



**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 

May 17, 2014

## The Iran you won't hear about from Ottawa

By Jeffrey Simpson

### *One businessman's travels reveal a country you don't hear about from Ottawa*

Art DeFehr is a very successful Manitoba businessman whose unusual curiosity takes him to places most Canadians would not want to go.

When Mr. DeFehr travels – and he's been all over the world – he goes to places such as North Korea, Cuba, Mongolia, Myanmar and, most recently, Iran.

He pens reflections when he returns, as he has just done from Iran. He went there as part of a small group organized by the Peace Action Network, a semi-autonomous group within the Young Presidents' Organization.

The group spent 10 days in Iran, visiting Tehran, Qom, Isfahan and Shiraz, meeting with two senior ayatollahs, business people, students, the chamber of commerce, diplomats. Obviously they didn't meet the Revolutionary Guards or secret police, very nasty parts of the regime, but they did meet a senior adviser to the country's new President, Hassan Rouhani.

Mr. DeFehr's impressions are fascinating reading, radically different from the black-and-white reporting in parts of the Western media and the bombastic demonization of the country by Canada's government. The latter was epitomized by Foreign Minister John Baird's appalling speech this week to the American Jewish Congress, where he called Iran the "biggest threat to global peace." (The minister might have noticed that a recent world survey by the Anti-Defamation League found Iranians to be the least anti-Semitic people in the Middle East<sup>1</sup>.)

Some of Mr. DeFehr's impressions:

The country is serious about a nuclear deal and optimistic about the outcome of negotiations to restrict Iran's nuclear programs – as is U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

The new government is very different from its predecessors. It is moderate and wants better relations with the West. Iranians do not trust Russia. Iran wants to be respected. Pakistan is a serious security threat. "Arabs" are natural adversaries. (Iranians are Persians, after all.)

Iran has immense human capital. Literacy rates are very high – 98 per cent among youth. More than four million students are at postsecondary institutions. Millions of educated Iranians have left the country, and many continue to leave because they dislike theocratic elements of the regime.

Women are subject to certain dress restrictions, which they disregard at home and sometimes interpret creatively in

public. Women work in almost all institutions. They drive cars and practise professions. Three women are ayatollahs. Is Iran heaven on earth for women? No. Is it like Saudi Arabia? No.

Corruption is widespread, due to an excess of state control in sections of the economy. Those with access to discretionary decisions (such as the Revolutionary Guards) and extended members of the families of the religious hierarchy can enrich themselves as a result.

The regime is founded on the theocratic principle that the Supreme Ayatollah is the voice of God, but the practice and belief in Islam is waning among the young. Mr. DeFehr writes of a "huge generational and demographic shift taking place that will inevitably lead to a showdown between an emerging secularism and an attempt to maintain a theocracy." He observes that perhaps a quarter of university students have any interest in religion.

Facebook and Twitter are banned, but young people easily work around the bans. The economy is suffering from international sanctions, especially in banking and finance. There is, however, a stock exchange with 300 listed companies and a capital value of \$150-billion. The country has enormous oil reserves.

Iran defends its involvement in Syria by explaining that Syria supported Iran in its war with Iraq. Militant Sunni groups battling to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus (made up of Alawites, a Shia offspring) are Shia Iran's mortal enemies. Iran hates the Taliban and like-minded Sunni extremists as much as the West. As for Israel, the new government has buried the hateful rhetoric of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom educated Iranians consider a national embarrassment.

As for Canada, we are irrelevant because our Conservative government closed its embassy in Tehran, has frequently denounced Iran and takes all its cues from the hard-line Israeli government.

Mr. DeFehr correctly calls the latter point an example of "sandbox diplomacy" and concludes: "We do not need to endorse a theocratic government or any or all of its 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."


His is a much more nuanced perspective than anything currently found in Ottawa. But then, he's been to Iran and talked to people, rather than approaching the country with a closed mind and an eye on domestic votes.

## References

1. [global100.adl.org/#map/meast](http://global100.adl.org/#map/meast)

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