

## Iranian Society – A Personal Perspective Itzhak (Itzik) Barzilai, former head of a "Mossad" division

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Talks between USA and Iran (Araqchi and Witkoff), are held now in Rome, Italy  
(Photo: REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein/Pool, Amer HILABI AFP, shutterstock, Smolkov Vladislav shutterstock)



Itzik Barzilai, former head of the "Mossad" division. Member of the Israeli Painters Association (Photo: courtesy of Itzik Barzilai)

Sir Denis Wright, the British ambassador to Tehran in the early 1960s, wrote in his end-of-service report that the "Iranians are a people who say the opposite of what they think and do the opposite of what they say, but that does not mean that their actions do not correspond to what they think. A defense pact cannot be signed with them because, simply put, they are neither trustworthy nor suitable for such a relationship".

Even if we assume that the world, especially the Western world, does not fully understand the phenomenon known as Iran, we still wonder, how does this land of the mullahs, with its strange and unique regime, manage time after time to deceive us all and emerge with the upper hand?

The main problem is that the world has not yet internalized or learned how to cope with their political culture and diplomatic traditions which are entirely different from Western ones. I will try to describe Shi'ite Iran through its societal patterns and modes, and I emphasize at the outset that I have not written an academic study, but share the insights I gained during my six years in Iran. I am not certain I have all the answers, but I hope I can help others to understand. To the misfortune of the Iranians, in 1501 one of their kings adopted Shi'a Islam, with everything that implies. The declared aspiration of the Iranians is to achieve hegemony over the Islamic world, to prove their superiority and more than anything, to break free from their inferior status as part of



The Village Wise Men, 1970  
(Courtesy of the painter Itzik Barzilai)

the hated and oppressed Shi'ite minority in Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini, in his first speech as ruler of the Islamic Republic, declared that he had come to correct the injustices committed 1400 years ago [the death of Muhammad], that Shi'a had to overcome Sunnah and take its rightful place in Islam. He declared a jihad, whose objective was to export the revolution to the world in general and to the Islamic world in particular. They hate Arabs, and feel a sense of superiority over them.

#### National character: traditional – "Sunnti"

Iranian society is not monolithic and has various religious denominations. However, religion and the demand for spirituality have greatly strengthened since 1979, leading to the flourishing of groups that believe in the return, after the war of Gog and Magog, of the Hidden Imam who will excise evil from the world and return the Sunnis to the correct path, to true Islam, to Shi'a.

In 2010, the Iranian army's chief of staff sent an open letter to the Mahdi (the messiah in Islam), in which he pleaded for him to hasten his return to solve the problems of the world and help the Iranian people overcome evil. Every session of the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament, opens with a prayer of hope for the imminent appearance of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, the true Caliph who will redeem the true believers.

Iranian society is completely religious and traditional. The mosque is the social and communal center, everything comes there and everything leaves from there. The preachers in the mosques are political figures who sense the needs of the worshippers and know how to give them the feeling of self-respect that is so lacking among the lower classes. Tradition is no less important than religion. Even the lives of educated secular individuals are imbued with religion.

The *achound*, the religious figure, has a central place in Iranian society. He conveys and disseminates the messages, but when someone is referred to as an *achound*, the connotations are “sophisticated, manipulative, deceitful and fixer.”



Shi'a is the source of inspiration and authority and rules everything. In Tehran, a city with millions of people, there is not a single Sunni mosque. To understand the depth of Shi'a influence on the average Iranian, one has to see the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who fill the streets of Iranian cities during the days of Ashura, flagellating themselves until they bleed.

Iranian society is a society of opposing identities. That does not mean that each group has its own identity which clashes with the others, but rather that opposing identities exist within almost every Iranian, whether regime leaders or opposition leaders living abroad.

Despite the many influences which infiltrated Iranian society because of its past conquests of foreign countries, as well as Western influences and modernization, it has remained Persian. It is difficult to separate the various components of Iranian identity, but generally speaking, it can be said that it is part Persian, part Islamic and part Western, and the contradictions between them coexist within it. However, there is a separate Persian identity that merged into Shi'ite Islamic culture and developed it into an art form. Ambivalence is at the foundation of Iranian society, and there are several Zoroastrian traditions that are preserved even today, despite the domination over the state of Shi'a and the mullahs.

## A patriarchal, class-based society



In Hope, 1974 (Courtesy of the painter Itzik Barzilai)

In Iran the family is sacred, and what is permitted and forbidden is deeply ingrained. The family name determines the attitude taken toward the person bearing it. If you ask an Iranian about some one he will first tell you about the man's family background and origins, but he will not forget to add that his own family is much more important and noble than that of the

other person. It is still a class-based society, even decades after the nationalization of state lands and the supposed elimination of the feudalism that prevailed until the White Revolution of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1963. It operates according to the foundations of its master and servant – *arbab* and *nokar*, even if it lost its wealth long ago.

Control over women and strengthening the patriarchal family are worshipped by fundamentalist Islam. According to Khomeini's doctrine, the feminist movement is a Western deviation which leads to adultery and the breakdown of the family unit. He deeply believed in the inferiority of women, physical, mental, moral and intellectual, and so do his successors.

The father is the absolute ruler of the household, and the woman is on the bottom rung of the ladder, bound to it by the shackles of tradition. Despite the fact that women in Iran currently make up about 60% of university students, they are unable to translate the advantage of their education into concrete achievement. They do not find suitable employment and return home to serve, without assistance from husband or children.

Islamic laws regarding sexual relations in married life have worsened women's situation and obliterated the few achievements gained during the time of Shah. A rapist who murdered his victim cannot be prosecuted, but a woman who committed adultery or in self-defense murdered her abusive husband can and will be prosecuted. Women must comply with the Islamic dress code and conceal and cover their hair, arms, legs and feet.

The ruling class during the Shah's time were the "men of the king," and today they are the *khodi*, a Persian word meaning "our own people." They adopt, outwardly, the worldview of senior clerics and comply with the dress code the regime imposed upon them. In Iranian society, there is a clear distinction between a *khodi* and someone who is not, and the attitude of the regime toward you is shaped accordingly.

Worship of power is characteristic of Iranian culture. Consideration for others, vacillation and the failure to firmly stand by one's principles are perceived as weaknesses to be exploited. Power and strength are treated with attention and usually submission. If an Iranian thinks you cannot harm him, he will not take you seriously or respect your demands, and at best will ignore you, both in private and in national life. The Iranians worshipped the Shah until he showed weakness and failed to act as expected to suppress the imminent revolution. Those same obedient Iranians suddenly became heroes and took to the streets the moment they sensed the ruler's weakness, crying out "The king is dead – long live the new king." They always follow the strong...

Consideration for others, vacillation and the failure to firmly stand by one's principles are perceived as weaknesses to be exploited..A patriotic, proud society

"The dignity and greatness of the Iranian nation" is a common phrase which enlivens in the statement and speeches of every average Iranian politician. Inflated national pride is the basis for any negotiation and an offense to it will prevent a dialogue from beginning.

The rulers of Iran show signs of megalomania, likely rooted in the glory of the past. A prominent character trait of the last Shah, Pahlavi, it has not bypassed the leaders of Iran since the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei, in his speech in Fars Province on May 4, 2008, claimed that "everything in Iran is the best in the world; under Islamic rule, the Iranian people, and especially its youth, are the happiest, freest, wisest and most intelligent in the world."

Iran's centrality in the Islamic world is not an invention of the mullahs. The Shah and his predecessors also viewed Iran as a leading regional power, and their megalomaniac ambitions, their perception of themselves as superior to Arabs and other Muslim peoples, and their striving to gain legitimacy as Shi'ites, further fuel their current aspiration for hegemony over Islam. Any Iranian, wherever he may be, will protest bitterly if someone mistakenly calls the Persian Gulf the "Arab Gulf." Even outspoken regime opponents, including those who fled abroad to avoid government persecution, will strongly object if "the good name of Iran" is attacked.

A prominent feature of the national character is pride, shifting between the elevated, sublime Iranian self-image and the Shi'ite self-image, which embodies a sharp sense of inferiority and existence under a burden of oppression and humiliation from

outsiders. Feelings of inferiority have accompanied Shi'a throughout history because of the belief that the world exploits them, and they believe primacy in Islam was taken from them by deception after Husayn ibn Ali, the father of Shi'a, was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E.

### Iranian culture

Iran's population is composed of more than thirty ethnic groups, with Persians being the largest, about 45%. Each group has its own culture, language and heritage, but they all share a common past, the glory which Iran achieved, in their view, during 2,500 years of the kingdom's existence. They still dream of restoring the crown to its former glory and aspire for "Iran to take its rightful place in the region and in the world".

Iranians are a people of poets, and poetry and poets hold a place of honor. A good Iranian who wants to illustrate something, but indirectly, will turn to his great poets, Saadi, Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam and others, and quote a verse of poetry suited to the occasion, especially when he wishes to contradict you without doing so directly. Even people from whom you would not expect literary expertise will surprise you with poetry.



Iranian fashion and culture (Photo: <https://www.iran-tour.com>)

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The Iranians admire their many poets, since when they were oppressed by invaders and feared to express their opinions freely, their poets did so on their behalf, disguising their opposing views. They are also justifiably proud of their contribution to architecture, their magnificent carpets, miniature paintings; silver and copper work, the ancient music that accompanies them to this day, the game of chess, which they invented. And more than anything, they are filled with pride over their eternal

contribution to humanity, expressed in the Cyrus Cylinder, the world's first declaration of humanity.

### A proud, patriotic society

Iranians find it difficult to cooperate and work with others, and selfishness is prominent in all social strata. The Iranian struggles to accept that others may be no less worthy than himself, which makes sincere cooperation with peers very difficult. To obscure their feelings, they will often shower their partner or rival with compliments and flattery, but will also consider him inferior (something "an outsider wouldn't understand ...").

### Corruption

Institutional corruption has always been a hallmark of Iranian society and the economy. With the collapse of the old order and the rise of a new elite, corruption spread further, often under the cover of a bureaucracy of intimidation which has taken over every aspect of life. Nepotism thrives, and new dynasties of ruling families seize Iran's wealth and maintain massive economic empires. Beneath the layer of the regime's political ambitions and messianic pretensions lies an outdated system of patronage that corrupts anyone who comes near it.

### *Ketman*, the avoidance of being truthful

*Ketman* means you deny your actions and true opinions, even as you strive to fulfill them. Iran's current position regarding the nuclear issue, and the claims of "civilian nuclear energy," are a good example of *Ketman*, not exactly a lie, but certainly not the truth.

Before Khomeini's men came to power, they repeatedly promised the American administration that "the Islamic government," once established, would continue to maintain close ties with the United States, which stood in stark contradiction to Khomeini's worldview and intentions. But not only did they say it, they *promised* it. Few months later they invaded and occupied the American embassy in Tehran for 444 days, taking some 52 diplomats as hostages.

In April 2008 a former Iranian minister told me, "Iran has 3,000 years of history. If in each year we learned only two or three new ways to lie, then today we have 12,000 ways ..."

An Iranian who tells a lie is, in doing so, expressing what he believes is the right thing to say at that moment, and therefore feels almost no remorse.

Truth and falsehood in Iran are flexible concepts. *Ketman* and *sighe* (temporary marriage, see below) occupy a special place in both individual and collective behavior and are derived from religious rulings (*fatwas*), permissions or prohibitions. When a Shi'ite is in a hostile environment, he is allowed to pretend he sides with the majority.

Some Shi'ite jurists have ruled that is permissible only in cases of personal danger, however, *ketman* has become routine in both personal and national daily life.

*Sighe* means "marriage for an hour." It is conducted in the presence of a mullah and allows the couple to "sin" with permission and authority. In its expanded form, it characterizes the Iranians' ability to whitewash the forbidden, to override, or more accurately, to circumvent prohibitions, and to appear fully righteous in their own eyes and in the eyes of the religion in whose name they act and by whose light they live their lives. That was how Khamenei could declare on April 18, 2010, "We consider the use of weapons of mass destruction forbidden by religion and see their prevention as the duty of all humanity." He, of course, was not referring to the production of such weapons, which the Iranian Republic pursues with great zeal. If wine is forbidden, then they drink vodka or whiskey, neither of which is mentioned in the Qur'an as forbidden, for obvious reasons. Wearing a *chador* often conceals jeans or a mini skirt.



Isfahan in all its glory, 1970

(Courtesy of the painter Itzik Barzilai)

An Iranian who tells a lie is simply saying what he believes is the right thing to say at that moment, and therefore he feels no remorse. Life operates like the bazaar, where *baleh*, "good, yes," is a magic word with a thousand meanings and interpretations, all depending on the intonation with which it is spoken. Even when they are forced to explicitly say "no," they will add *baleh* because it is impolite to say "no." The more refined will simply say *baleh* when they mean "no." Iranians waffle all the time, and a good Iranian will never answer directly, even if there is no reason not to. He will first try to guess the other person's expectations and what he would like to hear, and will formulate his answers accordingly. The starting assumption is that the other side is not telling the truth and it must be

uncovered before answering. The Iranian is extremely suspicious, and the saying "you cannot trust your eyes" illustrates his suspicion. In his speech on November 6, 2009,



Khamenei said, "Every time there is a smile on the Americans' faces, they are hiding a new danger behind their backs."

An Iranian's first response will almost always be positive and tentative, but it must not be seen as expressing his real opinion. First he will exhaust you trying to understand your position, and only then will he give you an answer that can be interpreted as both "yes" and "no." The Iranian will almost never allow you to understand what he genuinely wants, and his positive response to your question is a basis for later interpretation. Almost always, you will leave the meeting feeling good, thinking you achieved your goals, when the reality is quite the opposite. You will receive an intermediate response that can be interpreted in many ways, and while he gives you the impression that he accepts your position, in the end, he will do exactly as he pleases.

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An Iranian merchant will negotiate to sell something as if he has no real interest in the matter and as if he has all the time in the world. The buyer will act the same way. This approach is a way of life, a sort of game in which one holds onto one's assets, not rushing to sell, and tries to get the highest possible return. Time is not a constraint and patience pays off. The Iranian approach to negotiations is indeed characterized by delaying, stalling for time and threatening the other side.

*Befarmaid* is a form of politeness or flattery, a courteous refusal of an offer or refreshment, and is a basic form of interaction. The guest in Iran is all-important and enjoys the highest status. Two Persians will always stand at the doorway insisting the other go first. A proper Iranian will never begin eating before the other person, and a very common Persian word is *befarmaid* ("please," or literally, "kindly do"). He will also never leave a room with his back to someone of higher rank or status, and he will always offer something with both hands and a slight bow, an expression of submission (so to speak).

*Ketman* governs the invisible layers of life, courtship, family matters and political negotiations. It is the unwritten code of how people are expected to behave. One must be polite and appear sincere while concealing one's true feelings, turning pretense into an art form. According to a well-known Persian saying, "You never reveal your intentions or your true identity lest you expose yourself to danger."

Denial is central to Iranian behavior and culture, and is deeply rooted in Shi'ite belief. If you admire an Iranian's pen he will offer it to you with both hands, expecting you to insist he shouldn't offer it because you don't want it, until this absurd back-and-forth ends with his surrender, "only because he doesn't want to go back on his word."

The Persian language is rich, poetic and soft, woven with dozens of elusive terms meant to flatter and all lost in translation. Every other sentence begins with *ghorban shouma*, I will sacrifice myself for you.” Don’t take it seriously, he has no intention of sacrificing himself for you.

#### Patience, submission and endurance

The Iranians are a people of carpet weavers, investing years of work with no return before seeing a result. Patience is one of the Iranian people’s defining traits, mixed with an outward suffering which is one of Shi’a’s primary symbols. The Iran-Iraq War demonstrated the nation’s endurance as it absorbed terrible losses over eight years of war, the people gritted their teeth and continued, even though they could have ended the war after a year when Iran pushed Saddam’s forces back to the pre-war border lines, instead of invading Iraq. It was the clearest proof of Iran’s willingness to endure pain and heavy sacrifice in the name of justice, according to Shi’ite belief. When Khomeini was forced to sign the ceasefire with Iraq, he said, “I sign and drink the cup of poison...”

Patience to the point of submission is the result of generations of tyrannical rulers and occupiers. It enables the Iranian man in the street to endure oppression until the storm passes, hoping the next ruler will be better. That same patience was most likely used by the nuclear negotiators. They exhausted the other side, and at the brink of a blow-up they would halt the talks, only to be “ready to return” after some time and start all over again, however, not before they had used aggressive psychological warfare to set the price tag for taking action against them. The threats were an inseparable part of the negotiations.



Iranian family from the Kurdish region, 1975  
(courtesy of the painter Itzik Barzilai)

It is hard to say that all Iranians are grandmasters of chess, but it's equally hard to ignore the manipulative skill of current Iranian leaders to think three steps ahead and act patiently, inch by inch, until achieving their goals.

### Poverty and survival

Concepts of poverty in Iran are not the same as those in Western society, making it hard for Westerners to understand how Iran functions with 45% inflation, 35% unemployment, prostitution, poverty, millions addicted to hard drugs, corruption and a crumbling economy that experts in Iran and abroad define as beyond repair.

A working-class Iranian will always say, "What do I really need? A flatbread with cheese and a cup of tea." It was no surprise, then, that Iran's minister of welfare seriously proposed to the Majlis to stop referencing Western poverty percentages and instead move to Iranian standards and definitions.

### Duality is the name of the game

There is no fundamental contradiction in acting as though you agree with the person you're speaking to while doing the exact opposite. Even an opponent of the regime, as much as he acts against it, will almost always maintain direct or indirect channels of communication with it. He sees no contradiction, believing it might serve him one day.

A nation which builds two air forces, two navies and duplicates nearly every branch of government tells you more about its character than any other testimony. National committees investigating other national committees are common in Iran.

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The Iranian regime is a reflection of the national character. It is not a democracy, a dictatorship, a totalitarian or communist regime, or a monarchy, but a mixture of them all. Power is divided among military elites who compete with each other in a delicate balance dictated by religious decrees, but also by political and governmental laws, personal connections and bureaucratic dictates. There are so many centers of power that it is extremely difficult to determine in whose hands authority is concentrated and to what extent it can be exercised. It is unclear which of the many overlapping authorities represents the regime's policy. The system is structured in such a way that no one can ever gain absolute control. A Tehran lawyer, when asked who ruled Iran, replied, "Everyone and no one".

It is not inconceivable that a people like this, with such a past, may one day find the right moment to rise up against its rulers and overthrow the regime of the mullahs.

With all the above, various interest groups within Iranian society have managed to unite and revolt four times against the rule of the Shah's dynasty. There was the Tobacco Revolt of 1890, which annulled an exploitative colonial contract with the British; the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which led to the establishment of a parliament; the Mossadegh revolt in 1953, which led to the Shah's temporary removal until his return with the help of the CIA and MI6; and the popular uprising in 1978, which gave birth to the revolution that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It is not inconceivable that a people like this, with such a past, may one day find the right moment to rise up against its rulers and overthrow the regime of the mullahs.

In conclusion, two anecdotes:

The first: an Iranian folk tale I heard upon landing at Mehrabad Airport from the man who greeted me on my first arrival in Iran in 1968: If you see a Persian drowning in a river and say to him, "Give me your hand and I will save you," he would prefer to drown rather than give you something for free. But if you say to him, "Take my hand and I will save you," he will quickly reach out and be saved.

And the second: Sir Denis Wright, the British ambassador to Tehran in the early 1960s, wrote in his end-of-service report that the Iranians are a people who say the opposite of what they think and do the opposite of what they say, but that does not mean that their actions do not correspond to what they think. A defense pact cannot be signed with them because, simply put, they are neither trustworthy nor suitable for such a relationship.



Sir Denis Wright. Photoshot/UPPA/Photoshot