

IRAN IN TRANSITION

Written by Art DeFehr based on visit to Iran April 15 - 24, 2014

(Please note: Names of individuals in our group, our hosts and the companies visited have not been included to preserve their privacy)

1. Iran and Iranians can be understood by the lens you choose to use. They are heirs to a magnificent and ancient civilization, they are a sophisticated and educated people, home of the Shia version of Islam, possess fabulous petrochemical resources and are victims of a failing effort to create a religious utopia. They are heirs of colonial and post-colonial manipulation and as an alternate have invented their own version of dysfunctional Government. They have become an international pariah yet the Revolution has created a society with a very low degree of inequality and reportedly no extreme poverty.
2. I was privileged to visit Iran April 15 - 25, 2014 together with a small group organized by the Peace-Action Network, a semi-autonomous group within YPO (Young Presidents Organization) that explores relationships with places and cultures considered more challenging. We visited Tehran, Qom, Isfahan and Shiraz. We were given exceptional access to many elements of society and culture but were closely monitored given the presence of a number of Americans in our group and the nature of our contacts. Our small group was from several nations, male and female and from a faith and cultural perspective included members who were from backgrounds that were Jewish, Christian, Bahai and Islamic – yet we never felt that we or anyone was singled out because of our national or religious background.

My first international assignment was post civil war Bangladesh in 1972. We observed that the two-week visitors wrote books and the rest of us realized that after a couple of years we really understood less and less of a very complex situation. In that light I offer my 10-day insight – but informed by 50 years of global involvement in 129 countries and many difficult places and issues.

My goal is neither to defend or denounce but to provide some alternate views or at least personal impressions given the paucity of current reporting from inside Iran. These views cannot be complete given the limitations of time and exposure. Iran, its people and even its politics are not frozen in time and my goal is to encourage us to look for the nuance and the complexity in what we see and hear.

3. **Message to the West**

The first question I am always asked is whether Iran is on a path to self-destruction or whether the reported opening to the West is in some sense real. My own observation is that nobody in Iran has the slightest intention to promote or commit national suicide! They have issues but they are a very rational, thoughtful and sophisticated people and see the world from their point of view – and those perspectives are not always the same as ours or internally consistent as they are not consistent within our own countries or societies.

Anticipating that question I asked a very senior advisor to the President of Iran to give me a two-minute message to the people from the West that I would meet on my return. My schedule took me directly from Tehran to Washington DC to attend the Trilateral Commission. It was important that the voice and message was his and not my imperfect interpretation. This was the message:

- 3.1 **The change in the Government and its policies is genuine and real.**
- 3.2 **Iran has made two significant moves** (the election of a moderate President and the initiation of serious discussions re nuclear weapons) **and it is important that Iran experiences some genuine response from the West** (The implication was that internal voices are not fully unified in this new direction and it was important to encourage the forces that are promoting these changes).
- 3.3 **He stated that the leadership is optimistic with regard to a successful and near-term conclusion to the question of nuclear weapons.** He also added that it was important to keep the discussions to the singular focus of nuclear weapons and not insert a laundry list of other issues such as human rights, missiles and so forth – that could prevent a positive outcome. He added if you want to deal with human rights why not start with Saudi Arabia....
- 3.4 **He added that Iran as a culture and society should be considered as “accommodative”.** I found that comment personally interesting since the news profile about Iran pictures the administration and people as belligerent and brittle so possibly he was trying to suggest that may not be the correct (or helpful) way to understand Iran. (Note to those shaping Canadian foreign policy).

4. Additional Messages

Discussion with this person and others added several important elements that could form part of this “message to the West”.

- 4.1 Iran seeks “independent” relationships with America (presumably does not wish to be interpreted through the lens of a group of countries or the lens of Israeli policy)
- 4.2 It would be to the benefit of global powers to understand that there are only “two real countries” in the region – Turkey and Iran – and the West should realign its strategic relationships around these two historic centers of culture and power since they might offer an alternative and possibly more effective strategy to “manage a complicated neighborhood”.
- 4.3 While nuclear weapons may not be a possible or desirable strategy for Iran – the rest of the world should understand that Iran lives in a dangerous and complicated neighborhood. They are bordered by land or sea by 15 nations, many of which are in some degree of turmoil or disarray and several are antagonistic to Iran for various reasons.
- 4.4 The most dangerous long term neighbor (in the view of Iran) is Pakistan given they have nuclear weapons, are very large and are viewed as a potential challenge to regional leadership. (The Taliban are mortal enemies and they attribute their existence to America and Pakistan. The current example of a vulnerable Ukraine stripped of its nuclear capability is not a helpful example).
- 4.5 The Sunni-Shia split is real and will fuel instability for a long time. Iran is not only the largest Shia nation but views itself as the place that preserves, promotes and protects that (minority) religious perspective. (In that light the effective promotion of the Wahhabi version of Islam through American complicity with Saudi Arabia is an important present and future source of regional instability and extremism – we were told that the Shias do not even consider the Wahhabis a legitimate sect within Islam!

5. Iran and Israel

One does not become an expert in 10 days but the Iranians were free with their views and were overall very consistent so these observations simply reflect what we heard. The view has been

promoted by some commentators and in some circles that the “destruction of Israel” is an important goal of Iranian policy. This was reinforced by terms such as “axis of evil” which are no more helpful to creating relationships.

- 5.1 These comments are always attributed to the former President Ahmadinejad. If you check Google there are entries such as “Quotes from Ahmadinejad”, “Quotes from Rob Ford”, “Quotes from George Bush”, “Quotes from Stephen Harper” – example of the latter.... “The NDP is kind of proof that the Devil lives and is interfering in the affairs of men.” The quotes in these websites all reflect similar intellectual or discriminatory qualities.

*If we want to draw conclusions or demonize a country based on the words of its leadership we should at least make an effort to be balanced and maybe consider the more recent words by current leaders as more relevant than words of rejected leaders. The periodical **Foreign Affairs** in its May/June 2014 issue has published an article by Mohammad Javad Zarif the current Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic. In the Concluding section titled “The Way Forward” Zarif writes “Iran has no interest in nuclear weapons and that such weapons would not enhance its security.” The article concludes.... “Courage and leadership are required to seize this historic opportunity, which might not come again. This opportunity must not be lost.” Believe what you like but we do not serve ourselves or history well when we only select the words that serve our purposes. For interest Zarif has received all of his post-secondary education in the United States including a Ph.D degree.*

Iranians stated very clearly that the election of President Ahmadinejad was described most kindly as unfortunate and more generally as a disaster from an international perspective and even from the perspective of many internal policies. So why did he get elected? We were told that he had limited or no international experience but internally had the voice and profile of a populist and this translated into support. Allowing him to be elected a second time is now viewed as a serious mistake and is probably recognized as such even at the very top – and has contributed to a number of efforts to alter both the perception and the reality. Thoughtful Iranians also want to forget Ahmadinejad (as some people might like to forget some of the remarks of George Bush II and some Canadians might feel the same about pronouncements of some of our leaders) and asked us to listen carefully to the comments of the current President Rouhani who is trying to project a very different image of what Iran is about. (Always going back to Ahmadinejad rather than the current leadership is like using the words, views and actions of Senator Joseph McCarthy as forever reflecting the views of America – and my Mother made his list in spite of her being clearly anti communist – she swam the Amur from Siberia to China in 1931 to escape Stalin).

- 5.2 The failure to find a settlement of the Israeli-Palestine issue remains a source of poison in the entire region and beyond. Iranian views are not unique on this question and their views are increasingly supported in Europe and probably a majority of North Americans.
- 5.3 Notwithstanding the above we were reminded several times that Iran and Israel enjoyed constructive relationships in the period prior to 1979 and stated that Israel and Iran should be natural allies in the region since they shared a common enemy - “The Arabs”. The universal antipathy to the surrounding Arab populations was visceral and surprising.

A random Collection of my own Observations:

Iran reflects both its modernity and its ancient roots. Cyrus the Great wrote the first declaration of human rights 2,500 years ago and restored the captive Jews to Jerusalem. Persia was conquered by Alexander the Great, defied the Romans, was inundated by the Arab/Islamic wave, decimated again by Genghis Khan and finally was challenged by Western ideas of modernity. What always surprised was the visible survival of an idea of their place in history and a sense that each generation will again become something special. Our view of the current Iran is colored by what we consider important recent events like the Reign of the Shah, (we tend to forget the CIA overthrow of the democratic Mossadegh), the American Embassy hostages, the Iran/Iraq war and the Theocratic Revolution. The color that infuses the current generation is the green of the 2009 Green Revolution when youth defied their autocratic leaders. These youth were born after the hostage event, after the Revolution and War with Iraq and are a generation that lives with Twitter and their own ideas of a modern world. This is the world I am trying to describe.

6. Anti-American Sentiment

We were genuinely surprised that in our discussions and relationships we did not experience the slightest sense of antipathy to America or Americans in spite of a difficult history. The signs on the walls of the American Embassy are still there and a few billboards can be seen – but this sentiment is completely absent in any discussion or relationship.

7. The Revolution of 1979

The Revolution was a genuine revolution involving social, economic and religious aspects of society. The reported intolerance, brutality and other extreme actions are undoubtedly real and color the views of Iran within and without. (Remember that we celebrate the Equality, Liberty and Fraternity of the French Revolution but conveniently ignore the Reign of Terror.) We were given the impression that the regime has either through experience or wisdom adjusted its actions somewhat to reflect the failure of Iranian society to accept its rigid views of the world and Islam.

8. Role of Women in Society

My impression prior to the visit to Iran was that women were extremely disadvantaged and repressed – somehow on a parallel with our understanding of the role of women in places like Saudi Arabia. There are indeed restrictions on behaviour related to dress (the hijab is compulsory but not a burka in sight) and public social relationships are monitored to the point of being a threat at worst and mostly a nuisance. Laws remain punitive and may be practiced at times but the impression was that the more severe examples of repression are becoming more of an exception rather than the rule.

On the other hand women play a role in society that is completely different than what we understand to be the case in the more conservative Arab nations like Saudi Arabia. Women drive cars, walk about freely, fully 50% of University students are female and attend mixed classes. We visited many institutions and business settings and found women were fully represented in virtually every situation including many in leadership. They were visible and participated fully in all of our meetings and interactions. The irritation of the morality police remains and women find ways to make their objection known. The ability to wear a hijab with almost the entire head of hair on display has become an art form. The chador often becomes a

tunic many inches above the knee with very slim pants below – even yoga tights. Iran is no paradise for women – but it is also not a Saudi Arabia or Sudan.....

9. Impact of Sanctions

This led to many interesting discussions. Sanctions are having an impact in Iran largely because it is such a highly developed society that has historically been integrated with the world economy. While the discussion has been about sanctions on the sale or supply of material items – that has not been the major problem except for critical and original technical parts like spares from Boeing –which were not supposed to be restricted in any event due to safety concerns. It seems the (silk route) memories of barter and countertrade are serving Iran well and they seem to be able to move almost anything around and obtain anything – even illegal products like alcohol in great abundance. The real impact of sanctions relates to the restrictions on banking and the movement of money. In part this reflects the importance of the flow of money in a sophisticated society and secondarily the self-restraint of banks and institutions who are afraid that they may inadvertently make a mistake and jeopardize their institutions – or become the target of bad publicity. As a result even the legal financial transactions become difficult or impossible. The sanctions are a real irritant to the business community and are an important driver of the effort to rationalize relationships with the West. We did visit one bank that had managed to organize itself to be completely free of sanctions.

10. Human Capital

We were continually impressed with the quality and competence of people we met in every private and public setting. Iran has a highly educated population (currently 4,100,000 students in post-secondary studies) and is capable of filling critical positions from within in contrast to the reliance on imported expertise in all of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. Literacy was reported at 80% nationally and 98% among youth. Iranians continually reminded us that they are a serious country – “not arrogant camel-herders with too much money.” The preferred areas of study are medicine and engineering and the country has a surplus of both. If the regime achieves any reasonable degree of normality internally and externally Iran has the potential to become a leading economy and nation in its region.

11. Emigration

The impact of the Revolution of 1979 has been to encourage people to leave a repressive Iran and an estimated 4-5,000,000 have voted with their feet. Current estimates are that 200,000 Iranians emigrate each year and many of these are educated. These are generally not the migrants who wash up on Lampedusa or the shore of Australia but educated and sophisticated young people who use their skills to work in the Gulf Region or enter Europe or North America and enjoy considerable success. While this growing diaspora despises the current regime they retain considerable loyalty to Iran and their friends and relatives. This diaspora may serve Iran well in the future if conditions are such that they feel welcome and comfortable to return or to develop business or other relationships. In the meantime any country or jurisdiction looking for skilled and motivated young people should know where to find them.

12. Elections and Democracy

When we criticize elections and democracy in Iran it is always fair to ask “compared to what”? A senior official asked me to draw a circle of 1,000 miles around Iran and point to a superior election process – or indeed any election at all in most countries! Countries such as the USA with their gerrymandered jurisdictions and recent court rulings that put elections up for sale are

hardly in a position to criticize. There are two aspects of the current system in Iran that we find at odds with our view of democracy.

- a. Iran elects a fairly normal Government to administer the needs of society but the Supreme Religious Leader has the final veto on any important action or appointment. In theory this is like the Governor General in Canada except approval is now generally a formality. The explanation we received is that an Islamic Republic is really a Government under God, or Allah and in the Shia version of Islam the intervention of God is considered active (passive and scripture-based in the Sunni version) and therefore the leader represents God, is authorized to act and is infallible. We need to remember that many in our midst attribute similar powers to the Vatican. In any event this results in an administrative democracy subject to divine intervention as delivered by the senior ayatollah of the day. In the rest of the Middle East we have equally authoritarian Governments who take guidance solely from their desire to maintain power and enjoy luxury – hard to say which has better results. If the reports are correct that Iran has eliminated most poverty then possibly an argument can be made for the superiority of their version – at least as it impacts poor people. The officials we met in Iran were proud to point out their Gini index demonstrated a much more equal society than America.
- b. A Second characteristic of their elections is the requirement that each candidate for President be approved by the Supreme Leader. International observers were critical of the fact that a number of the moderate candidates had been disqualified and this was viewed as undemocratic and reflecting a regime that intends to remain conservative. It was suggested to us that the leadership of Iran might be given a bit more credit for intelligence. They noted that the Conservative applicants had been allowed to stand but only one relative moderate was approved - the current President Rouhini who speaks English and is Western-educated. The result was a split in the conservative vote and a concentration of the more moderate vote with the successful election of Rouhini. Canada has a requirement that is not all that different. At the national level a person running under a party banner must be approved by the leader of that party – really not all that different a requirement than Iran!!

13. Revolutionary Guards

This is a unique, disturbing and potentially problematic aspect of the way the regime is organized. Originally created to “protect the purity of the theocratic regime”, the Guards have taken on a life of their own that will complicate efforts to moderate and modernize Iran even if the leadership chooses to do so. The Guards are selected from a segment of the population that is by nature more conservative, then are brainwashed to the degree possible and have become a force outside of the control of the Government or military. As a result of nationalization at the beginning of the revolution they now control many key economic assets and have a stake in maintaining the current system and their control. After 35 years this kind of structure leads to a significant degree of corruption as benefit is distributed on the basis of loyalty, family and connections rather than merit or defined policy. In spite of the above it was reported that the majority of Guards had voted for the moderate Presidential option!

14. Impact of Sanctions and Repression on the Economy

Reduced reliance on oil revenue and various sanctions and restrictions have had both negative and positive outcomes. The experience with the Stuxnet virus suggested that Iran would always be subject to cyber attack since all of the programs and codes were controlled externally and recent NSA intelligence revelations only prove the point. As a result Iran has reportedly developed quite sophisticated internal proprietary systems in many areas of IT – a possible knowledge asset when relationships are more normal. We were also told that petro-related

economic activity is only 18% of GDP and even if there is greater opportunity to export oil the lesson has been that Iran should deliberately continue to support a diversified economy for long term sustainability. We visited a very impressive business incubator with over 300 Hi-tech startups and an adjacent science park – there are reportedly several hundred business incubators now in existence supporting a shift to a knowledge economy. We heard presentations by 6 very bright entrepreneurs about their business concepts – 3 of the 6 were women.

15. Role and Future of Religion

It is exceedingly dangerous to pretend any expertise in such a complicated situation but we did have intense exchanges with two senior ayatollahs, visits to various religious sites (Jewish, Christian, mosques and shrines) plus innumerable private discussions. The ayatollahs we met were possibly more moderate than the average but were clearly in the center of the system. They were both personable and even humorous and accepted questions on any subject. An important comment from each was that they were optimistic that the question of nuclear weapons would be resolved and we did not perceive any rigidity or reluctance to deal with that question. They perceive a special role for religion and specifically Shia Islam in Iran and its form of Government and consider religious intervention in Governance an obvious and natural extension of the faith. When asked if a person could change religions – the answer was of course they could – if nobody knew about it. If they make it public then they should be punished. The ideas of separation of church and state or freedom of religion are not yet part of their paradigm of thinking- but that is true of most of the Islamic world. In theory a number of European countries still have a state religion – it is just that most people have become apostate enough so that it makes no difference! One of the discussions took place in Qom – the famous religious city. There are 16 Universities in Qom with 65,000 students of whom 10,000 are foreign and 25,000 women. There are 3 female ayatollahs in Qom. One student who was taking a course in Qom other than religion found the atmosphere of the City so repressive and stultifying that he commuted two hours every day so he could spend his non-classroom hours in another setting!

16. The Future of Islam in Iran

That is an interesting subject for speculation and undoubtedly of concern to the religious leadership and establishment. Most of the population is highly resentful of the forced intrusion of religion into their daily life and activity and religious loyalty is increasingly just compliant enough to keep the peace and their jobs. We met many students in a variety of settings and the degree of disaffection with Islam should be alarming to the clerics. We were consistently told that among the University crowd at best 25% still had any significant degree of interest in religion or Islam and the rest were either not interested or increasingly wanted nothing to do with Islam based on how they had experienced it. A huge generational and demographic shift is taking place and this will inevitably lead to a showdown between an emerging secularism and an attempt to maintain a theocracy.

The access to the Internet is an example of the challenge faced by a controlling Government. Apparently Facebook and Twitter are both banned, yet young people with their omnipresent mobile phones could immediately demonstrate how they had workarounds for each and every site and social network that was in theory not available.

17. Demographics

Iran demonstrates its true modernity in the nature of its demographic profile. The largest demographic group is the millennials in their 20's. The demographic group that follows is surprisingly much smaller reflecting a very low birth rate, possibly some emigration although these are mostly too young to emigrate and we also sense a reluctance to get married or at least to marry early. The large bulge in the age group of 20-35 has the potential to give Iran a real economic boost if given the freedom to express their talent.

18. Comments on Society

"If tourists would not be required to wear a hijab in Iran then every Iranian women would instantly become a tourist."

Iran is a society of contradictions. The Revolution is real and the morality police are still around just enough to hassle the people. Everybody knows that in private the chadors and hijabs disappear, the skirts are tight and short even by Western standards, the music loud and the alcohol flows – and reportedly drugs. We were told that the biggest chalets and villas in the mountains and ski resorts north of Tehran were mostly owned by the sons and daughters of the ayatollah class who enjoyed special economic concessions and privileges. If social life exists beyond the permitted boundaries – the parties in these villas are at the extreme end of being risqué – since this group feel themselves immune from the control of the very morality police put in place by their fathers. I took some interesting photos in the grand bazaar of Tehran. While the chadors may be generally black, the lingerie department featured bras and other items in neon colors and bright patterns. The message seemed to be - "You can force me to look modest on the outside but I will express myself (and possibly my objections) under that chador."

I spoke with many students and young professionals both male and female in private settings. I heard the story of a young woman who had been picked up in a raid on a private party (diplomats present) when she was still in University. Although she had no alcohol or other obvious misdemeanor – other than possibly her presence and clothing – she spent time in the infamous Evin prison and was punished with lashes. That was enough to motivate her to leave the country for a decade. A young woman is an actress and explained the problems and contradictions of acting in roles that require male and female contact. Another young woman is a lawyer who needs to use and interpret Sharia law that is discriminatory relative to women and so it goes. A young man wears a wild hairdo simply as a statement of rebellion. The regime is struggling to maintain a system that is increasingly out of touch with reality and especially the young – they are going to some other place in their minds and lives.

19. Corruption

A society dominated by controls, restrictions and permissions inevitably leads to corruption and this is unfortunately becoming the rule rather than the exception in Iran. The perceived original purpose of the 1979 Revolution and much of the initial support grew out of the desire to be rid of the rampant corruption under the Shah. Current practice is returning to a similar situation with different actors in charge. The Russia-style of oligarch has not emerged in Iran or is at least not visible but a society based on permission or paranoia will always become distorted and increasingly so over time. Many economic actors benefit from this structure as they learn to play by those rules but we found a universal desire for a more normal and open society.

20. The Economy

Iran is the 17th largest economy in the world even under current conditions. GDP is \$7,000 per person but PPP is \$13,000 making it a largely middle class society. The population is literate and has a very high degree of participation in University-level education. Revolution can lead to distortion. We met a number of male students who were extending their (relatively free) University studies into the Masters and Ph. D level to avoid the compulsory two years of military service. At the end of that process they might then decide to emigrate – joining the military was not on the wish list of anyone we met! The Revolution was characterized by a high degree of economic nationalization at the beginning. Many families have managed to restore ownership of their companies and there is a new entrepreneurial class emerging. We visited the Tehran Stock Exchange with 300 listed companies and a capital value of \$150 billion. Foreign investment is permitted at the 20% level for portfolio investment – but 100% if a foreign company sets up on its own. Sharia law is a factor in the nature of debt instruments – but we were told that Shia interpretation of Sharia law is more flexible and not a significant deterrent to getting things done.

21. The Nuclear Issue

This question has dominated the views of Iran and its relationship with the Western world for the last number of years. I offer no defense of nuclearization (as a professed pacifist I believe the world should become nuclear free) but will try to interpret what we heard and felt inside Iran and elsewhere.

- Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and is surrounded by countries with nuclear capability (Pakistan, India, Russia, China, Israel, USA, etc).
- Iran has in very recent memory been attacked by Iraq in a war resulting in one million casualties, and experiences the turmoil of Afghanistan on the other border (2 million Afghan refugees still living in Iran). The point was made that Iran needs to maintain the capacity to defend itself.
- Regime change. Iran has experienced regime change initiated by the USA through the explicit actions of the CIA when the democratically elected Government of Mossadegh was replaced with the (autocratic, corrupt and repressive) Shah and notes US inspired regime change in its neighbors of Iraq and Afghanistan and efforts to do so in Syria. The message seems to be – “The US did not like our democratic regime and is equally antagonistic to our theocratic regime – so we need to be have the strength to make our own decisions.” I am only the messenger on this one.
- A consensus seems to have emerged inside Iran that the effort to develop nuclear weapons may be counter-productive to the more normal aspirations of 77 million people who wish to get on with their lives – but in the context of a modern state that is able to run its own affairs. We received a very consistent message that they were “optimistic” that the question of weapons would be resolved. Netanyahu may not believe that but possibly it is useful for people like him to have real or perceived existential enemies to divert attention from other controversies.
- I had the recent opportunity of hearing John Kerry speak to global issues in a confidential setting; however his views on Iran have been publicly stated as well. What was notable was that Kerry reported that every deadline required of Iran was being met, suggesting that it was reasonable to be “optimistic”.
- The suggestion was made at times that Russia could play a spoiler role and somehow assist Iran in its nuclear goals. We heard emphatically that the Iranian leadership and its people did not trust Russia and that was not even an option – regardless of how challenging the

relationships were with the West. The underlying message was that Iran really is part of the Western world and needs to find its way back – but not as a vassal state!

On several occasions informed Iranians said that Iran should not be defeated or feared but should be “managed”. Iran is a complex society located in a complicated part of the world – simple slogans and narrow views of reality will not get us to our collective goals.

22. Canada – Iran Diplomatic Relations

Canada took the initiative on Sept 7, 2012 to close its Embassy in Tehran, expel the Iranian diplomatic staff in Ottawa and effectively cut all links. I returned from Iran with an articulate request from Canadian-Iranians to get beyond narrow ideology and re-establish relationships with an important nation that will always be a critical player in the region and is demonstrating positive changes in its actions and attitudes.

Reasons stated by Canada (a collected set of reasons or rationalizations) for closing the Embassy were the human rights record, support of Syria, nuclear security, safety of its diplomats and threats to Israel. It should be noted that Canada has maintained relationships with countries such as Cuba, a number of South American brutal dictatorships, Russia, China and a host of regressive and repressive regimes in the Middle East and parts of Africa without batting a diplomatic eye. I had the opportunity to ask several Ambassadors whether Canadian diplomats were in particular personal danger – and they rolled their eyes in response.

Syria is an interesting subject. It should be noted that other nations and Russia in particular support Syria and Canada has not ended diplomatic relationships for that reason. Iranians pointed out that during the war with Iraq – in which Saddam Hussein was heavily supported by America and not criticized for using chemical weapons it might be noted – Syria was the sole ally of Iran and “we do not forget our friends”. Equally relevant – ask any informed specialist in the region if they can conceive a post-Assad outcome that would be superior to the former Government of Assad and the answer is an universal “No”. The Assad regime is anything but benign – but we need to be careful what we wish for.

The nuclear issue has been discussed and it is noteworthy that there has been an important shift in (Iranian) leadership, rhetoric, attitudes and actions since the Canadian exit – but that leaves Canada out of the loop in participating in and contributing to a possible solution. Standing on the sidelines and tossing unhelpful brickbats seems to be the new Canadian approach to diplomacy.

That leaves Israel. Earlier comments will not be repeated however listening to Iranian TV was interesting. One morning they reported two items on Canada in their newscast. One related to an Ottawa Citizen article about revelations that Canada was secretly planning strategies how it might make a military intervention in Syria. In trying to explain Canadian actions and attitudes to its Iranian constituency the female broadcaster (and notably all announcers were female), simply stated that “Canada has sub-contracted its foreign policy to Israel”. A standing ovation from AIPAC and honors from the Israeli Government seem to be the current measure of success for our foreign policy. Possibly the Iranian reporter was closer to the truth than we consider comfortable. I have been told by very senior and reliable sources within Canada that the single most important criteria for Canadian policy with regard to the re-opening of the Canadian Embassy in Tehran is the view that the current policy may garner a few more Jewish votes. I have more respect for the integrity and intelligence of my Jewish friends than to believe that this policy will be a defining criteria!

Canada is currently represented by the Embassy of Italy in Tehran but reportedly Canada asks nothing of the Embassy and fails to respond to even mundane technical questions when asked. This is sandbox diplomacy and should Iran emerge from its sanctions and isolation and re-establish commercial and other relationships my guess is that Canada and Canadian interests will pay a price for our unnecessary belligerence.

From a more personal perspective and one shared by many other Canadians is the departure from the historic and valued role of Canada as a trusted intermediary that did not have a colonial history or military and imperial ambitions. Peace and Peace-keeping have become unacceptable words in Ottawa – yet Peace should be our most valued international goal. Diplomacy has variously been described as “War by other means” or “The Art of the Possible”. Our leaders need to read history rather than the most recent poll on voting intentions.

Current Canadian foreign policy is widely viewed as damaging to the long term interests of Canada and makes Canada such an outlier that we are losing our credibility on most international issues. We too easily forget our own history. Canada had its residential schools while the rest of the Americas resorted to the more effective policy of genocide. The USA proclaimed itself the greatest democracy in the world and practiced another century of slavery. We worship the British Parliamentary system that ruled not only the waves but ruled and ruined the lives of millions of unwilling colonial subjects. We had laws that excluded Chinese or Jews and impounded innocent Japanese Canadians. America permitted Senator McCarthy and is still the only nation to actually drop a nuclear weapon (considered a gratuitous act by many). I am not ignoring even worse regimes but simply pointing out that when we speak we do not speak with entirely clean hands and hearts and in that context our Canadian policies based on “Principle” may not be judged kindly by history.

Canada should find its way back into an appropriate relationship with Iran. We do not need to endorse a theocratic Government or any or all of their views and actions – but recognize that they are a serious nation of 77 million that wish and deserve to be a productive part of the international system. The current regime has already lost its internal credibility and is now really holding onto power rather than believing that its citizens are mesmerized by its religious expressions. Our group was allowed virtually unimpeded access to every level of institution and society and this kind of interaction encourages those within who are striving to reform their system. There are extreme voices and will always be – but if we listen only to FOX News or MSNBC we might have two entirely different visions of America. We need to assume that Iran will be no different.

23. My final thought:

There is a children’s story about two wolves – one good and one bad – and the child asks which wolf will become dominant. The answer is “The one you feed”. A policy limited to isolation and extremist rhetoric actually feeds the bad wolf – if we cannot learn from history lets at least learn from our children.

Art DeFehr

Summary of Itinerary on next page.....

Summary of our Itinerary

- We visited Tehran, Qom, Isfahan and Shiraz
- International Business School (Tehran) offering Executive Education
- Tehran Stock Exchange including visits to a stockbroker and an investment manager
- Middle East Bank (not subject to sanctions)
- Several privately run companies and conglomerates with varying relationships to the regime
- Institute of Middle East Strategic Studies with close relationships to Government
- Central Chamber of Commerce
- Several Embassies
- Isfahan Science and Technology Town
 - Science University, Science Industrial Park and Hi-Tech Business Incubator
 - Presentations from entrepreneurs from Business Incubator and Science Park
- Ayatollah Ayazi in Qom
- Ayatollah Ansari in Shiraz (grandson of the famous Ayatollah who issued the tobacco fatwa to protest the British monopoly concession of tobacco to one British person)

- Tourist activity
 - Walk in the famous Leyla Park in Tehran plus many other of the great parks in Iran
 - Challenged the locals in chess and were demolished
 - Visited famous and historic Fin Garden in Kashan
 - Several bazaars
 - The world's largest square in Isfahan
 - Visited the spectacular Communications tower in Tehran for the view and lunch
 - Persepolis
 - Tomb of Cyrus the Great
 - Many wonderful interactions with men, women and children
 - Visits to private homes and dinners
 - Some world class restaurants