



The Portable Roya

A Selection of Favorite Essays & Articles

December 2014

Dear Friends,

It has been a hope of mine for some time to compile a “portable Roya,” a selection of some of my favorite pieces of writing gathered together in a single place. Enclosed, please find the pieces that gave me joy—and, occasionally, heartache—to write, but which give me even greater pleasure to share.

Yours,

“Christopher Hitchens Eulogized by Roya Hakakian,” *The Daily Beast*

December 16, 2011

Even from the tributes of his most ardent admirers whose numbers are lately multiplying, the trace of the Christopher I’ve briefly known is faint. The debater, thinker, charmer, weaver of luminous sentences, though impressive in their own right, strike me as peripheral. Only those who have been persecuted or fallen victim to tyranny know the rare virtue that was the elemental dust of his make up. Only one belonging to a forsaken people or a forgotten cause can know the value of her flag pinned to his highly-visible lapel. He may have been born in England, but the blood that flowed in his veins was Third World blood. The depth of his kinship with the suffering of those with whom he has nothing in common can’t be otherwise explained. He lived in Washington, but his moral time zone was set to Evil Standard Time. Like those from that zone, he operated according to the urgency that dictatorships instill in their subjects. He understood that to be leisurely is to forsake possibilities, even lives. That to be consequential is a question of now or never. I never knew him to take his time, squander words to be merely decorous. He loved or loathed immediately, and he did both as voraciously as he smoked, spoke and drank.

His investment in the opinions that he so elegantly articulated never superseded the austere truth. One never had to brace oneself with Christopher for an onslaught of the quintessentially journalese questions—how can you be certain that Ahmadinejad really won the elections? Christopher had the same visceral access to the a priori of the native, the dissidents. For other columnists writing about Iran, I’ve been a “source.” For Christopher, I was, at best and only at times, a conveyor belt of sorts supplying a few translations of Persian lines or terms to be consumed by his inexhaustible machinery. The intensity of his passion against the theocrats in Tehran is only matched by the expatriates who have fled the grip of the Revolutionary Guards. In one e-mail, I forwarded to him the name of a columnist whose writings had sympathetic undertones toward the regime. In response, he wrote that the name already existed in an especially designated file marked FIRI: Friends of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In an email last week, en route to address a Washington crowd about Iran, I wrote him that in preparation for my talk, I’d reached deep inside to unleash the Hitch within. He wrote in return, “I think the hour is a good one and the Pasdaran filth have overplayed their hand. We will meet at their funerals.”

Having lived in a theocracy, I learned long ago, that with His frighteningly capricious ways, their God, as Christopher declared a few years

“What Two Enemies Share,” The New York Times

February 25, 2012

“IF a war were to break out between Iran and Israel, whose side would you be on?” someone asked me on Facebook a few weeks ago, when an Israeli strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities was reportedly imminent.

From early adolescence, at the start of Iran’s 1979 revolution, my loyalties have so often been questioned that I’ve come to think of such suspicions as my Iranian-Jewish inheritance.

In the early 1980s in Tehran, a small group of socialist intellectuals who clandestinely gathered in an apartment every Thursday evening let me into their circle. Those were dangerous years. The government was new to power and violently insecure. Opposition groups were under assault. A war was raging with Iraq, and the United States had imposed sanctions. Our days were spent in queues, as the most basic staples were rationed.

Every member of the group was assigned to follow one of these pressing issues. I, however, was to give weekly updates on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though much younger than the rest, I knew exactly what kind of sympathies I was expected to express. The land had to be returned to the Palestinians, I would declare at the conclusion of each summary. I never mentioned that among the Jews living on that land were my penniless relatives who moved to Israel from Iran after their home and store were torched by an angry mob during the mayhem that preceded the revolution.

Silence and submissiveness were and are the cornerstones of the character of the Iranian Jew. We walked past and away from confrontation. We burrowed in oblivion while living alongside Muslim friends and neighbors. Security and success came to those who blended in best, to those who did not allow any part of their Jewish identity to bleed into the Iranian.

Today, it’s that oblivion that threatens to engulf both peoples. No two nations have ever been so deeply shaped by each other and yet so unaware of their debt to each other.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Iran was racked by the lawlessness and tribalism that were endemic to the region. By about midcentury, under Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran had an army and an effective central government, which

made subsequent industrialization possible. The credit for a surprising amount of that industrialization goes to the efforts of leading Iranian Jews.

Among them were the Nazarian brothers, who left Iran for Israel in the late 1940s, fought in Israel's 1948 war of independence, went on to work in construction and, when they had mastered those skills, committed the unthinkable: they returned to their birthplace to begin building there. They became manufacturers of loaders, dumpers, cranes and cement mixers, and made these modern tools of urbanization available and affordable for the first time in Iran. The city of Isfahan, one of Iran's greatest tourist destinations, whose proverbial grandeur equals "half the world," became so only when the brothers, in collaboration with top Israeli engineers, built its underground sewer system and rid the city of disease and noxious air.

Another group of brothers, the Elghanians, erected high-rise buildings and highways that inoculated the country against tribal isolation. They also founded Iran's first advanced plastic factory, which paved the way for other socioeconomic and scientific advances.

But soon after the fall of the shah, the chief of the Revolutionary Courts, Sadegh Khalkhali, executed hundreds of democratic-minded youths who had turned against the new regime. He also executed one Elghanian brother, Habib, on the charges of sowing "corruption on earth" and "espionage for Israel." Mr. Elghanian's execution set fire to the Jewish community. Many of Iran's 100,000 Jews fled, mostly for Israel or the United States, and today only around 20,000 remain.

Just as the majority of Iranians are unaware of this history, so too are Jews unaware of the contributions of Iranians to Jewish survival. All too often, I've witnessed American Jews' look of surprise when, upon meeting me, they learn of the existence of Jews in Iran for the first time, despite the fact that Iran still remains the largest home to Jews in the Middle East outside of Turkey and Israel.

As early as the sixth century B.C., Jews, exiled in Babylonia, found a savior in Persia's Cyrus the Great, who helped them return to Israel. In the early 1940s, Iran became a refuge to Jews, who were this time fleeing Hitler's army. Thousands owed their lives to the valorous conduct of Abdol-Hossein Sardari, the head of Iran's diplomatic mission in France, who defied Nazi orders by issuing thousands of passports and travel documents to Jews. Even when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was in top Holocaust-denying form, the descendants of the Polish survivors who chose to settle in Iran were laying flowers upon the graves of their loved ones in what's known as the Polish Cemetery in Tehran.

Would the two nations allow their rulers to begin a war if they were aware of their depth of indebtedness to each other? By bombing Iran, Israel would be bombing a portion of Jewish history. If that happens, which side I would choose will not be a question. I will be twice destroyed by the two

“The Ayatollah’s Disarming Wit,” The New York Times
January 13, 2014

Every tourist who visits Iran has three common observations: The women are stunning, the traffic is maddening, and, after oil, humor is the major industry.

On the streets and in taxicabs, political jokes abound. No one, especially the leadership, is spared, and no perspective is more telling or reliable than the anonymous satirist’s. A popular joke during the last presidential election invited Syrians also to vote: “After all, our president will be your finance minister, too!”

Even Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose dour and scowling face is what many associate with the Islamic Revolution, was said to be a connoisseur of satire. In a recent interview with the website Jamaran, one of Ayatollah Khomeini’s close confidants, Mahmoud Doayee, revealed that the leader demanded to hear the jokes about him, even laughing heartily at times. To him, they were the sociocultural weather vane of all that needed “correcting,” which at times meant “eliminating.”

Long before there was a fatwa against the British novelist Salman Rushdie, there was an official death threat against Iran’s best-known satirist, Hadi Khorsandi, who had allegedly insulted Muhammad. Mr. Khorsandi, who fled Iran in 1980 and resettled in Britain, told of the day the police in London called to warn of a plot against him: “Their best advice was to never be on time for any appointments! I laughed and said, ‘A half-hour delay is in the makeup of the Iranian character.’ The detective sighed and said, ‘Then God help you, because your killers are Iranian, too!’”

As early as the mid-1970s, the ayatollah began to methodically undermine the regime of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi by following the advice of the philosopher Jean Paul, who said, “Freedom begets wit, and wit begets freedom.” He first set out to weaken the shah with words before actually driving him from the palace in January 1979.

The shah had been the muse of the poets, but his impeccable wardrobe and fine manners provided little material for the satirists. Irreverence was the ayatollah’s main weapon in his war against elitism.

Ayatollah Khomeini never referred to the shah by his royal titles, addressing him by his first name, or worse yet, as “little man.” Soon, the nation ceased to call

the shah “the king of kings,” or “the shadow of God on earth.” In revolutionary slogans, the shah was reduced to “Mohammed the nose,” a reference that shattered the sanctity of the royal family.

The monarchy had symbolized civility and beauty, but the new theocratic order embraced all that was drab as a way to honor the masses. The ayatollah banned music and chess and relegated contemporary art to storage. He stated the same trite ideas so many times that he inspired a new genre of jokes — lampooning the obvious passed off as pearls of wisdom — that found its way into Iran’s graffiti: “A minibus is smaller than a bus! — Ayatollah Khomeini.”

While, at one time, the shah had placed himself a class above the rest and was deemed “the other,” the clerics remain in power in part because they are deemed the nation’s “errant children,” whom, as a visiting friend once said to me, “one can’t disown.” The common touch of the revolutionary regime, its ability to appear good-humored and down to earth, is one secret of its survival.

Former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a lifelong Shiite seminarian, has been ranked among the richest people in Iran. Yet Iranians’ reaction to his mysteriously amassed wealth is only occasionally one of outrage. Instead, they joke about Mr. Rafsanjani’s hairlessness, a sign of femininity, calling him “the shark” — by way of alluding to his sleek pate. Had he not punctuated every speech and interview with an anecdote or a joke, as well as wearing a robe and turban, it is unlikely that Iranians would have been so tolerant.

Other leaders, to prove and maintain “revolutionary” credentials, have acted like fools publicly. In 1980, Iran’s representative at the United Nations took his sock and shoe off during a speech to the assembly. And former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s declaration that a 16-year-old girl had invented the atomic bomb in her basement inspired this line: “The plan to issue a stamp to honor Ahmadinejad has been canceled because no one knows which side of the stamp to spit on!”

When asking why Iranians tolerate a regime more brutal than the one they overthrew in 1979, humor may explain a great deal. Tyrants need to dress, behave and speak in tyrannical ways to inspire a rebellion. It’s possible to feel heroic when opposing an evil regime headed by a self-serious monarch, but not so easy to do so when confronted by one run by a band of clowns.

“A Cappuccino With the C.I.A.,” The New York Times

March 25, 2014

The invitation came in an email, written in the ingratiating tone of the Nigerian prince looking to wire his millions into my checking account, and delivered the same jolt of giddy disbelief: Officers of the Near East Affinity Group at the Central Intelligence Agency wanted me to address them on a variety of topics, including Persian poetry and literature. My day with them would be as long or as short as I wished it to be, and could include a tour of the C.I.A. museum, a luncheon and a visit to the gift shop.

This detail made it clear the email was not spam: “Due to the budget constraints we are unable to pay a speaker’s fee, however we can reimburse the cost of travel, lodging and meals.”

For some 17 years, I’d been an editor for a Persian magazine whose chief was accused by Tehran of running it with \$20 million from the C.I.A. Now the agency had truly come knocking, but destitute; and the Persian magazine had gone under 10 years earlier.

To be a guest at the very place I had been taught to revile as a teenager in post-revolutionary Iran, to walk the halls of the universally feared agency seemed revolutionary indeed. I accepted the invitation.

In the hotel lobby on the morning of the talk, I anticipated that a Pierce Brosnan type would materialize out of thin air. Instead, some minutes passed before I spotted a round, flustered, middle-aged man, bearing an uncanny resemblance to my balding beloved uncle, pacing at the entrance. We shook hands and walked to the most unremarkable beige sedan on the lot, one that opened with a key. I glanced at the tight row of teddy bears in the back seat and wondered what had become of the Aston Martin.

In the heavy beltway traffic, as my avuncular companion regaled me with tales of his childhood in New York, then his marriage to a brilliant scientist, we quickly developed a warm rapport. His easy nature struck me as being unsuited for the business of secrecy and intrigue. But I quickly realized that the spy of my imagination was very different from the one before me.

At the gates, I was received as bureaucracies always receive — with official befuddlement. Several weeks of planning and yet my name did not appear on the roster of the day’s visitors. Getting in required several minutes and the surrender of all of my electronics: cellphone, iPad and the laptop on which I had saved my talking points.

After we stepped across the famous seal, my host offered me coffee before the talk. As he ushered me through the lobby, the sight of the familiar Starbucks sign momentarily stunned me. While we hovered at the bar, chatting amid the gurgle of frothing milk, folks were queuing up at other fast-food places; the headquarters at Langley reminded me of a suburban mall.

The officers had come with books in hand and behaved as all enthusiastic audiences do — smiling sympathetically, full of questions and compliments, quoting my own sentences back to me, meticulously spelling their names while I autographed copies of my books. A few native Iranians among them came to greet me, but then parted without extending the usual invitations for a future meal or to stay in touch.

As I read my prose aloud, laughter burst forth on cue and tears glistened in the eyes of the agents, most of whom were in their late 20s and 30s. They were genuinely curious and asked about what had happened to the characters since my books were published. But the usual hard questions — about Iran’s nuclear ambitions and the possibility of war — never came. We never drifted into the dark thicket that conversations about Iran always seem to lead to. I did my best to offer a portrait of the “other”: that Iranians resembled them and aspired to the same things in life they did.

In our third and final hour, the Persian speakers, fluent and not-so-fluent, reached into their pockets and unfolded papers on which they had painstakingly copied some verses. We did our best to extract what intelligence we could from their metaphors and similes.

It occurred to me that I had never asked my host how or why he had come upon me. “Google!” he exclaimed. “We had heard an earful from too many men on the same exhausted topics. I went looking for something completely different than the usual.”

As I said goodbye, the usual exchange of the business cards did not take place. My host, the likable anti-Bond, offered all his contact information. He left ample time for a stop at the gift shop, where, from the heaps of agency memorabilia, I bought a set of salt and pepper shakers from the sale shelf.

Months have passed since that purchase, and the set reminds me of the day that I met the great and powerful Oz of my adolescence and had a glimpse of his human face.

“The Feast and Famine of Iran Coverage in U.S. Media,” Huffington Post
July 19, 2009

For the past twenty-five years, I have lived in America, first as a reluctant transplanted Iranian always looking pastward, and later, as an exile reconciled with the chronic condition that exile always brings -- most notably an arthritic heart. In the first half of my stay, I was astounded by the leanness of the news coverage of Iran which was biblically vast. In the second half, beginning in 1997, I was grieving the bounty -- so skewed, so dilettantish -- that I prayed for the lean years to return. These cycles of ebb and flow resembled the spikes and dips of a feverish fit far more than the evenness that good reporting demands. Thus rendering the coverage of Iran in American media as consistently flawed.

From the dark hole of newslessness of the 1980s and early 1990s emerged a smiling, "reformist cleric" who commanded the headlines. Whereas Iran's love affair with President Khatami which began in 1997 had ended by 1999 when he failed to join the students who had taken to the streets in support of his agenda, that of the American journalists continued well into Khatami's second term. The essence of most of the news coverage of that era was far less about Iran than it was about the observers' lack of familiarity with that country and its people. Over and over again, the stories tended to be self-centered pronouncements about the Iranians' love of all things American or the Iranian urbanites' penchant for all things western. The surprise of finding teenage Iranians swinging their hips to the tunes of Madonna, consuming alcohol, dreaming of fast cars, and hosting secret house parties revealed the unpreparedness with which these reporters had gone about taking on a highly sophisticated nation with an ancient history of coping with dictators.

Khatami's rise, his amiable manners and surprising panache, gave many among the American intelligentsia the perfect opportunity for the kind of introspection into the CIA's sins of 1953 that was long over due. But as it was coming fifty years too late, it served mostly as a necessary exercise in self-absolution and a diplomatic opportunity for rapprochement. But it was hardly the manifestation of the urgent needs of Iran's majority who were not even born when those sins had occurred. Little was reported in the Khatami years about what the regime wished to keep obscure: The women's struggle for equal rights, the plight of the religious and ethnic minorities, the labor strikes, the arrest and disappearance of scores of Bahai's, the regime's assassination campaign against the opposition around the world, the rampant corruption among the officialdom, or the deep mafia-like way by which several leading clerics were running Iran's economy -- something that is at the heart of the fissures within the leadership today.

This skewed coverage is the reason why American readers were so flummoxed by the results of Iran's 2004 presidential elections and the sudden emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Instead of searching for flaws within, pundits began to blame Iran for being enigmatic. But this enigma, like most others, was only the product of flawed insight. The Bush years did not help. Any multifaceted assessment of Iran that included an account of the regime's mismanagement or mistreatment of its citizens was taunted as an invitation to another military occupation.

Those of us who follow Iran closely detected a direct correlation between lack of reporting on the state of the activists and minorities and the number of executions and detentions. What Iran's rulers may or may not do with the nuclear bomb in the future remains to be seen. But the coverage of Iran's nuclear development cast such a shadow over all other events in Iran that the phantom bomb has already devastated the lives of hundreds of activists who either perished or are languishing in obscurity in prisons. Iran's chief pyromaniac, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, knows well how to ignite the headlines. His proposed Holocaust cartoon exhibit generated thousands of reports about his intentions. But when the exhibit began and its halls went unfrequented, it was barely reported. His arsonous rhetoric against Israel so blinded the attentions in its blaze that no one could see the valiant journalists and intellectuals who were arrested for criticizing him for diverting much needed funds at home to Hamas and Hezbollah.

Was it macho adventurism that attracted so many to cover the nuclear issue at the expense of all else? Or was it self-centrism at work once more? Or were they all victims of the misconception that covering the invisible side of Iran was of no value to westerners audiences? Committing to continuously watching the state of human rights in Iran is not simply an exercise in altruism Americans must embrace against their own interests. It is the only way to learn the full spectrum of the behavior of a system which is detrimental to the global peace. It is the only way a sound policy can be forged.

Today, once again, Iran is receiving another bounty of coverage. But this column is to remind all those who are covering Iran now that if they partake in the feast, they must be there for the famine that is sure to follow. Green is not the last color to symbolize the quest of Iranians, and Mousavi, the true winner of the 2009 elections, is merely an incidental figure on the road of the nation's thirty-year struggle for freedom and equal rights.

It is also to remind fellow expatriates that it is not enough to explain to Americans that Ahmadinejad and his band of thugs do not represent Iran and Iranians. They must believe that fact themselves and remember that a nation's dignity does not only stem from the glories of its past, but also from the undaunted way it goes about ridding itself of those who deface that past.

“What Ben Affleck’s ‘Argo’ Misses About Iran,” Daily Beast

October 27, 2012

You have to watch *Argo* in the South as I did, in Burke County, N.C. to be exact, to feel that revisiting the hostage crisis between Iran and the United States still touches a raw nerve. Here, people came to let an old, still-nagging wound soak in cinematic brine. The film’s sharp and witty lines landed in this theatre like hail on plush carpeting. There was no sound of laughter. My fellow matinee viewers had hardly recovered from the humiliation of Vietnam when the assault on the U.S. embassy, and the parade of the helpless blindfolded American diplomats, had come. Thirty-some years later, the takeover is still a trauma of very high and personal order.

But you have to have been a witness to that history to appreciate the farcical beat at the heart of it all. Even as John Goodman and Alan Arkin’s bubbling comedic chemistry offered plenty of opportunities for guiltless laughs—those originating from cynical, self-deprecating insights—the truth, the actual history as it had occurred, was far more outrageous. A former hostage had once recalled to me that the Kalashnikov-wielding, radical Islamist teenager in charge of guarding him in solitary confinement had nearly begged him, “When you get out of here, can you help me get a visa to the US?”

I had been among the angry fist-throwing mob in front of the embassy enough times to know that the answer to the question Goodman and Arkin contemplated as they watched the footage of the demonstrations—“Is this all for the cameras?”—was, for the most part, yes. Feverish dramas of such magnitude and intensity are impossible to sustain for long. People eventually sweated and deserted the embassy gates. The crowds who showed up long after the excitement had ebbed were not driven there by ideology. For school-averse fledgling teenagers such as myself demonstrating before the US embassy was a legitimate excuse to miss math or skip an exam—the greatest snow day in the history of elementary education.

Mature humor is one of the qualities of *Argo*. The other is the cool-headedness by which the protagonist, the heroic CIA officer played by Ben Affleck, acted and the narrative unfolded. The tale begins at the climactic moment of the take-over, and somehow the suspense keeps on rising with every passing sequence. Even though the audience knows that all the hostages, including the six who are the focus of *Argo*, all return to the U.S. safely, the film’s thrilling quality and the viewer’s quickened pulse, do not lessen.

Yet *Argo* does not land in the canon of all-time classic political or liberation struggle genre in which the likes of *Z* or the *Missing* belong. In the best of that genre, the audience roots for the American hero while having fallen in love with the

cause which took that American to the troubled spot in the first place. A handful of the former hostages have told me that the devastation they still feel is from knowing that their captivity led to the American hatred toward a nation and a culture that they, despite their suffering, continue to love.

The enduring story that Americans have yet to learn is of the role that the Iran hostage crisis has played in guaranteeing the survival of Iran's theocrats.

What gets in the way of *Argo* reaching classic status is the flawed historical premise of the opening sequence, which aims to somehow justify the origins of the brutality that later unfolds. That flaw isn't a misperception unique to filmmakers in Hollywood but policymakers in Washington, too. The voice of the female-narrator booms: "In 1950 the people of Iran elected Mohammad Mossaddegh, a secular democrat, as prime minister. He nationalized British and U.S. petroleum holdings, returning Iran's oil to its people. But in 1953 the U.S. and Great Britain engineered a *coup d'état* that deposed Mossaddegh and installed Fazlollah Zahedi as Shah ... Dying of cancer, the Shah was given asylum in the U.S. The Iranian people took to the streets outside the U.S. embassy demanding that the Shah be returned, tried and hanged."

But in truth, under the monarchy, the people did not elect their prime minister. Rather, it was the Shah who appointed the prime minister based on the recommendation of the parliament, or Majles. The US had no petroleum holdings in Iran at the time. And the infamous coup that has been attributed to the CIA only succeeded because a few prominent Shiite clerics—precursors of Ayatollah Khomeini—lent their guidance and support to it. Lastly, the "revolutionaries" didn't need the Shah to be admitted to the US to seize the embassy, for they had already done so twice prior to the final takeover. Nonetheless, the misguided account, meant to legitimize Tehran's wrath toward Uncle Sam, perfectly suited the myopic, guilt-ridden American psyche which has readily embraced it.

The enduring story that Americans have yet to learn is of the purpose the short-term captivity of their hostages served in guaranteeing the long-term survival of Iran's theocrats. It was in protesting the take-over of the embassy that the moderate interim post-revolutionary government resigned. Once the shredded documents were pieced together again, several moderate members of that very government were falsely accused of espionage for the US, and in the case of its spokesman, Abbas Amir-Entezam, imprisoned for twenty years. While the world's eyes were fixed to the chained embassy gates, the hardline radicals solidified their hold on power and annihilated their opposition. 444 days later, the captivity of the US hostages ended. But that of a nation still continues.

“The Verdict That Shook Iran and Europe,” Reuters

September 25, 2012

They say a good news story is like an onion. The more one peels it, the newer and fresher are the layers that surface. If depth and longevity are the gold standards for a news story, then the assassinations of four Iranian opposition members at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin in September 1992 surpasses that standard. That story is more like a cluster bomb: 20 years later, it continues to explode. The verdict that was issued in Germany five years after the killings, and the subsequent decision by the European Union to cut ties with Tehran in 1997, achieved what perpetual threats of war have not.

What was the achievement? To a multitude of Iranian exiles, first and foremost, it was the bestowing of an elemental human gift – safety. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini’s henchmen were methodically killing a list of 500 dissidents – artists, writers, intellectuals and opposition members – against whom the Ayatollah had issued fatwas. These “anointed” individuals were not safe whether they were in Washington, Rome, Paris or Geneva.

As European governments turned a blind eye, the assassins crossed border after border and accomplished their diabolical missions one after another. With dozens dead, a generation of patriotic and brilliant future leaders was lost. Until the Berlin court’s 1997 verdict, which implicated Tehran’s top leadership in masterminding the killings, the luxury of European Union safety belonged only to its native citizens.

What followed safety was dignity. Disaffected Iranian immigrants, who in Germany and elsewhere in Europe had forever felt dispensable and invisible, were empowered by the court’s nod of acknowledgement. They were able to step out of the shadows, and many invested in notions of citizenship and civil participation in their adopted communities. They were far more inclined to fully stop at the red light when the protection of the law extended to them in their adopted lands.

Western policymakers and non-governmental organizations have spent millions of dollars in efforts to circumvent Tehran and fund individuals and NGOs inside Iran to cultivate a democratic movement there. But most of these convoluted and ultimately questionable attempts never accomplished what the Mykonos trial did in its elegant simplicity.

The Mykonos case gave its spectators a glimpse of how real democracy works. Among the audience members at the trial were former Iranian political

prisoners whose own trials, which had banished them to years of incarceration, had begun and ended within an hour. Their lives and dreams of an ideal society had been transformed by three and a half years of spectatorship. These dreams of an ideal society were given voice by attorney Otto Schily, later Germany's interior minister from 1998 to 2005, who, in his closing remarks to the court, said: "For much too long, European governments have watched Iran's violent behavior. A regime that touts terror and even commands it must not be the recipient of our loans or red carpet receptions." Schily had hoped the judges would realize that "we all have a shared duty. All of us – citizens, men and women, and even those who are our guests – must live in safety and without fear." The judges ruled that the Iranian government was responsible for the 1992 murders in Berlin.

We can see how effective the Mykonos verdict was simply by looking at Tehran's treatment of it. A regime that never fails to boast (it annually marks the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy with great fanfare and has printed portraits of terrorists, such as the assassin of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, on postal stamps) has kept mum about the Mykonos case. When Tehran's spin doctors saw that they could not spin this one, they did their best to bury it altogether. But they did not fail to register its magnitude.

The laws of political survival dictated that Tehran's leaders retool and recast their message and image. After all, 1997 was an election year. That April, the presidential candidate, Mohammad Khatami, was lagging in the polls. By the end of June, he was elected to the presidency, beginning two unprecedented years of political openness that, for better or worse, marked the dawn of the "reform era." In those two years, a handful of books set the national debate on a new trajectory. The most significant of these followed in the footsteps of the German prosecutors and investigated the killings of a few leading Iranian dissidents. These books drew the same conclusions that the Berlin trial had.

Is it hard to tell where Iran's democratic movement is heading. But this much is certain: Rather than shying away from the tales of its 30-year suffering, it needs to proudly claim them as the pillars of its legitimacy. In that painful history, the Mykonos case is a luminous example of how suffering can lead to dignity and justice. It is also a guide to how the West can use a transparent approach to be on the right side of that struggle.