

"Inside a Friendly Iran"

By Dr. Shahid Athar

Before 1979, during the days of Shah, before the Iranian revolution took place and Imam Khomeini came into power, Iran used to be one of the closest American allies in that region and was referred to as an "island of political stability" by our President. At that time, Iran was also one of the strong American business partners and customers. The trade between those two countries was flourishing. All of these changed with the hostage crisis and subsequent tensions between the two close allies and the freezing of Iranian assets.

Since then, Iran has been on the State Department's terrorist list. Sanctions which were imposed by the US Congress and have been recently renewed for another 5 years. However, in Iran now, Reformists are gaining popularity.

Recently, between July 25th to August 7th, I spent 2 weeks in Iran during a medical convention and post convention tour. The medical convention was held in collaboration with Tehran University with Howard University of Washington DC. The purpose of the medical conference was to exchange medical information between Muslim Physicians of the USA and Iran. At first, I was somewhat skeptical and concerned about this trip to Iran, but after reading a positive article on Iran in the travel section of the Indianapolis Star two months ago, I felt more comfortable.

What I observed in Iran was an eye opener and removed my misconceptions. I found out that Iranians on the street and in academics are friendly toward the USA and do not hate Americans. In broken English, many of Iranians expressed their desire to improve relations with the USA. I noted that Iran has rebuilt itself after the 8 year old Iran/Iraq war which they call "imposed war". This war took about 2 million Iranian lives in defending the country. In spite of the so called "sanctions", the evidence of economic boom and affluence was seen in the market place, in the construction industry, in airports and everywhere else.

The literacy rate is now at 90%. The misconception about the oppression of women was not seen. I found them working side by side with men in every field including at the airport, banks, hospitals and as tour guides in their head cover and black gowns. Iranians were kind and hospitable to the 300 American Muslim Physicians who were with our group. The food was great. No other country other than the USA seems to be enforcing sanctions on Iran. European goods, especially from Germany and France, were abundant. Now Chinese and Indians are also trying to fill up the Iranian market with their cheaper goods. I'm afraid that once the Iranian markets are saturated with Chinese and Indian goods, Iranians will get

used to them. Lifting sanctions then may not have any effect on American business.

I attended Friday prayer at Tehran University with about 100,000 or so Iranians, the largest congregation in the city of Tehran. During the speeches made against US sanctions which were passed a few days earlier by US Congress, I could hear the few slogans by leftist students, chanting "death to America". (It was this group of pro-communist students who had seized the US Embassy in 1979). Later, I confronted some of them and in my private conversation, I told them that being an American, I did not appreciate such slogans. I told them that these slogans are unwarranted and actually hurt the cause of Iran. Most Iranians that I talked to agreed with me. One of them remarked, "we will stop these slogans against you if you lift the sanctions and unfreeze our frozen assets which amount to over 30 billion dollars." I told them that Iran is perceived to be supporting terrorism, which they denied and said that they are only supporting the freedom struggle of the Palestinian people.

After the Tehran convention, we visited other cities, including Shiraz, Esphehan and Mashhad where great Iranian Philosophers, Poets and Saints are buried such as Hafez, Omar Khayyam, Saadi and Imam Reza. We were welcomed in all these places by Iranians with open arms and a friendly smile. I even visited an Armenian church in Shiraz.

After the Cold War was over, " the evil empire" collapsed. China also became a good business partner in spite of its Human Rights violations. I strongly feel that by lifting sanctions and improving trade relations with Iran, we can influence the democratic process there and win over an old friend once again.

This is a challenge for the peace loving and democratic citizens of both countries. In my private conversations with Iranian people and in public speeches, as an American Muslim Citizen, I tried my best to generate good will between the two nations, irrespective of what Politicians decide in the future.