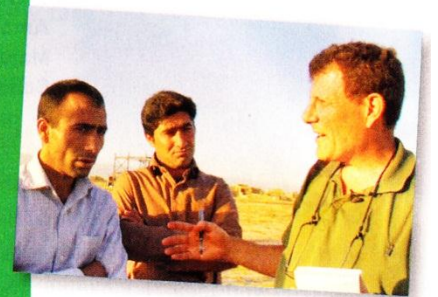


**At the Beach:** Swimming in the Caspian Sea, a man in a bathing suit, a woman in jeans and a headscarf (right); Kristof conducting interviews (inset).



# On the Road in

# IRAN



It's a much more complex country than we see on the news

BY NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

A critical challenge facing the United States and its allies is how to stop Iran's suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons in defiance of the United Nations. The nuclear standoff is only the latest confrontation between Iran and the West. The U.S. has had tense relations with Iran for more than 30 years—ever since young Iranians seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held 52 Americans hostage for more than a year during the Iranian Revolution.

For most Americans today, Iran conjures up images of burning U.S. flags, devout Muslims in prayer, or Iran's hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, calling for Israel's "annihilation." Last summer, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof spent eight days in Iran, traveling 1,700 miles across the country to speak not with government officials but with ordinary Iranians. What he found may surprise you.

One of the most harmful misunderstandings in the West about Iranians is that they are dour religious fanatics.

About half of Iranians are under the age of 25, and Iran has done a solid job of raising their education levels. I was struck by how many of them share American values, seeking fun rather than fanaticism. They seem less interested in the mosques than in amusement parks (which are ubiquitous in Iran).

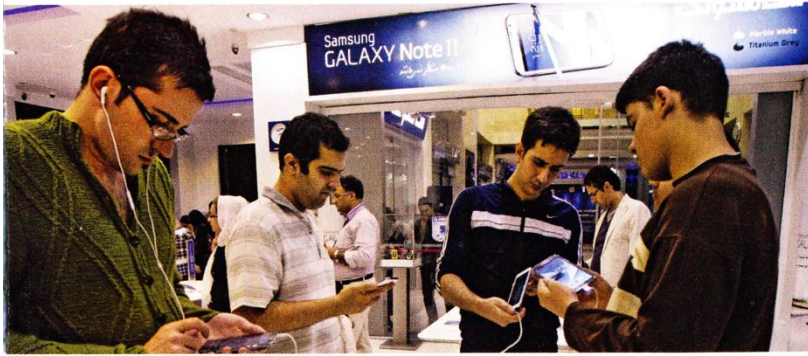
"Young people don't really go to the mosques," said a 23-year-old man in eastern Iran, cheerfully exaggerating.

▶ **WATCH A VIDEO**  
 Kristof's Iranian Roadtrip  
[WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM](http://WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM)





**Women discuss** Iran's unfair inheritance laws with Kristof (left); checking out new cellphones and computer tablets in Tehran (below); shopping in Tehran (right).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 2012 THE NEW YORK TIMES (CAPTURE FROM "MY IRANIAN ROAD TRIP" VIDEO); TRINITY MIRRORPIX/ALAMY; VAHID SALEMI/AP PHOTO

ed—mainly because of economic difficulties brought on in part by Western economic sanctions aimed at forcing Iran to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Those sanctions are causing bitter pain, yet a surprising number of Iranians seem to largely blame their own leaders for the woes.

"We can't do business as we used to, and our quality of life is getting worse," said a man who lost his job as a salesman. "We blame our regime, not Western countries."

### Authoritarian Government

It is very difficult to gauge public opinion in an authoritarian country, but it's clear that there are many government supporters, especially among farmers and less educated workers.

"Iranian people are happy with their leaders," Monad Omidvar, a 38-year-old farm laborer, told me as he played marbles with his friends beside the road near Mashhad. He has a ninth-grade education, and his only source of news is the government media.

Yet more common were those like the businessman in Adidas sandals and Ray-Ban sunglasses who scoffed, "The Iranian revolution was a mistake." Or the man at a roadside rest stop who sharply criticized America for bullying Iran, but added, "Our leaders have lost their

This man had joined the 2009 protests that erupted after allegations of election fraud.\* But then, he said, he was detained and beaten for several days, losing a tooth in the process. That soured him on political activism, and, like many others, he now just wants to go abroad.

Last summer, the Iranian government gave me a very rare journalist

visa, along with permission to drive unescorted across the country on a government-approved route from Mashhad in the east to Tabriz in the west, and back to Tehran. I interviewed people at random along the way, and as far as I could tell, I was not followed.

Compared with my previous visit, in 2004, people seem more discontent-

\*Mass protests began after the presidential election, believed to have been rigged in Ahmadinejad's favor. A brutal crackdown killed as many as 150 Iranians; more than 4,000 were arrested and tortured.



## Who's in Charge?

Iran is a theocracy, with unelected religious leaders wielding a great deal of power

### UNELECTED

#### Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei



The Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the military and appoints the head of the judiciary and six members of the Guardian Council.

He serves for life. Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed in 1989 to succeed Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, who led Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.

#### Guardian Council

Made up of six Islamic clerics and six jurists, this body must approve all laws passed by parliament and all candidates for parliament and president. In 2009, the council approved only four presidential candidates out of more than 400 who applied to run.

### ELECTED

#### President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

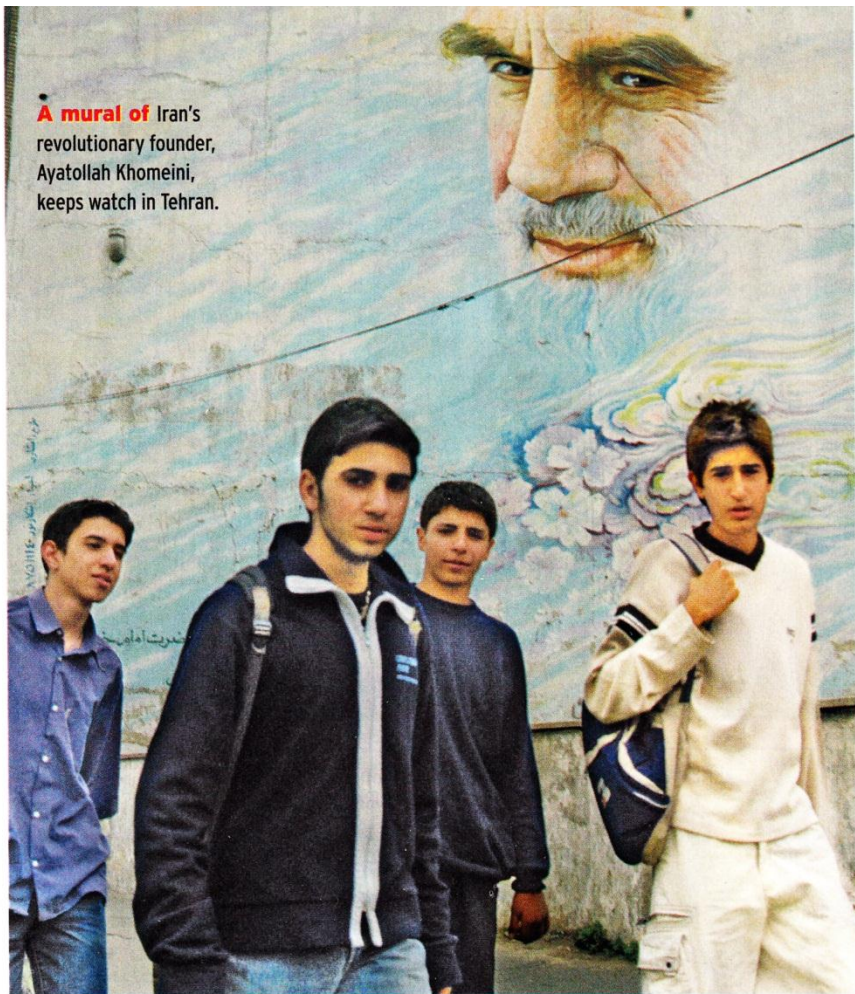


Presidents are elected by the people and serve no more than two consecutive four-year terms. Despite being the public face of the nation, their powers are limited.

#### Parliament

The 290 members of the parliament, known as the Majlis, are elected by popular vote every four years. All bills they pass are subject to approval by the Guardian Council.

A mural of Iran's revolutionary founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, keeps watch in Tehran.



marbles." Or the woman who has abandoned prayer and religious fasting, explaining, "The biggest factor that has turned people against Islam is this government."

At the grassroots level, Iran may actually be the most pro-American nation in the Middle East. All along my trip, I was showered with hospitality and gifts. "We love America!" a former military commando who now sells clothes gushed on my first evening in the spiritual center of Mashhad.

Iran's youth culture is nurtured by the Internet—two thirds of Iranian households have computers—and by satellite TV, which is banned but widespread. A BBG/Gallup phone survey conducted last March found that one third of Iranians acknowledged watching satellite television in the previous week, and the real number



## Iran may actually be the most pro-American nation in the Mideast.

may be much higher.

"The effect of satellite TV is very big," said one young woman, who was initially aghast when she saw Muslim women in Turkey wearing bikinis but gradually decided that there was more than one way to live.

Police stage raids to confiscate satellite dishes and can fine homeowners as much as \$400 for having them, but the raids aren't very efficient.

ALFRED'S/AP PHOTO (KHAMENEI); MORTEZA NIKOUBAZI/REUTERS/CORBIS (AHMADINEJAD); KAVEH KAZEMI/GETTY IMAGES (TEENS); BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES (MONEY)



"You recognize that it's the police taking the dishes away, and you just don't answer the door," said a shop owner in Gorgan. "So they take the dish and just go away," without imposing the fine.

Pirated music, videos, and video games are widespread. One popular—but banned—game is *Battlefield 3*, in which American military forces storm Tehran. In one home I visited, the kids were playing *Grand Theft Auto*. These young people are Iran's future, and they can be our allies.

### A Country of Contrasts

Americans think of Iran as a police state, but that overstates its control: Iranians are irrepressible. While I was interviewing people on a lovely Caspian Sea beach, a plainclothes policeman approached me. At first, I thought that the young woman I was interviewing was in trouble for criticizing the regime—but, no, her sin was rolling up her sleeves.

The policeman shouted at her. She shouted at him. Neither was intimidated. Finally, she covered her forearms a bit more, and he accepted a truce.

The confrontation was a reminder that Iran is a complex and contradictory country—in ways that don't register at a distance. Iran imprisons more journalists than any other country, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, yet it has a vigorous parliament and news media with clashing views (within a narrow range). Iran's regime sometimes embraces anti-Semitism, yet its parliament has a Jewish member.

Iranians gripe about their government without worrying about being overheard, yet participants in protests are tortured, gays can be executed, and the Bahai religious minority endures mind-boggling repression. Iranian women constitute almost 60 percent of university students and hold important positions in the country, yet under a new law, a woman can't even go skiing without a male guardian.

My road trip across Iran leaves me convinced that change will come—if we just have the patience not to disrupt the

## Iran & the U.S. Key Dates

### 1953 Backing the Shah

A coup engineered by the C.I.A. overthrows Iran's prime minister (who had previously nationalized the oil industry) and puts Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (*right*) back in power.



### 1979 Iranian Revolution

The Shah is overthrown and a fundamentalist Islamic regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini turns Iran into a theocracy. Iranian students seize the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and hold 52 Americans hostage (*right*) for 444 days.



### 2002 'Axis of Evil'

President George W. Bush includes Iran in his "Axis of Evil," along with North Korea and Iraq, which was then ruled by Saddam Hussein. The designation outrages Iranians.



### 2004 Going Nuclear

Iran restarts its nuclear program, which it insists is for peaceful purposes, and refuses to cooperate with United Nations nuclear inspectors (*right, Ahmadinejad at a nuclear facility*). The U.S. and the international community accuse Iran of trying to build nuclear weapons.



Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

### 2013 Today

Iran still refuses to allow U.N. nuclear inspections despite economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies. President Obama has said Iran cannot be allowed to have nuclear weapons, and Israel has threatened to launch military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

basic forces at work: rising education, an expanding middle class, growing economic frustration, and erosion of the government monopoly on information.

My guess is that the demise of the system is a matter of time—unless there's a war between Iran and the West, perhaps ignited by an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites. That,

I sense, would provoke a nationalist backlash and rescue the ayatollahs.

I think of a young man I met who said wistfully: "It's normal for a boy and a girl to want to hang out together. What's wrong with that?" The romantics are on our side and far outnumber the fanatics. We should bet on them, not bombs, as agents of change. ●