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St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Change in the wind

By [JON SAWYER](#)

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TEHRAN, Iran - After quick victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. armed forces are suddenly on both sides of Iran's Islamic republic, the country that gave Americans their first taste of Islamic extremism a generation ago.

Iran's continued support for anti-Israel resistance organizations, its alleged harboring of al-Qaida operatives and a suspect nuclear technology program make it a prime target for U.S. pressure - and a prime opportunity as well, judging from renewed student demonstrations this past week.

In the view of key officials in President George W. Bush's administration and some of its outside advisers, the clerics who rule Iran are more ripe for toppling now than at any moment in the republic's quarter-century history.

But that is not the view of the great majority of those fighting for change from within Iran.

In a reporting trip to Iran over the past two weeks, the Post-Dispatch found turbulence aplenty:

Young people fed up with a poor economy and social restrictions.

Journalists lashing out at government policies despite jail terms and newspaper closures.

Muslim mullahs openly debating whether rule by clerics should ever have been enacted.

Missing was the sense of a dramatic breakthrough anytime soon. But very apparent was a deep concern that American intervention could make things worse.

Among those who have stood up to the current government and to clerical authorities - journalists and liberal clerics and opposition leaders in parliament, some of them jailed and others banned from work because of their views - there is the conviction that Iran is slowly, painfully, but surely finding its way toward greater freedom and more democracy.

"We are experiencing our 1968 social revolution right now," said Ziba Jalali, an editor at the journal Goftegoo ("Dialogue"), who has written extensively on the struggle for women's rights in Iran.

Student demonstrations began Tuesday in protest against a proposal to privatize Tehran University but then swelled into more generalized complaints against Iran's poor economy, the lack of jobs and the failure of President Mohammad Khatami to deliver on the reforms he has repeatedly pledged during six years in office.

The demonstrations were an echo of similar protests last summer and fall and a possible prelude to something bigger by early next month, the fourth anniversary of another clash at Tehran University that produced the biggest popular protests since the 1979 revolution.

Yet support for overthrowing the government remains scattered and unorganized, according to Jalali and other activists, while resentment against past U.S. interventions runs deep.

The last thing Iranian reformers need now, they say, is American pressure. "You can't democratize a country with violence, with rockets and bombs," says Jalali. "It's a contradiction in terms."

The message of these activists? Iran is not Iraq. To proceed as if it were, they warn, is to play with fire.

There's nothing monolithic about Iranians themselves - from the every-man-for-himself chaos of Tehran's traffic to the dozens of ideologically driven newspapers that boisterously compete each day for attention and sales.

In a country that bans alcohol, young people flock to food courts and coffee shops instead - and find plenty of alcohol at private parties of mixed gender where women quickly shed the over-garments they are required by law to wear in public.

In Tehran, the fashionable Gandhi Street boasts six of the coffee shops side by side on the plaza level of a single shopping center. Out front there's a pizza parlor, with attractive tables overlooking the street, but on three recent evenings that area was empty. The 20-somethings crowded instead among the shops in the rear, less visible and therefore less subject to the roving *basij* militia whose mission, it sometimes appears, is to beat back the very idea of youth.

It is a losing battle, at least for now.

Islamic dress codes that were intended to shield feminine identities are now observed by the wearing of the sheerest, most brightly colored scarves, and by "overcoats" that cling to curves and barely reach the thighs, with daring slits on the side.

"It is an irony of history that this scarf and covering, which in the beginning was supposed to suppress femininity and sexual differences, is now the means of strengthening those lines," said Jalali, the feminist editor. "The comment I hear from so many people coming from abroad is, 'Iranian women are so seductive!'"

In many ways this is not the country that rose up against America, the "Great Satan," a generation ago.

The population has doubled, to nearly 70 million today from around 35 million in 1979. It is better educated - 83 percent literacy today compared to just under 50 percent in 1979 - and women play an increasingly visible role. Total university enrollment today, in fact, is 60 percent female.

Two-thirds of Iranians are under the age of 30, with no recollection of life under the Shah or the bloodletting that followed, and only vague impressions of the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s that claimed nearly half a million lives. It is making the most of their own lives, now, that matters most.

In the central Iranian city of Isfahan, families by the hundreds gathered recently at Emam Khomeini, the exquisite 17th-century Safavid Dynasty mosque and palace on an open plaza that dwarfs Moscow's Red Square.

The square was renamed in honor of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founding father of the Islamic republic. The famously rigid Khomeini would surely have been taken aback by the scene there this month, on the 14th anniversary of his death.

Families savored the holiday moment, spreading out oriental rugs for picnics and heating huge vats of *ahsh*, the savory stew of vegetables, garlic and yogurt. Couples and families cruised the square on motorcycles,

some of the women still in head-and-body *chadors* but many of those wearing makeup, lipstick and jeans.

A group of four boys sprawled on the ground, lost in a game of cards, oblivious to the fact that in the Islamic republic, card-playing remains taboo.

A few blocks away, couples strolled the riverbank between the astonishing 17th-century stone bridges of Isfahan, holding hands as evening fell or stopping in one of the water-level tea houses beneath the bridges, overflowing with smoke, chatter and young people flouting the rules.

Voicing caution

Some U.S. officials and Iran experts say the nation is ripe for regime change, that more pressure on issues like nuclear weapons and terrorism along with vocal support for demonstrations like the one this week will push Iran's conservative clerics over the edge. Others disagree.

"The situation is that if the Americans let us do things by ourselves, without interference, then very soon the reformists here will have the victory," said Fatemeh Rakei, a poet turned parliamentarian who is one of just 14 women elected to Iran's 270-member parliament.

Rakei was among the 135 members of parliament who signed an open letter last month to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, demanding action on the reforms. The open rebellion by nearly half of the parliament was unprecedented - as was the reaction by President Khatami's national security council, which banned publication of the letter on the ground that the issues it raised were too sensitive and might inflame public opinion.

The letter has circulated widely all the same, as behind-the-scenes negotiations continue over the two main reform bills. One would expand the powers of the presidency, in a system that now gives clerical authorities control of the judiciary and military and the right of veto against any parliamentary measure. The second would limit the clerics' current power to review - and block - all candidates for public office.

If the impasse persists, Rakei said, parliament might resign - and so might President Khatami, she said.

"Maybe this is the last card he can play," she said. "Khatami has tried hard to avoid crisis in the country, but everyone thinks this is not a situation that can be tolerated any longer."

Rakei warned that the current moment is highly sensitive and that any intervention by U.S. officials would be counterproductive.

"If America says the reformists are very good, or that the United States would protect us, this is very dangerous, because the conservatives will misuse it - to say that we have secret relations with the American superpower, that we don't want to have Islam, that we would sell our country to someone else," she said.

"Every expression of support for reform by America would just postpone the reforms. If Mr. Bush wants to do something for the people of Iran, let him solve his own problems, not ours."

Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Khatami's longtime chief of staff, now serves as his appointed vice president in

charge of parliamentary and legal affairs.

Abtahi said Khatami is determined to give America no excuse for taking military or other action against Iran. Khatami proved his bona fides during the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and again this year in the war on Iraq, providing surprisingly extensive help on each occasion and agreeing to secret meetings with U.S. officials in Geneva to guard against any misunderstandings as the military operations began.

Iran's reward for that cooperation, Abtahi says, was to be labeled part of the "axis of evil" by Bush (in his State of the Union address last year) and to be singled out for attack again this spring when the dust from the Iraq war had barely settled. The about-face on Iran, using what Iranians consider trumped-up accusations about nuclear weapons and terrorism, "was one of the worst mistakes in U.S. policy," Abtahi said.

"The logic of Mr. Bush is very similar to the logic of Osama bin Laden," Abtahi said. "Bush says 'Those who are not with us are against us.' Bin Laden says 'Those who are not with us are pagans.'"

"But we live in a world where we should consider different voices," Abtahi said.

Reality transformed

While internal Iranian reformists and dissidents are generally opposed to any U.S. intervention here, they acknowledge that America's suddenly robust military presence in the region - and its toppling of regimes to the east and west, in Afghanistan and Iraq - have changed the terms of internal debate.

"There's no doubt that U.S. military action in Iraq has had an impact on neighboring states, including Iran," said Davoud Bavand, a political analyst who served at the United Nations during the Shah's government. "Most Iranians believe that action has accelerated the pace of change here."

Bavand dismisses concerns voiced in Washington about Iran's alleged efforts to insinuate an Iranian-style Islamic government on postwar Iraq.

While about two-thirds of Iraqis profess Shiism, the strain of Islam practiced by nearly all Iranians, it is the differences between the two countries that are most pronounced, Bavand said. "For Iraqi Shiites, the connection to Arabism is much stronger than their ties to Shiism," Bavand said. "If the Shiites come to power in Iraq, the honeymoon with Iran will be very short."

The real question for Iranians is what will having America next door - or a reformed Iraq and Afghanistan - mean for Iran itself, and especially for the reformist and conservative camps vying for power within Iran's government.

Reformists say they fear that the United States will cut a deal with the conservative clerics, getting Iranian concessions on issues like the nuclear program and Israel in exchange for ignoring a crackdown on dissidents by the clerics at home. Others say it's more likely that Khatami himself will dispense with reforms, pulling closer to conservatives in the face of a perceived threat to national security.

Ibrahim Yazdi chairs the Iraq Freedom Movement, one of the "religious nationalist" opposition groups that

has pressed the government to move faster on reforms. A pharmacologist who lived for many years in Houston, Yazdi also served as the first foreign minister for the interim revolutionary government. He resigned that post after the taking of hostages at the U.S. Embassy in November 1979.

To understand the mood of Iran today, he said, it's necessary to recall what a deep impression the 1979 revolution made - both the exhilaration at displacing a widely loathed dictator and the shock, to many, of the oppressive clerical rule that followed.

"In 1979 many of us said the Shah must go, even if it meant that someone worse might come," said Yazdi, the only member of his party's executive board not currently under arrest.

"Now people know that that was a mistake," he adds. "Now they want to know for sure what the replacement would be."

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U.N. agency's report may provide answers on nuclear ambitions

By [JON SAWYER](#)

06/14/2003

ISFAHAN, Iran - Iran's government insists that its nuclear program is peaceful and transparent, but it remains a highly sensitive subject, as a Post-Dispatch reporter discovered last week when he photographed the entrance to a nuclear facility a few miles east of Iran's old capital.

The plant is surrounded by a red chain-link fence that runs for several miles in open country near Isfahan's airport. A mountain looms above the several dozen low-lying buildings; there is also an anti-aircraft gun emplacement. Anyone driving down that road could read the entrance sign for "Pishgan Energy Industrial Corporation," and the smaller letters identifying it as a subsidiary of Iran's Atomic Energy Association.

Yet an hour later, while eating dinner in a restaurant in downtown Isfahan, the reporter was interrupted by two uniformed policemen demanding his identity papers and an explanation for why he took the photograph. The reporter and his interpreter were also required to report immediately to the local police station to present their documentation.

If Iran is bent on developing nuclear weapons, as many senior U.S. officials contend, it is following a path remarkably similar to that of Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

Iran, like Iraq, is a signatory of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which means that it has officially renounced the possession of nuclear weapons and agreed to regular international inspections to guarantee its compliance.

The treaty was based on contradictory goals - to encourage the exploitation of nuclear power for peaceful purposes while blocking the development of nuclear weapons capabilities. So long as countries disclose what they are doing and permit access by inspectors, they have the legal right to walk to the edge of weapons capability by developing enrichment and reprocessing facilities that have peaceful purposes but could easily be diverted to the manufacture of weapons.

Iraq poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a clandestine weapons program that came to light only after the 1991 Gulf War. Iran pursued an ambitious nuclear fuel-cycle program that was acknowledged this year only after the facilities had been disclosed by an Iranian resistance group and confirmed by U.S. satellites.

What remains to be seen is whether in Iran, as in Iraq, the U.S. government stumbles when it comes to

documenting its claims.

The answers may begin to emerge as soon as Monday, when a preliminary report on Iran's program will be released by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Vienna-based U.N. agency charged with enforcing the 1970 treaty.

Drafts of the report were circulated to member states this month, at which point State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the United States was "deeply troubled" by its findings. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asserts that Iran is "likely to have nuclear weapons in a relatively short period of time."

Yet according to Iranian officials and to diplomats close to the energy agency, there is no such finding in the new report.

The report cites Iran for failing to disclose a shipment of 1,800 kilograms of uranium hexafluoride and uranium dioxide from China 12 years ago. Iran disputes the requirement for reporting but has agreed to put the material under safeguards now. The report cites no violation in regard to Iran's current nuclear fuel-cycle work, however, and recommends only that the program be studied further before the energy agency's next board meeting in September.

That's a setback for U.S. officials, who just weeks ago were talking about using this week's meeting to press for a U.N. Security Council hearing on Iran's alleged violations. In another rebuff, Russian officials now say they will continue supplying fuel to Iran and working to complete the nuclear power reactor under construction in Bushehr - contrary to U.S. claims that President Vladimir Putin had promised to withhold support until Iran agreed to more safeguards.

U.S. efforts proved more effective with members of the European Union, which issued a strong statement Tuesday calling on Iran to accept more international inspections.

The head of Iran's nuclear program, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, played on those inconsistencies at a news conference Tuesday in Tehran. Iran complied with all requirements for safeguards, he insisted. The country was also prepared to accept more intrusive inspections under the international energy agency's "additional protocol" provisions, he said - provided that the United States helped Iran develop peaceful nuclear energy, as the 1970 treaty requires.

The disagreement over the 1991 shipment from China "dates back to the distant past," Aghazadeh said. "It cannot be used as a pretext by America to launch a disinformation or propaganda campaign against our country."

Aghazadeh didn't mention at the news conference that Iran was about to deny access that day to international inspectors who wanted to visit a Tehran power plant suspected of being used to test centrifuge equipment for uranium enrichment.

U.S. influence changed the course of Iranian history

06/14/2003

Americans tend to think of Iran as a troublemaking sort of place - throwing its weight behind terrorists, seizing U.S. citizens as hostages and forever railing against American values and interests.

Iranians tend to view America, or at least the U.S. government, as a troublemaker, too.

The difference is that for America, Iran has been an irritant. For Iran, America has been a history-changer.

Consider the events of half a century ago, during what Iranians regard as the high mark of modern nationalism. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the oil industry and had the Shah on the run, in forced exile to Rome.

The U.S. and British intelligence services, fearing a possible tilt by Iran toward the Soviet Union, intervened, orchestrating street riots in Iran and engineering the Shah's return and Mossadegh's fall. The Americans in charge of the operation? Kermit Roosevelt, President Teddy Roosevelt's grandson, and Norman H. Schwarzkopf Sr., father of the general who would lead U.S. forces in the first Iraq war a generation later.

To American policymakers, it was a successful exercise in regime change. To many Iranians, it was the prelude to 27 more years of the Shah's oppressive rule.

Flash forward to November 1964, and the Shah's decision to exile Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The action against the popular cleric set the stage, many believe, for the emergence 15 years later of the Islamic republic. What drove that decision? Khomeini's criticism of the Shah's directive giving immunity from prosecution to all American expatriates working in Tehran.

Flash forward again, to November 1979. Students seized the American embassy, on the anniversary of the date that the Shah had announced Khomeini's exile - and in protest against the U.S. decision to permit the Shah to receive medical treatment in America.

The U.S. decision, and the students' response, gave Khomeini the opening he needed to seize control of a revolution that at the time could have gone in either a nationalist or Islamist direction. Riding the wave of anti-American fervor, he rushed through a constitutional referendum that had democratic elements but gave clerics the final say.

-Jon Sawyer

MONDAY 6/17/03:

Most of reformers' work is left undone

By Jon Sawyer
06/15/2003

TEHRAN, Iran - An overflow audience some 300 strong showed up last week at Iran's main teacher training college to discuss a locally produced film from which government censors had made 17 cuts and whose release had been delayed for nearly two years.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is remarkable that watchable films get made at all, considering regulations that are among the most stringent in the world.

No women shown with their heads uncovered. No woman making physical contact with any man. No direct criticism of Iran's ruling clerics, or of Islam.

Yet the director on the college stage, Bahman Farmanara, has made a film, "House on the Water," that tackles everything from adultery, betrayal, drug abuse and AIDS to the loss of faith in Iran's revolution.

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Iran is home today to some of the world's most compelling movies - and where movie directors are just some of the people battling the odds to live free lives.

Farmanara tells the students that in other university appearances, he has been chased off the stage by *basij* militia, paramilitary "volunteers" that Iran's clerical regime has traditionally used to enforce its edicts.

But at the teacher training college, the local *basij* gave its blessing to the showing of the film and Farmanara's appearance, students said, and pledged to permit more such discussions in the months ahead.

"They're responding to society's demand," one woman student explained. "They have no choice."

To many viewers, what is most striking in Farmanara's film is that the main character lives a morally corrupt life but is presented sympathetically.

"They're used to black and white," Farmanara said. "I tell them that in real life everybody is shades of gray."

It's not a bad summary for life in Iran itself.

This is a country seared by revolution and war, the sudden imposition of clerical rule after the revolution in 1979 and then, almost immediately, the onset of an eight-year war with Iraq that would claim some half-million lives.

You see the price that a generation paid at Zahra's Paradise, the vast and meticulously maintained cemetery in the desert plain south of Tehran where many of those killed in the war are buried. Row after row of graves, each with a stone marker and a glass case containing photographs and mementos, pays tribute to the "martyrs" who sacrificed their lives.

"Mother, be happy," reads the message at the grave of Mehdi Karimi, a member of the Revolutionary Guard who died in Iraq at the age of 19 in 1984. "I have not died," the message reads. "I am alive. The kindness of you is with me still."

Yet the very sacrifice of that war helped transform Iran. The mullahs who spurred the martyrs on knew that with so many men lost to war, they would need help to keep the country's economy afloat - and so turned to women who had traditionally remained at home.

It wasn't exactly "Rosie the Riveter," not with rigid enforcements on dress and sexual contact still in force, but it nonetheless brought millions of Iranian women into social and economic settings their mothers had never encountered.

"Women had to start being present in society," said Ziba Jalali, a specialist on women's issues. "Afterward, they didn't want to go back to their lives at home. They started to function in society and they wanted to continue."

Women of new Iran

Some of these new-generation Iranians were encountered last week in Dareke, the area of hiking trails in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains just north of Tehran, where young people flock on weekend mornings because social rules are less rigidly enforced than in the city streets below.

The trails follow a fast-flowing stream, with lush foliage on either side and bare mountain up above. The path crisscrosses the stream and at nearly every bridge there's a teahouse where day-trippers while away the morning, checking out the scene from raised platforms covered with rugs and pillows.

Fatemeh, 30, is a secretary in a school, as is her friend Sara, 32. They're here with two younger women, Sara's sister, Azer, 21, and Nazila, 20. They ask that their real names not be used but are otherwise engagingly frank - about their work, their families, men, America and what they see as the failures of the revolution.

None of them is married. All live with their parents. None has traveled abroad but would like to - "to America, of course," says Azer. "Because America is the place where anything is possible, where there is freedom for anything."

The women believe that the U.S.-led war on Iraq was good. "America got our revenge for us," says Azer, adding that she rather likes President George W. Bush's gunslinger style. "When America says something, they mean it," she says. "We chant - they act."

They have no faith in the clerics who rule Iran, whether reformers or conservatives. "They are all still clerics," says Fatemeh. "They will never give up their power voluntarily."

And yet they don't believe America should interfere in Iran. "Why is it," Sara asks, "that America must always deal with the world through war? Why can't they work through peace?"

Nazila, the youngest in the group, has a black belt in karate and teaches the sport as well. She's wearing the short black overcoat known as a *roopoosh*, a sheer black scarf and black denim pants. She has blond hair spilling out of her scarf and wears a stylish pair of reflector sunglasses.

At the gym, she's allowed to practice minus Islamic cover, she says, but only because the class is all women. She tells of a colleague who went overseas to a karate tournament, only to be told that competitors weren't allowed to wear scarves. She refused to compete and came home instead - where the government made a big show of giving her an award.

Nazila giggles in the telling of it, and the others join in. It would be ridiculous, they say, if it weren't so sad.

Unfulfilled promise

Progress remains uneven, at best.

Most of the reform agenda that formed the basis of President Mohammad Khatami's election in 1997 (and re-election in 2001) remains unachieved.

Women's testimony in court still counts for half that of men; custody and divorce laws discriminate against them; and travel abroad for women younger than 35 still requires the approval of a male family figure.

Iran remains a country where a judiciary accountable only to clerical authorities can sentence a professor to death for challenging the supremacy of clerical rule, as happened last fall in a case concerning dissident academic Hashem Aghajari that is now under appeal.

More than 90 publications remain banned. A steady stream of journalists and intellectuals have passed through jail, usually without the public trial and jury that are ostensibly required under Iran's constitution.

An example is Isa Saharkhiz, editor of the monthly journal Sun and the elected press representative on the panel that considers permit applications for new newspapers and that reviews content for possible violation of Iran's intricate rules of permissible material.

One of the pending applications is his own, for allegedly suspect articles on Islam. No stranger to controversy, Saharkhiz was forced out of his government job several years ago after approving a newspaper permit - even though the applicant was the daughter of a former president.

"They wanted to suspend me for three years," he says, "and so I resigned - for life."

In many areas the *basij* militia still wreaks havoc, from the street confrontations with protesters in recent days to raids on shops that specialize in more revealing versions of the overcoats women are still required to wear.

Moreover, the government has so far failed its biggest challenge - to reform a sclerotic, corruption-ridden and largely state-controlled economy so as to create jobs for the 2 million people now entering the work force each year.

"The cure is inside"

For most young people, a university education isn't a realistic possibility, not with 1.5 million high school students vying each year for some 150,000 slots. Drug addiction has soared; officially, the number of addicts and regular drug users is said to be 2 million. Specialists say the real number is probably 3 million or more, out of a total population of close to 70 million.

"Look around you," says an engineering student at Tehran University, gesturing to the swarm of young people jamming a fashionable Italian restaurant on a recent weekday night. "There's not a person here who has a real job, or the prospect of getting one."

He was no exception himself, he said, noting that he was dragging out his course work at the university to avoid compulsory military service and because there were no jobs available after graduation.

Farmanara, the movie director, says that notwithstanding the heightened U.S. presence in Iran's immediate vicinity, few people here put their faith in an American-led solution to Iran's troubles.

"There was a time when we all thought that when Americans spoke of freedom they spoke for everybody,"

he said. "Now we realize they don't care if we go back to the 12th century. All they care is that their own freedom is secure - if we go to hell, then so be it."

Farmanara speaks for many when he says that Iranians must solve their problems themselves, by engaging society and taking risks and speaking their minds.

There's a scene in his new film that expresses that point well. A doctor and his secretary are discussing the case of a boy in a mysterious coma.

"They are bringing specialists in from abroad," the secretary says.

"Nonsense," the doctor replies. "The cure is inside."

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Despite the censors, filmmaker conveys his message

By [JON SAWYER](#)

06/15/2003

TEHRAN, Iran - Bahman Farmanara, with drooping eyes and a protruding gut, looks less the *artiste* and more the Hollywood producer he used to be.

In a conversation at his home in the hills above Tehran, he displays a mordant wit.

In his previous film, "Smell of Camphor, Scent of Jasmine," he portrayed the lead character - a filmmaker who hadn't been allowed to make a film for 20 years. Preoccupied with death, he decides to make a film about his own funeral.

The story was close to home. Farmanara's films had been banned under the shah, and after the 1979 revolution, his situation got worse. He left for Canada in 1981 and eventually settled in Los Angeles, working first in film distribution and then as a co-producer on such films as Martin Scorsese's "Last Temptation of Christ," Oliver Stone's "Talk Radio" and "Grifters."

Farmanara returned to Iran in 1990, after his children were grown, to help in the family textile business. He has continued in that work since, writing scripts on the side. "Every year for 10 years I submitted a script and each time they took a year to say no." Finally, unexpectedly, the censors gave the OK to "Smell of Camphor" - "probably because the subject was my own death," he jokes.

His new film, "House on the Water," was first shown in early 2001 at Iran's top film festival, where it won the prize for best film and best acting. It took another two years of litigation before Iran's government permitted the film's release, and only then because Farmanara permitted government censors to hack away "offensive" scenes.

In all, some 17 sections of the film were cut, including several entire scenes. The censors took out the ending, including - ironically - four verses from the Quran that Farmanara included as a reflection on theocratic rule in Iran.

"Those who pretend to be believers in order to deceive the real believers are really deceiving themselves," the passage says, "and God has a great punishment in store for them."

Also cut: The scene that includes what Farmanara regards as the film's signature line.

It's an exchange at the hospital between the film's main character, a doctor, and a young patient he has just diagnosed as having AIDS. She's about to marry a foreigner - "my ticket out," as she puts it - and tells the doctor that she won't risk telling him the truth about her condition.

"I thought our generation didn't believe in anything," the doctor says, "but you guys have really beaten us."

"When you were our age you had a future," she replies. "We have no future and no hope. We're like people who have built our houses on water. We have all learned to be good swimmers."

At a college forum on the film last week, an impassioned young student stood up after Farmanara had complained about his "butchered" film.

"Don't worry about the censorship," she said. "I got your message very well."

Ex-spokeswoman for hostage-takers says U.S. misreads Iran

By [JON SAWYER](#)

06/15/2003

TEHRAN, Iran - When American diplomats were taken hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, at the height of the Iranian revolution, one of the most galling aspects for Americans following the drama was that the fresh-faced spokesperson for the student hostage-takers was a young woman known as Sister Mary who spoke like an American.

Sister Mary's real name was Massoumeh Ebtekar. Just 19 at the time of the embassy seizure, Ebtekar was a graduate of an international high school in Tehran and before that an elementary student in suburban Philadelphia, where she lived while her father pursued a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania.

After the revolution, she went on to earn a doctorate herself, in immunology. She raised two children, became involved in women's rights and was an adviser to the reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami, who defeated the conservative establishment candidate to become Iran's president in 1997.

Ebtekar now serves as one of Khatami's appointed vice presidents. She is also director of Iran's Department of the Environment, making her the highest-ranking woman in the Islamic Republic. She discussed her role, Iran's relations with the United States and her reflections on the revolution's first quarter-century in an interview with the Post-Dispatch in her downtown Tehran headquarters.

Ebtekar finished her schooling in Tehran. She was a college freshman when student activists seized the U.S. Embassy on Nov. 4, 1979, to protest U.S. support for Iran's deposed ruler, the shah. Ebtekar joined the protest, serving first as interpreter and then as a spokeswoman for the hostage-takers.

"I got involved with the revolution because I saw what the regime of the shah had stood for in Iran - with America's help - and how involved his regime had been in the brutal suppression of our people. Maybe it's because I had lived in America, had become friends with Americans, but I couldn't make the connection between what I had learned of American society and its mentality - and what I saw in my own country as the result of American policy."

The hostage-takers were portrayed as extremist fanatics, dupes of Iran's revolutionary mullahs, or both. Ebtekar says American policymakers misread what was really going on, then as now.

"They never comprehended that Iran is an inherently religious country, and that any government would have to comply with the culture of the country. They never really took the trouble to try to analyze and understand the Islamic Republic. It's very natural that two decades later it still goes on."

American experts who see Iran poised to embrace a secular democracy misread the current divisions in Iranian politics, Ebtekar says, and the range of potential outcomes.

"They think that in Iran the question between reformists and conservatives refers back to Western types of debate and that the reformists are focused on a totally secular Western-style democracy, which was never the case. It couldn't be, not in a culture where so many are religious."

But a "religious democracy," Ebtekar insists, is very much in place.

"Americans don't understand that there is a democratic process going on here, openly, especially under Khatami (who was elected to a second four-year term in 2001). We have no need for outsiders to come in and talk about freedom of speech, prisoners' rights or women's rights. These things are surfacing every day. There's nothing behind the scenes. Everything is discussed openly by the people. In fact, this is one of the most open societies in the world."

As head of Iran's environment ministry, Ebtekar says she welcomes the country's commitment to building a large nuclear power program. With a growing population and rapid industrial expansion, Iran needs nuclear power generation despite large reserves of oil and natural gas, she says.

"It's a serious problem here, our energy consumption patterns. If it's not changed, maybe within the next decade we won't be able to export petroleum products at all - but will have to import fuel for our cars. The main issue is attempting to diversify our energy sources."

Iranian officials insist that their nuclear program is for peaceful uses only. They dismiss U.S. claims to the contrary as disinformation and propaganda. Ebtekar says it's part of a bullying approach to issues that she says has characterized U.S. policy since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"The service that the American civilization has done for humanity no one could deny, in science, technology, any field you name. But when you see what is being done today - turning America into this rogue state that stands against the international community, against the United Nations - every nation has a right and duty to speak out against it."

The United States severed relations with Iran during the hostage crisis and has not restored them since. U.S. officials say that for relations to be restored, Iran will have to do a lot, from dismantling its alleged nuclear weapons program to stopping support for anti-Israel resistance groups. Ebtekar says that from the Iranian point of view, the bigger obstacles are on the U.S. side.

"America has to stop its aggressive tone. It has to accept that Iran is an independent, dignified member of the international community. Maybe that's a painful process, but it has to be done."