

According to Italian journalist Antontello Sacchetti, Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution reversed revolutionary commonplaces. But Sacchetti's writing and those of others now portray a static, post-revolutionary nation that is gradually losing its best and its brightest to a determined eastward exodus

## Three Decades after Khomeini, A Dulled Giant

IRAN

by Farian Sabahi

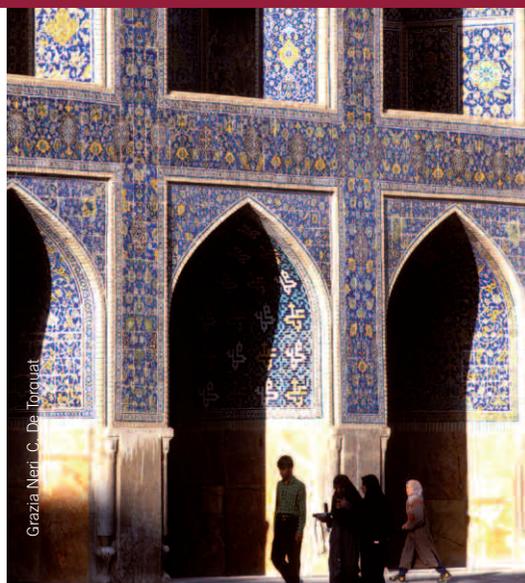
**T**he presidency of Barack Obama heralds a new era in global affairs. George W. Bush's tenure saw Iran's isolation deepen further with Tehran increasingly turning eastward in search of solid diplomatic relations and effective business partnerships. Iranian youth eager for academic and employment opportunities also began looking to nations whose residency and labor restrictions were less demanding than those of the United States and the UK.

I'll leave it political scientists to speculate on the course of future events. As a historian with a background in economics I'd prefer to focus on dates, data and books.

Let's begin with dates. Obama was born in 1961, the same year as Tehran Mayor Baqer Qalibaf, while Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was born in 1956 and Iranian parliamentary leader Ali Larijani in 1958. Reformers Muhammad Khatami and Mehdi Karrubi belong to the old guard, born in 1943 and 1937, respectively. Ahmadinejad, Qalibaf and Larijani instead reflect the paramilitary side of Iranian politics, their power emerging as a result of ties the Islamic clergy. The same holds for Hashemi Rafsanjani, once thought of as a conservative and now a considered a pragmatist. He was born in 1934 and is a linchpin in the Shiite hierarchy.

After years of waiting in the wings, a new generation finally occupies the nerve centers of power in both in the U.S. and Iran. But the analogy end with birthdates.

In the United States, Obama was seen as the peace candidate with Republican John McCain, a



Vietnam veteran, charging him with inexperience. There is no such inexperience in Iran. Ahmadinejad and his colleagues were involved in the war of attrition with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. When it comes to negotiation and strategy, Obama's point of departure will be dramatically different from that of his Iranian counterparts. It's also worth noting that under the Iranian constitution, foreign affairs, like the development of the domestic nuclear program, is ultimately under the control of the Supreme Leader, not the president.

Before moving on to data, let's remember that February 1, 2009 marks the 30th anniversary of Ayatollah Rholah Khomeini's return to his homeland after a long exile in France. Bearing in mind the growth of domestic



Contrasto, S. De Luigi

rivalries, the year may well signal a time of reflection concerning Iran's future.

On to economic figures.

Iran is a wealthy nation. It has nine percent of the world's known oil reserves (about 138 billion barrels), second only to Saudi Arabia. It also possesses 15 percent of the world's natural gas reserves (27.5 trillion cubic meters). It does not however have the know-how to exploit these reserves and transform them into liquefied gas. That technology is in the hands of the United States and Europe. The Iranian paradox is that it depends on foreign nations (mostly in Europe and Asia) to nourish its petroleum supplies because it lacks the refineries necessary to meet its own needs. Much of Iran's oil is refined elsewhere before export.

Though Iran is rich on paper, most of its citizenry is not. The annual median income is \$3,470 (World Bank report, 2007), and in the absence of a more diversified strategy its economy depends in exaggerated way on oil income. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), 87.3 percent of Iranian exports are tied to fulfilling global energy needs, while manufacturing exports represents 8.7 percent and agriculture 4.1 percent. Only oil is pre-eminent.

Exports target Japan (23.9 percent). China and Taiwan (22.5 percent) and European Union states (19.8 percent). Imports come mostly from the EU (9 percent), confirming Iran's strong ties with Europe. But domestic

corruption is rampant. Foreign investment is limited and the banking sector has hiked interest rates, making small business loans expensive. According to government sources unemployment stood at 10.3 percent in 2008, down from 11.3 percent in 2007. At the same time, some 750,000 youths are reaching legal working age each with fewer and fewer jobs to absorb them, suggesting that the actual unemployment rate is far higher.

This systemic problem leads tens of thousands of qualified Iranians to look for employment outside the country. The brain drain particularly affects major cities. Whereas many job-seekers once landed in the West, the threat of sanctions as a result of Iran's nuclear program has seen many move shift their focus further east and deposit their savings in Asian markets.

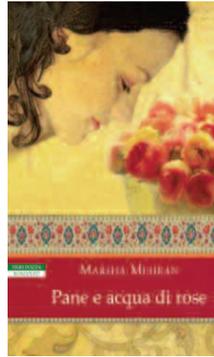
The most interesting piece of data concerns Iran's youth: in a country with population of 71.2 million, half are under 25. The under-25 generation never lived under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi's authoritarian rule nor did they content with his brutal Savak secret police. At the same time they didn't participate directly in the passions of the 1979 Islamic revolution, which included reverence toward Khomeini. They now seek a new system based on democratic and egalitarian ideals.

But how can these ideals be transformed into something more enduring? Regime-change is unlikely to yield much fruit. While the country has a functional domestic opposition, it



Grazia Neri, A. Pizzoli

Women on the streets of Tehran testify to the strictness of Islamic law under Khomeini and Khamenei. Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi bemoans the decay of human rights in the country.



is poorly organized and lacks a charismatic leader. Since Iranian society remains largely traditional and nationalist, an attack by a foreign power would be counterproductive, probably increasing support for the current crop of Islamic leaders. Even a “velvet revolution” is difficult to imagine. Civil society remains in peril. Intellectuals and activists have been arrested, including some with dual nationality. At the moment, few Iranians seem inclined to take exaggerated risks.

“The Iranian revolution is an odd event. It went against political logic precisely because it happened in Iran, and not in a nation where the first Sunni Islamic movements were born (Pakistan or Egypt), and where the idea of an Islamic state was first promoted.” The comment comes from Italian journalist Antonello Sacchetti in his book *“Misteri persiani: i volti nascosti dell’Iran”* (Infinito edizioni, 2008); in English, “*Persian Mysteries, the hidden faces of Iran.*”) It astutely captures an essential theme of the 30-year-old revolution.

On January 16, 1979, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi fled Iran with his third wife, Farah Diba. On February 1, Khomeini returned from

an exile that included time in the holy city of Najaf, Turkey and the Paris suburbs. Weeks after his return, women were forced to wear veils. Their family and legal rights were suspended, setting the country back half-a-century.

After publishing the book *“I ragazzi di Teheran”* (“The Kids of Tehran”), which examined the country’s lost youth, Sacchetti returned to Iran, this time to get a closer look at the more traditional side of Iranian life by probing bazaars and mosques. At the same time, he didn’t lose sight of daily life however. He watched the country’s religious police “that examines passersby seeking someone who isn’t wearing proper Islamic dress.” When a group of young women are stopped, he writes, “it’s like watching a documentary about wildlife in the African savannah, when the lion has just pounced on and killed the gazelle and the rest of the herd stops running as the lion dismembers its prey. There’s no longer any need to run.”

Sacchetti pays close attention to the Shiite faithful, “visible to the naked eye” (in Iran, unlike the iconoclastic Sunni world, sacred images abound). That’s largely due to the central importance of the martyrdom of Mohammed’s grandson Hussein, a centerpiece of Shiite history. According to Sacchetti, Hussein’s role is fundamental because of how he chose to end his life. He’s “a little like Christ and a little like Socrates,” writes Sacchetti. “He sets himself ablaze because to escape would be unfair and because the shedding of his blood signals a new alliance with God, one that his disciples could consider more authentic.”

It’s a mystery of faith. Sacchetti is a Rome-based journalist who fell in love with Iran. His narrative is distinguished for his willingness to ask questions. Why does someone love someone or something? he asks. Another mystery. Iran, for Sacchetti, is a country of “a thousand contradictions: terrible, sublime, enchanting, fierce, rich, and up to its neck in water.” In a 100 seamless pages, Sacchetti reveals the underbelly of Iran to those who don’t make a habit of studying it. There’s also a preface by Amir Madani, the author of *“Letture persiane”* (Edizioni associate, Roma 2007).

*“La gabbia d’oro. Tre fratelli nell’incubo della rivoluzione iraniana”* (Rizzoli, 2008) — “The Golden Cage” in English — is a fictional, first-person “autobiography” by Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. It tells the story of her friendship with Parì and his three brothers,



scattered following the 1979 revolution. Abbas, an army general, is forced to flee to the United States. Javad, an activist in the Communist Party, the Tudeh, is repeatedly jailed. Ali, who follows the Khomeini mullahs, fights in the war against Iraq. The brothers are profoundly different, “each one entrenched in a different position, as if locked up in a golden cage. A beautiful cage for sure, strong and secure, as ideology can be, but still a cage that prevents those inside from looking outside and speaking to others.”

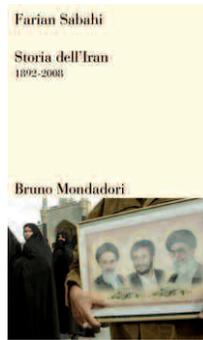
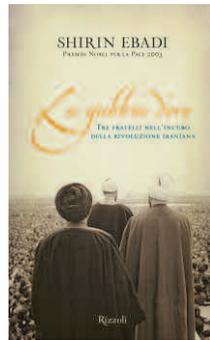
Their fate of the brothers is intertwined in this true and tragic story of a post-revolutionary family. Ebadi deplors injustice because — in the words of intellectual Ali Shariati, a 1979 revolutionary ideologue — “if you couldn’t get rid of injustice you could at least speak of it to all those around you.” Injustice was evident in the time of the Shah, which led Shirin Ebadi to protest against a rise in university fees. “After years of silence and deference,” she writes, “my husband and I and a few friends went to demonstrations shouting out slogan: Independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic” because “at the time we truly believed that an Islamic Republic could bring about independence and freedom.”

But the Shah’s exile and the return of Khomeini brings about a worsening,

frustrating the hopes and dreams of thousands. Women suffered the most, and Ebadi’s writing decries the sexual segregation imposed by the mullahs. “Think of Apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in the United States. For the first time I understood what it meant to be black.”

Ebadi relives the final days of the Shah. Nor does she mince words when it comes to the behavior of the Islamic Republic and its leaders: “Democracy exists when the people maintains the state. At that point, the government is compelled to respect the will of the people, and do their bidding. What importance can the people possibly have in Iran when they depend on the state for their riches?” The question’s importance endures. Not only for Iran, “at the mercy of its theocratic regime,” but also for other regional states, “oppressed by corrupt monarchies, ruined by foreign interference and unscrupulous American foreign policy”

“It was the eve of the solstice. At the bottom of the sea, an old grandma’ fish gathered together her 12,000 sons and grandchildren to hear a story.” Samad Behrangi’s *“Il pesciolino nero”* (Donzelli editore, 2008), a children’s fable written in 1968, is still celebrated both in Iran and in the



Mass demonstrations in late 1978 and early 1979 ousted the Shah and ushered in the return of Khomeini. Dissenting books are not available. Best-selling author Marsha Mehran, far left, wrote "Rosewater and Soda Bread" and "Pomegranate Soup" from her Scotland home.

Iranian Diaspora ("The Little Black Fish" in English). Behrangi, an elementary school teacher, lived in Iran and wrote in mellifluous Persian. But this simple story would be his last. A few months after its publication, he drowned in Aras River that runs along the border between Iran and Azerbaijan. Some believe he was assassinated by Shah's secret police. Though the story appears to be little more than the parable about a small black fish that leaves the stream of his birth to explore the mysteries of the wide world, its revolutionary potency is thinly veiled. The little black fish, for example, is indifferent to death. "It doesn't matter if one day I'm no longer alive. What matters are the traces of myself I've left with others during my life." The line became an epitaph on the tombstone of many young revolutionaries.

In "Rose Water and Soda Bread" and "Pomegranate Soup" ("*Pane e acqua di rose*"

and "*Caffè Babilonia*" in Italian), meanwhile, Marsha Mehran tells of the Aminpour sisters, three Iranians living in Ireland. Escapees from the Islamic Revolution, they find shelter in London and then in a small Irish town, characterized by the curiosity and bigotry of its residents. The three sisters create an obvious stir. But it's their cooking that finally wins over the hearts and minds of locals, in the vein of Lasse Halstrom's 2000 film "Chocolat" (from Joanne Harris's novel) with Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp.

Author Mehran left Iran during the revolution and settled with her family in Argentina. In Buenos Aires, her parents opened a Middle Eastern café while she continued her studies in Scotland. Following trials and tribulations Mehran now lives in Ireland with her husband Christopher. Her books are partly autobiographical and focus on the nostalgia of the sisters, Aminpour, Marjan and Bahar. Their wistfulness becomes an emblem for all those displaced from Iran and now dispersed throughout the Diaspora. Her nostalgia is colored with the smells of wild fennel, dill, cumin and rosewater sprayed on vanilla ice cream scoops sprinkled with pistachios and minced almonds.

Finally, there's a dose of satire. Thirty years after the revolution Iran is haunted by its brain drain. According to the International Monetary Fund, 150,000 youths leave Iran each year. The emigrants are the best and the brightest, and they're not leaving only for financial reasons. In the book "Iran. Gnomi e giganti: paradossi e malintesi" (Spirali, 2008), writer Ebrahim Nabavi, an Iranian exile in Belgium, pokes fun at the phenomenon. "He laughed: They charged with plotting to overthrow the government. He was still: They charged him with plotting to overthrow the government. He led a cheerful life: They charged him with immorality. He chased riches: They charged him with corruption. He sought power: They charged him opposing the government. He cried: They arrested him charged with defeatism. He wrote: The arrested him and charged him with plotting to spread lies and insults against the leadership. He didn't write: His friends accused him of complicity with the state. In the end he used his head: he fled. Moral of the story: One of the reasons for the brain drain is people using their heads."

In other words, optimism can wait. ■