



An Interview with

John W. Limbert

Former hostage, scholar and diplomat who is hoping for peace between Iran and the United States

PART TWO

BRIAN APPLETON

Good morning John and thank you for giving us your time for part II of your interview with Persian Heritage Magazine.

It is my pleasure.

The Iranian community as well as the community at large continues to have a curiosity about your incarceration period. What did you do to occupy your time during that long 444 days?

I think to best understand what happened is by reading two books, Kim Wells' "444 Days" and Mark Bowden's "Guest of Ayatollah." They both extensively cover this subject.

Fair enough.

The only new point I would like to add here is that there is a narrative among Iranians that we were treated very well, but that is simply not true.

What can you tell us about the "Canadian Caper," Tony Mendez and Argo? I find the timing a little suspect and intended for propaganda value like the 300 Spartans. I have been avoiding it because I thought it might be like On the Wings of Eagles, which made Ross Perot look like a hero at a time when all the jails were being liberated.

The movie is worth a look, some Iranians will like it others not, but "Wings of Eagles" was rubbish.

Do you think that Reagan and his re-election had anything to do with the release of hostages?

The timing of our release was not coincidental. The plane didn't take off until Carter was out of office. This timing was not accidental. But the October surprise? Many believe it but there doesn't seem to be any evidence emerging after 32 years.

Is there a statute of limitations on keeping government documents classified?

The historian of the State Department makes documents declassified after 30 years, but in some cases documents are

held longer.

Carter is usually blamed by the monarchists for the fall of the Shah. Is there any truth to that?

I am often asked that question by Iranian Americans. There is no evidence and I have said it is not true in the past. But lately I have put a new twist on the question. Carter was a graduate of the Naval Academy, served on nuclear subs and has a strong technical background. In 1977 and 78 he saw that the USA had a shortage of people in math, science and engineering and we needed to make up that shortage. Usually to create an adequate technical demographic is an educational process that takes 15 or 20 years, but Iran was already the best source for this class of people. So if Carter could make conditions there so miserable that they would come here, he could short-circuit that long training process.

That sounds like a conspiracy theory. Whether there was a conspiracy or not, certain conservative factions certainly benefited from the aftermath and were able to promote their agenda making inroads into our civil liberties with the Patriot Act, suspending the protections of Habeas Corpus.

And torture of POWs.

You did a great job explaining the Iran Contra Affair in your latest book and the role of Michael Ledeen. What can you tell us about the American Enterprise Institute and the New American Century? Is that still an agenda, to divide or again colonize the Middle East?

I don't know. I haven't followed that. I've done events at the AEI...they have some serious scholars like Ali Alfoneh and Michael Ruben. I gave a talk there once and no one was laughing at my jokes. I told one about how in Washington DC a moderate on Iran was someone who would bomb it tomorrow. They took it seriously. In principle I will talk to any group. I don't just talk to groups I agree with. Everyone needs to hear other opinions.

That is what democracy is supposed to be about; diversity of opinion and the right to dissent isn't it?

Absolutely.

Which regime had more political prisoners, executions, disappearances and torture, the Pahlavis or the mullahs?

I have no idea. Both regimes have bad human rights record. But many royalists had it good under the Shah.

I asked the question because a lot of royalists have a Rococo or Camelot like nostalgia, romanticizing the memory of the Pahlavi era. After the revolution I watched the people taking down a torture house I didn't know was there only a few blocks from my house on one side and US embassy on other.

Really!

A "carrot and stick" policy is a poor choice of words our politicians are fond of repeating, since in Iran they use carrots and sticks to motivate donkeys. For a long time during the Iraq invasion the media kept saying An Najaf instead of Al Najaf, which is one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam and we both know what "An" means in Persian. Do you think these faux pas are on purpose?

I think it is a combination of ignorance and indifference. In Arabic certain letters are not pronounced as they are written which is the case with Al Najaf so perhaps that is where the media made the error.

Iran twice offered to halt its enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, which the United States has identified as its highest priority in the nuclear talks, in return for easing sanctions. Meanwhile, it is now known that France and Germany were prepared in spring 2005 to negotiate on an Iranian proposal to convert all of its enriched uranium to fuel rods, making it impossible to use it for nuclear weapons. The deal was vetoed at the insistence of US President George W. Bush. Why do you think Bush vetoed this and do you think that Bush made a mistake in vetoing this offer?

I try not to assign motives to people. I have no idea of Bush's motives. You are talking about a more general condition of the relationship... neither side seems able to say yes. If the other side agrees to something "they must be cheating us." Neither side is willing to move on a position until the other side gives up something. The US won't stop sanctions until Iran stops their nuclear program and vice versa.

Well I think the Iranian people are seriously suffering under the sanctions. I have friends who can't afford to buy dollars to send to their children studying abroad right now.

Well for example in Shiraz we had a nice middle class life in 1970; the value of that salary in Iran today is now \$1.50. We don't hear about starvation though.

Why did the Brazil, Turkey, Iran Tehran Declaration fail?

Good question. I think it delivered 85 to 90% of what the US and Iran had agreed on in Geneva eight months before. The problem was that by the time that agreement came up, the USA had expended so much effort in getting consensus in UN for sanctions that there was no backing down. Congress was anxious to impose unilateral sanctions on Iran, which was upsetting to our allies so Secretary Clinton convinced them to hold off until after the UN sanctions. What surprised me at the time was the very dismissive language that was used not just "no" but "hell no!" whereas my response would have been: "this is interesting and needs further study." People know how to say no... it's easier to say no than reach a deal... we are good at saying no. I was in Europe at the time... and was interviewed by the Persian service of German radio... they asked me the same question. I didn't have a good answer so what I do in these situations is resort to poetry. In this case I quoted Shahriar: "Amadi jaanam be gorbanat vali hala chera?" or "O love of my life, you finally came to me – but why now?"

Boy I can relate to that one. Why did the Russian Step-by-Step Proposal fail?

You or me on that one! It took months of very difficult diplomacy to get Russia and China on board with sanctions.

I don't think the USA feels comfortable with Russia brokering an Iran deal. I think that the Cold War competitiveness is not completely over but it is unrealistic of the USA to expect Russia to have no relations with Iran, they share a border and a long history.

April 2012 Iranian 5 Step Proposal and 5+1 Proposal? In reading over the history of proposals from both sides from 2003 to 2012 it looks to me like some progress is being made and that there are numerous opportunities for win win situations on regional cooperation against terrorism, cooperation on regional issues like Afghanistan and Syria, cooperation on stopping drug trafficking, repair and parts for Iranian commercial airlines, medical isotopes, trade of uranium for fuel rods, international cooperation on nuclear safety and nuclear fuel supply etc.

You have done your homework on this subject.

How do you make negotiations work and avoid another war? It seems like there is so much to be gained by cooperation on both sides. Is it just mutual distrust and mutual hubris that is preventing progress? It seems like both sides want to be the author of the peace proposal. Couldn't a third party national mediator let each side author every other point and share the authorship?

What can I say, in a reasonable world the answer is yes.

But I think it took guts for the White House to offer negotiations, one on one with Iran...

Iranians are running from it. It hasn't happened since Oct 2009. I don't know what they are afraid of, for all their bluster.

Are they afraid of losing conservative votes by talking to the US government? Ahmadinejad's term is almost up. Who will be next?

I don't know and it doesn't matter, since their president has no power.

Given the history of the lack of success of the effectiveness of sanctions like on Cuba and in Iraq why does the UN and the US government continue to pursue this approach? Do you think that it is disingenuous and engineered to fail as a justification to invade?

Set up to fail is a little too conspiratorial. The outreach of Obama set up to fail to usher in sanctions is another theory, but I don't think so.

Is the nuclear issue another WMD bogeyman created to weaken public resistance to a new war or do you believe a nuclear Iran constitutes a real threat? Is it a threat to global security or a threat to the status quo?

Romney said that a nuclear Iran is the greatest threat to the USA. Why are we so obsessed with this issue? Why not be more concerned with dysfunctional Pakistan that already has a nuclear arsenal, nonfunctional civilian government, claims it didn't know Osama was living one mile from their military academy, has ties

with the Bombay terrorists and so on. Why are we so obsessed about Iran when there no proof exists that they even have a nuclear weapons program?

What did you think about Ahmadinejad's last UN speech about US bullying and a new world order of equals?

Nothing new there. He actually toned down his usual rhetoric.

Why did Russia and China and Japan go along with the sanctions when they had so much trade with Iran?

I will cop out on that question...ask them. I try not to assign motives to other people's actions.

Well I'm guessing they had more to lose not having commerce with the USA than Iran. Why did Harper choose to cut Canada's diplomatic ties with Iran and why now?

I have no idea. One bit of speculation...it was done right before the showing of the film Argo at Toronto International film festival. Actually closing an embassy is not the breaking of diplomatic relations. A country can have diplomatic relations with another country without having an embassy there. The British recently closed their embassy in Tehran after it was attacked but still maintain diplomatic relations with Iran.

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How does India manage to avoid US reprisal for continuing trade with Iran?

Good question. Behind all this may be some wisdom that one you don't want to tick off everyone and two you don't want to push Iran too far into a corner or it will react dangerously.

What do you think about Rohrabacher's Plan to Partition Iran? Isn't it ironic that in 1947 the secession of Western Azerbaijan and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad were overturned by the Shah with the help of the CIA but now that there is a regime uncooperative with the US government, partition is being promoted. Is there any evidence that the CIA has been promoting and funding separatist movements in Western Azerbaijan and Khuzestan? Would this not be a violation of the UN charter?

All I can say is an Iranian proverb that "to be a donkey takes more than eating grass." There are other ways to be a donkey. I don't know if the CIA is behind attempts to partition Iran, it would be a major mistake for US or Israel to try to partition Iran. Nothing unites Iranians more than threat of partition.

As a member of the NPT doesn't Iran have the right to enrich uranium for domestic use for generating electricity and for medical isotopes? The US built the light water reactor for their medical isotopes and started the Bushehr reactor that Russian Federation has the contract to finish. Why does the US think that Iran under the IRI is any more dangerous than Israel, Pakistan or India who are not members of the NPT and who purportedly have

nuclear weapons?

What you see on this issue is a dialogue of the deaf. .Iran always speaks about its rights and the West always speaks about Iran's obligations.

Did Iran agree to these "obligations" or were they imposed upon them?

They did agree to them in treaties. The nuclear issue is a morass. There are people who are experts on it but I am not. Both sides have made it the crux of the problem and that is why we can't get anywhere.

In your opinion has Ahmadinejad actually stated that he wants to wipe Israel off the map or has he only wished for an end to Zionism?

I understand Ahmadinejad was quoting Khomeini about Israel being erased from the pages of time. But if I were an Israeli I would be worried. For Israeli hardliners Ahmadinejad is the gift that goes on giving.

I believe I have no more questions for you for the moment. I and Persian Heritage thank you Mr. Ambassador once again for your time in addressing all these questions. It is important for our readers and the general public to gain a better understanding of these issues and I know that in your heart you are an educator first. You are a definite asset to the United States and the world community and an intellectual property we should be proud of.

Thanks for your kind words. It has been my pleasure.

The Salt Mummies of Iran

Iranian miners working at the Chehr Abad salt mines (located west of the city of Zanjan in Iran's northwest) made a startling discovery in the winter of 1993. They discovered a human body with long reddish hair, beard and a lower leg still inside a boot. The body had been buried inside a tunnel, which was roughly 45 meters long. Another five bodies were to be discovered in the ensuing years, including those of a woman and teenager.

There were other artifacts found with the body, notably three iron knives, a pair of woolen trousers, a silver needle, sling parts of a leather rope, a grindstone, and a walnut.

Isotopic analyses have been conducted on five of the salt-preserved "mummies" to help identify their origins and determine the times they had lived. The bodies have been dated to a vast time range between the 4th century BCE (circa Achaemenid era) and 4th century CE (Sassanian era).

There are variations in the geographical origins of these bodies as well. Researchers from the Department of Environmental Sciences, Università Ca' Foscari in Italy, have matched the osteological samples from various the Iranian sites and those from the salt "mummies" found in the mine.

The isotopic studies have led the Italian researchers to the following hypotheses:

1. Two of the "mummies" may possibly have hailed from the Tehran-Qazvin area, which is consistent with the salt mine region.
2. Two of the "mummies" were probably from Iran's northeast regions or even modern-day Central Asia.
3. The fifth body appears to have come from further away, possibly from further east (possibly further into Central Asia towards China's northwest or ancient Mongolia).

According to a Tehran Times report, a number of the salt mummies are currently being housed in special showcases under controlled conditions at the Zolfaqari Museum of Zanjan.

