

AQ & A with
Azadeh Moaveni
 the author of
Lipstick Jihad



Q: How does the atmosphere in Tehran now, differ from the city Azar Nafisi talked about in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*? How does the atmosphere in Tehran now, differ from Tehran before President Bush's famous "Axis of Evil" speech?

A: The atmosphere in today's Tehran borders on outrageous, for the capital of a supposed theocracy. People are done being scared, skittish, living in the shadow of the past, which was how they lived for so many years, the years *Reading Lolita* captures. For years, Iranians nurtured their trauma and bitterness at the revolution, and went through life minus a few layers of skin—anger and regret tinged everything.

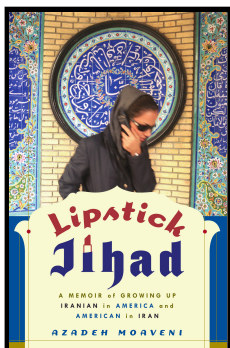
Tehran now belongs to this new generation that was very young during the revolution, and happily missed out on all that trauma. They came of age in the period when the revolution had become ridiculous, all the clerical kitsch had zero legitimacy among the majority of society. The key point is that no one is scared anymore, and everyone is just mocking the elephant in the living room. People say whatever they want, bribe to get their way, and live whatever sort of life they want, juggling when required, coasting when not. That doesn't mean people are not angry any more. They are deeply furious at the state of the country, and stressed out some, because public space is still dysfunctional. But that resentment is dynamic, you don't have a stagnant city where people are cowering.

The Axis of Evil speech ruined any medium-term chance for liberal politics in Tehran. Newspapers mute their criticism, intellectuals have quieted down, there's a real sense that the regime is in survival mode, and will no longer tolerate any dissent. So intellectual life, city politics, which was so vibrant before, is now shaded by cautious and self-censorship.

For a while web-loggers stepped in, and recreated all this political dynamism on the Internet, but the regime has caught on, and that sphere is vulnerable again.

Q: How do Iranians feel about the announcement by a prominent Iraqi Shiite that "there will be no turbans" in Iraq's new government, in part because individuals in Iran's own government warned against it? Do Iranians hope that a secular government in Iraq will have repercussions on their own political situation?

Continues Next Page



LIPSTICK JIHAD

Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran

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For review copies or interview requests, please contact:

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• **AQ&A with Azadeh Moaveni, the author of *Lipstick Jihad*** •

A: Iranians are stuck waiting for their regime to reform. That's a reality. So yes, there's a feeling that if the Iraqis end up with a Shiite government that is moderate and secular enough, maybe it will be increasingly difficult for the Islamic regime in Iran to insist that hard-line theocracy is the only option for a Shiite-majority state. Iraq is home to the holiest cities of Shiism, as well as its historical center of learning, so what happens there will certainly impact Iran, but it might not be immediate. More a slow, local example of how things could be very different, like you had in eastern Europe in the twilight of communism.

Q: As you point out in *LIPSTICK JIHAD*, sixty percent of the population of Iran is under the age of thirty. How would you describe the attitude of young people in Iran toward their government, the West, and the United States in particular? Do the majority of young people identify themselves as secular, or religious?

A: Young people in Iran consider their government bankrupt in most every respect—it's oppressive, inefficient, corrupt, and it cramps their style. Many of them have never even been to the West, but they associate things Western with the type of lifestyle they want. Personal freedom and individual choice, whether it's the person you marry or your job or the clothes you wear, are important to this generation, and that's associated with being Western. So it's not necessarily that young people want to alter the substance of their Iranian traditions, but they want the flexibility to choose how and to what extent they follow tradition.

For Iranian kids, the U.S. is this mega-symbol of everything they want but can't have – better jobs, better government, better cars. But on a deeper level, they embrace American culture as a protest attitude, since the clerical regime chants “death to America.” It's not easy for a fifteen-year-old to articulate how and why he finds Islamic theocracy repressive and irritating, but he intuitively knows that by eating hamburgers and wearing jeans, he's somehow saying he doesn't want that. So attitudes toward the U.S. operate on a bunch of levels, and there's a lot bound up in this pro-U.S. sentiment Iranians are so famous for. At the same time, they're perfectly aware and critical of U.S. policies in the region, so they're politically savvy but still yearning for what U.S. culture means to them.

Q: How did you decide on the title *LIPSTICK JIHAD* for your memoir?

A: The first time I returned to Tehran as an adult, this awful policewoman told me to wipe off my lipstick before I entered a theater. Then I noticed that all my female relatives were adept at taking lipstick on and off, nail polish too. It was a symbol of this stubborn resistance to being told what to do, a symbol of much deeper opposition that was taking hold in all realms of Iranian life. Lipstick also connotes eroticism, and I find Tehran a deeply sexualized city. Jihad, for all its new connotations in the west, is a very classical Islamic concept that means struggle. The two words together invoked so much of what I wanted to say about Iran.

Honestly, the title initially made me uncomfortable. It was edgy and provocative, and it needed explaining. But then I realized that was just fine, because Iran today is all about edge and provocation too.

I also chose it because young women's mode of dress became the most visual symbol of how Tehran had changed. Much of how Iran has transformed since 1998 is silent or verbal – attitudes, expressions, beliefs.

Continues Next Page

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Because on the outside, apart from a bunch of rip-off hamburger joints, Tehran looks the same. Unless you live with Iranians, the transformation in lifestyle and urban culture happens inside people's heads, or behind closed doors. But the way women look, this amazing urban resistance that started with an inch of hair and a smear of lipstick, is the one outward indication of this whole generation's rebellion.

Q: Why did you ultimately decide to go to live in Tehran as an adult?

A: I was quite sick of being a partial American and a partial Iranian and I thought if I went back, I had a shot at becoming "really Iranian," whatever that means. I had the usual rootsy homeland bug, and all the identity neuroses of second generation Middle Eastern kids. But more importantly, what made me stay there, is that I knew Iran would be absolutely central to Middle Eastern politics for my whole life, and I wanted to understand its internal dynamics.

Q: How does your life in Beirut compare with your life in Tehran, in terms of your personal freedom and your quality of life?

A: Beirut has this indomitable spirit that attracted me like a magnet, after living in Tehran. The Lebanese have had as much upheaval as Iranians, but there's an atmosphere of openness and tolerance in Beirut that I particularly admire. In Beirut, you don't have to live in an uptown bubble to be independent, like you do in Tehran. The Lebanese are socially very sophisticated, and pride themselves on it, to the point that people who are deep down very conservative pretend they're not, because it's so un-Lebanese to be dogmatic. In Tehran, if your lifestyle is Western, you're forced to live and socialize in a very exclusive sphere, and I find that very suffocating. Beirut has public space, which I missed desperately in Tehran. In cities where people live with their parents until marriage, this is critical.

Q: What is it like for you as an Iranian American living in Beirut? Do you feel compelled to respond to criticism of the American government?

A: When people make reactionary or ill-informed or conspiracy-minded criticism, I will respond, and say there are plenty of legitimate avenues for criticism, no need to indulge in the worst sort of hate-mongering, even if the other side is doing it.

Q: Have your experiences living in Iran and the Middle East affected your relationships with your family and Iranian friends living in the West?

A: I feel frustrated a lot, because most of them still live in 1979 attitudes, 1979 emotions. They're either scared or bitter or outrageously uninformed, and I feel like I'm talking to someone who might as well have no Iranian in them at all, for all they know. Not to say that I'm some sort of expert, but Iranian-Americans who think the regime is about to fall get on my nerves, because it really does a disservice to both reality, and to Iranians' struggle to get somewhere with this regime.

Continues Next Page

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Q: What do you feel is the biggest misconception about Iran? And about the Middle East?

A: That women's feet are bound, and that Middle Eastern people hate America. There are elements of truth there. Tradition is still repressive, and Middle Eastern people are horrified by the mess that is Iraq. But the extent to which women participate in Iranian society, and the reasons why they resent the U.S., are wholly misunderstood or unappreciated.

Q: Iran's nuclear ambitions have made it a target of the present American administration. Does the average Iranian want her country to become a nuclear power?

A: It's split evenly down the line. You have nationalist Iranians who thoughtlessly think "well why not, the Pakistanis have it, are we any less?". And then you have Iranians who are deeply skeptical of this regime's intentions, as well as its ability to prevent a Chernobyl, and they see no need to confront the West for a nuclear program we don't need. The Iraq war legacy has bred a discomfort with weapons and confrontation, so I'd say there is more reservation about this than is usually pointed out.

Q: You've just spent several months travelling through Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. What was the most surprising thing you learned on this trip?

A: The cynical journalist in me was amazed by the number of people who -- despite the ongoing deterioration of Iraq--still believe the United States is capable of, and inclined to, help improve their lives. Many young people, especially, lack the political baggage of their parents' generation, and are still prepared to give America the benefit of the doubt. I found this very exciting and a bit scary. Exciting in that we still have an opportunity to help these countries rebuild or move forward. Scary in that time is short, and in a few years this generation could turn as bitter and anti-American as their parents, if they don't see any dividends from the U.S. intervention in the region.

END

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