

# Confessions of an Islamic Militant

## America Needs to Know

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As told to Allen D. Allen

I was born in Tehran in 1963. As my childhood progressed, Iran began to simmer and then boiled over with political and cultural strife. The popular religious leader, Ayatollah Mousavei Khomeini, was mounting an increasingly serious challenge to the dictatorial regime of the Shah, who had been placed on the Peacock Throne by Western powers intent on protecting their oil interests. My mother and maternal grandmother, along with their entire family, were devout Shia Muslims who enthusiastically supported the impending Islamic Revolution. I myself soon became a fervent Muslim. I learned to despise America, the Great Satan, and its dominant population of Christians, the unholy descendants of the Crusades. My father, by contrast, had served in the Iranian air force under the regime of the Shah. By the time I was 14 years old, he had been in the United States for training on four different occasions, spending up to two years at a time at American universities. Ironically, it was because of his firsthand experience with the Great Satan that my father decided to send me to the United States to be educated along with my older brother. A man of modest means who was determined to provide his sons with a good education, he settled on the Harding Academy, a boarding school for high school students in the small Southern town of Searcy, Arkansas.

My father's decision was easily rationalized, especially since I aspired to a career in science and mathematics. Satanic or not, America had placed its flag and its footprints on the moon. Nonetheless, my mother and maternal grandmother were gravely concerned about the corrupting influence the American culture was sure to have on my brother and me. Despite the financial hardship it imposed on my family, our mother decided to accompany us to the United States. She was quite concerned that we were vulnerable and would require her maternal protection, at least for the short time she could remain in the United States. As we prepared to leave, our grandmother offered a despondent farewell to her grandsons:

“My dear grandsons, I say good-bye to you with a very heavy heart. Please take care of yourselves in the United States because it is a very bad country. The people there are Christians and the most impure people there are. If they touch you, make sure you wash your hands because Christians are impure in the eyes of God.”

We departed for the United States in late 1978, just prior to a year that brought momentous change to Iran. In 1979, after many years of struggle, Ayatollah Khomeini finally overthrew the Shah's regime. He proclaimed that in order to serve God, all Iranians must now obey him, a standard proclamation made by the supreme clerics of the Shia branch of Islam. Those of us who are so indoctrinated, beginning in early childhood, predictably become reticent to do much of anything without first consulting our religious leaders. This practice is not merely antiquated as compared to Western civilization. Even before the Protestant Reformation and the usurping of religious authority by Henry VIII, the ultimate authority of European monarchs was limited to secular matters, notwithstanding the belief that royal authority was anointed by God Himself. In the theocracy of modern Iran, the divine right to rule is deemed ubiquitous and without limit. It was with this lesson impressed upon the very core of our souls that my brother and I left for the United States.

Upon arriving in Searcy, Arkansas, we enrolled in the Harding Academy where we were welcomed by the school superintendent. When he learned that we had meager funds, he took us into his home where we stayed until the school term began. When I realized that the superintendent and his family were practicing Christians, their hospitality and kindness seemed incongruous to me. When I asked my mother about it, she explained that this was simply an exception to the rule, reiterating that Christians are impure and a bad influence. As time went on, however, I became all the more confused by similar experiences. I was not about to admit it to myself, much less my mother, but I loved the years I spent at the Harding Academy. The school offered wonderful athletic facilities and a rewarding educational experience. Worse yet, I even enjoyed the time I spent in the company of the American students.

### **The Undergraduate Years**

Because the Harding Academy accepted the transcripts from my high school in Tehran, I was able to graduate in 1980. From there I enrolled in Utah State University in Logan, Utah not far from Salt Lake City. I was attracted to Utah State by low tuition and a top-rated engineering school. In terms of extracurricular activities, the University offered student groups an opportunity to meet and debate in the Student Union. Among those groups was one for students like me, who were visiting from Iran and supported the Islamic Revolution. Others included Muslims who were our enemies, such as communists from Iran and students from Iraq.

In 1980, Saddam Hussein saw the Islamic Revolution as an opportunity for a quick military victory that would extend his corrupt power across the ancient civilization of Persia (now Iran). His ambition reflected the Baath Party's desire for hegemony and subsequently led Saddam to invade

Kuwait after an eight-year war with Iran that ended in a stalemate. Meanwhile, the Student Union's confluence of warring student factions would make my next few years tumultuous, to put it mildly.

When I was 16 and still attending the Harding Academy, I began studying the martial art of Tae Kwon Do. About a year after I arrived at Utah State, the students who supported the Islamic Revolution formed a martial-arts class to teach all of their members Tae Kwon Do. Not to be immodest, I was the only one who wound up with a black belt. It cast me as something of a super warrior and I found myself engaged in several confrontations that quickly became violent. Among other things, this distracted me from my studies and I was eventually suspended by the University. Although my suspension was not as permanent as an expulsion would have been, it was sufficient to invalidate my student visa. In order to continue my studies, I would have to leave the country so I could apply for a new student visa. I used the opportunity to return to Iran to see my parents.

Back in Iran I visited the front lines of the Iran-Iraq war. After two weeks of witnessing the carnage, I was overcome by the romantic desire to pick up a weapon and join in the combat. After all, martyrdom is the traditional and desired fate of an Islamic warrior. Yet, in contrast to some of the Palestinian mothers who had exalted in the martyrdom of their sons, and despite her profound devotion to the Islamic Revolution, my mother was adamantly opposed to my martyrdom and wanted me to return to the United States so I could complete my education. Surprisingly, our local religious leaders agreed with her. They assured me that it was God's will for Iran to prevail against Saddam's legions, making the outcome a foregone conclusion. The real battle would be with America, they reminded me. By having the Americans educate me, I would be better prepared for the ultimate struggle against the Great Satan. Thus, it was with the blessings of my family and our religious leaders that I returned to Utah State. I still saw myself as a warrior for the Islamic Revolution. Only now my weapons would be books rather than bullets.

Having buckled down to focus on my studies, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering in 1985. During that same year I enrolled in Brigham Young University in Provo Utah to pursue a Master's Degree in Mechanical Engineering. I would receive my Master's Degree five years later in 1990. In 1991, I would enroll in the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, receiving my Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from that institution eight years later in 1999. It was during these ensuing years that I would encounter many hardships and challenges that would profoundly change me.

## The Graduate Years

A year into my Master's Program I was handed a new and formidable challenge, the responsibility of supporting my entire family. To make matters even more unrealistic, I was to continue pursuing my education. Since there was little chance of doing either as a salaried employee, and since I was blissfully unaware of all the things I had yet to learn about business, I used the family's remaining cash to buy an insolvent business that manufactured native American pottery and sold it to small shops throughout the American Southwest, shops that were owned by men from the Middle East. Soon I was traveling 15 to 20 hours a week making sales calls, all the while continuing with my studies, albeit at the pace of a crippled camel limping into the wind during a sandstorm in the Sahara Desert. Many were the times that I went to the wrong stores and said the wrong things to the wrong people. My father began to regret the honesty that had prevented him from becoming wealthy during the regime of the Shah. He told me that many other military officers had taken advantage of their positions to enrich themselves.

"I feel so terrible because I did not steal from the Iranian government when I had a chance to do so," my father said. "If I had done that, my son would not be humiliated and would not need to work so desperately. But me, I had to be too proud to steal. Because of this my son has to suffer. I would rather have God burn me in the fires of hell and spare my son from all these hardships," he lamented.

Eventually, however, my tenacity and ability to learn the ropes would turn things around and the business would begin to pay off. Indeed, even after I received my Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering, my job as a self-employed traveling salesman would continue as my vocation for many years to come. I was still struggling financially, however, when I fell in love with a young American woman who happened to be a practicing Catholic. We were married in 1989, a development that did not please my mother. Nor did it help matters that my wife was in the Army National Guard.

"You said you loved Islam and your country," my mother complained, "and then you turn around and marry an American soldier!"

In the confessional of the present exposition, I must admit that I treated my wife quite badly. I was still very much the traditional Muslim man. As such, I could not accept her habit of wearing makeup, her desire to dress in the fashions of her own culture, her flouting of the standards of Islamic modesty. I was unrelenting in my criticism and it put my wife in a constant state of apprehension. I was not unmindful of her feelings. But I was torn between my desire for a successful

marriage and the teachings of my own religion. The latter held that I would not be a real man if I allowed my wife to live in defiance of Islamic law. Indeed, I was told that a prominent Muslim cleric had said that men who allow their wives to wear makeup are no better than pimps because they supply society with prostitutes.

In 1991 my wife gave birth to our son, Joseph. This made things all the more difficult. But I believed that now I would be able to coerce my wife into embracing Islam for the sake of our son. I was wrong. In 1993 she finally told me, “I’ve had enough of you and your religion. I’m leaving.” I was stunned when she turned out to mean it. It would be a decade before our bitter divorce would be finalized. But from the moment she left me, I was tormented by her refusal to let me see my son, whom I loved dearly. She might as well have cut out my heart as cut me off from Joseph.

During the many years I had spent in America I had already seen a good deal of evidence contradicting the religious edicts that I, like all Iranians, had been taught. Unlike many Muslims, I had also read the Koran. But now, for the first time, I began to question the teachings of our religious leaders, the teachings that had cost me my son. How could this be what a loving and merciful God desired? I decided to read the Koran again. Only this time I would be looking for the standards of modesty that God imposes upon the women of Islam, or so say the religious leaders who purport to speak for God. I was astonished to discover that the Koran contained no such thing. No prohibition against women wearing makeup. No requirement that they wear veils. I began to realize that the high rate of illiteracy in the Muslim world serves to preserve the authority of its clerics, much as the Vatican had opposed translating the Bible from Latin into a living language. With further study of the Koran, I began to focus on passages that were ubiquitous and that could be taken as the commandments of a just and merciful God without self-contradiction: His desire that we extend to each other the respect and personal freedom that Americans take for granted; His desire that we treat each other with the kindness and compassion that America’s citizens had shown me from the time I first set foot on her shores.

I will always be a son of Iran. But I am no longer at its service to do battle with the “Great Satan,” which turns out to be anything but. A radical Muslim no longer, I have traveled a long and difficult path to become a loyal Iranian-American. God willing, others will read the Koran for themselves and follow in my footsteps. The trail, my brothers, has been blazed.