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Spring in Tehran:

Daily Life in the Islamic Republic

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An unexpected departure

My cell phone rings. It's Mr. Moradkhani, the press officer for the Islamic Republic of Iran's embassy in Paris. "His Excellency the ambassador would like to see you so that you can present him with a copy of your book." The news leaves me speechless. Nine years. It's been nine years now since I last set foot in Iran.

As Tehran correspondent for the French, Swiss, and Canadian press from 2005 to 2007 under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ultraconservative presidency, I had my Iranian press card revoked by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic

Guidance and was forced to leave the country in July 2007. Back (under duress) in France, I was greeted with open arms by my parents, who, delighted and relieved, welcomed me back into their home—and my old bedroom. Despite my chronic restlessness, I was more determined than ever to bear witness to the reality of Iran, and took the time to write several books. *Dentelles et tchador (Lace and Chadors)*, published in 2009, traces the two years I spent in the Islamic Republic. While the book spares neither mullahs nor the Iranian people, it mixes laughter and tears and certainly gives readers a more human picture of Iran—and, from the comments I've heard, a wild desire to go there.

Flattered by the ambassador's invitation despite his close relationship with Ahmadinejad, I agree to meet him and give him a copy of my book. It could be an opportunity to get closer to that country I love so much; even—who knows?—to set foot there again. But I'm still wary, because these are dark times for the Islamic Republic. In April 2009, the Iranian authorities jailed Roxana Saberi, an Iranian-American journalist arrested while, like me, reporting from Iran. Accused of spying for the United States, the reporter likewise had her press card revoked, and was sentenced to eight years in prison by the revolutionary tribunal of Tehran. She was freed a month later following intense negotiations between the two countries. Carried away by my ardor and hoping to project an air of naïve

sincerity, I allow myself a few thinly-veiled criticisms. “Look, Mr. Ambassador, I know that journalist, and she’s anything but a spy. Roxana Saberi loves Iran, and the only thing she was doing in Tehran was her job.” My interlocutor’s thick eyebrows knit. I push on: “Iran is a wonderful country that any French person would fall in love with the minute they set foot in it. I honestly don’t understand why some people in the Islamic Republic are doing all they can to make sure the country is demonized.” Visibly startled by the tone of my remarks, the diplomat looks at the cover of my book, sitting on a low table in front of him. Two Iranian women, headscarves slipping off, are daring to dance a few steps at nightfall—an activity officially prohibited in the land of the mullahs.

The ambassador shoots suddenly to his feet and spits: “Mr. Arefi, being young and having dual nationality doesn’t give you the right to piss all over the Islamic Republic this way!” He seizes the book and throws it violently back down onto the table, leaving me speechless. I won’t be seeing Iran again anytime soon.

But seven years later, here I am, invited to the Iranian ambassador’s elegant residence once again (happily, another diplomat, Ali Ahani, more experienced and open-minded, has replaced the previous one). It’s February 2016. The Iranian delegation to Paris is marking the thirty-seventh anniversary of the Islamic Republic with a grand celebration—and they’ve put

on an amazing spread. The menu features fresh-squeezed orange juice along with a succulent *baghali polo ba goosht* (rice with fava beans and dill, accompanied by lamb). Numerous French and foreign diplomats are in attendance—and a few rare politicians, including among their highest ranks one Jean-Marie Le Pen, a regular visitor. Iran has changed its image. Since the election three years ago of President Hassan Rohani, a conservative turned “moderate”, the land of the mullahs has ceased to be a source of fear for France. [...]

Iran is opening up, and they want the world to know it. Western journalists are once again authorized to enter the country. Business leaders are lining up to get their slice of the pie in this new Eldorado with its population of 80 million. But things are more complicated for people with dual French and Iranian nationality. And even more complicated for me. For three years now I’ve been sending applications for press credentials to the Iranian embassy the way you toss bottles into the ocean, and despite my countless requests, I’ve never gotten a response.

“I don’t think it’s going to happen this time either,” Mr. Sadatinejad, the embassy’s new press officer, tells me during the reception—though he has continually gone out of his way to assist in my efforts to obtain this Holy Grail. “Keep trying,” he says. “*Inshallah*, the end is near. I think you should go to Iran yourself, which you can do as an Iranian citizen, to try to

further your case.” And risk being arrested *manu militari* as soon as I get inside the airport? No thanks! Still, the diplomat advises me to get in touch with a semi-official Iranian “agency” to facilitate the process. For twenty years now, authorities in the Islamic Republic have insisted that foreign journalists (or those working for the foreign media) wishing to enter Iran employ the services of “agencies” claiming to aid in their endeavors. For a minimum fee of 200 euros per day, these organizations, managed by former officials of the regime, will supposedly arrange interviews and provide journalists with a guide-interpreter. These translators, who are paid next to nothing and are often young, open-minded and ambitious Iranians, are required to report the journalist’s every word and slightest movement back to the authorities.

With nothing to lose, I decide, despite everything, to contact one of these organizations, directed by one Mr. Nejati.¹ “Look, I’ll do everything I can to get you accredited,” says the gravelly voice of this former member of the Iranian security forces, who refuses at first to talk money over the phone. A few days later he asks me to call him, and informs me that he has personally obtained the precious *open sesame* for me. I can hardly believe it. How can one man in Tehran have more influence than an entire embassy? [...]

¹ For security reasons, the names of the principal players in this book have been changed.

Mind buzzing with questions, I decide to throw caution to the wind and buy my ticket for Tehran, via an Alitalia flight with a layover in Rome. The Italian airline's antiquated Airbus is completely full. Lots of Iranian passengers, of course, but also plenty of Western businessmen—not a woman among them—eager to carve out places for themselves in this “new” market. The relatively advanced age of the aircraft means that there aren't even any screens in the headrests, which leaves me with four hours to think about the strong emotions to come. Fortunately, I meet Reza, a stylishly-dressed thirtysomething Iranian in a dark suit who often travels between Tehran and Rome. Today he's accompanying two Italian colleagues on their way to feel out the Iranian market for water-heaters. Though we've never met, my seatmate talks to me like he's known me for years. In no time he's telling me about his parents, who still live in Iran, and his Italian girlfriend. Cautiously, I avoid telling him the reasons for my trip to Tehran. After a few glasses of red wine Reza speaks to me as if I were his best friend, describing a beautiful Iranian woman living in Paris whom he met in Rome once and promised a box of pistachios from Rafsanjan, reputed to be particularly fine.

“It would be great if you took them to her,” he says, impishly. Amused, I play along and agree. “Tell her they're from me. I'll give you her number.” The plane finally touches down on the tarmac at Imam Khomeini Airport south of

Tehran, opened during my absence—international flights used to land at Mehrabad Airport, in the heart of the capital. The night is pitch-black. My heart thumps. “Under current Islamic law in Iran, women are required to cover their heads,” announces the Italian stewardess, who won’t even be getting off the plane. The female passengers on board have put on headscarves already.

We stream into the airport’s sole terminal, which is chilly and deserted, with nothing more than a few billboards touting the treasures of ancient Persia serving to revive the spirits of travel-weary arrivals. Moving sidewalks lead to passport control windows, in front of which five lines of passengers have formed. To the left are those reserved for Iranian citizens; to the right, their lines shorter, those for foreign nationals. The latter are now able to pick up their visas at the airport, dispensing with the lengthy formalities required at the Iranian consulate in Paris. One line includes a statuesque Western tourist with plunging décolletage and long blonde hair who visibly doesn’t understand where she has just landed. I get in the left-hand line, my heart suddenly beating faster. Around me, most of the Iranians’ eyes are glued to their smartphones, a first piece of good news: during my absence, Iran has embraced technology. Before I left the country in 2007 I often found myself locked in a duel with my 56K modem to access the Internet. Now, every Iranian has 4G.

[...]

Iranian night

This is what they call *atefeh*, a gentle Persian mixture of feeling and loyalty. Nine years after the last time we saw each other, even though it's been months, if not years, since we last spoke, Kamran is here for me this evening. Together again in the dark Iranian night, joking around as if we've never been apart. "Your reporting's canceled!" he says from the front passenger seat. "You're in my hands now!" Kami, as I affectionately call him, switches on the car's MP3 player, which blares the hit "Adagio for Strings" by the Dutch DJ Tiesto, a trance reinterpretation of the work by the American composer Samuel Barber. There is construction work on the highway tonight, and our driver rattles along a narrow dirt path. He zig-zags to the rhythm of the bass before flooring the gas pedal and sending us rocketing off into the night. The song ends. Hearty laughter gives way to frequent silences that grow weightier and weightier. "Life is crap here. Nothing's changed," sighs the friend, now in his thirties, who I left in the departure hall at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport (now reserved solely for domestic flights) in 2007, and whom I was supposed to see again two weeks later. "Life is worse than crap," puts in Arya, Kamran's friend, from the driver's seat. The opening-up

of Iran the French media has been extolling doesn't seem to have made it beyond the border.

Arya, an Iranian pop singer, isn't able to perform live at the moment because he lacks permission from the sacrosanct Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. However, since the election of the "moderate" Hassan Rohani to the presidency, the number of public pop concerts in the Islamic Republic has multiplied. "Just between us, you should come and see all these young people enjoying that indescribable atmosphere," an Iranian government minister passing through Paris said to me one day as we were wrapping up an interview. Arya clearly hasn't been invited to share in these festivities, and is therefore confined to the Iranian underground scene. A singer-songwriter, the young man has no choice but to record his songs in the secrecy of a clandestine studio so they can be broadcast via the mobile application Radio Javan (Radio Youth). This pirate station, based somewhere outside the country, is beloved by young Iranians—but doesn't bring in a penny. "You can't imagine how frustrating it is, knowing your music's appreciated but not being able to play it in public," the musician rants. "It's like everything in Iran is designed to make you leave and never come back."