

## **DANCING WITH "THE ENEMY"**

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Iran is listed in my telephone directory just as any other country. Iran country code: 98; Tehran city code 21. Everything normal, or so it would seem. And yet, Iran is "the enemy." When we think of Iran we think of the coming to power of the venomously anti-Western Ayatollah Khomeini; we think of the flight and death of the Shah. We remember the take-over of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and the 52 diplomats held hostage for 444 days. Our media portrays Iran as deeply hostile.

Other unpleasant images flick through my brain: the kidnapping by the Iran-backed Hezbollah of Americans in Lebanon, including my colleague Terry Anderson (held for seven years); the failed Iran hostage rescue mission in April 1980; the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986; the fatwah against writer Salman Rushdie. Iran is the country that frustrates a Middle East peace settlement; it is a nascent nuclear power in the Middle East, and, we are told, a center of state-backed terrorism.

So when Ruth proposed a visit Iran, my reaction was ambiguous. There were reasons to go, of course. Since the election of President Khatami in 1997, American tourists have been welcomed. We had special interests of our own: getting to know the world of Islam better; assessing Iran's policies in general, and judging whether Iran's pipelines might present a better export route for Caspian Sea oil than the highly expensive Azeri-Turkish pipeline backed so heavily by the United States.

I had been to Iran once before and those memories lay deep in the back of my mind. In 1974 I accompanied Henry Kissinger on a visit to the Shah with a group of State Department journalists. That two-week journey began in Moscow and included India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan. The Iranian portion focused heavily on the Shah's profligate acquisition of high military technology -- purchase of B-1 bombers was sometimes mentioned -- and his deplorable human rights record, especially the atrocities of the SAVAK political police.

In July 1999 the idea of visiting Iran raised intriguing possibilities. We put the wheels in motion by e-mailing a travel agent in Tehran, asking for visas and a tour. We planned the trip for November, following a few weeks of teaching at the University of World Languages in Tashkent.

### **TASHKENT, Uzbekistan, Oct. 18, 1999**

At a diplomatic reception in the Uzbek capital, I fall into conversation with the Iranian charge d'affaires, Seyed Ahmad Dehnavi. The conversation is principally about Iran's outreach to the West. We speak in French.

"Do you really see that we are trying to make new contacts with the West?" says the charge.

"Of course," I reply. "The Khatami interview on CNN was particularly important. It was well noted."

"I am glad to hear that. I hope you will have a good trip to Iran."

To my surprise, quite a civilized exchange.

**BAKU, Oct.27, 1999**

After our flight yesterday to Azerbaijan, we seek out the Iranian Embassy. It is an elegant mansion of the Oil Baron era on Buniatov Street, not far from the Baku City Council. The great, carved oak door swings open to admit another visitor and we barge in. A harried official, loose papers in hand, ushers us into a side room without greeting or explanation. We wait for a few minutes, wondering what will happen next.

This tall, unshaven, functionary reappears shortly and inquires about our business. Visas, we say. He explains we are in the wrong place. We must go to the Consulate at Nizami Square near the Milli Bank of Iran. We take off in the car, Aga at the wheel.

We circle around the statue at Nizami Square and ask for directions on the street. A tall, thin, man (whom I take to be Iranian) points up the hill, saying we'll find a brass plaque on the door. We do and push in with enthusiasm, fearing the door will suddenly snap close and keep us out. A corridor leads to two doors on left and right. The right-hand door says VISAS in English. We thrust forward into an oblong waiting room, painted in cream, with a long row of chairs on the right. To the left are several cashier-like windows, with little men, grubby in appearance, standing behind. It is early, and business is only just getting started.

I explain our business in Russian. I can't seem to adjust to the fact that in "post-Soviet space" the international language of choice is English. "Mr. Grub" looks at me half-astonished; half-comprehending. I show him e-mail messages from Tehran informing me that the Consulate will issue the visas.

Yes, says Mr. Grub after a cursory check, the visas are here, but you must pay \$50 apiece at the Milli Bank. No, I say, the e-mails say the visas are already paid for. We are told to sit down. We will lose this battle, I think. Mr. Grub disappears from the window and we while away the time. Half an hour passes, and he reappears. He beckons, pushes our passports with visas from the Islamic Republic of Iran through the opening under the window. "We wish you a good trip," he says. This was not what I thought my enemy was going to say.

Next stop is IranAir. We were told it is located next to the Aeroflot office on 22nd May Street, but it has moved. It takes many stops and many questions to find it. But finally we discover the airline office in a new building off Molokanskii Sad. A small, blue Pegasus -- symbol of IranAir -- decorates a window on the second floor, which is barely visible from the street. Aga and I bound up the steps to discover an empty reception room. A young Azeri man stands behind the desk, a secretary in chador is hovering about. The IranAir manager is seated in a glassed-in, adjoining room, reading a novel.

The young Azeri (who turns out to be a graduate of Khazar University and an acquaintance of our American Baku host, Deborah Welsh) checks his files. He fumbles through the papers interminably, and finally finds the necessary notification. Our fares have been paid for in advance, and he painstakingly writes out the tickets in very legible English. At the end of this morning we are set: visas, tickets, high anticipation.

**BAKU-TEHRAN, Nov.1, 1999**

In late afternoon, Aga drives us to the newly-revamped air terminal. Baku Airport looks like a Persian ziggurat, an architectural structure made up of indented levels, rising like a pyramid to a peak. Check-in at the IranAir desk is surprisingly easy. The woman in black chador is there; examines our visas, and says ominously, "How strange! Your visas are for 11 days instead of 8 or 14." My heart skips a beat; what can be the matter now? I decide against asking too many questions. She does not bother to explain and everything continues to move forward. We finally sit down, and wait for the next 90 minutes. The new airport is not a bazaar of confused travelers which we expect from long Soviet experience. It is a rather Western looking place: antiseptic and calm. Even the toilets are immaculate.

Finally, the boarding call. As we head for the gate, an Azeri airport official whispers to us, "Be careful. It could be dangerous in Iran."

We walk down a long ramp to a waiting bus. The plane is an aging Boeing 727-100. I suppose Tehran buys these planes from third countries since there is a trade embargo against Iran. The hour-long flight south is no different from any other flight, complete with instructions about emergency exits, lifejackets and light refreshments. Towards the end of the 60 minutes a tie-less steward in unpressed white shirt takes the seat next to us.

"Where from?" he asks in good English.

"America," I say. His eyes light up and he welcomes us to Iran. He hopes we will have a good time.

I ask how Iran services the Boeings and where IranAir gets its spare parts. "You know," he replies, "from France, Korea...I mean South Korea."

We are now descending on Tehran, an enormous city of 12 million which covers 1,200 square kilometers (468 square miles). A quick mental calculation means the city would be a square about 20 miles on a side. It is dark and the city lights go on forever. We circle slowly, losing altitude, and finally touch down at Mehrabad Airport just as if it was any other airport.

We walk into the entrance hall decorated with portraits of the Ayatollah. All women, including Ruth, are garbed in chadors, ankles and wrists covered, hair tucked under a headscarf. We fill out currency declarations, move to the passport desk where male officials insist on Xeroxing our passports on a broken-down machine which stains the copies with broad, gray streaks. We sail through customs uneventfully, and I stop at the Milli Bank to change \$20 into rials.

A woman in a chador sidles up to me as I negotiate the exchange. "Don't change your money here," she volunteers. "They'll gyp you. Go to the black market in town. They'll give you a much better rate."

I respond that the transaction already has gone too far and thank her for her kind advice. Imagine: the enemy tells you to gyp the enemy bank by consulting the enemy's black market! Thinking about this later, I realize the woman had been out of the country a long time. What she said was true a few months ago when the rate was 3000 rials to \$1.00. But the official rate today is 8000 to \$1.00, and the black market rate is 8500. But why was this woman so friendly? And why did the government accede to black market reality? Things become clearer later on.

We move now through the exit doors into the unknown. A great crowd awaits; some with expressions of anticipation; some with flowers. Through the hub-bub, I see a hand-held sign on the left: "Mr. and Mrs. Daniloff."

It is Cyrus, the driver, and Mohsen, our guide, who greet us warmly. A sense of relief flows over me as everything slots into place. A few minutes later they introduce us to a western-looking man, in a gray business suit without necktie, speaking excellent, cultivated English. Rustom, who fought in the Iran-Iraq war and boasts a B.S. degree in English, is our travel agent. He is the author of the powerful e-mails which I presented to the Consulate in Baku.

In an unexpected gesture, he hands Ruth a plastic bag inside of which she finds a light brown "monteau" -- the word in Farsi, borrowed from the French, for street coat. This is something less than a chador, to be supplemented with a headscarf.

Minutes later we are heading for the center of town in a gray Peugeot, down endless boulevards, lined with plane trees. Half an hour later we are passing the old American Embassy, now the barracks of the revolutionary student corps. "We will face America with a severe defeat" warns a carefully lettered sign along the wall. The faded American crest with eagle is still vaguely visible. "It is forbidden to photograph the wall," says Mohsen "But," he adds, "there are ways to do it, if you really want to."

What does he mean? We'll probe that after a night's sleep at the Mashad Hotel, a somewhat run-down private establishment which we are told is owned by a Jewish capitalist.

### **TEHRAN, Nov. 2, 1999**

Mohsen, it turns out, is really a dental student. These days he is working for Rustom as a freelance guide but in January he will receive his dental degree. He is very bright and his English is excellent. He fields all our questions, even the most provocative, with ease. It turns out he has a brother and sister in the United States; his mother even has a U.S. green card.

We are taken aback when Mohsen declares with no particular prompting that The Ayatollah "was deceitful." He adds, "Khomeini promised more than he could deliver. In the end, he was not practical."

Mohsen goes on to explain that Iran today has relations with some 70 nations including Britain, Germany, France and Canada but not the United States or Israel. He explains that Iran needs help -- technology, know-how, goods, services. Under President Khatami, Iran seeks to expand relations with the West despite the outrages of the past. I think of the American Embassy takeover Nov.4, 1979. But Mohsen cites the shooting down of the IranAir passenger liner by a U.S. warship in the Persian Gulf in July 1988.

"It's time to let bygones be bygones," says Mohsen. He points out that when Khatami came to power, the Iran government took the decision to allow Americans to visit. At first, visas were obtainable through the Iranian Embassy in Ottawa. More recently, however, six Tehran travel agencies have been allowed to extend invitations and the Iranian Interest Section of the Pakistan Embassy in Washington can issue the documents. Of course, the Iranian Foreign Ministry vets the visa applications and denies permission to persons on "The Black List."

It turns out that Mohsen has been in the United States. Iranians are allowed to travel abroad if they have the means. His sister left 14 years ago and Mohsen spent three years as a teenager with her. Mohsen's sister came back for a six-month visit, but things went badly. At the airport she was mistaken for a blacklisted woman and was thrown

into jail for 24 hours until the mistake was clarified. She shortened her visit to one month, Mohsen explains, and vowed never to return.

Mohsen is not bashful in talking about the Regime of the Clerics. "They are corrupt and getting rich," he asserts. "They are collecting money and salting it away abroad." But he also maintains that Americans have a distorted view of Iran. They believe, he says, that Iran is evil and is supporting terrorism abroad. He concedes that Iran may have a secret terrorism unit but says if that is so, it is very carefully hidden.

What is clear is that economic shortcomings at home are driving President Khatami to reach out to the West. His visit to France at the end of October made quite a good impression although his clerical robes looked out of place in a western setting. Last year, Khatami did a long interview with Christiane Amanpour of CNN, who is herself of Persian background. The Iranian government has been courting Iranians who fled the revolution and have become scholars in the West. That's how my friend Majid Tehranian of Hawaii University returned. Indeed, Majid confided to me that he had advised Khatami how to handle the CNN interview.

The media in Iran are carefully controlled. We are told the clerics' main concern is to blot out scenes of the decadent western life-style. Satellite dishes are illegal. You can't see Russian or Turkish TV, or European broadcasts. CNN is available in five-star hotels, but only in the rooms, not in the lobby. You catch an occasional glimpse of American TV on the five Iranian channels when the programs demonstrate that America is riddled by violence. The clerics, however, do not jam the Voice of America or the BBC. They don't object to news reports.

Access to the Internet may become a problem. When Iranians sign up with an Internet provider, they are asked to accept a contract promising not to visit pornographic or other undesirable sites. If caught, they get two warnings. On the third strike, they are out. We learn these details from H and N, friends of our friend Julia. They assert that there are a wide variety of opinions in the Iranian press, but criticism of the president or other leaders is prohibited. At the moment, a trial is underway against Abdollah Nouri, owner of the daily newspaper *Khordad*, who is charged with defaming the Ayatollah and of promoting "the restoration of ties with Iran's arch-enemy, the United States." At least, that's what two English-language newspapers, *Iran Daily* and *Kayhan International* report on Nov.3, 1999. *The New York Times* reports on November 28, 1999 that the court sentenced Nouri to five years imprisonment and a five-year ban on political activity).

### **TEHRAN-SHIRAZ, Nov.3, 1999**

We fly to Shiraz to begin our architectural tour. But, beginning with the airport, we are introduced to the role of women in modern Iran. There are two entrances: one for men, and one for women. Ruth goes through the female entrance where she is checked by a woman attendant for metal objects, bombs and other devices. None are found. But the attendants do have a complaint. Ruth's skirt is too short and the attendant yanks it down so that her ankles will not show.

The airport itself is very orderly. There is plenty of space to sit down and the flights are announced on an electronic panel which is easy to see. This is so different from a Soviet internal airport, like Domodedovo or Sheremetevo-1, where everything seems in confusion; where delays are not explained where flights are badly posted if posted at all. The thought immediately springs forward that Iran displays western

orderliness. Should this be surprising? After all, since the 1930s Iran had had much intercourse with Britain and the United States. The dead hand of Soviet bureaucracy, just a few miles to the north, has not had a chance to creep in.

Sitting in the Airbus 310 waiting to take off, I look around the runways I spot a fair number of Soviet-built TU154bs, and a few Boeing 747s. Several Hercules transport planes, in desert camouflage, take off before we get permission to fly.

On arrival in Shiraz, 1,000 kilometers south of Tehran, we are introduced to Solma, our local guide. Solma is a feisty young woman, determined not to let Mohsen pre-empt her duties. Despite the chador which makes women look like nuns, Solma proves right away that she is anything but retiring. Soon the conversation turns to the role of women in Iran. Solma asserts that women are equal to men, or almost equal. Fifty percent of medical students, she says, are women. Women may head up enterprises, and may boss men. Their pay is not always equal, although at the highest levels they earn the same amount as men. For the moment, the phenomenon of househusbands has not hit Iran.

Solma does suggest that the *hejab* (the modesty dress code) is somewhat inconvenient, but it is a small price to pay in this religious state for the advancement of women. Young girls are expected to start wearing the *hejab* by the time they reach the age of nine. But this depends on the family. Solma says that if Ruth were to take off her scarf, ordinarily people would consider it wrong and would let her know immediately. If she resisted, the police would be summoned.

In the course of the day, we learn miscellaneous bits of information. There are private doctors in Iran and a system of medical insurance. It costs somewhere between \$300 and \$1,000 for pre-natal care and delivery. Top salaries are in the range of \$1,200 a month, while a low salary would be \$80-100 a month. Iranians may travel freely abroad, including to the United States if they can get visas, assuming they have the money to do so.

We dine in a "five star" hotel where we notice a group of French tourists and another group of about 12 Americans. We are told that in the early days of American tourism, this Homa Hotel displayed a large anti-American sign in the lobby. This offended the Americans. After numerous protests the sign was taken away and on this night no such sign is in evidence.

Our taxi driver for this night had been in the Iranian airforce and spent time in Texas in the 1970s learning to service F-4 and F-5 fighters. "Those were pleasant days in sunny Texas," he recalls.

### **SHIRAZ, Nov.4, 1999**

Does every nation need an enemy abroad to maintain order at home? America, "The Great Satan," seems to play that role in Iran. Today is the 20th anniversary of the student take-over the U.S Embassy and the beginning of the 444-day hostage crisis. The television has been hyping the event, and for the last 24 hours programs have been recalling those days two decades ago.

Ironically, when this sort of propaganda is overdone, doubts begin to creep in. Mohsen explains that many Iranians have a schizophrenic view of America. On the one hand, America is seen as trying to dominate the world. President George Bush's call for a New World Order is America's latest attempt to force the world under its thumb.

And yet America, the fabled land of opportunity, also beckons. About one million Iranians live around Los Angeles which has gained the nickname "Tehrangeles." Many consider that America stands for decency and morality, and can be harshly criticized when it does not stand up to its professed values. Many know that violence is also as much a part of America as mom's apple pie.

Is Iran violent? Is the Shiite version of Islam terroristic? The more you talk with people, the more you are told that the schism between the Shiites and the Sunnis is only a dispute over the rightful leadership of Islam. Shiites, like Sunnis, profess the same humanistic principals as the Christians. Extremist Moslems may claim their actions are sanctified by Islam. But explains, Mohsen, "Everyone sings his own song with regard to Islam."

What is the true faith? How to promote the true faith? This is an issue which must worry the religio-political leaders. If their rule is seen to be fundamentalist, and if the suspicion arises that they have not followed the true faith, or that their faith is lacking in the modern, hi-tech world, they themselves might be vulnerable to overthrow by violent extremism.

In the United States, we know that the extreme right would have liked to overthrow President Clinton using his dalliances with Monica Lewinsky as the excuse. Mohsen has views on that too. He believes Clinton's sexual activities are typical of most high political leaders. Nothing unusual. But Mohsen thinks Clinton should have come clean immediately. As for Monica, Mohsen responds curtly, "I understand she has become wealthy."

### **ISFAHAN, Nov.5, 1999**

Akbar, our driver in Isfahan, reveals that his 16-year-old sister is getting married this afternoon and he invites us to the festivities. After lunch we drive to the northern suburbs where we enter a small street and are met by the father of the groom and other guests. The wedding takes place on both sides of the street: men on one side; women on the other.

I enter the men's house where an enormous tent has been stretched over the inner courtyard. Inside, small tables loaded with apples and other fruit are arranged around the sides of courtyard. Male friends of the family sit at these little tables in twos and threes, munching on fruit, but on the whole remaining silent. An air of expectation hangs over the gathering.

Finally, enters the mullah in white turban and the groom who greets the guests. The mullah and the father of the groom sit in a corner and go over the marriage contract. As they do so, I glide around the room snapping photographs, having asked permission. No one seems to mind. At the end of the contract explanations, the mullah and groom rise, excuse themselves and disappear.

On the women's side, Ruth reports that the bride receives the same explanation from the mullah. To all appearances, she looks miserable. On questioning, Ruth learns that she is supposed to look miserable because she is leaving forever the protection of her father's house. When the men disappear, Ruth reports that the women take off their scarves and dance with great spontaneity. But let a man's face appear at the door, and the scarves immediately go on.

Later in the day, Mohsen discloses that he, too, will be married soon. He has been working out a marriage contract with his bride-to-be but he is having trouble with his future father-in-law whom he dislikes. "He thinks Iran is a prison," says Mohsen, "and he is demanding that I write into the contract that I will take his daughter to America."

Even more onerous, Mohsen says, is that his father-in-law is insisting that a financial element be entered into the contract. He is insisting that Mohsen commit himself to providing 1973 gold coins worth \$70 apiece for a total of \$138,110. The year 1973 is the year of the bride's birth. Such monetary conditions are not unusual in marriage contracts and are called up if the marriage goes sour. Even so, one in five marriages is said to end in divorce in Tehran.

We spend the day visiting mosques, the Armenian Church (a curious mixture of Armenian and Islamic art), and the 33-arch bridge. Underneath the bridge are little cell-like rooms where couples go to relax. Men often use the opportunity to smoke hubbly-bubbly (hookahs).

In the evening we visit a rug shop where we suspect Mohsen gets a commission on each deal which is concluded. We have no intention of buying a rug but the salesman is so persuasive and so flattering to Americans that we weaken and in the end, after much negotiation, settle on a fine woolen carpet for \$600. In the final deal, we put down \$200 and agree to transfer electronically the remaining \$400 to a bank account in Dubai, thus avoiding the U.S embargo.

"But how can you trust us to do that?" Ruth asks Ali, the rug salesman.

"We trust you Americans," says Ali. "Americans are the most honest and trustworthy of tourists. Better than the Germans and the French, and certainly much better than the Japanese."

### **ISFAHAN, Nov.6, 1999**

Our local guide Mahmood is beginning to get on our nerves. He states the obvious with no additional input or insight. He seems to us to know less than Mohsen, and to speak English rather poorly. But he is a kindly sort and indulges in political discussions with little reserve.

He explains that in Iran today a significant political struggle is in progress which pits Ayatollah Khamenei against President Khatami. Also in the mix are the revolutionary students, the army and SEPAH. President Khatami has been maneuvering carefully to open up relations with the outside world, but he has to be careful not to go too far.

Mahmood notes that new presidential elections will take place in two years time, and if Khatami is re-elected -- he is popular with the people -- he will have a good chance to complete his program of seeking normalizing relations with the outside world, and particularly the United States.

An insight into this mix comes to me in Khomeini Square, that enormous plaza in the center of Isfahan, in a chance conversation with a student who is studying French. I had parked myself on a curbstone to photograph passersby using my long distance lens. I was interested to see how well I could illustrate the fact that many young women are wearing jeans and fashionable shoes with high heels under their monteau.

The student spotted me and opened up the conversation. It went something like this: "We should have made more progress in the last 20 years. We need more

technology. Even though we have relations with Russia, Russia holds no real hope for us. Russia took the wrong road. But America is a problem. It wants to dominate the world. There is no one there to confront and restrain America, except Iran. And we can do that only symbolically."

We round out the evening by visiting a *zourkhaneh* -- a school of martial arts. In a round pit, a dozen burly men are demonstrating their brute force through physical exercises. They toss and juggle wooden ten-pins which look like grotesquely swollen baseball bats to the religious chanting of the Master who is sounding out the musical chimes.

At one point in this atmosphere reeking of human sweat, the Master pauses and announces in his gruff voice, "We wish to welcome our guests, especially those who have come from the United States of America."

### **ISFAHAN-KASHAN-QOM-TEHRAN, Nov.7, 1999**

Much of this day is spent driving the 300 miles from Isfahan to Tehran with a variety of stops along the way. At Kashan we visit the splendid water gardens. In the *chaikhaneh*, we make the acquaintance of two young men who are sitting cross-legged on a rug with their hubbly-bubbly and two women friends. Although the women look like nuns, they are full of sparkle and enter into conversation without the slightest hesitation. We explain we come from America and that causes considerable curiosity.

"Our government presents America as our enemy," says one of the young men, Morteza. He is clearly skeptical and curious. "Yes," adds his companion Habibollah. "But we don't know if we can believe all our government says. We have no way to judge."

Once again we sense the latent desire for more contact and less isolation. It seems to us that Iran is in an abnormal situation. The western influence in Iran is palpable and we feel the people want to lean westward. This is not a post-Soviet state suffering from the dead hand of Soviet bureaucracy.

It is not a state that inclines towards Russia. Leonid Brezhnev was wrong in saying Iran was like a ripe apple which would fall one day into Moscow's hands. You ask people who is interested in Russia, who is studying Russian, and the answer is No one. Everyone, it seems, wants to learn English.

And look at the infrastructure. The roads we are travelling on are first class. (While the speed limit is 110 kph we are travelling easily at 140). There is electricity everywhere. The water is good and you can drink it from the faucet.

As we drive through the desert and over the mountains, I recall the abortive rescue expedition which came to grief at Tabas in the northern desert within striking distance of Tehran. I was called out of bed in Washington twenty years ago to cover the Pentagon end of the catastrophe. I ask Akbar and Mohsen what was the reaction in Iran.

"The information was not let out," they respond. "Later the government said that Allah saved Iran."

Outside of Tehran we visit the Mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is an enormous mosque-like center intended to become a pilgrim's shrine. The interior is perhaps 300 feet on a side, with a highly polished white marble floor. Small boys, on their knees, are rolling coins along the smooth surface. Along the sides of this cavernous interior travelers and homeless are sleeping on rugs. On the northern wall is the

Ayatollah's resting-place, enclosed in a house-like structure, perhaps 25-feet on a side, covered with chromium gratings. The faithful inundate the interior with bank notes pushed through the openings in this grillwork.

As we leave, Akbar volunteers that far too much money is being poured into the Ayatollah's mausoleum. Iran has enough problems to deal with, he says: too much inflation (12-14 per cent), rising cost of living, difficulty getting jobs.

### **TEHRAN-BAKU, Nov.8, 1999**

Our trip ends today and I decide to make a final effort to understand the media situation. Mohsen and I tramp around numerous bookstores looking for a copy of the Law on the Press. (I had bought a copy of the constitution and the criminal code in Isfahan). The law of the press was cited in the coverage of the libel case against Abdollah Nouri; he was accused of violating Article 30. Try as we may, we are unable to find a copy of this law in the bookstores near Tehran University.

It occurs to me that the next best thing is to visit one of the English language newspapers and see what kind of a briefing I can elicit. We drive to *The Tehran Times* and Abbas skillfully arranges an impromptu interview. We stand in the lobby, while Mohsen negotiates on the phone. There is clearly some resistance; it is not every day that a representative of "the enemy" shows up.

But at last a woman editor, garbed in black chador, appears and sits down with us in the lobby armchairs. Her name is Mojgan Ahmadvand and she enters into a free-swinging conversation with considerable charm and excellent English. She describes the media situation. There are some 40 newspapers in the country, and they are allowed to criticize the government -- and do -- within the framework of the law. They must not undermine the government, however, nor Islamic beliefs, nor national security.

One newspaper *Salaam* was closed because it published classified documents. Often newspapers are closed down for various reasons, but they often reappear under different names. Ms. Ahmadvand reports that journalists must pass a competency test which includes exercises which measure political reliability. She gives the impression that the newspapers design the tests, but Mohsen asserts that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance draws them up.

I ask to see the Law of the Press and she checks by phone with her colleagues upstairs. There may be a copy in the archives. But word finally comes back that it cannot be found. "If you send me an e-mail when you get back to America, I will see if I can send you a copy," she says.

We are delighted with the encounter and, on parting, I spontaneously try to shake her hand. She rebukes me gently. In public, a woman may not touch man's flesh.

Our last stop before the airport is a lunch not far from the Shah's palace. I had wanted to see the mansion again to remind me of the press conference there in 1974. It is a cold rainy day and time is short. I recall the proliferation of plane trees, the location up on the hill. I reflect briefly on the fall of the Shah, his inability to quell the rising discontent over his authoritarian rule in 1978, his fatal cancers, the collapse of his will to govern.

On leaving the restaurant, today's chauffeur offers a final plaint which I quickly pen in my notebook because of its spontaneity and eloquence: "Under the Shah, we were all equal -- the United States, Europe, Iran. Now we aren't part of the world community

anymore. We can't go to discos. We can't listen to western music except at home. And yet you can get everything in Tehran. There's even a black market in liquor. Worst of all, all the best minds have fled the country."

I am struck by the driver's frankness and wonder if I will do damage by quoting him. I press Mohsen on this point, but Mohsen assures me that there is no retaliation these days against Iranians who talk critically to foreigners.

By mid-afternoon we have left Iran, winging our way again back to Baku.