

Shahin & Sepehr: Two Hamsafars On a Road Less Traveled

By: Negar Anna-Ahkami

Shahin & Sepehr is Shahin Shahida, 36, on guitar, and Sepehr Haddad, 38 on keyboards. Their debut album, *One Thousand & One Nights*, reached Number 6 on Billboard. Their second release *e* is a more introspective follow-up that was nominated for album of the year in the New Age category by the National Association of Independent Record Distributors. Their most recent CD *ARIA* ranked number 23 on Billboard and is the third CD of their five record deal with the renowned label Higher Octave.

Shahin & Sepehr has been heard in a wide variety of mainstream venues: on radio stations nationwide, airline headsets, The weather Channel, General Hospital, World Professional Figure skating on NBC prime time, in commercial

stores like Tower Records, the Sharper Image, and The Nature Company where their albums are sold, and in international restaurants, nightclubs, and parties.

Although categorized and marketed as "New Age," their music is a lot more than that. It is multidimensional: the more you listen the more interesting it becomes. While easy on the ears, their music intricately weaves layers of melodies and tempos. As a result, listeners never get bored.

Shahin is the quiet one, with intense eyes and a soothing manner. His warmth, cool attitude and infectious charm are a breath of fresh air, especially in bureaucratic Washington, where he lives. (And he is not married.) A versatile and gifted performer,

Shahin takes you to far and wonderful places with his guitar.

Sepehr is the more vocal and nervous one; his speech is rife with excitement, movement, and metaphor. He and his wife Moana, a well-traveled American "dying to see Iran", recently had their first child, Kian. More the songwriter than a performer, Sepehr is so in sync with Shahin that he often creates his keyboard arrangements out of an intuitive sense of where Shahin will go with them on guitar.

Sepehr describes their musical dynamic as two painters working on the same canvas. Sepehr prepares the canvas, the frame, and background, and thus creates a general mood with his keyboards. On guitar, Shahin then paints chords and melodies of all shapes and colors. Like all great Iranian artists, they understand detail.

The Best of Both Worlds

With Shahin & Sepehr the same song can evoke a festive, dancey mood on one day, and yet heal a tired, wounded soul on another. "When you come in from a hard day's work," says Sepehr, "you might not want to listen to classical, [or] to music that has singing in it because that also can get tiresome. This is instrumental music that has a beat to it. So it's the best of both worlds."

Indeed, "the best of both worlds" can be used to describe the artists themselves. On the one hand, since childhood, the artists were predominantly influenced by American music: Shahin developed a taste for contemporary rock, while Sepehr has always favored folk

At the same time, their exposure to Persian culture and sound must have seeped into their souls. Any Iranian listening to their songs and moving preludes and interludes, such as *Golestan Interlude on e*, would realize this.

"Typically when people try to make the East and the West mix, you can see the seams." Says Shahin, "you'll hear a very cliché Persian or Arabic scale and then behind you'll have a rap beat or a rock beat." With Shahin & Sepehr, the interweaving of Persian and Western is extremely fluid and natural. Both the East and the West, as the title of the song *East-West Highway* suggests, are parts of their identity. Iranian movies like *The White Balloons*, and the musical success of Shahin & Sepehr and Strunz & Farah (Farah is Iranian) could prove to Iranian parents that Iranian artists, and their children, can become successful in this country for their art.

Roles & Responsibilities

These Iranian success stories, and their recognition in the mainstream American press suggest that Iranians can make known to the world the true, beautiful colors of Iran. But in order for the infiltration of Iranian artists in the media to be a meaningful victory for our community, we have a duty to actively support our own artists.

This means that we need to go out of our way to see Iranian films while they are in the theaters, and actually purchase the CD's of Iranian musicians. While Iranians have been very receptive with film many have a tendency to tape the music of their friends, rather than



purchase CD's at retail stores themselves.

While the natural tendency is to copy tapes, unfortunately this does a great deal of harm to Iranian artists. Billboard charts are entirely based on retail sales. *One Thousand & One Nights*, which reached #6, would have undoubtedly become #1 if members of the Persian community stepped up to purchase it on the market.

Shahin and Sepehr themselves sense a degree of responsibility to the community. While they choose not to rely solely on the Persian community for their success, they always make it a point to tell interviewers about their Iranian roots. Even when it might have been to their marketing detriment.

The very use of their real first names suggests pride in their

heritage. Various marketing groups suggested that they use a name "less difficult" for radio announcers and the public seeking to buy their albums to pronounce. Sepehr recalls, "we were thinking, we're Persian, these are our names, these are the closest thing we have to identify us as Persian, so we want our names."

After all, Ottmar Liebert is now famous and everyone pronounces his name with great ease. Names like Omar Sharif, Antonio Banderas, Mikhael Barishnokov, and Englebert Humperdink are no less exotic, and have become household names in this country. While it might have been difficult in the beginning, program directors of radio stations have learned to pronounce Shahin & Sepehr.

Given the strength and openness of their personal pride

artists got a lot of personal flak from the Persian community. This has everything to do with the packaging of *One Thousand & One Nights*. The cover of the CD described their music as "a blend of Spanish, Moorish and Turkish influences with elements of Roxy Music, Peter Gabriel and The Police."

Many Iranians viewed this as a slap in the face, given their purely Persian names, the title of the album, and the Song, *Persia*. Nothing was said of the Persian influence.

New to the record industry, the artists had little say in the packaging. Their own description, which included "Persian," was deleted and replaced with "Turkish" for marketing reasons—given that the label distributed CDs in Turkey, but not in Iran.

Shahin admits, "I'm sure there was some skepticism about the Iranian thing as well." Shahin and Sepehr were extremely vocal about their disappointment. The label understood, to a point, so that the second album, *e*, contained no such omissions.

If anything, *e* goes out of its way to mention their Iranian backgrounds, and their musical goal to "gradually introduce some of the classical Persian instruments, such as the tonbak, santur and the ney to [their] international audience. The album jacket even includes explanations of these instruments quoted from "The Art of Persian Music."

Compared with *One Thousand & One Nights*, are parts of their identity.

If there ever were such a highway, the artist have certainly traveled it. Shahin and

Sepehr have taken common journeys from Iran to California to Washington, D.C. Both attended the Tehran International High School at the same time. Although back then Shahin played in a band and Sepehr dabbled with the guitar and singing, they did not yet start playing together.

Sepehr moved to California in 1975 to pursue a degree in agricultural development at the University of California Davis. He reunited and began playing on and off with Shahin (who also moved out to California) when he moved to the Bay area for work.

In 1982, Shahin left for Washington, D.C. to pursue a degree in finance at American University. He played guitar and sang for a local band called Feast or Famine. Sepehr came later to work for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where he met Moana. At that time, Sepehr was persistent about getting back together with Shahin. "Shahin never wanted just to be playing the clubs. And he really didn't deserve to. I really believed in him from long ago."

Although Shahin was busy doing concerts in the D.C. area, Sepehr convinced him to co-write a song for the 20th anniversary of Earth Day—which they performed on the Mall in Washington. They also wrote and sang a song for Barbara Bush's Literacy campaign.

The artists eventually caught the attention of a local Washington D.C. radio station, which played their demo tape on the air. The program director, a recognized name in the music business, wrote an extremely impressive letter saying that if promoted right, the pair was bound for international stardom.

The music and letter got in the hands of interested record labels, including Higher Octave.

Grounded Bohemians

Despite having risen to heights that most musicians never reach, both artists remain grounded with non-musical jobs. Sepehr still works for EPA, and Shahin has his own real estate business. While Sepehr hopes that more Iranian parents would encourage their children to go after music and the arts, he advises aspiring artist to not give up their schooling.

He explains, "both Shahin and I followed our education and then went into this music business... We always have our education to support us. That's the beauty of it... I thank God every night [that] I have a job that I really enjoy... [and] a hobby that I love that might become a career."

Shahin can relate. Although as a kid, Shahin has a burning desire to make music and dreamed of stardom—until the record labels approached them, he would ask himself "am I doing the right things? Am I spending too much time on this? When is it going to pay off?"

Shahin's story is familiar. "I come from a family where my dad's a lawyer, my older brother is a banker, my younger brother's a lawyer, my uncles are all doctors—you know what it's like with Persian families." However, the pressure is not so much brought onto you from other people as it is by yourself, because you're constantly thinking... where is the income going to be coming from?"

Shahin credits his family for neither supporting nor discouraging his music. "They were very neutral, which in that

environment was a good thing because generally most people would not even be happy if their kids were playing in a rock-and-roll band in Iran. My parents...were really cool about it, they were like, oh good, he's got something to do! He's amused!"

Sepehr is optimistic about the next generation of Iranian artist, and the level of support and encouragement they can expect to receive from their families. He sees the success of the Iranian film industry as one reason why Iranian movies like *The White Balloon*, and the musical success of Shahin & Sepehr and strunz & Farah (Farah is Iranian) could prove to Iranian parents that Iranian artists, and their children, can become successful in this country for their art. Compared with *One Thousand & One nights* which

seems more heavily laced with upbeat Latin rhythms, *e* sounds more middle eastern. This may be due to a more prominent use of Persian melodies, instruments and minor chords. In fact, Shahin suggests that *e* stands, among other things, for "east" - "the direction from which the sun rises."

You won't, however, find this interpretation anywhere on the album cover. Shahin & Sepehr were told it sounded too political. While things thus still haven't changed, Shahin believes that they are chipping away at the negative mentalities very slowly.

In response to occasional criticism from Iranians that they should be even more vocal, Shahin points out, "we're not here to fight with anybody. [I]f you are going to make a point across, you've got to do it in a very subtle and educated

manner." Sepehr adds, "there is a difference between pride and propaganda."

We cannot ask our artists to use their art and public platforms to make up for nearly two decades of bad press. We can only ask them to on the one hand make us proud by doing what they do best, their art, and on the other hand, to be proud, and not hide their Iranian roots.

With their vocal pride, their rhythms that make us hit the dance floor, and melodies that ease tension take us to new land-and often back to the homeland-Shahin & Sepehr are giving us a whole lot more that we ask for. □

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The Birth of
Mithra or Mitre
(the sun)
Winter Solstice

YALDA

F. A. Sadeghpour
Boston, MA
1996

"Yalda" is a Syriac word for birth. Among Iranians the "Night of Yalda" indicates the night which preceded the birth of the sun. It is also another word for the night of winter solstice (December 21 or 22). It is the time when the sun enters Capricorn and is at its greatest distance from the equator in our hemisphere.

Man, the great seeker, is as time is counted, a newcomer to the earth, yet his achievements, his beliefs, and the shaping of his thoughts according to his environment seem ancient and old. From the first day man walked upon the earth, his curiosity, one aspect of his ability to think, has driven him to search out his own destiny. He gradually subdued the earth, and at an early time shaped it to suit his needs. He pondered the mysteries of earth when he encountered them, and he wished the natural elements to be in his favor. Anything in nature that was helpful he embraced, anything that caused pain and unpleasantness he feared. One of these events that man in the northern hemisphere

feared was the last ice age. A geological epoch - the Pleistocene, which covered most of the northern hemisphere, began to melt about 9,000 years ago. Flooding was happening quickly creating rivers, lakes and swamps.

Among the families of man who encountered such geological upheavals were the Aryans, Iranian ancestors, who occupied the foothills and pastures of the Pamir Mountains in Central Asia. They were aware that they should move and seek warmer and greener pastures for their domesticated herds of cattle, flocks of sheep and herds of small horses. They had no other choice but to migrate south and southwesterly toward the Iranian plateau and northern India. While migrating, which took several centuries, they noticed that the days were longer and the sun was more in evidence, and that the environment was warmer. Another reason the Aryans were inclined to seek new lands was to watch over their wealth, and their possessions such as their herds and flocks for which there

was a dire need for protection. If one was clever, he was wealthy, and that was a reason to be noble, therefore the meaning of the name of those ancient Aryans meant wealthy, clever and noble.

The early science of astronomy and medicine was being practiced among the Aryans at this time, and because of this ability "the night of solstice", the long night before the birth of the sun or Mithra was recognized and celebrated. To the ancient Aryans, since the sun changed many aspects of their environment gradually, the creed and belief of Mithraism developed years later when Zoroastrianity became a new creed, Mithraism was still being practiced among the various Aryan families. Zoroasterism is one of the oldest religions with a written book known as Avesta. By contact with the ancient Greeks, and later the Romans, the ideas and beliefs of Mithraism and Zoroasterism became widespread in those countries. Mithraism among Roman laities especially, became a popular creed.

Roman nobles and emperors believed themselves to be the descendants of Greek deities such as Zeus (Jupiter) or Apollo, etc. At times, due to their hubris, they even thought of themselves as one of the gods personified.

From the outset, the Aryans found it unreasonable to carve a piece of wood or stone, then worship the very same product of their own creation. Iranians found their source of belief and faith beyond terrestrial possibilities. Hence from the very beginning, mysticism became another strata of man's unity with the



unseen Creator whose radiance was prevalent through Mithra, the sun that defeats Ahriman, who is the source of evil such as illness, disease, wars, enmity, and natural calamities, and darkness is his dwelling place.

Today Iranians celebrate the

winter solstice out of respect to their heritage and forebears. Families, by gathering together in assemblies with many lights, singing, dancing, reading poetry, and imparting the tales of the past, wear out the longest and coldest night of the year. For more than a thousand years, the Iranian poets

refer to the long, dark tresses of their beloved and metaphorically equate them with the winter solstice.

The following poems are self-explanatory, and relate the night of solstice and its tradition and an ancient epic tale of a famous hero. □

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Rozbeh Pirouz, a second generation Iranian living in Vancouver, Canada recently was awarded a Rhodes scholarship. He began his studies there in the fall of 1996. He could be the first Iranian to have received a Rhodes scholarship. The following is a brief interview, conducted in Persian, about him and his background for the Mirass-e-Iran (Persian Heritage) Magazine.

Interview with Rozbeh Pirouz



Rozbeh Pirouz

THE AWARD

The Cecil Rhodes Scholarship - Cecil John Rhodes - 1853-1902. British imperialist and British magnate. Made a fortune (1870's) in the Kimberly diamond fields of South Africa. The country Rhodesia was named after him. The Rhodes scholarship was established by a stipend left by him under his will. The scholarship was meant to maintain British, American, and German students at Oxford University in belief that better understanding between these countries will serve peace of the world.

Rhodes scholarship presently is one of the prestigious awards received by any student. It provides for full-tuition and room and board for two to three years of study in any field at Oxford University in England.

- Tell us about yourself and your background please.

- I was born in Tehran, Iran on January 4, 1972. My mother Shadan Pirouz is an American educated architect. She is currently working as an architect in Vancouver where we are residing. My father is Behrouz Pirouz. He also was educated in the United States. He is a businessman and lives between Vancouver, Canada, and Mallorca, Spain.

- When did you leave Iran?

- My parents and I left Iran in 1980 after the Iranian revolution. I was then about seven years old and I was attending the second grade at Rostamabadian School in Tehran. Because I had a neurological condition which inhibited my muscular development and mobility, it was an important decision for my parents to decide what country to emigrate so that it

would be helpful for my needed medical treatment.

My parents eventually settled in Vancouver, Canada. As far as I remember from childhood, I was determined to be independent and to overcome my handicap. Fortunately, I received a great deal of family support (i.e. from my parents, grandparents, and other relatives). I think this support along with my own determination was a factor to help me to overcome my physical limitation. After we settled in Canada, and after several surgeries my mobility was much improved. Now I am physically self-sufficient.

I graduated from West Vancouver secondary school in 1989 with honors, and a diploma in the international baccalaureate program. I was also the high school debating champion of Vancouver.

- Which university did you

attend after your graduation from high school?

- I pursued my undergraduate degree at Stanford University. I graduated in 1993 in international relations with honors. While at Stanford, I was director of Stanford Homelessness Action Coalition, which is one of the largest public service groups at Stanford. I also spent two terms in Paris at L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris.

- Tell us about your post-graduate studies.

- I attended Harvard Kennedy School of Government after Stanford. I graduated with a masters degree in Public Policy in June 1996. My major project at the Kennedy school was to produce a blue print for the

development of a civil administration in the newly established Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank.

Currently, I am working on a project that will examine how to operationalize the concept of preventive diplomacy for international organizations such as the UN, and the OSC (Organization of Security and Cooperation).

- What are your plans for the Rhodes scholarship?

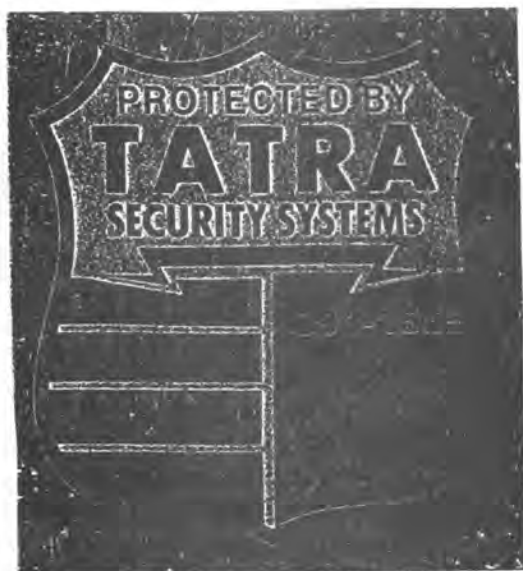
- I plan to pursue a doctorate in international relations and to continue the work that I am currently involved relating to preventive diplomacy.

- Do you have any message to give to second generation Iranians?

- I think based on my personal experience that there is never a shortage of opportunities in life, but that it takes certain determination to take advantage of those opportunities.

Young Iranians abroad, particularly in America, are confronted with a unique identity crisis. However, I do not think there is a choice between succeeding in this society and retaining a sense of ones heritage. Indeed one can reinforce the other. As an emphasis on education my family encouraged my academic pursuits and my personal advancement has given me a better means of exploring and understanding my heritage. □

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From

Strangers to Citizen - The Evolution of the Iranian-American Community

by: *Joseph C. Ayoub*

(Joseph C. Ayoub is a graduate student in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University)

The Iranian people have a saying: "God willing, you will never be a stranger somewhere." This expression reflects the unfavorable view the Iranian culture has of immigration. Iranians do not have a history of migration, nevertheless, they have left their homeland over the past century and a half, many coming to the United States. Given these cultural and historic circumstances, the Iranian community in America is arguably a unique one which merits a close examination.

The first immigrants from Iran to the United States arrived at Ellis Island. Between 1842-1976, these immigrants totaled only 34,000 individuals. By the early 1970s, there were over 10,000 permanent residents of Iranian ancestry in the United States. As contacts with Westerners increased during the 1970's in Iran, more and more people emigrated, especially students of American teachers in Iran who were encouraged by the friendly relations between the two countries under Presidents Nixon and Ford. The largest wave of Iranian immigrants occurred in the late 1970s as many fled the Islamic Revolution. The flow slowed considerably following the seizure of the American

Embassy in Iran on November 4, 1979. Thus, many Iranian students simply stayed in the United States, particularly in the mid-west, as some were not welcomed back to Iran while others disagreed with the new clerical government.

According to the 1990 census, there are 235,521 American citizens, less than 0.1 percent of the total population, who claim Iranian ancestry. Close to half of these citizens reside in the state of California, while the next four largest communities are in New York, Texas, Virginia and Maryland. Iranian-Americans are most numerous in occupations of a managerial or professional nature, followed by technical, sales and administrative positions. With respect to both household and per capita income, Iranian-Americans rank above the national average. In fact, Iranian immigrants are much better off educationally and economically than other political refugees. Recognizing this, the Iranian government has attempted, albeit with limited success, to persuade these expatriates to return to Iran.

As a community, Iranian-Americans are relatively new and not extensively integrated into American society. This

lack of integration or separateness from society is in part due to the sense of alienation Iranians feel about being in the United States, particularly those who arrived after the Islamic Revolution. Moreover, Iranians with American citizenship, even young people, do not feel like part of American society, rather they consider living in the United States a temporary condition while they await their eventual return to Iran.

Because of their education levels and achievements, Iranian-Americans tend to have high visibility at the individual level. Collectively, however, they have low visibility which may be partially attributed to discrimination directed against Middle Easterners and Muslims. Iranian-Americans have not wanted to call attention to themselves by voicing their concerns and opinions since the community enjoys socio-economic success. Like other Middle Eastern peoples in the United States, Iranians are often not well received by their fellow Americans who are bombarded by terrorist and fundamentalist stereotypes.

Although Iranians who have come to the United States tend to be rather conservative

politically, increasingly different political opinions and beliefs are found. In addition, many have little to no experience with the civic process. They have not participated in domestic politics, and are generally more concerned with the political situation in Iran. Recently, however, younger Iranian-Americans have begun to mobilize and to build coalitions with other communities. For example, Iranians were active in the 1994 local elections in Northern Virginia, working in cooperation with Afghani - and Pakistani-Americans. Of course, learning about the American political process must precede mobilization. Iranian-Americans face several challenges as they learn the political process. They have to communicate, share experiences, find common

ground, and learn from other ethnic communities with similar backgrounds and concerns.

If communication is the challenge facing the Iranian community, then organizations are the best way to foster this. Iranian-American organizations are mostly regional in nature and organized along professional and social rather than political lines. There are many locally-based cultural societies which are often unconnected, even within the same state. In the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area, for example, there is a small Iranian-American community composed of white-collar professionals. This community operates Farsi schools, hosts lectures, and has their own branch of the Republican party. Publications such as *CHANTEL*, a magazine published by the PAR Cultural Foundation with

focuses on Iranian cultural issues, and *SECOND GENERATION*, a publication for young Iranian-Americans, tend to tie the members of the community through the United States in various regions together. The Iranian-American Cultural Association (IACA), a new organization founded by Reza Behbehani in the spring of 1994 in Washington, DC, has numerous members in the metropolitan DC area as well as many "friends" around the United States, and is receiving national exposure.

As the Iranian-American community matures and asserts itself, fueled by the energy of the younger generation, perhaps its members will no longer consider themselves strangers in a foreign land and they may even adopt the American saying: "Home is where you hang your hat." □

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In the 1960s, the late Canadian media critic, Marshall McLuhan, predicted that future wars will not be fought by conventional weapons on the battle grounds, but rather by images portrayed by the mass media. Today, "the war of images" is in full-swing, and image-makers are busily packaging everything from soaps, toys, and breakfast cereals to presidential candidates, nations, religions, and ideas. Unfortunately, wars produce casualties, and in contemporary wars of images, the Middle East and everything associated with it, including religion, politics, language, climate, and custom has been under an unscrupulous attack by the Western media. Based on the prevailing Western media reports and perception studies, it is safe to say that the Middle East is perhaps the most misrepresented and stereotyped region of the world. It seems that whenever politicians need a scapegoat to boost their standing in the public opinion polls or a whipping boy to blame for their political shortcomings, failed policies, domestic problems, or an excuse for meddling in the internal and regional affairs of other nations, or a justification for selling arms, or a cause for exploiting the natural resources of other nations, or a campaign for gaining voters' sympathy, they resort to actions aimed at and against the Middle East or other developing countries. For instance, President George Bush bribed some nations and persuaded others to form a so-called coalition of allies in his war against Iraq. In the meantime, a highly orchestrated media campaign began to transform Saddam Hussein's Clark Gable image to a ruthless ruler, worse than Hitler. (Interestingly enough, just prior

Mass Media and American Perception of the Middle East

to Iraqi's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the U.S. government had vigorously supported Saddam's war against Iran for 8 years!) On the other hand, the American public relations firm, Hill & Knowlton, was hired by Kuwait's ousted rulers to stage media events aimed at stirring up the American public opinion in favor of military intervention. Hence, the Kuwaiti ambassador's 14-year-old daughter was trained by Hill & Knowlton to tearfully tell the U.S. Congress that she had personally witnessed Iraqi troops taking the newly born babies out of hospital incubators in Kuwait and throwing them on the floor to die. The reality was that she had not even been in Kuwait during Iraqi's invasion, but her emotional and eyewitness testimony was aired repeatedly on television networks in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world to stir up the public's sentiment in favor of the planned war! Of course the viewers did not know that they were watching a

staged event or an act. In the process, the American public opinion was manipulated, and Americans were skillfully deceived by the media and media handlers. Bush went to war and Saddam to his safe underground bunkers while his innocent people were tragically slaughtered and Iraq's infrastructures destroyed, not to mention the immense damages done to the environment. Bush triumphed and shed his "wimpy" image, and Saddam survived and continued to rule Iraq with an even a tighter iron-fist than ever before. Furthermore, Bush had successfully overshadowed his domestic political economic problems, had helped the oil companies to boost their profits by increasing the price of petroleum, had illustrated the military might of the U.S. to the world, had gained the excuse to establish military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and so on.

The Persian Gulf War has taught us many lessons, including the media's dependency on government and vice versa, propaganda techniques aimed at

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staged event or an act. In the process, the American public opinion was manipulated, and Americans were skillfully deceived by the media and media handlers. Bush went to war and Saddam to his safe underground bunkers while his innocent people were tragically slaughtered and Iraq's infrastructures destroyed, not to mention the immense damages done to the environment. Bush triumphed and shed his "wimpy" image, and Saddam survived and continued to rule Iraq with an even a tighter iron-fist than ever before. Furthermore, Bush had successfully overshadowed his domestic political economic problems, had helped the oil companies to boost their profits by increasing the price of petroleum, had illustrated the military might of the U.S. to the world, had gained the excuse to establish military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and so on.

The Persian Gulf War has taught us many lessons, including the media's dependency on government and vice versa, propaganda techniques aimed at

manipulating public opinion, government censorship of the media, and manufacturing or altering public perception. Another lesson is that in the final analysis when it comes to politics and the leader's self-interests people or ordinary citizens do not really matter, they can be easily sacrificed in battles for political and economic gains by lords of the global village and by those who own and control the communication channels. Another lesson is that, although the mass media's version of events usually differs from reality, it is the concocted media version or the manufactured reality that is internalized by people as reality. In other words, media portrayals of people, places, and events become perceptions and perceptions become realities. These realities or mind-set then become the basis for human interactions.

The recent Oklahoma bombing tragedy, the crash of a TWA Boeing 747, and the bombing incident at the Olympic games in Atlanta provide further illustrations of a mind-set that every terrorism act committed in the U.S. or abroad must somehow be linked to the Middle East. Relative to all these tragedies, the American media and the American security forces were quick to point their fingers at the Middle East. In every instance, assumptions and speculations by the media and government officials lead the American public and, in fact, the world public, to believe that a Middle Eastern country, perhaps Iran or Libya or Syria or Iraq or perhaps a Moslem fundamentalist group, might be behind these tragedies. For instance such speculations and assumptions lead the U.S. security forces to detain and search a Jordanian-American who happened to be on a flight

out of Oklahoma on the same day that the bombing tragedy took place. Furthermore, the TWA crash was a sufficient cause for President Clinton to sign a bill imposing strict economic sanctions on Iran and Libya amidst the tears of the mourners who had lost their loved ones in that crash. Of course, no journalist bothered to question the logic of that action. Were the two events (TWA crash and the economic sanctions) connected? If so, what was the connection or what was the proof? No one seemed to care! Once again, America needed a scapegoat to cast its ills onto. And the American media followed suit with such sensational headlines as "Who Wishes us Ill? The CIA is casting a wide net for those who hate America, including groups from the Middle East" (Time, July 29, 1996). Although President Clinton had immediately after the TWA tragedy cautioned the American media not to speculate until the cause of the crash was known, his action implicated both Iran and Libya. Furthermore, at an economic meeting in Europe, he unsuccessfully tried to persuade the G-7 nations to adopt his economic sanctions aimed at not only punishing Iran and Libya, but also companies that choose to invest in those countries. The Clinton administration has even accused Iran of being behind the bombing incident at a U.S. military base in Saudi Arabia. Although inconclusive, some media have reported that a Saudi dissident group was behind that bombing.

Based on the numerous accusations made against Iran, it can be concluded that Iran is indeed a powerful country whose influence and reach span the entire globe and whose



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resources are such that it can train and finance many political or terrorist groups throughout the world. However, such a conclusion falls flat on its face when one examines the sad state of the Iranian economy, including a disgruntled population, a high rate of inflation, widespread unemployment, and many other social and political ills that confront the Islamic Republic. Added to these domestic problems in Iran's negative image throughout the world that is induced partially by its government's actions against its political opponents, partially by dissident groups, and partially by the American media.

At this writing, we do not yet know the cause(s) of the TWA flight 800 crash, nor are we certain about the culprits of the Olympic bomb incident, but we do know that the Oklahoma bombing was carried out by one of over 200 of America's homegrown hate groups.

Although such amazing revelations may vindicate the Middle East, unfortunately, the prevailing public mind-set, fostered by the U.S. mass media and government officials, is such that the mere mention of the Middle East conjures fear, mistrust, hate, and terrorism. Hence, the general public unquestionably accepts any accusations of the Middle East for any act of violence, anywhere around the world! In such a milieu even the unrelated events become related - as illustrated by Mr. Clinton's signing of the sanctions bill in the presence of the families of the TWA crash victims.

Clearly, the current state of affairs is counter productive to both the U.S. and the Middle East as a whole. Hence, the anti-Middle East rhetoric and the American mind-set need to be changed in accordance with the realities of the Middle East -- the cradle of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the birth place of some of the earliest human civilizations such as the Egyptians and Persians. As any historian would attest, few regions of the world can match the contributions in arts, philosophy, science, medicine, language, and natural resources that the Middle East has made to the world and humanity. Suffice to say that even astronomy, the science that studies the universe, began in the Middle East over 5,000 years ago. Unfortunately, the American media tend to simplify; sensationalize, generalize, and, in the process, dehumanize the entire region by not only portraying the Middle East as a dangerous place, but as a place where terrorists are born, raised, and trained.

The reality is that the Middle Eastern people happen to be some of the most hospitable,

friendly, and kind people in the world. The reality is that the Middle Eastern countries, despite many economic, political, and social problems, happened to be among the safest (in terms of crime and murder rates) countries in the world. The reality is that peoples of the Middle East wish to enjoy a relative degree of freedom (e.g., economic freedom, political freedom, freedom of expression) in their daily lives and have the choice to democratically choose their political leaders. But, as long as power is viewed as an inherited matter, as long as there are self-appointed or externally supported Kings for life, Emirs for life, or Presidents for life, as long as people are kept out of their own political affairs, as long as leaders put their own self interests and foreign interests before their nations' interests, as long as people are deprived of the very basic necessities of life such as education, employment, food, shelter, healthcare, and safe drinking water, internal strife will continue. In other words, internal unrest or domestic violence can be caused by internal conditions and not necessarily by external forces. To this end, journalists need to provide context for their reports, search for the causes or roots of conflict or problems, and resist making hasty generalizations or quick assumptions.

In general, American journalists tend to report world events in accordance with their own ethnocentrism, through their American eyes, and largely in line with the views of their government, especially during conflicts and crises such as those mentioned earlier. Such ethnocentric reports coupled with the global reach of the American media often tend to be

more confusing than enlightening, entertaining than informative, sensational than factual, and biased than balanced. What is lacking in the American media coverage of the Middle East is precisely what the journalists should have learned in the journalism classes in colleges and universities: To be objective or impartial observers of events and report in an accurate, balanced, and fair manner.

It goes without saying that the contemporary mass media (newspapers, magazines, books, music, motion pictures, radio, television) largely determine our perspective of the world, the way in which we make decisions, the way in which we spend our leisure time, the way in which we perceive others, and most importantly, the way in which we interact with one another. Furthermore, media's interpretations of events can radically alter people's interpretations of reality. Considering that only a handful of media conglomerate control most news and information that is disseminated throughout the world and that these very same sources interpret reality according to their own interests, it is then no wonder that much of what we see, read, or hear has nothing to do with reality.

According to an American philosopher, Walter Lippmann, the depictions by the mass media are often superficial and misleading, often creating completely false pictures in our heads for the "world outside." Our "mental pictures" are then largely based on not only what media present to us but also on how people or places are portrayed by the visual media. It is then no wonder that American opinion as well as world opinion concerning the Middle East has been highly negative. According

to Professor Hamid Mowlana of the American University in Washington, DC, the media images of the Middle East to a great extent have their roots in the media's image of Islam. Indeed, the Islamic identity and the media's understanding of this worldwide phenomenon determine the procedure through which the events, policies, and actions are portrayed. Bosnia-Herzegovina with its large Muslim population in the heart of Europe provides an example of this image-making process that was also observed in the Persian Gulf War. Hence, the Middle East leaders and people, must not only avoid fueling the prevailing stereotypical images propagated by the Western media about Islam and the region, but must collectively, consistently, and consciously try to count these negative images by taking appropriate actions toward enhancing the status of Islam and the region as a whole. Of course, in a world where the time-tested strategy of "divide and rule" is still operational, it is easier to speak of cooperation than act upon it. Nonetheless, it is through a concerted effort that the negative portrayals of the Middle East image by the Western media and opportunistic politicians can be reversed.

Finally, it is true that the image makers, often of Western origin, have their own agendas, but the leaders and people of the Middle East need to understand those agendas and act, or react, in ways that do not perpetuate the existing stereotypical images of their nations and people. Although there are no magical formulas, creating a favorable impression requires knowledge about mass communication processes, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, and nonverbal communication, coupled with careful research, planning, coordination, and implementation. Image, reality, or what others think of us, are social construction, and the tools used to construct this structure are mainly the mass media. It is, then, no wonder that today huge industry exists in the U.S. and elsewhere whose job is to transform unknowns into celebrities, build or enhance images, destroy images, package candidates for political offices, change appearances, and in the process change or modify public perception. In the final analysis, there is only one reality and that reality is perception. And the basis for perception are the mass media.

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