



An Interview with

John W. Limbert

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

PART ONE

BRIAN APPLETON

John W. Limbert attained the rank of Minister-Counselor in the United States Foreign Service after a 33-year career there. He was appointed Assistant Deputy Secretary of State for Iran in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs by the Obama administration. Among his last postings prior to retirement were Dean of the Foreign Service Institute's School of Language Studies, Chief of Mission in Khartoum, Sudan, president of the American Foreign Service Association, Ambassador to Mauritania and Director of Orientation at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC. While serving as Ambassador to Iraq in 2003, he was one of the first civilian officials to enter Baghdad with the Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. His earlier postings include Algeria, Djibouti, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He is fluent in Arabic, Persian and French.

He was awarded the Department of State's highest award—the Distinguished Service Award and the Award for Valor after being held hostage for fourteen months in Iran.

Of his hostage experience he stated that it taught him a new appreciation for his profession of diplomacy namely how do you solve problems between nations and between people?

He has written numerous articles and authored four books all on the subject of Iran. He obtained a BA, an MA and a PhD in History and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard and was a Senior Fellow at Harvard University's Center for international Affairs.

In 2006 he was appointed Distinguished Professor of International Affairs at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md.

He has a long standing love for Iran and Persian culture stemming from his first visit there in 1962 as a student while his parents were on assignment with USAID, his years there in the Peace Corps, his marriage to an Iranian and his time there in the Foreign Service. He extremely interested in finding peace between our nations. It has been my great privilege to know John Limbert.

Thank you, John for taking the time to do this interview for Persian Heritage magazine. I think the last time I saw you was either at the US Naval Academy when we screened Bam 6.6 with the film's director Jahangir Golestan-Parast or at the World Affairs Council in San Francisco in 2009 when you were launching your latest book: Negotiating With Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History.

I am honored to do this. It is great to speak with you again. By the way, I really like your new book about Western Azerbaijan.

Thanks so much for endorsing it. We have a lot of questions for you that have not been covered by the press, so let's begin. Were you one of those whiz kids who always knew that you wanted to be a diplomat when you grew up?

Not at all! I never planned to be a diplomat, I wanted to be a teacher.

You were born in Washington DC, did you grow up there and where did you go to

school K-12?

I went to all public schools in Washington DC.

How did you first become interested in Iran?

My parents were there working for USAID and I went over in 1962 and visited with them and fell in love with Iran.

What was USAID doing in Iran at that time? Was it related to President Truman's Point Four program?

That's exactly what it was...a continuation of that program...there were vaccination programs and vaccination of cattle as well.

You went to Harvard, as did my late father, Class of '36. Who was your favorite professor there?

My academic advisor was Richard Frye.

It doesn't get any better than that!

I also worked a lot with Richard Bulliet (at Columbia University now) who was an Associate professor at Harvard at the time working on his thesis on the urban history of Nishapour.

Did you learn Arabic and Persian at Harvard?

I did a year of Arabic as an undergrad and Persian as grad student. I studied Arabic further at the Foreign Service Institute.

What did you write your PhD thesis on?

It was on Shiraz in the Age of Hafez. I researched it while I was teaching in Shiraz between 1968 and 1972 and in fact my thesis was the basis for my book: Shiraz in the Age of Hafez: The Glory of a Medieval Persian City published in 2004.

Let's talk about teaching. What did you teach and at what level while in the Peace Corps?

I taught English at high school level.

Which students did you like the best; the high school pupils, Shiraz University students or the US Naval cadets?

Well I have to say that I wasn't really cut out for teaching high school students but I really enjoyed teaching the college students in Shiraz. They were very studious and sincere. About the midshipmen, they are not necessarily going for PhDs but they have made a certain commitment which includes personal sacrifices and they are very dedicated. They are very openminded and eager to learn and I have enjoyed teaching them.

You are married to a wonderful woman Parvaneh; where did you meet? Where in Iran is she from?

Parvane was teaching at the same high school as I was during my time in the Peace Corps which was in Sanadaj. My wife is from Sanandaj and her father was a medical doctor there.

You were in Sanandaj? No wonder you wrote that study on: The Origins and Appearance of the Kurds in Pre-Islamic Iran for Iranian Studies in 1968. Did you go to any Khanegahs while you were in Sanandaj and see the derives in Sama? What did you think about all that? I myself tend to lean in that direction.

I did see them indeed.

We know that you were one of the US Embassy hostages during the revolution of 1979 and I will address that later. At the moment tell us the story that is behind the American Foreign Service Association's Rivkin Award for Creative Dissent, which you received?

Actually there is no particular story on that. I received it along with the Department of State Award for Valor after being held hostage in 1979-81.

What is it about Persian culture that really attracts you:

Terence O' Donnell said it best: Ira-

nians are like us only more so.

I often say that the price of Persian friendship is heavy but worth it.

Agreed, that's another way of saying it. Marriage also had made me become part of the Iranian culture, you absorb it and assimilate through family. Our children are bilingual.

Have they ever been to Iran?

They were born In Iran. The last time they were there was when they were 9 and 7 years old and they still remember a lot.

Have you ever wanted to go back? Could you go there for a visit?

Politically it is still difficult for me and my children but yes we would love to go for a visit.

I may be a bit of a dreamer but I believe the whole impasse and tension between Iran and the USA could be ratcheted way down although many Americans would oppose it if Obama would just hop on a plane and go lay flowers on the graves of some of the young men who died in the Iran Iraq War at their national cemetery, Behesht e Zahra.

That's not that far fetched a notion. It's what in diplomacy is called the "Sadat to Jerusalem plan"...one huge gesture to try to break the impasse.

And I guess there is the question of western cultural influence.

Well of course the regime has tried to restrict Western influence and impose dress codes and so on to prevent a soft revolution but the more they restrict the more people resist.

That's human nature isn't it? Nobody likes being told what to do.

Everyone likes creature comforts and Iranians do too.

Our readers want to know about your hostage experience. Do you have anything more that you haven't already said in other venues that you would like to say about it?

First it taught me the importance of my profession, of diplomacy in trying to resolve or avoid hostility. Secondly it pointed out to me the dangers of mixing religion and politics which we need to recognize in the USA since it has not produced good results in Iran.

You mean the rise of the religious fundamentalist right wing here and its influence on politics and public policy?

Yes and thirdly I learned about the power of ignorance or what Orwell called "collective stupidity."

Why do you think that the American public and politicians won't let go of this hostage crisis when most Americans live by the 24 hour news cycle and can't remember anything past five years?

Clearly it is due to humiliation by people whom we considered inferior.

That is why the hostage crisis remains so alive for 30 years in our collective consciousness.

One thing I learned in reading your last book was that under a treaty started by Truman during US occupation of Iran during and following WWII that American military were exempt from Iranian law. I had always wondered why the employees and their dependents of Bell Helicopter acted with such impunity to the local laws when I worked there.

These laws did not apply to civilians. Unfortunately that original agreement – dating to WWII – was extended in 1963 -64 and expanded to the exempt US military trainers and their dependents. By the way Khomeini started out his political career in the early 1960s as a right wing religious ideologue trying to stop religious minorities from having an equal vote in municipal councils. His position, however,

did not have wide appeal or support until he attacked the 1964 immunity law, then he became the darling of the nationalists.

I read recently that you were the first civilian official to enter Iraq after the US invasion. You had a role in trying to restore the looted national treasures to their national archeological museum. How did that go?

We had some modest success. I had never dealt with the world of antique collectors, dealers, museums administrators, archeologists and others who made that their life's work who all consider the other the enemy. What we did was offer amnesty for those who looted the Iraqi National museum. . . \$100 to \$200 for a \$35K Sumerian head for example for a hungry family was usually enough of an incentive to return the artifact. The damage was worse at the actual archeological dig sites which couldn't be secured or guarded. At the museum the damage was more cosmetic. The looting was not as bad as first anticipated because a lot of the most valuable items had been squirreled away.

What is your opinion about the use of Sanctions? Do you think they are effective?

They are better than bombing but 30 years of sanctions haven't fixed anything. To decide upon their success it depends on what your goals are. One group of politicians wants sanctions to make the IRI get serious about negotiation. A second group wants the sanctions to force the IRI to capitulate with all the US demands. A third group thinks the discontent generated by the sanctions will foment an overthrow of the regime. So depending upon which political group you belong to you can claim with total justification that the sanctions are working or not working.

The reason crippling sanctions don't foment revolutions is that people begin to struggle so mightily just to subsist that they do not have time nor energy for political activism and protest.

Is there any proof that the IRI is actually sponsoring terrorism?

Well there were all the assassinations of dissidents in Europe, of Sharpour

Bakhtiar in Paris, there was the bombing of the Jewish Center in Buenos Aires. . . so they have engaged in terrorism in the past but it waxes and wanes.

But I mean when the IRI helps their Moslem brothers the Palestinians whom no one else seems to help, the Egyptians built a wall, they call it humanitarian aid but the West calls it terrorism.

Well of course it is hard to define terrorism. Some of the dreariest conversations I have been involved in were spent trying to define it.

Lastly do you think the IRI has a Nuclear weapons program?

I don't know, but one thing is clear: The real threat to the IRI is an internal soft overthrow for which the possession of nuclear weapons is no defense at all. To me it doesn't make much sense for Iran to have one. What good would it do them?

Perhaps it goes back to that notion of national pride for one, or any country which possesses one has never been attacked so it seems to serve for defense.

But it goes back to the question, if they had a nuclear weapon then what? Would they be another Pakistan? Ahmadijad when asked about nuclear weapons on one occasion responded by saying no and for all the reasons of expense, against Islam and so on but finished by saying that whether Iran had a nuclear weapons program was Iran's choice and not a decision to be imposed upon them by the outside world.

There you have it back to the issue of national sovereignty and pride. Mr. Ambassador, I want to thank you for giving us so much of your time for part I of this interview for Persian Heritage Magazine. I would love to continue our conversation with the subject of "peace". Is it possible and how? How can a war between the USA and Iran be avoided. Thank you again.