

Welcome to Tehran
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By Fatima Bhutto

After a pleasant Iran Air flight I landed at Mehrabad International Airport. A sign greeted me: Welcome to Tehran, Fati. I am not a nervous flier, but I am a nervous traveller. As I walked towards the departure gate at Karachi's Jinnah airport, my mother kissed me and sensing my apprehension at the journey ahead held my face and said, "You're going to your country, safe travels". She was not wrong. As I sat in the taxi and drove off towards North Tehran, I felt wholly at home. The foothills of the Alborz mountains were laced with snow, but there was a warmth in Tehran I could not have imagined.

A man on the road held out two pomegranates in his palms, one was sliced open. He shouted out the price for a piece of fruit. Cars slowed down to bargain with the pomegranate seller and I looked at my taxi driver, trying to find a common language in which to ask why this man was selling only what he could hold in his hand. The taxi driver nodded his head and pointed a few feet ahead of the pomegranate man — there were families sitting by the road, on the hoods of their cars, eating pomegranate and drinking tea. There was a truck full of the fruit parked by the picnickers. The taxi driver nodded again towards the truck, "For you?" he asked. I put my hand to my heart and shook my head, touched, "no thank you."

We drove on in silence until we passed Azadi Monument, built in 1971 to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. "Azadi" he pointed, and just as he did, a couple — a young man and woman — crossed the street holding hands and leaning against each other affectionately. "Azadi" I repeated. Freedom.

Let me say what most people must be wondering: I've been in Iran for six hours now and I have barely registered that I am wearing a Hijab. Actually, I barely am. In my overeager desire to fully ingratiate myself into Iranian society I have made myself the most covered person in this city. Women are everywhere, their hair visible save for a swath of fabric covering their ears. With every woman I saw on the streets of Tehran, looking nothing like the stereotypical image of Iranian women beloved by the Western media (oppressed, miserable, suffocating in her gender, you know the type) I promised myself I would never ever believe what I saw on CNN again. I say this quite often, CNN is a major thorn in my side, but I really mean it this time. In fact the day I arrived the front page of the Iran News had a photograph from a national fashion show held in the city. It was quite a photograph.

In the evening, a mere hour and a half after landing I met a dear family friend — Rana Amini, Iran's envoy to the World Health Organization (and also, you'll notice, a woman, and a formidable one at that) along with her husband and their friends. We drove through the busy streets of Vali Asr and I leaned forward and told her that I was slightly worried about coming to Iran at this particular time. With every passing day it seems like Washington is gearing up for another misadventure in Iran. "Attack on Iran before April?" asked the Arab Times. Maybe. Robert Gates, the US Defence Secretary, didn't hint at whether a springtime offensive would be agreeable or not but angrily insisted that America had no time for diplomatic talks with Iran, but had plenty of time for military moves in the Persian Gulf. A Patriot

missile battalion and aircraft carrier had been deployed to the Gulf because "the Iranians are acting in a very negative way" he said. Personally, I find Patriot missile battalions negative. Secretary Gates apparently does not. President Ahmadinejad, in Nicaragua on a Latin American tour, commented on the speculation with his usual flair "They well know the power of the Iranian people. I don't think they would ever dare to attack us...They won't do such a stupid thing". I needed to be further reassured.

"Do you think America will attack Iran?" I asked my hosts. "No." "NO." There was no pause. I leaned further forward, waiting to hear why not. "Our border with the United States is closer than theirs to Canada," Khale Rana said "We're surrounded by the Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey..." pause. I hated to say it, but I knew it had to be said "Pakistan" I added. My hosts nodded.

I left the thought of war as we sat down to dinner. Joined by another associate from the World Health Organization's Iran office, a young woman named Shima, we spoke of matters our countries had in common. We spoke of the brain drain that both Iran and Pakistan are obligingly familiar with. I asked Shima, who is not older than I am, why she never left Iran and never added to the mounting brain drain. "I did think about it at times," she said "but Iran for me is..." she struggled to find the right word, her fingers moving against her hands thump thump thump "it's...love". A heartbeat. "I could have gone and gotten a job abroad, but when you gain one thing you often lose another and I never wanted to lose that love". We spoke of our shared experience of disaster - the Bam earthquake ravaged Iran in 2003, two years before our own landscape tore from underneath us. I told my hosts about the amazing spirit of the Pakistani people at a time of unfathomable crisis and they nodded knowingly. "After the Bam earthquake people lined up on the streets of Tehran to donate blood, it was true solidarity". Yes, that was what I had come here to offer and to see: solidarity. I had come to be with the Iranian people — to see how they live, how they survived, and how they triumphed against many, many odds. This is the heartland. We spoke of Lebanon and how ordinary people lost their homes and their families to the banality of war. I couldn't help it, I asked again — aren't you worried? No came the resounding reply. Khale Rana, a truly generous and kind woman, told me how she had studied at Tehran University after the Revolution, how she had lived through Saddam Hussein's vicious bombings of civilian neighborhoods during the carnage of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, how she worked to promote sustainable health and development under consistent US sanctions and I felt a shiver in my spine. This was not mere survival; this was courage, the noblest kind. And it was Iranian in nature. "Why did you never leave?" I asked. Music had started playing around us. A group of five musicians, playing the Tar, the Kamonche, and the Daf a large drum- cum- tambourine made of deerskin, had taken the stage and the room swelled with that ecstatic warmth again. "I've travelled to many places, I've been to Europe, I've had the chance, but this is my country" she said. "When I go to a newsstand to buy my newspaper, those magazines and those words are mine. When I hear music like this," she gestured to the booming Tabla beat "it's mine. I grew up hearing it since I was a young girl. This is my country and I love it".

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