

INSIDE THE ENIGMA OF IRAN

One again Iran is in the news. On this occasion it is about concerns in the West that the country is pressing forward with plans to produce weapons-grade uranium. Last year it was about the disputed June elections which returned the ultra-conservative and outspoken president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to power and the unrest and crackdowns on dissenters that followed. Ever since President Bush declared the country part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002, the West has viewed Iran with suspicion and fear ... but is this the full picture? **MARGARET PIPER** reports.



I first heard these words from a glamorous, expensively-attired woman as we stood in the aisle donning our hijab as our plane approached Tehran on my first visit to Iran. Soon both of us were covered from head to foot; ready to step forth into a country full of contradictions.

The first thing you learn about Iran is that nothing is what it seems from the outside and things are rarely black and white. Yes, women are (often violently) oppressed but there are more women at universities than men. Women also hold key positions in the bureaucracy and academia and there are even senior women clerics. Alcohol is strictly forbidden but many people make their own wine and hard drug use is prevalent. And no, not every Iranian hates Westerners. In fact the level of generosity and hospitality I encountered was humbling. As a woman, I felt safe travelling alone and was treated with respect. But at every turn there are reminders that Iran is a fundamentalist Islamic state where freedoms, as we know them, are still beyond the grasp of the population as a whole.

It has not always been like that. Persia (as Iran was known until 1935) was one of the greatest empires of

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the ancient world. This history is not lost on the Iranians today who take great pride in it and the fact that they have maintained a distinct cultural identity within the Islamic world. The interpretation of what this means, however, is at the heart of many of the problems in Iran today. There are some who argue that the Iranian heritage is about art, culture and ideas; whereas others believe that everything must be viewed through the lens of a conservative interpretation of Islam.

These tensions have been playing out for more than 30 years. First came the 1979 Revolution that saw the overthrow of the Shah by religious clerics; then the bitter conflict that raged between Iran and its western neighbour, Iraq, for much of the 1980s; this was followed by a tentative period of liberalization under President Khatami, which lasted until Ahmadinejad was first elected in 2005. The election signaled another fundamental shift in Iranian politics, restoring the influence of the hard-line clerics led by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in whose hands effective power now resides.

The influence of the clerics has not, however, gone unchallenged. Having tasted the possibility of reform in the Khatami era, the various dissident groups, in particular women, students and journalists, are deeply frustrated by the return to hard-line Islamic rule. Their calls for change have come in the context of a failing economy, growing unemployment, increased oppression

by the state and state-sanctioned militia, all of which have been compounded by 30 years of sanctions which have had a profound impact on all aspects of Iranian life. These boiled over after the 2009 elections and are still simmering just below the surface.

The human rights situation in Iran is of grave concern to international observers. In a letter sent to UN Member States in November 2009, Human Rights Watch drew attention to the thousands of Iranian citizens who have suffered grave violations of their internationally protected human rights in the aftermath of the elections, with many having been beaten and shot during peaceful protests. It also noted that there are credible, verified reports of torture, rape, and ill-treatment in detention and that hundreds of reform-oriented citizens and political figures have been tried in ‘show trials’ without due process.

Due to this human rights situation, the conditions are ripe for a renewed exodus of people whose activities have come to the attention of the government as well as those who have long suffered institutionalized oppression (particularly women, ethnic minorities and religious minorities such as the Bahá’í, etc) who have been caught up in recent developments. This is the Iran that most people think about when the issue of refugees is raised but, as on so many other fronts, it is not the full picture.

When talking about refugees in the context of Iran, one must not lose sight of the fact that Iran hosts one of the largest and longest-staying refugee populations in the world. As of June 2009, Iran’s Bureau for Aliens, Foreigners and Immigrant Affairs had registered some 976,500 refugees, of whom 933,500 were Afghans and 43,000 were Iraqis. The majority of these refugees live in urban areas, often in the poorest neighbourhoods, and few refugees in Iran live in camps.

While these numbers might seem large, they do not reflect the whole story. Iran has hosted large numbers of refugees for more than 30 years and there have been times when the numbers have been in the order of five million. The majority has always been Afghans but in 1991 at the height of the Iraqi exodus, there were also some 1.4 million Iraqi refugees living in Iran.

Iran’s hospitality towards its Afghan neighbours has its roots in the historical connection between Iran and Afghanistan (they were once united) and Iran’s desire to help fellow Muslims when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Similarly Iran has historical links to many of the refugees from Iraq, and those who are not of Persian stock were welcomed because they shared Iran’s opposition to the former Iraqi government.

Iran took great pride in being able to assist the refugees in its territory and initially spurned outside offers of assistance. As the years ground on, however, and as the economy of the country spiraled downwards, the Government of Iran came to see that it could not manage without help. Repeated pleas for international assistance fell on deaf ears, in large part due to US

opposition, and from the late 1990s, the entitlements (especially to employment, education and health care) of refugees in Iran were progressively eroded.

The worsening economic conditions also diminished the sympathy that the Iranian community had once had for refugees. The Government came under increasing pressure to “deal with the refugee problem” and put Iranians first. The refugees were portrayed and perceived as an excessive social, economic and security burden for the nation.

By the late 1990s, many refugees who had been in Iran for some time grew increasingly worried about their situation. With no apparent prospects for return to their homelands, they became a willing target for smugglers offering passage to the West. Thus began the first major wave of secondary movement from Iran, with the majority heading to Europe and North America and smaller numbers coming to Australia.

Two things curbed the flow. The first one was the changes in Afghanistan and Iraq which led many refugees to consider that return might at last be possible. The second was the intervention of Western states intent on preventing secondary movement. This manifested itself in many ways including the financial support for which Iran had long advocated and increased opportunities for resettlement. Little by little the conditions for refugees in Iran improved and the urgency of seeking sanctuary elsewhere diminished – for a while at least.

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And so this was the case for a while during the 2000s. Many refugees returned to Afghanistan and Iraq, some were resettled and others stayed on, living and working within the Iranian community. As time wore on, however, it became increasingly apparent that the instability in many areas of Afghanistan was likely to continue and that there were some groups of refugees for whom there was no place in the new Iraq. Add to this the high inflation, rising prices and unemployment that had an even greater impact on refugees than the Iranian population at large, not to mention the increasing tensions within the country as a whole, and once again we have conditions ripe for people smugglers.

When boats arrive in our northern waters it is important that we do not fall into the trap of thinking only in terms of “border protection”. We need to look behind the headlines to see what is causing these people to risk their lives, and that of their children, to come to our country. We need to ask what more could we have done to make

the journey unnecessary, and what more should we be doing to create viable futures for refugees.

Close to one million refugees in Iran are still waiting for this help. Many have been waiting for upwards of 30 years. How many more years will they have to wait?