

Interview with Bruce McCandless August 9, 2000

- What new impressions and feelings of the country did you have this time?

I was very impressed by the hospitality of our Iranian hosts. They did a superb job. I was impressed by the construction everywhere. I took this as a sign of a vibrant economy that's going places and doing things. In contrast to other Mid-Eastern countries I have visited, I saw no armed police presence in any cities...I noticed that the women were complying with Hijab but taking a full part in life unlike other counties in region.

- Were you aware of any stereotypes broken on this trip, either the delegation's views of Iranians, or Iranians' views of Americans?

From an American perspective...it's risky to generalize, but I initially was loaded down with apprehension and concern built up over years of news media but I was favorably impressed by the country and the apparent freedom we had within the country, such as to walk the streets and participate in scheduled activities. It struck me that it was a going economy and that the situation was probably still evolving only 20 years since the Revolution. I was pleased, while riding on Iran Air, that they always had an English language copy of newspapers. I was surprised to learn that Farsi is an Indo-European language written with Arabic script. I didn't notice any significant shortages...Japanese cars and occasional Mercedes and the latest in computer technology, including Internet cafes. I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of agriculture. There is plenty of desert but plenty of land under cultivation, and the produce was delicious. They seem to be working hard to diversify their economy. Iran is the 2nd largest oil exporter in OPEC.

- Did you notice any generational differences in attitudes? How were your interactions with younger people vis-a-vis older people? (I'm trying to get a sense here of societal change.)

I can't say I saw any differences in the way people see the world. Men in my age bracket (60) have spent time in the U.S. Others I met had studied in the U.S. and most of the older generation seemed to have spent some time in the U.S. Those of the younger generation (people in their 20s) who are mostly recent university grads, due to the timing of the Revolution, haven't had time to come to the U.S. Many expressed the desire to visit the U.S. Overall, everyone seemed positively oriented to the U.S. Walking down streets and in the Bazaar people wanted to know where we were from, and smiled and wanted to practice their English. The "Down with USA" sign mentioned in the *Lonely Planet* guide had been taken down in the restaurant. With the ending of sanctions against carpets rug merchants are actively promoting their wares.

- Would you agree with the claim that Iran is a dynamic country? If so, could you describe a vignette or episode that illustrates this?

Anecdote: It struck me as a little incongruous that women wearing the *chador* were also using a cell phone. On one hand, the *hijab* reminds one of a strict religious past

and the cell phone symbolizes the present. I noticed a lot of cell phone usage. It seemed like women were much more an active part life than I had expected.

- Could you describe a successful/harmonious/stimulating interaction with (an) Iranian(s)? Are there any particular quotable lines you heard from Iranians that you could share?

In a bazaar in Shiraz we noticed 3-4 girls in the 8-12 range dressed in native costume. My wife asked if she could take a picture of them and they all disappeared and came back appropriately dressed in beads and baubles in shepherd costume. They were very pleased to pose for us. There is an accommodation/contrast with conservative attire granted to tribes in general vicinity.

We observed an inscription of Henry Stanley in Persepolis. I had mixed feelings about this: I was amazed to be at the site of Stanley of Stanley-Livingstone fame, but I was disappointed that Stanley drew graffiti on this ancient site. It's a shame.

I was impressed with the tolerance for Christian and Judaic minorities in Iran. Iranians have been accommodating to Armenians and Afghanis, supporting the largest number of refugees in the world.

- What specific possibilities do you see for future joint collaboration?

As far as astronomy is concerned, since we have sent 2 groups of foreigners (both Americans and non-Americans have participated in the last 2 conferences) to Iran, I would think the next step would be to bring some Iranians to the U.S. It would be nice if some of them could come over and learn about astronomical space techniques and maybe see a space shuttle. I'm sure working with Alan Hale and folks like that I don't see any problem seeing a space shuttle launch. The only caveat I'd give is allow about 3 days. If the shuttle doesn't launch, you go out to Disney World, and then go out the second day...the weather tends to radically affect launches. Glad to help out trying to organize it but I would want to see them bring along some of the women.

I talked about the use of the Hubbel telescope with an Esfahan professor and how we could share Hubbel unclassified images as many are accessible by web. There is more that we could do on joint telescope projects.

In a broader context, I mentioned to someone the existence of 911 telephone calls in the U.S. and they were very interested. As I understand with rotary phones over there, I suspect that the telecommunications system would be ripe for modernizing. With the embargo in place, we could get an exception on humanitarian grounds. U.S. companies should be allowed to upgrade emergency response features.

- What would be your advice to the State Department on the proper U.S. policy towards Iran? (i.e. what would you do differently, if at all.)

I asked our Iranian hosts what they would recommend the U.S. to do. I got the same answers: be quietly supportive of the initiatives of President Khatami, don't openly come out and say "we'll do this", but help him to build his support and power base and not meddle in our affairs.

Over the course of several decades, there have been actions by both sides in the relationship that were grievous, and the only way for both sides to make progress is to forgive, maybe not forget, and move forward. The USS Vincennes incident was from our standpoint an accident and was unfortunate, and they understand that, but we still killed 200-some people. Both sides have done things to aggravate the situation.

It strikes me that the idea of the Islamic Republic, where they have a theocracy, but where it is modified or directed by the democratic process and with built-in checks and balances, over time it might be a very good model of government. France since its revolution has become a stable responsible government. Any genuine revolution is bound to be in a period of oscillation before things settle down and I see that process in effect in Iran. I don't want to advise the State Dept. That's a job for other people.

- In 10 words or less, how would you describe Iran to Joe American?

Iran struck me as being a dynamic nation with a very competent and very hospitable population that I value as a neighbor and a valuable relative in the family of nations.

Before I went, I found considerable skepticism about Iran: "Why would you want to go there?" I did some research and convinced myself that it would be okay to go. Since I came back, I have found that most people are interested to hear about my experiences.