

The Awakening

Only a few months ago, if you asked me what life was like in Tehran, I would have told you that Tehran was a pocket edition of the hell. Today, in the wake of the recent events, if you asked me the same question, I shall tell you that the hell is a pocket edition of Tehran.

What I put forward to you tonight is some raw material to engage in a conversation, or perhaps contemplation.

It is my opinion and is not impartial. It is shaped by my upbringing, the society I grew up in, the value system and ethics of that society.

I am not impartial for impartiality is indifference and I am not indifferent to the Persian question. This is about the place I grew up in, the country that I feel I belong to and proudly so, even though the number of the years I have lived abroad has surpassed those I lived in Iran.

I have chosen three main themes for this talk. I think these are key issues in any attempt to understand Iran today.

The themes that I propose to discuss are the following:

- Who are the people that are defying death in the streets of big cities in Iran today and what are their aspirations?
- The curse and blessing of oil, and how it has shaped the destiny of Iran;
- The media coverage of Iran in the West.

From the very outset: the 1979 revolution has taken a heavy toll on the people of Iran from the very outset. I say the very outset and I insist on that: in March 1979, after a referendum, the Islamic republic was established in Iran. The US embassy hostage crisis took place only 8 months later, in November that year (to end in January 20, 1981). The Iran-Iraq war that lasted 8 years and ended with the defeat of Iran broke out a 1.5 later, in Sep 1980 (- August 88)].

Both events had enduring adverse consequences for Iran.

Not a new story: the events of last month have had an extensive echo in the West; however this uprising is yet another rebellion in a chain of movements that have been occurring in Iran since late 1980s, and unfortunately not much talked about here in Europe.

Scale and spontaneity: what makes this upheaval so particular is above all the scale and the spontaneity of it. The participation in this uprising has been massive and I say massive, as one should not forget those millions of Iranians who share the same outlook with the crowd, but who did not dare to get out to the streets for fear of the brutal suppression by the security forces.

As we speak tonight the number of people arrested in the past 50 days has risen to possibly a few thousands. A few hundred have disappeared; no one knows where they are. Some may have already died.

Those arrested include not only students, women activists, lawyers, journalists, photographers, and web bloggers, but also high profile personalities – almost all of them part of the militia men

who seized the US Embassy in Tehran, staunch advocates of the Islamic Republic who served the system in the highest positions for years: they were minister, vice minister, governor, head of National Radio and TV, Director of the Central Bank, members of the parliament etc.

Stalin style brutality: the brutality of the regime in handling peaceful demonstrators and those in prisons has been described as comparable to what was going on in the Soviet Union under Stalin:

In the streets, the security forces in plain clothes or uniform brutally attacked peaceful demonstrators with knives, chains, clubs, and riflemen posted on the roofs of houses along the streets where the crowd gathered.

Prisons: the number of those arrested has been so high that the prisons ran short of space. Some of the detainees have been packed in containers placed in the open air in an area in the south of Tehran in a temperature of about 40C. The number of detainees locked in each container is said to be several times above the capacity of the container. Some detainees have died as a result of suffocation, heat exhaustion and/or dehydration.

Confessions: the prisoners are subjected to threat, humiliation and physical duress of all sorts to make confession. The Iranian TV has shown some of the so-called high-profile detainees confessing that they were agents of foreign interests and intended to initiate a velvet revolution. Some even expressed praise for the investigators and commended their wisdom and tact. These scenes are as tragic as they are ludicrous.

Electoral fraud: this protest was triggered by a spectacular electoral fraud in which the outgoing president was announced to have overwhelmingly won the ballot, hardly after the polls were closed. For the people, who had massively participated in the election to oust Ahmadinejad, the announcement came like a slap in the face. They took offence in being lured into an election, where the candidates were all handpicked by the regime, and even so, their vote was blatantly discarded. In an outburst of indignation, they poured into the streets and incited their candidate to challenge the outcome.

This time round, Western reporters saw it: Interestingly enough, in those early days of the protest, the western reporters who had been allowed into the country to cover the electoral campaign and the election day – that preposterous theatrical show of democracy in Iran – provided an extensive coverage of the street violent scenes.

Such scenes have not been unprecedented in Iran since 1980s, but there was little reporting of them in the West.

The other Iran that was overlooked: as the events unfolded not only the real face of the Islamic republic was revealed to the world but also the world saw the other Iran whose voice and aspirations had been overshadowed for so many years by a boisterous revolutionary regime; and whom, more importantly perhaps, the governments, particularly in western Europe had knowingly overlooked nearly for three decades, while flirting with the successive governments in Islamic republic in the hope of reaching an entente cordial.

Young people overwhelmingly in the majority: watching the scenes of the riots, one can specially notice the presence of young people and women in the crowd.

Iran's population has doubled in the past 30 years, from 36 million in 1979 (the year of the revolution) to more than 70 million today. More than two-thirds of the population is under 30. Most of them are well educated, well read and well versed in the new technology.

Revolutionary parents: this is a generation whose parents are likely to have been, if not ex-revolutionaries, at least sympathetic to the ideals of the Islamic revolution.

Children of war: this is a generation whose childhood was marked with the fright of the eight year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) where boys, as young as 14, were recruited at high schools, transported to the front-line- sometimes unknown to their parents and without parental consent. More than a million people died in that war.

Adolescence: chain assassinations: this is a generation whose adolescence was marked with the terror of the chain assassinations instigated by the interior ministry in the 1990s, where dozens of writers, journalists and political activists, who spoke out against the regime disappeared, were assassinated or died in prison.

This generation has experienced oppression at university, where their movement for freedom was brutally suppressed in 1999.

United in a shared experience: so they are united in a shared experience of permanent fear, insecurity, threat and humiliation throughout their lives; the experience of being deliberately ignored in their own country.

Their concern is that unless something radical happens, their future is likely to be as bleak as their past.

Indoctrination failed: ironically, this protesting crowd is a generation who grew up in a system that spared no effort to indoctrinate them. Propaganda and rhetoric against the Western world and their values and in praise of the Islamic ideals is the backdrop of day to day life in Iran.

How did this happen then? The people of Iran, unlike the political leadership are quite outward looking.

Fascinated by things foreign: They are fascinated by foreign things: technology, cars, gadgets, films, music, and fashion. It is the dream of every Iranian parent to send their children to America to study. English language courses are a lucrative business. Children from the age of 6-7, if not younger, are sent to private language schools, after school hours and often that goes on into their 20s or so. In my visits to Iran, it is not unusual that when meeting family and friends in their homes, in the background the TV is tuned to a French TV channel or CNN or Euronews. A friend of mine was visiting Paris for the first time a couple of years ago. On her second evening in Paris she asked me to go with her to Buddha Bar. I had been living in Paris for 13 years and knew nothing about that place. A cousin asked me to send him a tennis racket, and stressed that he didn't want one made in China, but one made in America.

Also this passionate rejection of the Islamic model can be attributed to other causes, associated with the regime itself:

- 1) The nature of this regime.
- 2) Its performance record in the past 30 years.

1. Constitution and the role of the leader: The Constitution of the Islamic republic gives the supreme leader unfettered control over major levers of power.

The duties of the supreme leader encompass setting out the general policies, supervising their proper execution, supreme command of the armed forces, confirming the suitability of candidates for presidential elections before they are nominated, signing a decree formalizing/endorsing the election of the President of the Republic before he is sworn in the parliament, dismissal of the President, the appointment and dismissal of the head of the head of the national radio and television rests with the supreme leader. In other words, he has a foot in every level of the power: legislation, judiciary and executive. So much so for the balance of power.

As for the relationship between the people and the leader, in effect, the people are considered as a herd, the supreme leader the shepherd. He sets the goals and shows the direction. The people are expected to follow without questioning.

2. Performance record

The economy of Iran has been nose diving for the past 30 years in real terms, and that in spite of the spectacular revenue of oil.

To Khomeini and his successors economy was unworthy of revolutionary pursuit. “This is not a revolution for bread and butter” was his rhetoric.

To him and his successors, the revolution was about Islam: to spread the gospel of the Coran in the region and beyond by exporting the Islamic revolution. That was the pillar of their foreign policy.

Domestically, they sought to establish a society governed by the Shari’a law. Economic development and the welfare of the people have never been a priority for the leaders of the Islamic Republic. They are neither willing nor capable of doing so.

Some figures and stories may illustrate the point better:

Inflation, according to the figures published by the Central Bank of Iran, inflation was 17% in 2007, 28% in 2008 and 22 in 2009. Usually those figures are underestimation.

Concretely, to tell you how much the local currency has depreciated and lost its value: the monthly salary of a senior civil servant in 1979 will not be sufficient to buy you a meal today. The monthly income of a teacher in 1979 will not get you a loaf of bread.

Threshold of poverty: the percentage of the population living under the poverty line was about 53% in 2000, but with the increased oil revenue between 2006 and 2008 dropped to around 18%. That is what official figures say. The minimum wage for a worker as set by the government is equivalent to \$279 (monthly), where as the poverty line in the metropolitan areas is \$860.

Unemployment: there are no independent statistics about unemployment rate in Iran. The official figures, again grossly underestimated, put it at 12.5 % in 2009. Unofficially, the figure is between 30-40% for the under 30s.

Real estate prices: real estate prices are always on the rise. They surged by more 50% in 2005, 65% in 2006 and 100 percent in 2007.

It is as expensive to buy a house in Tehran as in Paris or New York, while the average salaries are a fraction of those in France and the US.

These are the hallmarks of Iran's economy today, which is in stark contrast with 1979 when Iran, was the most dynamic economy in the region.

On the record it looks great: despite its abysmal performance, the spectacular revenue of oil and gas has allowed the Islamic republic to put on record a positive growth in the GDP, and to fill in the numerous gaps in the economy with quick fixes that have had enduring adverse effect on the economy.

Just a touch upon some other highlights/(?) low lights of the poor performance of the regime:

Child labour problem: Iran has a major child labour problem. A recent UN report estimated more than one million Iranian children live below the poverty line. The number of street children who sell miscellaneous items to passing cars is approximately 20,000 to 30,000 in Tehran alone, although the numbers are believed to be far greater than what the statistics suggest. The sight of child street workers has become a common part of life in Tehran.

Drug abuse: Thousands of young Iranians have been, in the last few years, victim of depression, suicide and drug abuse.

The U.N. World Drug Report 2005 had found that Iran has the highest proportion of opiate addicts in the world: 2.8 percent of the population over age 15.

According to the national statistics published in the country, 20 percent of Iran's adult population is "somehow involved in drug abuse".

There is high drug availability in the country. Some people believe that this is a government plot to make as many people as possible drug dependent, to marginalize them.

Suicide: Iran has the highest suicide rate in the world. Suicide, especially among women, is the second leading cause of death in Iran.

Human rights violation: Even before the recent elections crackdown, massive human rights violation was rife in Iran.

Hundreds of people have been in detention on vague charges including "propaganda against the state" or "endangering the security of the state". Such optical illusion to see enemies everywhere contradicts the allegations of the regime of being loved by the people.

The Islamic Republic executes more people than any other country in the world except for China. In 2008 alone, the Islamic republic executed at least 346 people. It is the only country in the world that continues to execute juvenile offenders.

Exile: millions of Iranians have chosen life in exile. In California alone there are 1.5 million Iranians, in France an estimated 60,000, in the UK 75,000. The more recent immigrants live in difficult and uncertain conditions and depend on the solidarity action by fellow Iranians and/or the assistance of the host countries for survival.

Moving on, I would like to highlight a couple of the salient features of this recent uprising:

Stay within the laws of the land: one of the striking features of this movement has been that the protesters have adopted tactics that allowed them to remain within what is allowed by the laws of the land. In other words, they are fighting back within– and not outside – the tight framework imposed on them. Civil disobedience has been applied as a means to achieve the goals.

For example, rather than boycotting the election, they overwhelmingly participated in it, even though elections are not democratic by any standard. They voted, in their majority, against Ahmadinejad, in favour of a candidate that although was selected and vetted, seemed to them a lesser evil.

Restraint: the demonstrators showed great restraint and measure initially when they were suppressed brutally by the security forces.

Slogans: the earlier slogans were claims for a vote recount. “Where is my vote”, “Get my vote back”, were the slogans.

Only after the brutal treatment they received from the regime did the slogans change and become more radical: today they directly and openly challenge the supreme leader call him a murderer and his authority not binding. There are also chants of death to Russia, and death to China.

Make use of the system: e.g. they have used the traditional mourning ritual, being the third, the seventh and 40th day from the death of a victim, to re-assemble and express their protest, although the regime does not authorise these gatherings and forcefully disperses the crowd.

Presence of women: not surprisingly, women have become the soul and heart of this movement. Women were the first group who, as early as March 1979, when the code of Islamic dressing was enforced, making the wearing of a head scarf compulsory, challenged the regime for this blatant interference with individual rights.

The enforcement of Shari’a law discriminates women harshly in all matters: from matrimonial issues to the custody of children, to inheritance rights, even the right to travel abroad, for which a woman must produce the written consent of her husband or father.

A woman’s life is worth half that of a man; her witness statement is worth half that of a male witness; women are banned from some professions, example being a judge, and often regarded spitefully by the officials if they pursue a career.

A woman’s place in the society is best reduced to that of a reproduction unit in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

It is little wonder then that thousands of women harbour more than a little resentment against this regime.

So what are the aspirations of these people?

This movement is not a fight for candidate A or B, even though it found its expression through that channel initially. It is not driven by the lure of an –ism: it is neither for capitalism nor socialism, nor any other ideology or specific form of government. It is neither Islamic nor anti-Islamic.

These demonstrators care little about historical squabbles before their birth.

These young men and women are inspired by the liberal values of freedom, justice and respect of human rights, including the right to determine one's destiny. In a nutshell, they want their country back. This movement is, above all, about the sanctity, more importantly, the sovereignty of the ballot box.

I now turn to the critical role of oil in shaping the history of Iran.

The blessing and the curse of oil

The discovery:

In 2008, 100th anniversary of the discovery of oil in Iran, the country's gigantic oil reserves, the price of the crude oil, the foreign currency reserves, the revenue generated from the export of oil, the balance of the foreign trade, all reached record levels.

New oil fields are constantly discovered, swelling up the reserves which exceed the domestic consumption and export.

Ranking: Iran is second oil producing country in the world, behind Saudi Arabia. Cautiously estimated, its oil reserves represent 11.6% of the world's oil stock. A remarkable distinctive feature of the Iranian oil, other than its size, is that it can be extracted at relatively low cost – around \$4.35 a barrel, thereby the profit generated from its sale at market price is very high.

Gas reserves: Iran has vast reserves of natural gas, which are equally attractive, or perhaps even more. Iran's gas reserves represent 15.5% of the total natural gas reserve in the world, ranking the second behind Russia. Experts estimate that there are more natural gas fields in Iran than has so far been discovered or is ready for development.

Enviably position: with those gigantic energy reserves and its privileged position in the region, Iran is in an enviable position in the eyes of the developing countries, who have to deal with the thorny dual problem of capital deficiency and increasing oil prices, or the developed countries, who have to pay the increasing price of imported oil and often have deficit in their foreign trade.

Between 1999 and 2007, the income generated from the export of oil increased five fold, from \$16 bil to \$79 bil providing the Islamic republic with a unique opportunity to exercise influence on the security and stability of the Middle East and beyond.

In the foreign policy:

Support for Hamas and Hezbollah: the Islamic Republic has been a major source of spiritual, financial and logistic support for most Islamic fundamentalist movements in the world. Notably, its presence and activities in *Iraq*, *Afghanistan*, *Lebanon* and *Gaza strip*, its support for *Hamas* and *Hezbollah* in *Lebanon* are well documented. This would not have been possible without financial resources.

Nuclear programme: the Islamic Republic has an ambitious nuclear programme, which it inherited from the old regime, and has been resolutely continuing with the assistance of Russia. Pursuing that programme, whatever its objectives, would not have been possible without financial resources.

US and UN resolutions: the US UN resolutions and sanctions against Iran have not had much effect on the Islamic Republic (though they have adversely affected the people of Iran).

Ahmadinejad and his foreign minister mock these resolutions and sanctions and treat them with contempt. They have, time and again, called them “worthless scraps of paper, legally and politically incoherent”.

One of the reasons these sanctions have been ineffective is that Russia and China, who have significant economic interest in the Islamic republic- and in the case of Russia considerable political leverage, exercise their veto every time the Security Council has attempted to impose more effective sanctions.

Without the revenue from oil and gas, the Islamic republic could not have warded off the impact of these sanctions, would not have been able to persist so resolutely on its uncompromising position in the negotiating with the EU and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In the domestic front:

Security forces: the Islamic republic has used some of the windfall profits of oil and gas to generously compensate the core of the security forces, thereby to secure their loyalty to protect and defend the regime.

The recent uprising showed that this has been an effective method. Some have reported that there were Arab men among the security forces. Members of *Hamas* and *Hezbollah* in training in Iran? It is not unlikely.

Lower income families: part of the proceeds of the oil is paid out to lower income families particularly in the rural areas. This is the very same crowd that is mobilised and transported to Tehran to populate the Friday prayer which is the official platform from which the leadership addresses people directly.

No tax, no accountability: the government of the Islamic republic does not depend on tax revenues for its finances. Therefore, it does not consider itself remotely accountable to the public, often even not to the parliament. The proceeds of oil in the hands of an undemocratic government has promoted and reinforced a despotic behaviour in relation to people.

It seems that the Islamic republic alone is the beneficiary of the blessings of the oil.

The curses of oil, however, have fallen on the shoulders of the people of Iran: for the wealth generated by oil and gas and other natural resources of the country, that could have been a key

source for economic, technological and social advancement of these people have instead been applied to secure the survival of the regime.

Lastly, but very importantly, I must mention the rivalries and interferences from foreign governments:

This has added yet another dimension to the curse of oil, that has shaped the destiny this country: since the discovery of oil in Iran in early 20th century, foreign countries have sought gaining access to Iran's oil resources. During the first decades of the 20th century, Iran was the scene of rivalry between Britain and Russia (with whom Iran shares 1,500km border in the north); following the Second World War, America also joined in.

The British role: In 1941, in the heat of the Second World War, the British forced the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty to abdicate and go to exile to South Africa.

Together with the Americans, they welcomed Khomeini's call to remove the Shah in 1979, in the hope that Islam would ward off the risk of the expansion of communism in the region (the Green Belt Policy). In effect, with that policy they sowed the seeds of Islamic fundamentalism in the region and beyond. Today, they are reaping what they sowed.

Post-1979: the rivalry to seek influence over the leadership in Iran for economic gains did not stop after the 1979 revolution. EU countries, particularly Germany, Italy and France (before President Sarkozy) have gained substantial economic interests, as the US businesses have been out of the picture due to the sanctions.

I sometimes think that perhaps the people of Iran, like those in their neighbouring country Turkey, would not have been better off without oil and gas and petrodollars. Perhaps, if instead, nature had bestowed this land with more arable land and water their destiny would have been different and better.

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to the role of the Western media in shaping an image of Iran to the public in the West – past and present - and its contribution to understanding - or more appropriately misunderstandings – of Iran in this part of the world.

The media coverage of Iran

Superficial, clichés and myths: I often read the press coverage of Iran with trepidation and unease, for analyses of the events in Iran, past and present, are superficial, packed with clichés and myths.

More often than not, the press disseminate opinions rather than the truth; and the facts become important only in as much as they support the opinion expressed.

Profile of reporter: The reporters are often not based in the country; they stay there for short spells of time; they don't speak the language and hardly know much about the mentality, value system, the driving force and aspirations of the people they write about.

It is hard to believe that with so little in depth knowledge of a subject, anyone could write up or say anything materially significant about it.

Furthermore, the 24 h/day-7 days/week news reporting do not admit quality. Sensation is the name of the game.

Black and white: As a result, what we have is rather a black and white picture: the good guys and the bad guys. Simple and crystal clear. But the reality is more complex.

Let me illustrate this with a couple of examples:

An example of branding, creating a personalities: Khatami: I mentioned earlier that in 1999, there was a student uprising in Iran that was brutally suppressed. About 1,200 students were arrested, 70 disappeared, a dozens died while in prison or shortly after they were released as a result of the injuries they sustained in jail or hunger strikes. A few dozens got long term sentences, as long as 15 years.

This was during the presidency of Mr Khatami. The president sided with the supreme leader and allowed this happen. To date, Khatami is branded without any qualification in the Western press as a reformist and a moderate. He was even honoured with a doctorate in Law at St Andrew's university a couple of years ago.

An example of distortion: until recent events, Iran was described by some journalists, and I am particularly thinking of the BBC journalists, some heavy weights like John Simpson and the lighter weights like John Snow, who put themselves forward as experts in the subject, as a sort of democracy.

Whereas, the very nature of Islam and an Islamic regime, or at least the Islamic Republic in Iran, is incompatible with democracy, and the record of their performance bears evidence that this label does not stick.

Example of selective news coverage: in the past 30 years, there have been at least a dozen of political assassinations of Iranian opposition members and activists in Paris, Frankfurt, Madrid and Vienna to name but a few.

No coverage of them in the local press. For the economic interest of the countries involved and the desire of the EU governments to cash on the suspension of US/Iran business relations had taken the upper hand and the press abided by it. -

Finally, an example of character assassination - demonising: Going back to 1979, in the mind of Europeans, or at least most of those I have met, the pre-1979 Iran is reduced to a two-liner:

“an autocratic regime represented by a demoniacal monarch and Savak. Those more *“in the know”*, may have heard the name of a certain Dr Mossadegh, prime minister of Iran in 1953 who was allegedly toppled with the help of Americans, who restored the Shah back to power.” (and they all think of themselves as experts in this matter).

It is staggering that such definite and enduring judgments have been formed – undoubtedly the press has had a critical role in their inception as well as endurance.

The reality, though, is that this is a country and a people whose complexity merit a more subtle approach.

Iran is not a monolith, but a mosaic of conflicting influences and interests: the Persian question is far too complex to be reduced to one person. There have been, and there still are too many conflicting interests, pushes and pulls interacting in this land sometimes openly, but more often covertly. They need to be taken into account in any attempt to understand the events – past and present. The press in the West has failed to do its job.

Historians, particularly Iranian historians and researchers have done a better job in taking a step back, re-examining the narrative, re-assessing the old accounts in the light of new findings, the release of once-confidential documents, away from the heat of the moment and with the benefit of time and experience.

But in the competition between the press and historians for grabbing our attention, the former who has more resources, more voice, and almost no accountability has had the upper hand.

Therefore, I implore you: **do not read, watch or listen to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider.**

As for the battle that the people of Iran have chosen to fight, with or without the support of the *so-called* free world, the victory will be ultimately theirs:

For Goodness is stronger than evil, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death.

Thank you for your indulgence.