



A conversation with Roya Hakakian, *author of*  
**JOURNEY FROM THE LAND OF NO**

**You fled Iran in 1984 yet only now are you publishing a memoir about life in that country. After all that time, what compelled you to write it now?**

My experience in Iran had seemed all along to be only personal. But pacing the streets of New York City on September 11, 2001, I felt that I was in the middle of Tehran. The personal had suddenly become universal.

**As a Jewish person who suffered persecution under Islamic rule, what do you think is the best strategy for peace in the Middle East? Can Jews, Moslems, and Christians live side by side peacefully?**

Long before Islam came to Iran, Jews were there; their presence goes back nearly 3,000 years. Jews and Moslems lived in relative peace in Iran for hundreds of years, until the Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power in 1979. Since then Jews have been leaving Iran, and the community is on the verge of vanishing. Given the timing, the exodus can only be the result of the rise of this new brand of political Islam, and not Islam itself.

**Much has been written about Iran by pundits or former officials, but this marks the first time that an ordinary "child of the revolution" is giving her account of events. What do you hope to convey that others haven't?**

The pundits look at what Iran became—a society in which mosque and state are one—and assume that this was the dream of those who brought about the revolution. As a teenager living in revolutionary Iran, I was feverishly hopeful about the prospects of the movement, and I can say that the pundits have it wrong: my generation had nothing but democratic intentions.

**The Iranian revolution happened twenty-five years ago, yet you believe that it is still a pivotal event that sheds important light on understanding the Middle East today. What can we learn from that time, and how is it relevant to current events today?**

In a region where the dream of Islamic rule is fast growing, Iran is the only country that lived the dream. To study how Iranians are now faring provides an important glimpse of a possible future for many Middle Eastern countries.

**In the past few years there's been an ongoing push for reforms in Iran. Given your own experience, how do you assess this new movement and the youth in Iran today? Do you believe there will be significant reforms in the near future?**

Iran is heading in the direction of becoming less restrictive, not so much by choice but by the sheer force of statistics: 70 percent of the population is under the age of thirty. But whether less restrictive would also mean more democratic depends, in part, on the international community.

**What parallels do you see between post-revolutionary Iran and today's Iraq? What lessons can Iraqis learn from Iran's recent history?**

Both were societies that rid themselves of decades of brutal dictatorial rule, but were then plagued by chaos and factional tensions. In 1979, in the face of those tensions, the secular forces in Iran made concessions to the clerics in an effort to unify the country. In retrospect, those concessions only strengthened the hand of the conservative forces. The Iraqi society isn't simply going through a crisis; it's undergoing an inception. What the secular forces forgo now, they may never again recover.

**How hopeful are you that democracy will take hold in a post-Saddam Iraq? Is the threat of a fundamentalist movement like the one you experienced in Iran a real possibility?**

Ayatollah Khomeini was a lone voice in 1979, but that's no longer true—the threat is greater now. The world turned its back on Iran when it didn't like what it saw; in the absence of scrutiny, Iran became a hotbed of terrorism and is on the verge of gaining weapons of mass destruction. Hopefully the international community has since learned that it can't afford to avert its attention, especially from the unpleasant events in the Middle East. Our vigilance is crucial to our safety.

**The book ends with your father telling you it is time to leave Iran for America. What have you been doing since you fled Iran in 1984?**

My mother and I spent a year wandering through Europe as refugees until May 1985, when we were granted political asylum and came to New York. Given the sorry state of my English, I declared myself premed, betraying my true love, which was to study literature. But writing, especially poetry, kept luring me. My book of Persian poems was published, and I took a course with the late Allen Ginsberg; with his friendship and encouragement, I slowly began to chart my way in English, though not, at first, as literature. Reporting was a more natural entry, since I had been a trusted source to many U.S. journalists already. So I spent a few years working as a journalist in TV, most recently CBS's 60 Minutes, which I left in early 2002 when I began to work on my book full-time. The following winter, I was a fellow at the MacDowell Colony. I also contribute regularly to Connecticut Public Radio.

Another passion of mine is world affairs. I am a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations and also a documentary filmmaker. My most recent film, on child soldiers, was screened at the United Nations.

**Can you tell us about some of the stereotypes you've faced as an Iranian living in America?**

When I left Iran, I left behind a modern society with a strong secular tradition: Parties, miniskirts, jazz and blues bands, foreign film festivals. . . We followed the West closely, especially America—so closely that arriving here in 1985 was no shock to me. But Americans are always surprised to hear my accounts of the metropolis that Tehran was. They expect to hear stories of sand and camels, muted lives and child labor.

**Two other recent memoirs, Persepolis and Reading Lolita in Tehran, also by Iranian women, have received worldwide acclaim. Why do you think Western readers are so drawn to these personal stories?**

For years the only image audiences saw of Iran were photos of angry, fist-throwing crowds. These books show the Iran that the cameras missed, and readers are enchanted by the humanity they're discovering among those they once thought of as the enemy.

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**JOURNEY FROM THE LAND OF NO: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran by Roya Hakakian**

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