuclear Armageddon. The [Natanz](#) fuel enrichment plant, Iran's largest uranium enrichment facility, was "exposed" in 2002 by the MEK-Israeli consortium in an attempt to add the Islamic Republic to Washington's growing list of regional military targets. In 2009-10, the facility was on the receiving end of the Stuxnet computer virus, a joint U.S.-Israeli effort that, Jay Solomon writes, constituted the "first known use of cyber warfare against a sovereign state." Nor was the institution a stranger to more tangible forms of warfare, having produced such martyrs as 32-year-old Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, the former employee and PhD student whose dad I had spoken to at the terrorism conference in Tehran. Prior to his son's assassination in 2012, the dad had reiterated, Ahmadi Roshan had labored under the conviction that a peaceful nuclear program was key to national sovereignty.

The Natanz plant is not to be confused with the uranium conversion facility in nearby Esfahan or with that city's nuclear research center, which [according to](#) the Federation of American Scientists initially came about via an agreement signed in France in 1975 during the shah's reign—the enduring lesson being that nuclear programs are A-OK as long as they're overseen by imperial stooges. Following the [nuclear deal](#), Iranian uranium enrichment activities are restricted to Natanz, where no more than 5,060 centrifuges are now permitted. For his part, Shayesteh identifies Natanz as "the cradle of the most superlative potteries."

For the excursion to Abyaneh I was picked up at my hotel by a middle-aged guide named Masoud with spectacles and a fanny pack, whom the travel agent had instructed me not to inform about my otherwise guideless state. Before becoming a tour guide Masoud had been an English teacher; before that he had evaded military service thanks to poor eyesight and meticulous calligraphy that had, he said, gotten him a job "writing things" for a police official instead. As a guide he had taken Iranian tour groups to Malaysia and Singapore on three separate occasions, after which he had put a stop to the arrangement because "the Iranian tourists thought they were the guides and not me." In Iran, meanwhile, he had guided a few groups of Americans, including one group of Jewish travelers who had refrained from revealing their spiritual orientation until the end of the journey, whereupon they had reportedly professed their love for the Islamic Republic and reluctance to leave. Regarding the upcoming U.S. elections, Masoud told me that he referred to Trump as "*loulou*," which he explained was a voracious monster adults invoked to frighten children into obedience.

Driving north out of Esfahan in the direction of Tehran, we passed through an extensive industrial area that was doing its fair share to maintain Esfahan's air pollution levels. A desolate and parched landscape ensued, the Zagros Mountains lining the horizon; Masoud pointed out the ruins of a caravanserai on our left. In the quiet town of Natanz we stopped to inspect a mosque and tomb belonging to a thirteenth-century Sufi sheikh, and Masoud took the opportunity to acquire a stockpile of saffron. Continuing on toward Abyaneh, the scenery gradually became infused with more color, and roadside attractions expanded to include military outposts displaying anti-aircraft guns.

The highlights of the red-hued village of Abyaneh, arranged against a hillside, range from a Zoroastrian fire temple dating from several centuries B.C. to a slightly more recent house door that features male- and female-specific knockers—the idea being that those inside the house would thus be apprised of the gender of the visitor and be able to execute wardrobe adjustments accordingly. Traversing the village, it seemed that there were perhaps more martyr portraits than inhabitants; for a brief but excruciating spell, there were more vociferous Italian and German tourists than portraits and inhabitants combined. When the tour buses mercifully departed, I purchased dried apples and homemade vinegar from two women in vibrant, flower-patterned hijabs while Masoud chatted with an old woman seated on her doorstep. He reported the essential details of the conversation to me, which were that the woman resided in Abyaneh with her husband and that they were both over 100 years of age.

Apparently invigorated by the autumn breeze, Masoud announced that he wanted to show me the view of Abyaneh from a hilltop across the way and went marching off down a tree-lined path that put us at our destination some 20 minutes later. In addition to the village view, I was shown a series of holes in the side of the hill where Masoud said shepherds kept their sheep at night. When the autumn breeze turned to ferocious gusts of wind that imperiled our hilltop positions and raised the distinct possibility of accidental martyrdom, we evacuated the area as rapidly as possible and sought refuge in a hotel restaurant at the entrance to Abyaneh. Masoud finagled what amounted to a two-for-one discount on the buffet by telling the woman in charge that I was only having tea and then smuggling servings of eggplant, chicken, and rice to me when no one was looking. Afterward in the car, he explained that he had overridden the woman's objection to the prospect of a tea-only dining experience by alleging that I was on a diet and that "Westerners aren't like us, eating all the time."

The windstorm accompanied us on the ride back to Esfahan, meaning that it was Masoud's car versus dust clouds, garbage, tree branches, and everything else that could be made airborne. While navigating the hurdles Masoud listed those of his friends that had died during the war with Iraq and those that had emigrated. He himself had until recently planned to apply to the American green card lottery program, but had since concluded that there were more productive ways to spend his existence. The wind had died down by the time we reached the city known as "half the world," and Masoud nonjudgmentally accompanied me on a frivolous errand involving procurement of a converter plug for a leg-hair-epilating device before depositing me at my hotel.

I left Esfahan early on the morning of 4 November, which according to certain counter-intellectual circles in the U.S. is officially "[Death to America Day](#)" or "[Hate America Day](#)" in Iran—i.e., the anniversary of the 1979 student takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in light of America's persistent chummy relations with the deposed shah. The female and African-American hostages were quickly released, having apparently been deemed by Khomeini to have already suffered enough oppression at the hands of the empire; fifty-two others were ultimately held for 444 days.

My taxi driver to Shahid Beheshti airport hadn't gotten the memo about the holiday, thereby enabling a lively discussion in modified English:

HIM: America good.

ME: America no good.

HIM: America good.

ME: America no good.

At the airport I spent my remaining Iranian rials on boxes of syrupy pistachio-laden sweets and boarded my flight to return to Lebanon, thus proceeding from the world's preeminent [State Sponsor of Terrorism](#) to said sponsor's principle terror satellite, where as usual the immigration official at the Beirut airport asserted that although he had painstakingly written "one month" next to the entrance stamp in my passport it meant I could stay for three.

As the U.S. strives to perfect its estrangement from human reality, at least we've still got the other half of the world.