

The Persian Expedition'

Dr Zahra Mostafavi is the daughter of the late Imam Husyan Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. She is probably one of the most influential women in Iran. She is also the Secretary General of the International Union of NGO's Defending Palestinian Rights.



In October 2007, she invited me to give a series of lectures on the impact of Christian Zionism on the Middle East. The tour was arranged and facilitated by Dr Javad Shabarf of the NEDA Institute for Scientific Research in Tehran.

The purpose of the visit was three-fold:

1. to give a series of lectures in Iranian universities highlighting the destructive impact of Christian Zionism on the Middle East peace process.
2. to explain how Christian Zionism represents a departure from orthodox Christian teaching and why it has been repudiated by the historic denominations.
3. to strengthen the faith communities in Iran who share a common commitment to justice, peace and reconciliation in the Middle East.

The tour included lectures in eight universities and theological institutions in five cities, together with several TV, radio and newspaper interviews. The visit culminated in meetings with Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of Imam Khomeini, with Dr Zahra Mostafavi, with several heads of the churches in Iran and also members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.

Friday 19th October: Heathrow



The visit begins, as it so often does with a spiritual lesson in patience. Its early evening and Heathrow's Terminal 4 has never seemed so busy. Is everyone leaving Britain today? The interminable file of aspiring travellers, snaking back and forth in row after row, is exacerbated by those queue-jumping because their flights are imminent. Like many others, ours is also delayed, in our case, by an hour. The flight to Tehran is completely full and cramped. British Mediterranean Airways, a subsidiary of BA, is about to become part of BMI. The only film on offer, Evan Almighty, based on a modern adaptation of the story of Noah's Ark, seems an appropriate one to show as we fly over Mount Ararat, near the border of Turkey and Iran.

Saturday 20th October: Tehran

The sun is rising. As we land in the first Islamic Republic in the world, all the women, including the BA crew, begin to cover their heads with a colourful display of shawls, scarves and hijabs. In the men's toilet at Tehran airport, I swap my casual shirt for a clerical shirt, to freshen up and make life easier, negotiating customs and passport control.

However, taking a right instead of a left turn out of the toilets, without realising it, I found myself in a queue for a flight to Frankfurt. I manage to get all the way through the terminal gate, before an astute attendant guides me back through the flow of passengers to the arrivals hall. The X-ray machine at the end of the green customs channel reveals the contents of my over-full suitcase. My answer to the question, "What have you got in here?" necessitates a detour back through the red channel where several security staff examine my payload of Christian literature, books, CD's and DVD's I have brought at the request of my tour

organisers. The invitation letter from Dr Mostafavi helps convince them that my primary objective is not to plant a new church. The books, CDs and DVDs are left behind in the safe hands of the Office of Cultural and Religious Affairs to be inspected and vetted. Dr Sharbaf, who is there to meet me, quietly intercedes on my behalf with the officials. Dropping the name of Dr Mostafavi helps. One customs official even offers to translate my material into Farsi. My material is returned later in the day.



My guide, host and driver for the week is Dr Ali Tavakoli. Now retired, he is a former Iranian diplomat and ambassador to Mozambique, Tanzania, Somalia and Zanzibar. His English is good but it takes me a while to pronounce his name. I am impressed that he has done his homework. He knows my age (he is two years older) and recites details of my family, books and ministry. The drive from the airport to Tehran is an unforgettable experience and even beats Thorpe Park for the thrill factor. The only rule of the road, it seems, is give way to anything bigger than your own car, but without a hint of cowardice. Perhaps that is why some motorcycles are fitted with air horns as used on articulated lorries. Pedestrians weave in between cars nonchalantly, crossing the road through gaps in the moving vehicles. Pedestrian crossings are everywhere but it seems invisible to motorists. Showing fear is not an option. Traffic lights display a large numerical countdown like those used in a Formula 1 Grand Prix. They seem to have the same effect.



My room on the twelve floor of the friendly Howeyzeh Hotel, in Taleghani Avenue, is clean and comfortable. It is just above the haze of pollution blanketing the city, glistening like snow in the early morning light. The hotel lift plays 'Bright Eyes' by Paul Simon. If only. After a few hours rest and a shower, I am taken to meet the staff of the NEDA Institute where giant floor to ceiling maps of Israel and Palestine adorn every wall. Many are from B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation. They include giant street maps of Jaffa and Jerusalem. The NEDA Institute clearly takes the study of Israel and Zionism seriously. After lunch, I have an interview with journalists from an Armenian newspaper and radio station keen to promote my visit.



Sunday 21st October: Tehran



Today has been set aside for me to meet representatives of the Christian communities in Tehran. Dr Tavakoli and I attend a morning service of the Armenian Orthodox church. It is Bible Sunday and Sebouh Sarkissian, the Armenian Archbishop is preaching on 2 Timothy 3:16. After the formal communion, unleavened bread is distributed around the church so that all can share in the agape meal. A nice idea to show inclusivity. Encouragingly, there are many young Iranian Armenian students present. Bootlegged Armenian books and music are on sale in the church courtyard. After the service we meet Archbishop Sarkissian, who studied in Birmingham, and learn about the Armenian minority in Iran. In the afternoon we are also taken to meet the Bishop of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, Domara Benjamin. He shares with

us that he is going to Rome the next week to speak with the Pope about his recent statements about Islam. Relationships within the faith communities, he says, are good.

I have been invited to preach at the Anglican Church in Tehran this evening. The challenge is to find it. I teach on the Parable of the 'Good' Samaritan. It seems appropriate. Supper is at the Armenian Club, a popular venue for diplomats and embassy staff, as it is the only place in Tehran serving alcohol - legally. The Armenian Bishop joins us. He is relaxed, gentle and protective. It seems as if he knows everyone. And 'no', I don't imbibe. I stay up to 2:00am. My internal clock is still adjusting to the time zone change - we are two and an unusual half hour ahead of the UK.



Monday 22nd October: Tehran

This morning I give my first lecture – to the students of the theological faculty of Tehran University and then meet Dr Zahra Mostafavi. The students have lots of questions and want to dialogue long after its time to leave. There is also a interview for a TV programme. Lunch is at a traditional Iranian restaurant where we sit on a raised floor to eat. In the afternoon there is a press conference at the Iranian News Service with around 20 journalists and reporters from Iranian TV and radio stations and newspapers. They grill me for about two hours. It is exhilarating.

In the evening the second lecture is at the Imam Sadeq University.

This institution specialises in training civil servants, government officials and diplomats. Many of the questions revolve around views about the films, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Passion* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I recommend the film, *Jesus* as more trustworthy. Finding supper so late proves challenging but we settle on a fast food outlet in a quiet side street. The day is not over. There is one more TV programme to make – live – at midnight for



IRIB, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. I keep going with several cups of sweet coffee and we are back at the hotel about 1:30am. The longest day of the tour has already begun

Tuesday 23rd October: Tehran – Mashhad - Isfahan

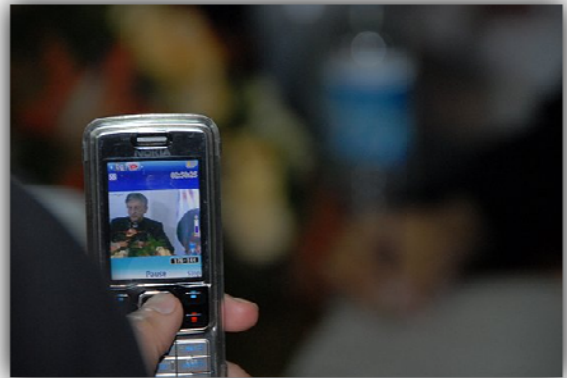
Although it is 1:30am, it is time to pack, shower and catch a couple of hours sleep, ready to leave at 4:30am. The hotel doorman takes pity on me as I wait in the lobby for the ride to the airport and brings me a cup of sweet tea and cake. The flight, on

an aging Russian Tupolov 154, to Mashhad, near the Afghan and Russian borders leaves at 7:00am. We arrive at 8:30am and have breakfast at a plush hotel near the airport. As we will be flying out the same day to Isfahan, our luggage stays in the car. The next stop is the new IRIB studio in Mashhad for a TV programme. Then we drive to Ferdowsi University. The auditorium is packed for the lecture – over 400 students with young men on one side of the auditorium and women on the other. I am a little nervous. They have billed me as an Archbishop. The question time is lively and animated and goes on longer than the lecture. The pile of unanswered questions is about three inches thick. The smiling faces of the faculty show they are pleased with my presentation. Lunch is with the faculty in a roof top restaurant.

In the afternoon we visit the Free Islamic University of Mashhad. 'Free' means fee paying (as in Public School) and they are more animated, debating and remonstrating with my translator as well as expressing strong opinions about the Middle East peace process in the Q&A that follows. Getting away after the lecture is hard. Students gather round



asking me to write a sentence or proverb in their books or on paper to encourage them. I am reminded of their spiritual needs and thirst for the truth. My hand aches from writing notes of encouragement from the scriptures. I am whisked into a side room for another impromptu press conference with local news media.



It is 6:00pm and time to get back to the airport for the 7:30pm flight to Isfahan on the other side of the country. I sleep. It is dark by the time we arrive but we manage a tour of the cities highlights including the famous 16th century Allah Verdi Khan Bridge and the giant 17th century bazaar, the Madarshah caravanserai. Stunning - even if I do feel brain dead. We witness the final whistle of the Iranian win in the latest round of the Asia Cup. The town erupts in noisy celebrations. We make it to the Isfahan University student hotel before I lose consciousness.

Wednesday 24th October: Shahreza - Isfahan

This morning we travel in glorious sunshine through the stunning hills around Isfahan, southwest to the city of Shahreza for a lecture at the Free Islamic University. As always, we meet first for refreshments with the senior faculty and university president. The students themselves are enthusiastic to learn and question me afterwards. After lunch on the floor of a caravansari, we drive back to Isfahan for an afternoon lecture in the university. There must be 300 or more present. My translator is good and I am getting used to my material. Afterwards we meet with members of the university medical faculty for a separate



discussion. In the evening we do a little sightseeing around Isfahan and dine in a traditional restaurant, once again, reclining on a raised floor. I try out a Persian dish, made of potatoes, vegetables and lamb stew served in an earthenware pot. With the help of a plunger, the food is crushed and then scooped up with bread. Maybe I am tired or it is the fresh yogurt but later that night, something does not agree with me...

Thursday 25th October: Isfahan – Qom – Tehran

Today we must drive 370 kilometres north, back to Tehran via Qom. The journey takes us through the rugged hills and desert of western Iran. With a sensitive tummy and service stations about every 100 kilometers, it is fast becoming a memorable journey. The new motorway, the stunning mountain scenery, the derelict ancient caravansarii and the vast salt flats keep me distracted. Playing cat and mouse with police speed camera units also provides some entertainment.



Qom is considered a holy city and the largest centre for Shia scholarship in the world. We visit the Centre for Religious Studies and meet the team of scholars who are translating my book into Farsi. We discuss the differences between Judaism and Christianity and Judaism and Zionism. It leads to a fruitful; discussion on core Christian beliefs. They show me their extensive library of Christian, Jewish and Muslim literature.



Back in Tehran, the sun is setting as we visit the vast shrine of the late Imam Husyan Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is still under construction. After attending a service in the Mosque we meet privately with his grandson, Seyyed Hassan Khomeini. He is keen to discuss the impact of Christian Zionism on the Middle East, and how we can advance the peace process.



Friday 26th October : Tehran

A whole morning to sleep, relax and pack. Luxury. Lunch is with the relatives of friends in America who runs an art gallery in her home. The paintings are Armenian and Persian. They are inspiring. In the evening there is a final meal with our host, Dr Zahra Mostafavi, who is keen to sponsor a Hebrew translation of my book. The Armenian Archbishop

and several members of the Iranian Consultative Assembly are invited for supper. And there is one final interview with PresTV. Then its home to pack and sleep for a few hours.

Saturday 27th October : Tehran – London

Awakened by the alarm at 4:30am, we leave the hotel about 5:30am for the flight home leaving at 8:00am. Tehran airport is civilised compared to Heathrow, although the security checks are less rigorous. The plane is full once again but I am past caring. I sleep most of the way home and dream of the next Persian Expedition...

Stephen Sizer

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ⁱ With apologies to Xenophon