

My Journey to Iran

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“Where are you from?” a young man outside one of the many carpet stalls asked me. He looked strong as if accustomed to hard work but had a boyish face.

My mind raced. Where am I from today? Washington? North America? South of Canada? Europe, where I had a layover? The hotel down the street, where I had slept the previous night?

Sigh. “The U.S.,” I replied.

“U.S.?” His face screwed up in puzzlement. “U.S., U.S.,” he repeated, brow furrowed, the wheels turning. “Aaah!” the light bulb turned on. “U.S. Aaaahh! United States of America!” his dark eyes now gleaming, looking like he would hug me, were it permitted. “Welcome to Iran!”

Such interactions were repeated many a time throughout my stay in Iran. Curious people, perhaps tipped off by my blue eyes or the awkward positioning of my headscarf, would approach me and ask, in English, where I was from. After learning that I was from America, their responses varied from the inquisitive to the exuberant: “America! We love America!”

How it Came to Pass

I came to travel to Iran after being contacted by an organization called Search for a Common Ground that works to emphasize commonalities among cultures and to prevent conflict. Their U.S.-Iran program had sponsored a trip in 2002 for Lester Brown, the president of Earth Policy Institute where I work as a researcher, to speak about the global environmental situation with university faculty and environmental organizations in Iran. This year they were helping to recommend participants for an international conference organized by the Iranian Department of the Environment and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), on “Environment, Peace, and the Dialogue Among Civilizations and Cultures,” to be held in Tehran in mid-May 2005. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to take part.

In the final weeks before my trip, dozens of women wearing headscarves who had previously blended into the crowds suddenly appeared all over Washington, DC. I noticed them coming up the escalators from the Metro station near my home; handing me change at the market; walking through Dupont Circle talking animatedly and laughing. I fought the urge to approach each one for a headscarf primer, realizing that the fact that I would temporarily be joining them in hijab would probably seem monumental only to me.

Arrival

As the airplane neared its destination, the voice of the head flight attendant echoed over the loudspeaker. Instead of the usual warnings about storing away tray tables and putting seatbacks in their upright position, she announced, “we are nearing our destination in Tehran in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Women are required to observe Islamic dress on leaving the plane.” Much shuffling ensued as half of the passengers dug into their bags to pull out scarves and readied their manteaus or overcoats, which were to be worn over clothing whenever in public company. High-heeled sandals that were worn on the streets of Paris were traded in for more conservative closed shoes. As we began our descent the glowing lights of sprawling Tehran commanded my attention. I was arriving.

The passengers all filed down the steps onto the tarmac, breathing in the warm and smoggy night air. We were ushered into the Tehran airport where the lines at immigration seemed to be moving fairly quickly. When I reached the front of the line, however, I handed over my American passport to the chador-clad woman in the booth, who gave a barely audible sigh and signaled to someone up the stairs, motioned that I move aside, and preceded to call up the next person in line. Several minutes later, a gentleman came down and without a word of explanation briskly took my passport back upstairs. One by one the rest of the passengers made their way through the line until I was the last one left. After what seemed like several eternities, but was likely only several minutes, the man returned. He opened my passport, peered at the photo of me (sans headscarf), looked up at my face, and then asked for my father’s name. I silently questioned the relevance of his inquiry, but thought it best to answer directly. “Very well,” he said, and handed me back my entry documents. I think I saw him try to conceal a smile. “Welcome to Iran.”

I was the last one from the flight to go through to the airport lobby, so I didn’t have any trouble spotting a concerned Hamid Taravati, Earth Policy Institute board member and colleague, who surprised me by meeting my flight. Hamid and his wife, Farzaneh Bahar are modern day Renaissance people, both parents, physicians, environmentalists, and translators and publishers of Earth Policy Institute’s writings. They had traveled to Tehran for the conference by train from their home in the eastern Iranian city of Mashad.

As Hamid drove us to the conference hotel getting passed at close range by speeding cars that ignored the white lanes painted on the asphalt, he commented on how lucky it was that I had arrived at night so that we could avoid the traffic. I had to wonder if Iranians employed a different definition of traffic than the one I was used to, but I would find out soon enough what he meant. For the meantime, I was content to arrive safely at the hotel (formerly a Hyatt, since renamed “Azadi,” meaning freedom), go up to my room with a view of the Alborz Mountains, climb into the huge bed, and fall asleep gazing up at the arrow on the ceiling pointing the way to Mecca.

The Conference

The opening chords of the Iranian national anthem signaled the crowd to stand for the start of the conference. Next, a young man chanted verses from the Koran. This was followed by a brief photomontage, set to the tune of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” highlighting the natural and cultural wonders of Iran. After the visual and aural treats, Dr. Massoumeh Ebtekar, Iranian Vice-

President and Head of the Department of the Environment, opened the meeting with a call for dialogue and understanding to achieve peace and sustainable development. (Dr. Ebtekar is Iran's first female vice president, perhaps better known to Americans as the spokesperson for the hostage takers who commandeered the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.)

The idea for a “dialogue among civilizations” was born in September 1998 from a proposal by then-Iranian President Seyed Mohammed Khatami to the United Nations General Assembly that “hostility and confrontation” be replaced by “discourse and understanding.” Thus it was appropriate that Khatami greeted the participants representing more than 30 countries, dozens of Iranian students and environmentalists, and ample news media at the 2005 conference with a call for mutual understanding among cultures to foster peace, cooperation, and a healthy environment.

Klaus Toepfer, Deputy Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), brought a message from Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, reminding us of how people around the world are all dependent on the environment. Environmental problems, such as those recently documented in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, only block progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals that deal with poverty, hunger, primary education, gender equality, mother and child mortality, as well as the environment. Toepfer went on to praise Wangari Maathai, the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai was the founder of the Kenyan Green Belt Movement that planted 30 million trees across Kenya, and did so by employing thousands of women and offering them education, family planning, and empowerment. The choice by the Nobel Committee reflects the importance of the three pillars of sustainable development—peace, environment, and social justice—which would be examined in more detail in the conference sessions that followed.

Toepfer’s remarks were aptly supported by a short but poignant UNEP film, which began by asking the audience to take a deep breath and hold it for ten seconds. (The film can be viewed at <http://www.unep.org/gc/gc23/UNEPLAST.swf>.) It counted down:

10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...exhale, and went on to explain what happened during those 10 seconds when we were holding our breath. In that time, some 42 people were born, 40 of whom live in developing countries; 3 children died from preventable causes (such as malaria, pneumonia, measles, and malnutrition)—of the three children who died, 2 were babies; 1 person died from AIDS; 2 became HIV positive; 4 died from hunger-related causes; 2 died from drinking bad water; 3,716 tons of fuel were consumed; 2,000 tons of carbon were added to the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels; 4 acres of rainforest were destroyed; 119 tons of hazardous waste was added to the environment; \$4,100 of damage was done to the global economy from polluted coastal waters; and an unknown amount of biological diversity was lost.

Soon after this, we had a chance to catch our breath over tea and pastries before we heard from several other conference participants. Oli Brown from the International Institute for Sustainable Development discussed how if you were to ask both ecologists and political scientists to make lists of countries most at risk, their choices could end up looking remarkably similar, with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Haiti, Iraq, Somalia as top candidates. He cautioned that though environmental problems can exacerbate tensions, they are rarely the sole causes of conflict. Other contributing factors include ideology, ethnicity, and power politics. Protection of shared

environmental resources can help lead to political cooperation and peace, a theme that was echoed in many of the presentations over the two days of working sessions.

Pekka Haavisto brought news from UNEP's post-conflict assessment units that have worked in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Liberia, and Iraq. He distinguished between the direct environmental impacts of conflict, which may include depleted uranium, bomb waste, and land mines, and the less obvious indirect environmental impacts of conflict, which include corruption, refugees, sanctions, collapse of management, military exploitation, and the use of marginal land. UNEP's work in Iraq, for example, showed the country to be suffering from chronic environmental degradation and contamination from military weapons' production sites, the use of depleted uranium, and the breakdown in municipal waste services.

Haavisto's remarks were later underscored by Hayder Mohammed Abdul-Hameed, a scholar from the University of Baghdad, who presented his findings about the effects of depleted uranium on human health. Studies have linked a dramatic rise in infertility, miscarriages, leukemia, skin cancers, and respiratory diseases among the people of Iraq with depleted uranium contamination from the Gulf War as well as from the most recent conflict. He went on to describe that in addition to the pollution of water and land, military tanks had removed the desert's top stabilizing layer of sand, contributing to sand storms even in the city of Baghdad. Clearly the environment can be a silent casualty of war.

Said Mahmoudi, Professor of International Law at Stockholm University presented a historical perspective of the relevance of law with regards to environmental damage during and after conflict. He traced back to the 1899 and 1907 International Peace Conferences in The Hague, noting that most laws on the books that govern war were inadequate to protect the environment. In addition, he related how oftentimes the force used in conflict is not proportionate to the objective. He cited the first Gulf War as an example, where the 6,000 bombs and 2 tons of ammunition brought in by U.S. forces left a legacy of damage to health and the environment.

Next, Antonio Marquina, Director of the Research Unit on Security and International Cooperation (UNISCI) in Spain, listed a number of vital state security challenges, including abrupt climate change, ozone depletion, natural disasters, weakened states (not just failed states), and water availability. With climate change, agriculture in Northern and Southern Europe is particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, water scarcity will also worsen, for with a 2 to 2.5 degree Celsius rise in global temperature, more than 2 billion people will be added to the group suffering from water stress.

Approaching environment and conflict from the other side, Geoffrey Dabelko from the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC, illustrated how the environment can be used as a tool for conflict prevention, as a lifeline in times of conflict, as an essential part of peace agreements, and as an important ingredient post-conflict. He referred to Aaron Wolf's analysis of some 1,700 state-to-state interactions regarding water, using the cases of Palestine-Israel and India-Pakistan as specific examples. In a time when many scholars see water wars as imminent, it is important to remember that sharing water resources does not inevitably lead to conflict, but that such cooperation is always requisite for sustained peace.

In addition to bringing together people from various geographical locations, the Tehran conference also hosted a special panel on dialogue among civilizations that convened representatives from diverse religious communities. Though not often seen in Iran, the Jewish representatives in their black hats, beards, and forelocks did not look terribly different from the conservative Islamic mullahs. The discussants drew from environmental references in sacred texts and historical traditions to share commonalities.

Dr. Ebtekar, Iranian Environment Minister, and Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, both participated in the final session of the conference. I had the chance to present them with copies of the Earth Policy Institute books *Outgrowing the Earth* and *Plan B*. Dr. Ebtekar mentioned that she was glad to receive the latest books as she had found the institute's first book, *Eco-Economy*, to be useful. Farzaneh and I handed out books in exchange for business cards to delegates from a number of countries, including Australia, Colombia, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States. As I handed *Plan B* to the representative from Tanzania, he mentioned that he was glad to receive another copy as he had given his original to the president of his country, President Benjamin William Mkapa, noting at the time that *Plan B* could stand for "Plan Benjamin," were he to decide to apply its ideas to his country!

All told, the recommendations and the conclusions of this conference are to be submitted to the United Nations Secretary-General in September 2005 at the start of the 60th session of the United Nations General Assembly. They will be part of the 5-Year Review of the Millennium Summit that had led to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals.

An American in Tehran

After the close of the conference, several other participants and I piled into a taxi to go to the southern part of the city. The taxi sped in and out of the harrowing traffic, passing ornate gates partially hiding manicured gardens on one block and rundown houses on the next, a strip of shops bursting with bicycles, an old railroad station, public parks with flowers and fountains, and many a tall building adorned with murals of the country's supreme religious leaders. From the diverse storefronts, I got the impression that one can easily buy almost anything in Tehran, except perhaps, for alcohol. One shop even showcased glamorous sleeveless Western-style white wedding dresses, though it wasn't clear where one would be able to wear such a revealing ensemble.

Our final destination was a traditional Iranian restaurant. We were ushered in to the beautifully appointed dining room replete with hanging plants, paintings, musical instruments, and platters piled high with fresh fruits and vegetables. We removed our shoes and sat cross-legged on a raised seated area covered with an elegant Persian carpet. One of the servers brought tea, dates, and almond cookies, and offered around a yogurt-based drink called doogh, an Iranian favorite. I graciously tried the salty yeasty concoction but found its taste to be one that neither I nor most of the other Westerners had acquired. While we waited for our main course, a band played traditional folk music. Drawn into the energy of the lively tunes one of the patrons up front bobbed up and down to the beat until a member of the restaurant staff came up behind him and

rested his hands on the gentleman's shoulders, an apologetic expression on his face. Not a word was exchanged, but the message was clear. One of my dinner partners, an American who had been living in Tehran for half a year, also caught the interaction and explained that the owner most likely did not mind dancing himself, but that having patrons dance could bring trouble to his establishment. He thought that forbidding Iranians to dance was tantamount to stopping them from breathing. Apparently private parties now served as the outlet for those without the constitution to stay still.

My visit the next day to the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's summer residence, now a museum complex, reminded me of a time when dancing was more in political favor. Inside his White and Green Palaces were finely carpeted rooms and mirrored halls. Outside the White Palace, however, two giant bronze boots were all that remained of an immense statue of the Shah himself that was severed after the revolution. The grounds around the palaces were immaculately kept, complete with narrow tree-lined drives and aquamarine peacocks. Replicas of dams, canals, and water wells used for irrigation—very important for this partly arid country—were displayed outside the museum of water works. The military museum showcased tools of war, ranging from a primitive wooden warship to a cannon inscribed in both Persian and Greek script to propeller planes and camouflaged tanks. Iranian soldiers patrolling the grounds with their machine guns made the experience all the more authentic.

It wasn't the last I would see of the soldiers. On my final day in Tehran I paid a visit to the old U.S. Embassy, now affectionately called the U.S. Den of Espionage. This complex was the site of the CIA-engineered 1953 coup d'état that toppled the Mohammad Mossadegh government, and for the 25 years following it was the base of U.S. support for the last Shah. Then starting in November of 1979, after the March election of Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader of the world's first Islamic Republic, the Embassy became the holding center for the 52 American hostages kept for 444 days. The building now houses the Sepah, hard-line revolutionary guards.

What they see on entering and leaving the complex, and what passerbys cannot possibly overlook, are the brightly colored murals painted on the high walls around the Embassy. To the embarrassment of many Iranians I spoke to on my trip, the paintings displayed in no uncertain terms distaste for the U.S. There was a portrayal of the Statue of Liberty with a skull in place of her face, a gun painted with the red, white, and blue of the American flag, and epithets wishing death to America in both English and Farsi. The old U.S. seal that had once been proudly displayed at the gate was sanded down until practically illegible. Though I had been warned against taking photos in the area as it was one of the few places where visitors had had cameras confiscated, I didn't need film to record the sight to memory, a sight that contrasted so sharply with the gracious welcome I had received from all I met.

On my last evening in Tehran, I met with Mrs. Mallah, the founder of one of Iran's largest environmental non-governmental organizations, the Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution (WSAEP). At 85 years old, Mrs. Mallah is still leading tree-planting expeditions into the hills. She and her husband, Mr. Abolhassani, welcomed me into their lovely home on a winding narrow street away from the bustle of the major thoroughfares of northern Tehran. I sipped tea and nibbled on pistachios and gaz, a nougaty treat from the city of Esfahan, while they displayed photos from WSAEP events. Mrs. Mallah humbly shared some of the successes of her

organization's environmental education outreach to children, teens, and adults. Mr. Abolhassani was less tentative about singing praises of his wife and her work. We talked of the environment, politics, literature, history, and gardening. By half past ten at night we were seated around the dining table laden with homemade soup, yogurt, meat, delicious thin flatbread, and a plate piled with radishes and fresh green herbs. After more inspiring conversation, I thanked the wonderful couple for a lovely evening, tied on my headscarf and slipped on my shoes to head back to the hotel. I caught two hours of sleep before I was to make my way by plane about 400 kilometers (250 miles) south of Tehran, to the ancient city of Esfahan.

Esfahan is Half the World

Esfahan nesf-e jahan. Esfahan is half the world. This half-rhyme just begins to sum up the grandeur of Esfahan's blue tiled domes and minarets, endless labyrinthine bazaars, fragrant spices, secret gardens, and ancient palaces. The Iranian Department of the Environment had arranged the trip there for me and three others who were at the conference who hailed from New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S. I was eager to soak up the city's charms.

The Safavid monarch, Shah Abbas the Great, moved the Persian capital to Esfahan at the end of the 16th century. He rebuilt the city around the Naqsh-e Jahan "Pattern of the World" Square, now known as Iman Square. Today horse-drawn carriages carry people past the dancing fountains in the center of the square, the world's second largest after China's Tiananmen Square. The shops on the square's perimeter were filled with tapestries, miniature artwork, confectionaries, enameled copperware, and piles of Persian carpets. The secret of the carpets' distinctive reds, blues, and golds was revealed to me when one kind shopkeeper led me down a set of stone steps to a cavern-like basement room. A single sunbeam shined through a hole cut in the ceiling, hitting a giant circular stone in the center of the room. This wheel was rolled over pomegranates and other natural items to coax out their brilliant hues.

In the nearby Jameh Mosque, Iran's largest, I saw such carpets put to use by turbaned men at prayer time. Religious activity in this site dated back at least as far as the Zoroastrians in the 11th century. I walked in silence through the courtyards and arcades and among the imposing columns supporting perfect domes high above.

At the Zurkhaneh, "house of strength," boys and men gathered together for a sort of religious gymnastics designed to keep up sound mind and body. As a foreign woman I was happy to be allowed in as sort of an honorary man. The champions of old sat in a line against one wall, and photos of others from years past covered the high walls of the square room from floor to ceiling. A drummer and chanter seated on an elevated platform rang a large bell to signal the participants to descend into the sunken ring. With his first slow drum beats the men began doing pushups. Over the next hour the pace escalated until the men were tossing heavy clubs made from tree trunks high into the air and spinning around in a blur, interspersed with recitation and chants. An English speaking Iranian explained on our exit that men had been calling out for peace and goodwill among peoples and nations.

I continued to make my way between holy sites and palaces. The paintings in Chehel Sotun ("40 Pillars") Palace, originally built for Shah Abbas II in the middle of the 17th century, were quite

impressive, both for their artistry and for their depictions of musicians, dancing girls, lavish feasts, and parties. I later learned that some of these paintings had been covered with whitewash by invading Afghans in the 18th century, and that they only survived the 1979 revolution because diligent caretakers stood ground between the artwork and the fundamentalists keen on destruction.

In the entryway of the late 16th century Ali Qapu “Magnificent Gate” Palace, I met an Iranian woman who showed me how I could stand facing one corner of the entryway and hear perfectly, “like a telephone,” her whispers into the opposite corner. She introduced me to her parents, sister, and nephew, who through her translation invited me to come to their home. Together we climbed to the Palace’s six-story terrace and admired the painted ceilings and the sparkling dome of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque across the square. We ventured to the mosque, where my new friend pointed to where the turquoise and gold tiles that covered the interior walls spelled out verses of the Koran or the words Allah and Mohammed repeated in geometric script. She explained that unlike in the palaces, the decorations of religious sites generally did not showcase human or animal forms, as their creation, even in symbolic form, was restricted to the realm of the divine.

And so it went for the rest of my stay in this city filled with students of English, students of the world. I traded snippets of life stories with a group of female students in their first year studying English. Many had on dark lipstick and wore blue jeans under their trendy manteaus. The most outgoing of the group, a trained midwife in her thirties married with a child, bought us all pineapple juice to sip as we discussed our common stories. I shared my appreciation of the artistry of Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi with one student of film, and she confessed her admiration of Stanley Kubrick. Another woman was one year away from earning a doctorate in mathematics. She proudly informed me that in universities in Iran female students outnumbered the men.

As with many of the other people I met in the country, our conversation moved beyond the basic pleasantries and the burning question came forth: “What do American’s think of Iran?” Some went a step further: “Do they think we all are terrorists?”

It was easy to state my personal opinion, but much more difficult to serve as a spokesperson for nearly 300 million people in a country of 50 states, only half of which I have ever visited. How many people in the United States understand Iran beyond the unfortunate “Axis of Evil” moniker? I don’t know. For better or for worse, many of the Iranians with whom I spoke understood all too well that the views of a country’s figurehead do not always represent the sentiments of its citizens.

Late one night as we were flipping through the television channels, my New Zealand friend and I came across an English language news show. If she hadn’t been there to assure me that I had heard correctly, I might not have believed my ears. There on the screen was a prominent religious leader, translated as saying, “America hates Iran because here we love freedom.”

When Thursday night came, the start of the abbreviated weekend, the city was filled with energy. I grabbed a quiet moment at sunset in a window seat of a teahouse set beneath the Chubi bridge.

Dozens of bells and lanterns and colored lights hung overhead, the water of the Zayandeh River rushed by, and the mildly scented smoke from the water pipes that graced many a table filled the room. After the sun made its final descent, I walked along the river passing several other bridges, marveling at the number of strollers silhouetted by the lights shining through the bridges' many arches. I walked over to the Armenian quarter with its large Christian cathedral and enjoyed a warming stew and good conversation with the restaurant owner.

After eating their late dinners, families congregated in the public parks and gardens, spread out Persian carpets and set up elaborate teapots to converse well into the wee hours, children and all. My New Zealand friend recounted trying to convey to one family who had invited her to tea that it probably would not be prudent for a woman to go to a park alone in the middle of the night in many major cities of the world. It was hard for her hosts to comprehend reasons why that would be so. "You could even sleep here if you wanted," they explained, gesturing around the grassy expanse. "Really?!" was her incredulous reply. "Well of course. It is warm enough now." In sharp contrast to the worries of my own friends and family before my trip, it is hard for me to think of another place where I have felt safer. Other than a brief incident of being tempted with illicit playing cards from the inner pockets of a smuggler's coat, the few international travelers I did meet in Iran were without complaint.

Beautiful Memories

I ran into my carpet seller friend again on my last day in Esfahan. By then I had nearly gotten over the surprise that even in the city of some 1.6 million I still seemed to be recognized everywhere. Because there are so few tourists, foreigners tend to stand out and are remembered. He approached me in one of the dusty and winding halls of the bazaar and asked if I was looking for my husband. "My husband?!" I exclaimed, thinking of my husband far away in Washington. "Yes, your Canadian husband. Because he's around the corner buying some plates." A wave of concern passed over his face. "Oh, but maybe they're for a surprise. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry!"

My laugh dissipated his concern. "No, it's okay," I assured him. "He's not my husband. Just a friend, probably buying an anniversary present for *his* wife." His confused expression reminded me that traveling with a man other than my own husband was something of a novelty for those who could understand it and practically a scandal for those who could not.

I apologized that I had not bought any carpets on my trip. "Oh, no, no, no!" It was his turn to reassure me. "Yes, I am carpet seller. But I'm not here just to sell carpets. You are a visitor. You are here for a good time. And I want you to have beautiful memories."

I nodded (another habit that seemed odd to the Iranians I met, but one I couldn't turn off), but before I could open my mouth to assure him that I most certainly had accumulated many beautiful memories, he continued. "We want you to have beautiful memories, because beautiful memories for you mean no bombs on us."