

## The Search for the Real Iran

Review by Sanam F. Vakil

TERENCE WARD. *Searching for Hassan: An American Family's Journey Home to Iran*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, 336 pp. \$25.00.

With President George W. Bush's first State of the Union on January 29, 2002, all hope for an immediate Iranian-American rapprochement has ended. Gestures of good will in the aftermath of September 11 and talk of collaboration in the name of regional stability have evaporated. Targeted for its opaque nuclear weapons program and sponsorship of militant Hezbollah and other anti-Israel terrorist groups, Iran is once again back on the hot list. As part of the "axis of evil," Iran is now in the same league as Iraq and North Korea. Although it boasts a democratically elected president and parliament, a vibrant

media, and an energetic reform movement, Iran is ultimately controlled by "an unelected few [who] repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom."<sup>1</sup> Any promise of reform or progress towards change is overshadowed by aggressive rhetoric from all sides. In their war on terrorism, Americans have forgotten the Iranian candlelight vigil in memory of the terrorist victims and instead only recall images of fiery clerics chanting "Death to America," as was the case during the recent twenty-third anniversary of the Revolution. Again, we find ourselves at a stalemate.

Terence Ward's *Searching for Hassan: An American Family's Journey Home to Iran* takes us to task for such political stereotyping. His personal reflections on Iran have come just in time to remind us of our common misperceptions and the realities of Iran's past, present, and future. In 1998, after an almost thirty year absence, the Ward family returned to Iran on a mission to locate their old housekeeper, cook, storyteller, wart healer, philosopher, and friend:

## Ward has done us a good service by reminding us that even “enemies” have a human face.

Hassan. Documenting his overland journey from Shiraz to Tehran, through his reflections and encounters, Ward uncovers another country—the real Iran.

In 1960, Patrick Ward, an American citizen, accepted a position as an economic advisor to the National Iranian Oil Company, moving his wife and four sons to Iran. Employing Hassan Ghasemi and his wife, Fatimeh, the Ward family came to appreciate Iran’s rich culture, legacy, and history. It is through them that Terence and his brothers learned of Iran’s Zoroastrian heritage, which is celebrated on the first day of spring, known as the Persian New Year. It is through them that they discovered the prolific prose of Persian poets like Hafez, Rumi, and Saadi. Moreover, it is because of them that they traveled the disparate terrain from the lush mountains and villages of the North to the deserts and ruins of the Persepolis and Pasargadae, grasping the magnificence of Persian history.

In their decision to return to Iran, the Wards received no dearth of warnings ranging from U.S. State Department officials who predicted possible captivity to travel experts who feared even worse. Undeterred, the Wards prepared for all obstacles from fervent anti-Americanism to the dreary funeral-like dress code and “like fashionable New Yorkers [they] packed black.” Upon arrival, the search for Hassan seemed hopeless, for all they had to go on was the vague recollection of Ghasemi’s small village, called Tudeshkt or Tadoosht. And when their driver and tour guide learned about their objective and anxiety over their search, he coun-

seled, “Don’t worry, my dear friend. Even if you don’t find him, something else will happen. In the end, you will find many Hassans along the way.”

And find him they did, but not in his small village. He had moved to Isfahan, where he tended to his garden and his new life as a chef in a hotel restaurant. Yet, in addition to finding him, the Wards encountered many Iranians who shared the same sensibilities as the Ghasemis. Surprised by the continued warmth and goodwill gestures toward Americans, the Wards were repeatedly invited into Iranian homes throughout their journey. While driving through Ardakan, President Khatami’s village, Mrs. Ward insisted on paying her respects to the president’s family. As it turned out, the president, unlike the remaining clerical order, chose to live in humble surroundings. His house was open and unguarded like that of any Iranian family.

It was through these encounters that they experienced the generosity and kindness of the Iranian people. With this glimpse inside the heart and mind of the real Iran, the Wards learned of the realities of the twenty year revolution. Iranians had fought to purge the country of the excesses of the shah, but yet again they had suffered as their liberties were repressed and opportunities vanquished. What befell them was a theocratic regime that found legitimacy in a decade long war where the loss of human life was unbridled. The aftermath of the war left economic repercussions as well. With a population that has almost doubled in the past twenty-two years, unemployment is now rampant and

inflation uncontrolled. In the lingering dust of revolutionary fervor, what remains is an agitated youth with a bleak future.

Despite this grim reality, Iranians have retained their sense of humor and purpose. As recounted by Firuz, one of the many hosts to the Ward family, "The mullahs sit on their thrones and make promises. And their families get richer. Do you know the Iranian theory of relativity? It is special. All must go to relatives.' Then he leaned over us, speaking in a sotto voce. 'You know why the mullahs dream in green? They love the dollar.'" That's why Iranians are no longer accepting the status quo. Tired of the challenge of daily life, the people are demanding change, albeit in a slow and methodical way of their own. This is worth noting as a movement undoubtedly unique in the Middle East, where coups are notoriously the quickest approach to ensuring a transfer of power and, for once, where people are experimenting within the confines of their constitution. The election of a moderate president, Mohammed Khatami, and his reform parliament, coupled with vibrant journalistic expression, is hope enough that the Iranian people are reviving their fight to achieve what went off course in 1979.

In highlighting the political realities, the Wards were also amazed by the many improvements implemented since the shah's reign. "Where are the beggars?' my mother asked. 'Where is the glaucoma, the rickets and polio? And where was the hopelessness that stripped all dignity away? Where was the despair we had seen ... when crippled children crawled up to a chauffer-driven Mercedes.'" While the mullahs have perpetuated the remnants of monarchical corruption, they also have attempted to provide basic amenities and an improved standard of living. More-

over, in dispelling his family's original misperceptions, Ward offers his own advice for future travelers, especially Americans: "Expect to suffer from excessive hospitality" and to gain weight going from "one five-star meal after another."

*In Search of Hassan*, as yet another anecdotal attempt to capture the beauty and mystery of Iran, succeeds in convincing the outsider of Iran's secret treasures. It also reveals the paradox of an anti-American regime ruling over a pro-American population. But for the connoisseur, this book sheds nothing new except Ward's rediscovery of his childhood land. Even though he includes references to scholars like Harvard's Roy Mottahadeh and Sandra Mackey, Ward reveals his scholastic knowledge of Iran as being peripheral at best. Nonetheless, he manages to grasp the splendor and largesse that survived the country's turbulent history. He writes:

Walking in the darkness, I wondered about this country's magnetism and beauty, its inner and outer faces, the duality of forces with equal weight that push and pull. These people, so long cut from the world, possessed such acute insights. They offered their humor in healthy doses and a profound friendship that will conquer any who encounter it. I thought of Hassan watering his tiny garden and wondered about his life—a simplicity of possessions, but a wealth of spirit. In the face of such civility and refinement, I felt overwhelming humility.

Published in the aftermath of September 11th, Ward has done us a good service by reminding us that even "enemies" have a human face.

**Notes:** 1 George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

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