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LETTER FROM TEHRAN ELECTION, MONITORED

The tragic farce of voting in Iran.

by Laura Secor
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Voters outside the Al Javad mosque, in Haft-e Tir Square, in Tehran. A government campaign presented voting as an act of defiance against the West. Photograph by Newsha Tavakolian.

On February 29th, two days before parliamentary elections in Iran, I joined a few dozen foreign correspondents—along with official handlers—in the parking lot of the Laleh, a formerly five-star Tehran hotel with tatty rooms, an ornate lobby, and a surfeit of eyes. We had come to Iran to cover the election, but we were told upon arrival that there would be a compulsory program. Its first order of business was a bus trip to the Alborz Space Center, where we would learn about Iran’s new remote-controlled satellite.

Our bus, clearly in no hurry, rumbled westward along streets of low-slung storefronts until we'd left the capital; it traversed the neighboring city of Karaj, passing a string of industrial plants, and reached a clearing in the midst of sprawl. The space center was a modest glass-fronted building an hour and a half's drive from any conceivable election activity in Tehran.

The regime had bused us all this way to show us a PowerPoint presentation. No one at the space center seemed to speak English, so one of our handlers stepped in to translate. He said jokingly, "I am not a member of Iran's space program, so please don't put that in your reports. I really don't want to be the next Iranian scientist to be assassinated." (Since 2010, four scientists connected to Iran's nuclear program have been killed.)

Iran, we learned, had become the world's tenth nation to launch satellites into space, despite international sanctions denying it foreign-made parts and expertise. Video of a rocket launch was set to a Middle Eastern techno beat. "We don't wish to dominate the world by launching rockets," the voice-over explained, in Farsi. "We just wish to serve mankind under the auspicious supervision of the Twelfth Imam, peace be upon him." The satellite's technical specifications flashed across the screen, in English. Several slides referred to the satellite's temperature in space on various "days after lunch."

An Italian reporter asked if the satellite had military uses. No, a staff scientist replied. It monitored weather patterns. If this little excursion was a show of force, it was not because Iran had launched a satellite but, rather, because the regime was no longer even trying to mask its coercive nature. We were here to waste our time, and the Iranians didn't care who knew it.

The last time that most of the world peered inside Iran was in June, 2009, when, for two searing weeks, the Islamic Republic cracked open. In what came to be known as the Green Movement, a series of mass protests contested the official results of the Presidential election, which granted a second term to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has held the office since 2005. The Basij, a state-sponsored militia, crushed the demonstrations; photographs and furtive cell-phone footage captured young people in green fleeing down broken sidewalks, motorcycles at their heels. By the time of the Arab Spring, in early 2011, Ahmadinejad's election-year rivals, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, had been placed under house arrest, their mid-level operatives imprisoned and forced to confess on television to international conspiracy, their movement dubbed *fetneh*—"the sedition." As the regime silenced the country's internal press and shunned Western reporters, the world lost sight of Iran's domestic life and focussed instead on its nuclear program.

Iran reopened its doors to the foreign press for the March 2nd elections, but the moment was an especially sensitive one. International tensions over Iran's nuclear ambitions were at a peak, a European embargo of Iranian oil was set to take full hold in four months, and Israeli officials were threatening to strike Iran's nuclear facilities. "You are in a small box this time," an Iranian journalist cautioned me. My visa was for only five days.

Yet Iran, vast and restive, had a way of revealing itself, even in bad times. The Green Movement had been forced underground, but it remained a preoccupation, even among hard-liners. One day, my handlers directed me to a campaign event: a debate among conservative parliamentary candidates at Tehran University, organized by the Basij. The room was filled, and my translator and I stood in the back.

A brave soul approached the microphone and inquired, in Farsi, "If we object to the policies of the *nezam*, what recourse do we have?" In Iran, the word *nezam*—"the system"—refers to the country's unusual political structure, which combines a theocracy, ruled by a Supreme Leader and his executors, and a republic, with elected officials and public debates.

One of the panelists, Hamid Rasai, a white-turbaned cleric in an olive-green robe, replied, "Most people don't think like you. Most people are from the Basij. You who complain are in the minority."

The crowd roared with applause. Rasai represented the Steadfastness Front, an arch-conservative group of parliamentary candidates associated with a cleric, in Qom, who had once remarked that anyone offering a new interpretation of Islam should be punched in the mouth.

Rasai's dismissive remark was the reverse of a claim that I had often heard from Iranian reformists: that only a fifth of the populace supported the Basij and that most Iranians were reformists or liberal-minded. Neither appraisal was verifiable in a country without reliable polling. But their concurrence conveyed a different kind of truth. Iranian society had become not just divided but adversarial, with entire communities denying one another's existence.

A Basiji accosted my translator. Foreign correspondents were not welcome, she told us. "No one invited you."

A questioner asked the panel about the Green Movement: "If the system knew what would happen

after the Presidential election—that there was a plot—why didn't they stop it from the beginning?"

Zohreh Elahian, a close ally of President Ahmadinejad and the unlikely chairperson of the parliament's committee on human rights, took this question. "It was an election with candidates," she began. "And suddenly we faced candidates cooperating with anti-revolutionaries and foreigners. The candidates themselves got involved in this plot. Suddenly, we faced many people on the street. They thought it was a good opportunity to do what they'd wanted for the last thirty years—to topple the system. The United States Congress assigned money to this plot. The Zionists were involved inside and outside Iran. Any other system would have collapsed, but this system was able to resist. The Leader said to follow the law. He told the candidates not to ask people to come to the streets, but the candidates did anyway. Some people were killed, and this created good propaganda for the foreign media."

Rasai interrupted. "The system knew they were plotting, but if Mousavi had been disqualified you people would have objected," he said. "Young people wouldn't have accepted that we could guess he wanted to conspire."

The young woman from the Basij kept badgering my translator, though she would not meet my eyes. My translator's phone rang. It was the translator for a German journalist who had walked in with us, saying that we should go now. One of the Basijis had just ejected the German. My translator, rattled, tripped over the threshold as we left the room, and went sprawling on the linoleum. We did not look back as we rushed toward the exit.

On the way out, I glanced through an open doorway, into a dim cafeteria with yellow brick walls. I had been there in 2005, on the day that Ahmadinejad was elected President. Then student activists, both leftists and liberals, had crowded the campus. I had talked with them casually in that room. A liberal activist, with gelled hair and a short-sleeved polyester shirt, had spoken disdainfully of reformists who sought to effect change by running for office. They only burnished the system's legitimacy, he had told me. Today, the cafeteria was empty. Outside the campus gates, Tehran lay mute and forbidden. Iran was holding an election and seemed truly afraid that nobody would come. The only other national election scheduled since 2009—for city councils—had been postponed. A parliamentary election was too important to postpone but not necessarily exciting enough to overcome voter apathy and calls for a boycott. And so the government had organized a get-out-the-vote campaign that equated domestic submission with international defiance. Vote, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei urged Iranians, because it would be "a slap in the face of the enemy." Vote in order to show the Americans your support for the *nezam*. Vote because the enemy would be baffled and defeated by the sight of Iranians casting ballots, which was really a form of genuflection before the Supreme Leader. Purple billboards festooned Tehran's byways, proclaiming the enemy's horror of the Iranian voter.

At an election rally in the southern Tehran suburb of Shahr-e Rey, I heard Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, a former speaker of parliament and a faithful lieutenant of Khamenei's, tell a story. In 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began preparations to leave his exile, in Paris, foreign journalists and politicians told him that it would be dangerous to return to Iran while it was in the throes of revolution. "And Imam Khomeini said, 'I thought, Why are all these foreigners insisting that I shouldn't go back to Iran? And then I realized that it would benefit the Iranian people and damage the foreigners.'" So it was, Haddad Adel concluded, with voting in the Islamic Republic's 2012 parliamentary elections.

Although the emphasis on foreign threats was surely heightened, the underlying message—that voting was a show of the people's submission to the Iranian state, and not vice versa—was not new. During midterm elections in 2006 and 2008, more than one conservative voter had told me that voting was more important than his health—indeed, his life—and had gone on to say that all the candidates were the same. In fact, there often were major differences among them. But Iranians who regarded voting as an exercise of civic power had increasingly stopped voting, feeling that their choices had been circumscribed and then ignored. For the discriminating fundamentalist, Iran's elections offered many choices; but, by and large, this cohort didn't care about choice. Under the *nezam*, with its autocratic and democratic elements in perpetual tension, Iranians were neither subjects nor citizens, and they reacted with appropriate confusion.

The system had purged itself of contrary elements so many times that it could fairly be described as bulimic. Yet it had a curious way of reproducing dissent within its ranks. Since 1979, the regime had, successively, rid itself of liberal nationalists, anti-clerical Islamists, Islamic leftists, pragmatic conservatives, reformist Islamists, and moderate reformists. This year's parliamentary candidates were virtually all affiliated with what had once been called the United Fundamentalist Front. The Front had split into sixty overlapping factions, kindly grouped by most analysts into a mere thirteen. Though the conflict among these factions was surprisingly overt, the ideological spectrum was the narrowest it had been since

the Revolution. It was as though the contest between Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich were the whole of American politics.

There was a fabular quality to politics in the Islamic Republic. Those who amassed power by purging others ended up getting purged. As the government tilted farther rightward, the old hard-liners became the new reformers. (Their critics would say that they began championing free speech and representative democracy only when they were excluded from the centers of power.) Now it was President Ahmadinejad's turn to go from enforcer to target.

Though Ahmadinejad owed his political life to Khamenei's favor, he had challenged the Supreme Leader over control of the intelligence and foreign ministries. Now Ahmadinejad's fealty to *velayat-e faqih*—rule by Islamic scholars—was in question, and many of his allies had been disqualified from running for parliament. His rivals contended that the President had fallen under the sway of a “deviated current,” and was intent on reducing the role of clerics in government. (On March 2nd, Ahmadinejad's allies were resoundingly defeated, but the President had one consolation: the parliamentarians eager to impeach him also did poorly.)

Ahmadinejad, with a year left in his second term, was a lame duck. But a few months before the start of the campaign season the Supreme Leader attempted to undermine him further, floating a plan to eliminate the post of the Presidency and institute a more docile parliamentary system. You could hardly blame Khamenei: from the time he assumed the Leadership, in 1989, Presidents had not given him a moment's peace. From Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami to Ahmadinejad, they had established independent power bases, challenged the Leader's authority, and pursued policies that took effort to dismantle. To eliminate the Presidency would require a constitutional amendment, something that could take more than two years; but it would finally quiet the political scene and clarify that Khamenei was in charge.

The afternoon before the parliamentary election, I went to see one of Ahmadinejad's closest aides, Ali Akbar Javanfekr. He was the President's media adviser and the head of Iran's official news outlet, the Islamic Republic News Agency. Nevertheless, in November security forces had raided IRNA's offices with tear gas and handcuffed Javanfekr. He had been accused of multiple offenses, including undermining the official policy on women's dress. A magazine he published, under the IRNA umbrella, had printed an article suggesting that the black chador was not a traditional Iranian garment. The day before I met Javanfekr, he had learned that he would serve a year in prison and be banned from political, cultural, and media activities for five years. His transgression was “insulting the Leader.” It was a clear warning to the “deviated current.”

Javanfekr is heavy-set, with a helmet of salt-and-pepper hair and a trimmed beard several shades lighter. He seemed sad and stunned, as if the story of his life suddenly made no sense to him. He was not a provocateur or a dissident, someone who might have expected to go down fighting. He was an official of a state that disapproved of such people. If he wasn't that person anymore, who was he?

“Those who accused me of cursing the Leader wanted to destroy my face and image,” he told me earnestly. “It is not true. I love the Leader. I have been working closely with him for eleven years.”

Javanfekr speculated that Ahmadinejad's rivals felt threatened by the President's popularity with the masses, and wanted him and his allies eliminated from the scene. Ahmadinejad's circle did not think that way. “There should be an open atmosphere, so anybody can move in and have his or her influence,” Javanfekr said. “The decision of the people should be valued and respected.”

These were striking words from a member of Ahmadinejad's inner circle. I asked Javanfekr if he had rethought the events of 2009. Should the reformists, too, have a chance to compete? Javanfekr was not prepared to go that far. There was a crucial difference between his situation and that of the reformists: the reformists' views were wrong.

“Our protest is that Ahmadinejad supporters have been disqualified from the parliamentary elections,” he explained. “Because we believe everybody should be there and take part. When I say everybody, I mean everybody who believes in the political system.”

There was exactly one person within the conservative firmament who called for a critical reckoning with the events of 2009, arguing that it had been a mistake to put down peaceful protests with violence, and that dissent should not be a crime in the Islamic Republic. This was Ali Motahari—to my mind, the most interesting figure on the Iranian political scene. He is a conservative member of parliament, representing Tehran, and a scion of the revolution. One of the city's major thoroughfares and countless smaller streets are named for his father, Ayatollah Morteza Motahari, a revered Islamic scholar who had been close to Khomeini. Now the son had become the enfant terrible of the fundamentalist bloc.

Motahari had been leading the charge against Ahmadinejad in parliament. He had called for the President to appear before parliament (and questioned him when, in March, he came); he had even called for the President's impeachment, citing budgetary irregularities and financial improprieties. But Motahari was not an ally of Khamenei. Rather, he dared to suggest that the Supreme Leader's powers were not all-encompassing. He got away with reinterpreting aspects of *velayat-e faqih* in this manner, mainly because his father was one of its authors.

Motahari had a sour expression, recessive and thin-lipped, beneath a dark brow. His rivals accused him of pandering to the "seditionist" vote. Hossein Nejabat, a nuclear physicist and a member of parliament close to the Supreme Leader, told me that Motahari naïvely insisted on seeing 2009 as a domestic dispute over an election, rather than as a showdown between the regime and an international conspiracy. At a campaign event in February, Motahari said that forty to fifty protesters had been killed on a single day in June, 2009. When his debating partner protested that even the BBC hadn't reported such large figures, Motahari retorted, "The number of people killed was much higher than this." The interior ministry first denied Motahari's bid to compete in the March election, but he was reinstated by the Guardian Council, the powerful clerical body that vets political candidates.

I saw Motahari address conservative students at a women's university called Alzahra. He appeared onstage with a representative of the Steadfastness Front, before an unruly audience that hurled questions out of turn, booed, cheered, and broke into chants.

"The Leader knows that his powers are limited," Motahari declared, to wild applause and some heckling. "Some people try to convince him that he can do whatever he wants. But he heeds his limitations."

His debating opponent submerged Motahari's heresies in a wave of obsequiousness. "The Leader has enormous influence," he told Motahari. "Condoleezza Rice once confessed that, after a one-hour speech by the Iranian Leader, the plans of a hundred scientists had to be changed. . . . Somebody once said that if you went to the moon and looked down at Earth, you would see two countries: the United States and Iran. Even if you compare the time the Americans put into collecting information on Russia during the Cold War, it is not comparable to what they are doing now with Iran. First and foremost, we in the Steadfastness Front are followers of *velayat-e faqih*. We have no relationship with the deviated current or with the *fetneh* current."

A young woman in the audience spoke out. "We are all, here, in favor of *velayat-e faqih*. But if the people say they don't want *velayat-e faqih* they don't want it. We're not animals."

The crowd turned hostile, chanting, "Death to those who oppose *velayat-e faqih*!"

"Members of parliament are representatives of the people, not of the government or *velayat-e faqih*," Motahari said, in a tone bordering on insouciance. "We should not interpret *velayat-e faqih* as a monarchy, which means cruelty and oppression." He added, "You young people don't know *velayat-e faqih*. You should read my father's books."

The young women booed him—as much for his condescension, it seemed, as for his iconoclasm. But Motahari was undeterred. "Some people say *velayat-e faqih* is higher than justice. You can't say that. Not even God is higher than justice."

Motahari strode out of the auditorium early, murmurs of outrage trailing him like a motorboat's wake. Outside, women who had not attended the event circled him, announcing that they were boycotting the parliamentary election. Feebly, the candidate echoed the official line: they should vote, he told them, because of the global hostility toward Iran.

Motahari evaded me as though I were a member of the paparazzi. He shook the students loose, too, then darted through the campus—a man without a clear constituency but with a golden name that, for now, allowed him to say nearly anything.

Late one afternoon, a Green Movement activist named Amir took me for a drive. In Tehran, cars are the intermediate space where much of life is lived. It takes an hour to get virtually anywhere in the traffic-choked capital, a skein of alleyways and dead ends. Public places are monitored; inviting a foreigner into your home arouses suspicion. In a car, you are finally nowhere, which is sometimes where you truly want to be.

Amir wasn't a hero or anybody famous. He was an ambitious, clean-cut, thirty-four-year-old computer handyman from the educated middle class. During the unrest over the 2009 election, he developed an algorithm—using Google Maps, his knowledge of Tehran, e-mails and photographs from friends, and his own observations on the ground—to determine crowd size during demonstrations. Through a network of journalists, his numbers made it into international press reports, until they didn't. On February 11, 2010, the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the international media reported a lacklustre turnout

for the Green Movement's counter-demonstration. It was not what Amir had reported. He couldn't remember the numbers now, just his certainty that the demonstration was enormous, and the feeling that the outside world had stopped paying attention.

Unlike Amir, the demonstrators came mainly from the lower middle class. At night, Amir would go to parties with his friends from what he called "the Gucci crowd." He told me, "None of them were in protests. Just me showed up at those parties, red in the face from pepper spray. My own brother and sister didn't go."

One day in the fall of 2009, Amir's car broke down outside a traditional desert village in central Iran. A man on a motorcycle offered him a lift. Amir sized him up as "exactly the type of people that I think may vote for Ahmadinejad." The man asked Amir if he was from Tehran and, if so, what was happening there. "I was cautious not to expose myself as an activist," Amir recalled. "I told him some people shout 'Allahu Akbar' from the rooftops. He said, 'Bravo. We admire you people in Tehran. We want to gather a group to go to Tehran for protest from here. Unfortunately, we cannot do anything here, because one pro-government guy in a quarter can sell'—that was the word he used—'all of the people. We are afraid of those Basiji guys in the town. Everybody knows each other here.'"

Amir concluded that the opposition was wider and deeper than he had known. "There is a big layer of people in Iran who favor changes more radical than they would have two years ago," he said as he drove us through thinning evening traffic. "But the dictatorship, the censorship—they don't allow us to see each other."

In the summer of 2009, Amir was a reformist. He believed that the system could be democratized from within, and so he voted in every election. No longer: the parliamentary election of 2012 would be the first one he sat out.

He remembered the precise moment he changed. November 4, 2009, was a government holiday commemorating the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran. Green Movement activists took to the streets, chanting "Death to Russia" instead of the officially sanctioned "Death to America." Amir was in Haft-e Tir Square, not far from the Embassy site. On YouTube, there are videos from that spot on that day. A green balloon bobs over the heads of a crowd that grows denser by the minute, people ambling and weaving while chanting Mousavi's name and "The political prisoners must be freed." Suddenly, the crowd heaves to the right, fleeing the square, pursued by men in fatigues. The action moves off-screen; the camera pans uselessly, to the sound of screams.

That day, Amir felt something in himself that he did not recognize. "I don't like hunting, I don't like to harm anything," he said. "But, that time, a feeling was rising in my body and I thought that I can kill them." He added, "In the street behind the square, it was the first day that the slogan 'Where Is My Vote?' changed to 'Down with the Leader, Down with Khamenei.'"

Amir was depressed for a year after the regime crushed the Green Movement. "When you try so much and you don't get results, you get a kind of feeling like you can't do anything," he said. "I stopped reading the news." He still went to demonstrations, like the one held in Azadi Square on February 14, 2011, the day after Mousavi was placed under house arrest. Amir covered his eyes as rubber bullets flew, worried that they might blind him, and feared that a stampeding crowd might trample him. Military vehicles covered the square, even the grass: "And huge guys! I don't know where they get these people, N.B.A.-size people." The demonstrators threw rocks.

Amir's reformist views had curdled to something close to nihilism. He told me that the narrowing of the political space was ultimately a good thing. "The more radicalized the system, the easier to break it," he said—though with what movement, and by what means, he did not know. The opposition was not dead, he insisted, only dormant. "Right now, it looks like everybody went back to their lives. But it's still there, it's aching."

I asked Amir how he felt when, a year and a half after Iran's movement was defeated, demonstrating citizens toppled repressive governments in Egypt and Tunisia. "The problem with the Green Movement was that the goal was not to change the system," Amir said. "It was to change just a little part of it. And, since your horizon is not toward changing the system, you're scared to put everything you have into it." Even if Mousavi had assumed the Presidency, he explained, the intelligence ministry would have remained the same. Its agents could "come to your place later." Unless the government changed completely, "the system could still kill you."

The sky was dark, and he had parked the car on a quiet street. I asked him how it felt to be called a seditionist. He said that if he still believed in reform it might be hurtful. But when you've ceased to feel that you can correct the system, he said, "you don't give a damn what they call you."

On the eve of Election Day, my translator informed me of a last-minute change of plans. At eight in the morning, all the foreign correspondents were to report to the Laleh Hotel. From there we would be bused to polling stations. There would be no exceptions.

An Iranian state-television reporter and a cameraman sat at the front of my bus; intelligence agents sat at the back. Our first stop was Hosseiniyeh Ershad, a blue-domed lecture hall and mosque, in northern Tehran. In the nineteen-seventies, it had been a font of revolutionary activity. In recent years, it had reliably been one of Tehran's busiest polling places, with lines down the street at all hours, even for city-council elections. This morning, however, it stood nearly empty, except for representatives of the Iranian state media, who had fanned out to cover our arrival. (I appeared on Iranian state television that night, declining to appear on Iranian state television.)

A young woman, in what looked like a high-end chador, approached me with purpose.

"Are you looking for someone to interview?" she asked, in a plummy British accent.

She was a twenty-nine-year-old electrical engineer who had spent half her life in England. Why, she demanded, did the Western media not report the truth about Iran? "I do follow all media," she explained, sounding a bit like Sarah Palin. In 2009, the Western press had exaggerated the size of the street demonstrations. Iranian elections were freer than American elections: one could never guess their outcome. "Our country is a lot more democratic than other countries," she said.

The next stop was in the east of Tehran: a mosque in Narmak, Ahmadinejad's home neighborhood. Many people were voting here, and Iranian state television was again on hand to track the foreign press. To elude the cameras, I stepped out of the mosque. Earlier that day, I had run into an independent Iranian reporter. Hang back, he had advised: if I played my scripted part, I would become a "tool of despotism."

The mosque was on a busy square, and a pedestrian overpass emptied into the plaza, mixing passersby with the voting crowd. My translator and I approached a stocky man in a windbreaker, who was standing on the edge of the square with a friend. He came from Kermanshah, a Kurdish city near the Iraqi border. "I didn't vote, but I have a message," he told us, in Farsi. "It's a problem for the Americans if they support the M.E.K.—Iran will never cooperate with them or listen to them as long as they support the M.E.K." He was referring to the Mujahideen-e Khalq, a guerrilla group dedicated to overthrowing the Islamic Republic; the U.S. government officially considers it a terrorist organization but has reportedly provided its members with arms and covert training.

An older man strode over. "The nation of Iran will vote!" he yelled at me, in English. "I have a message for the United States nation. Barack Obama is not really your President. He is just a puppet in the hands of Jews and Zionism."

The man from Kermanshah broke in. "Why shouldn't we have a nuclear bomb? I have seen how the Iraqis used chemical bombs. Why shouldn't we have a nuclear bomb? Israel and India and Pakistan have it."

"Americans also have it!" an old woman who had appeared, seemingly, from nowhere exclaimed.

The circle around me became a crowd, pressing close. To my left, a woman in a coat and glasses spoke of the sanctions that had been imposed on Iran in response to its alleged nuclear ambitions: "This pressure is nothing. Mr. Obama, keep your hat. Don't interfere in our business. In international relations, we are much smarter than Americans."

I was at the center of a mob now, and a television camera was trained on me. I caught the cameraman's eye and shook my head. He took the camera down and gestured an apology.

A tool of despotism, I thought: in four previous trips to Iran, the only crowds I'd attracted were of curious and friendly young people. Anti-Americanism was harder to come by here than in Europe. English speakers were exceedingly rare. Given the choreography of our bus tour, I had to wonder.

"We just came from Hosseiniyeh Ershad," I told the crowd. "There was no one voting there. How do you explain that?"

The crowd stopped shouting for a moment. The man from Kermanshah offered, "They haven't collected their salaries yet."

The television cameraman had positioned himself behind me and resumed filming. When my translator objected, someone accused him of supporting an American over his own people. He vanished from my side. A middle-aged man was inches from my face. In labored English, he said, "United States, Great Britain, Sarkozy are just lying, lying, lying. Israel should be"—he swept one palm across the other—"from the earth."

I found a break in the throng and slipped into somewhat open space. But I was not alone. A voice—quiet, deliberate—sounded in my ear: "Have confidence in your eyes."

It was the man who had been standing next to the fellow from Kermanshah from the beginning. He met my gaze for a second, then disappeared into the crowd. From Narmak, we were taken to polling stations for minorities: the synagogue, the Armenian church. The Italian reporter made a spirited attempt at resistance, dashing down the street to interview someone whenever his translator's back was turned. By two o'clock, it had become apparent that our handlers had not planned for lunch. My translator asked our intelligence escort if we could take a break, and returned with bad news: the bus tour lasted until seven. If we did not wish to continue, we could return to our hotels. But we could be arrested if we were seen on the streets or in polling stations.

I opted for the hotel. I couldn't be sure where the bus would be at seven, but if I left the hotel at that time I could get to an eight-o'clock appointment that I had made. A businessman, who was also a member of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, had agreed to meet with me to discuss the effect of sanctions on the private sector. I had been told not to bring my translator. Maybe the businessman spoke fluent English. Just as likely, the meeting was sensitive and required discretion.

The most recent round of what Western leaders called "crippling sanctions" was meant to pound the economy so quickly and severely that Iranians would be forced to the negotiating table before Israel lost patience with the West's diplomatic tack. Benjamin Rhodes, the deputy national-security adviser, told me by phone from Washington, "We've made it clear that containment is not our policy." The sanctions targeted Iran's banks, including the Central Bank, and its oil exports, the backbone of its economy. "That's a game-changer for Iran," Rhodes said.

Critics have called the sanctions an unnecessary punitive gesture meant to demonstrate Washington's toughness against Iran while Obama pursues a diplomatic solution. But this spring Rhodes credited the sanctions with prompting Iran to participate in multilateral talks, in Istanbul, that set the stage for more substantive talks, in Baghdad later this year. In Istanbul, the Iranians purportedly begged for sanctions relief. The official Iranian press presented the talks as a defeat for the West, and it was possible to imagine that Iran was laying the groundwork for a compromise, which it would claim as a victory. But another scenario was also imaginable: the Iranian regime might double down, as insensitive to its people's economic suffering as it was to their political disaffection.

As a result of the sanctions, Iran's crude-oil exports were expected to drop by up to forty-five per cent by July 1st, when a European Union oil embargo is to take full effect. With oil at more than a hundred dollars a barrel—significantly more than what Iran's budget projected—Iran's economy would not face immediate collapse. But the government was extremely sensitive about acknowledging the impact of sanctions, and when I arrived in Tehran my translator instructed me to avoid the subject.

The Iranian media were under similar orders. Some journalists I spoke with believed that sanctions would seriously harm Iran's private sector by late fall, when manufacturers ran out of imported raw materials and machinery. But they had not published these observations. "It's not allowed," one editor told me.

Iran's economic difficulties predated the latest sanctions. Unemployment and inflation had been high at least since Ahmadinejad assumed the Presidency. During a time of soaring oil revenues, the government had unwisely flooded the economy with cash and cheap imports, inflating prices and quashing local industry. But now it was nearly impossible to distinguish these self-inflicted wounds from those resulting from sanctions. There was no good way for Iranian leaders to spin this. Either they were responsible for people's economic pain or they had to concede that international pressure was affecting them. The only way out was to deny that there were any economic difficulties at all.

Yet the economy was a hard problem to hide. In the twelve months preceding my visit, Iran's currency had lost half its value. I had brought some currency from a visit four years ago, thinking I'd have cab fare from the airport. It was small change; the largest bill in general circulation in 2008 was now one of the smallest. The day before the election, Tehran residents were complaining about the price of chicken, which had just leaped to forty-five thousand rials, or four dollars, per kilo—triple the 2008 price. In the past year, the cost of rice had jumped twenty-eight per cent, and vegetables a staggering hundred and forty-six per cent. Even when you wanted to talk to Iranians about politics, they turned the topic back to inflation.

"Never mind buying clothes," a clothing vender near Vali Asr Square told me. "We know people who have unplugged their freezers because they are empty and they don't have money for electricity."

Late one night, on a drive through northern Tehran, two young men employed in the energy sector told me that the outlook in their field was bleak. One of them said that, because of financial sanctions, oil and gas projects were too costly and had to be postponed. And conditions in the private sector were about to get much worse. "It's going to be"—he struggled for the word—"terrible."

Still, the government did its best to obfuscate. There were only two sources of economic data on Iran, and both were agencies connected to the government. Moussa Ghaninejad, a liberal economist and the head of research at the economic newspaper *Donyaye Eqtesad*, told me that, in 2009, the two agencies had begun sowing confusion by issuing incompatible numbers. Ghaninejad said that it had become impossible to make detailed assessments of, say, the unemployment rate in a particular sector. But economists could get a general grasp of Iran's situation by extrapolating from a few obvious indicators, like the devaluation of the currency. (In mid-April, the Central Bank finally released some figures acknowledging the country's inflation problem.)

Ghaninejad was certain that sanctions had already bitten. Iran was importing less than before and paying more for it. He said, "Officially, one must say that the sanctions are not working, but the sanctions have some very negative effects on the performance of our economy. They facilitate the position of the hard-liners, the extremists in government. I don't know if the Western powers understand that. The sanctions justify the incompetence—the mismanagement—of this state."

Ghaninejad could see no positive outcome from economic pain. On the nuclear issue, he speculated, the Iranian regime would yield nothing under pressure. And if Westerners believed that hardship would lead Iranians to revolt, and that this would be good for Western interests, they should think again. The regime, determined to maintain power, would not simply fold. Indeed, it might choose a desperate option to shore up support: "If pressure and the discontent of people on the street increase, the last resort for the regime will be to provoke a war with foreigners."

After I left the Election Day bus tour, I returned, as instructed, to my hotel. I had coffee in the lobby, waiting to go to my appointment with the Chamber of Commerce member. There were no other guests, but the hotel staff was everywhere, polishing every last surface to a shine. A well-dressed man sauntered in from a back room and sat on a couch facing me, obscured only slightly by decorative latticework. I waved. The lobby emptied around five. I went to my room.

At seven-fifteen, I walked past the reception desk. The lobby was empty. Outside, I looked right and left. No one. I headed for the metro. It wouldn't take me to my destination, but it would get me closer. Outside the Tajrish stop, in the city's far north, I would hire a cab.

On the train, I removed the battery from my cell phone. Iranian friends had warned me that I could be tracked otherwise. A man sitting across from me stared. He might have been thinking about something else, but it was an ugly look. I put the battery back in.

I arrived at the meeting place shortly after eight. The Chamber of Commerce member, Mohamad Reza Najafi Manesh, had just returned from his villa, on the Caspian Sea. His white hair was combed back, and his manner and outlook were as sunny as Ghaninejad's were dire. He spoke enough English so that he did not feel the need for a translator. I tried to signal that I had probably been followed, but he waved the concern aside.

A carpenter's son, Manesh had become a magnate in the auto-parts industry. For the past twenty-four years, he has run a company specializing in springs, including those used in clutches and seat belts. Business was booming, and he did not fear the impact of sanctions. For decades, Iran had used its oil wealth to import goods, instead of manufacturing them domestically. Sanctions might serve as a corrective.

The Iranian automobile industry, he said, used to import sheet metal for auto bodies from South Korea. But, in response to financial sanctions, car companies were acquiring eighty per cent of their sheet metal domestically. His own factory used to smooth its clutch springs with grinding wheels imported from Germany. With the latest round of sanctions, the German supplier decided that exporting to Iran was too much trouble. Manesh commissioned an Iranian factory to produce his grinding wheels. Everybody won.

International isolation wasn't desirable, Manesh stressed, but it wasn't deadly. Iran was not North Korea. It had resources: oil, gas, copper, lead, iron ore. And it had big trading partners—China, India, the United Arab Emirates—that had not acceded to the sanctions regime.

"First I like to have my goods coming from Germany," he said. "But if there is no route for that I go other places. I don't stay there and die."

The morning after the election, I visited the offices of Alef, one of Iran's most popular conservative Web sites. Associated with a parliamentarian who is critical of Ahmadinejad and close to Khamenei, Alef had just attracted international attention by publishing an article calling for Iran to strike Israel preemptively, destroying its military capacity and annihilating its people. The article, by a previously unknown former Basiji named Alireza Forqani, included maps of Israel marked with targets.

Alef's offices, in a run-down apartment building in central Tehran, had scuffed walls, filthy cement-tile floors, and a conference table made of two cheap dining tables covered with brown checked oilcloth.

An aide pattered around in slippers. For a Web site that claimed to receive two hundred thousand visits a day, it was a ragged operation.

Alef's editor, Seyyed Amir Sayyah, seemed like a modest and courteous man. He was unstinting in his criticism of Ahmadinejad, who, he said, had made "great mistakes" and "resisted against the Leader's order." After the 2009 crackdown, Ahmadinejad had enraged the opposition, giving it ammunition at a time when it needed to be disarmed. "The first Sunday after the election, he gave a very famous speech in Vali Asr Square," Sayyah recalled. "He called those who created the insurgency dust and dirt. He's very smart, but he made this great mistake. We say that he made a pass and the enemy scored a goal."

Sayyah expressed surprise over the intense reaction to the Forqani piece. He had debated whether or not to publish it, but in the end he concluded, "I am not a professional in that field, but I think there were very respectable opinions inside it." He added, "I should remind you that we are a country that has been threatened by the American President that they are going to attack us with a nuclear bomb, and Israel also is threatening us every month."

When had President Obama threatened to attack Iran with nuclear weapons? Sayyah assured me that he would get back to me on that.

If Israel had "the courage and the ability" to attack Iran, he said, it would have done so ten years ago. "The Iranian people don't take this threat very seriously," he said. "And they trust in the armed forces of their country to protect them." He said of sanctions, "Iran has fifteen countries around it that we have been friends with even before America was invented." He went on, "Sanctions will affect us, but they are never going to be crippling."

Sayyah expressed frustration that, although American journalists could visit Iran, Iranian journalists were not granted visas to report in the U.S. American officials even ignored his inquiries from Tehran. Thaddeus McCotter, a Republican congressman from Michigan, had refused to speak with him by phone. In 2009, on the House floor, McCotter had shown a photograph of a female Green Movement activist allegedly raped and killed by the government. The veracity of the incident has come under question. Sayyah wanted to know where McCotter had obtained his information. His secretary told Sayyah that she did not know.

"So they just accuse us," Sayyah said.

My translator and I left Alef just before noon. I was supposed to fly to Dubai that night, and was racing to make my final interviews. Soon after we stepped onto the street, a wiry man in a black nylon jacket stopped my translator and talked to him intently. This did not strike me as unusual: Iranians often talk to strangers at such length, and with such warmth, that at a glance it is hard to tell old friends from people who have just met.

But the conversation intensified into a relay of insistence and objection. My translator's face was a mask of tension. He would translate nothing, despite my repeated requests. A car idled in the street, and he nudged me in its direction. "We have to get in the car," he told me, looking away. The man in the nylon jacket got in the front passenger seat; the waiting driver was larger and silent. I asked who they were and where they were taking me. Silence. My translator finally said, "Passport and visa office. They want to have a short conversation."

I had never felt that Iran was a dangerous place for foreigners to work. The danger was to my sources, who might come to harm on account of their contact with me. To get in and out of the country without hurting anyone was the first objective. And so, in that silent car, all I could think about was the contents of my purse. Knowing that my hotel room would be searched, I kept everything important with me. Thankfully, I did not have contact information for Amir, the Green Movement activist, in writing. I had a voice recorder full of interviews. I fished it out, turned the volume all the way down, and removed the batteries.

The building that I was taken to, near the central business district, was not a police station. Later, my translator called it an intelligence office. But even this was a murky category. Iran has an intelligence ministry that is part of the government. There is also a less accountable intelligence service, which belongs to the Revolutionary Guard.

The man in the nylon jacket ushered us into a green room with worn carpeting and a massive desk. Four high-backed chairs flanked two small coffee tables, as though arranged for a meeting over tea. I stood between the chairs and the coffee tables, hoping that I would not be there long.

A man entered and asked for my cell phone and voice recorder. Comply, my translator said: if they discover that you've withheld something, it will be worse. Next, the man took my purse, to be sure I hadn't concealed any recording equipment. I gave my translator my notebooks and folders, for safekeeping. He

was sent out of the room. I sat alone, facing the door.

A woman in a chador entered. She was to be my translator. She had a crude face with small eyes and a large, downturned mouth, but she did not look unkind. A short man, his gray hair swept up in a pompadour, sat down behind the desk. "Your professional biography," the woman translator prompted me, at his request. I recounted my employment history, while she tried to take notes on unlined paper. Her English was dreadful. I took the paper from her and helped her spell.

The door opened, and a second man came in and casually sat on the edge of a couch on the other side of the room. He was dark and bright-eyed, his face heavy with stubble, his hair short. Unlike the others, he had a lively face, which sometimes cracked into a malevolent smile. On the middle finger of his right hand he wore a ring with an oblong piece of faceted green glass that caught the light. My eyes settled on that ring, and on the woman translator's mouth.

When I noted that, in 2008, I had written an article "about the Iranian economy," the man behind the desk said, "What do you think about the Iranian economy?"

"Some analysts felt that the economy was performing very well," I said, blandly. "Ordinary people had complaints, as people often do."

"Why are you asking ordinary people about the economy?"

"This was four years ago."

"Did you talk to ordinary people about the economy this time?"

"Not intentionally. It comes up."

"What did they say?"

"The currency has lost a lot of value," I said. "People aren't happy about the price of chicken."

"Why are you talking to people about the price of chicken?"

The man with the ring let loose a torrent of talk. The woman translated sparingly. Perhaps it was the chador, or the stilted words she chose, but when she spoke I felt like a Catholic schoolgirl being reprimanded by Mother Superior. "Yesterday, you were told not to leave your hotel," she said. "You went out. You have not behaved."

I turned to the man with the ring. I was terribly sorry, I said brightly. No one had told me I could not go out for dinner.

"Where did you go?"

"A businessman invited me to dinner."

"What businessman? Who introduced you to him?"

Manesh had nothing to hide, nor did the person who had introduced me to him. But maybe they would get in trouble for meeting me without my translator. My instinct was to filibuster. Iranian names were so difficult, I said. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our two countries could have a free exchange of visas?

"What was the address, where you went?"

"I wrote it on a piece of paper and gave it to the taxi-driver," I said. "I never got it back."

"What was it near?"

"I don't know," I said. Tehran was so large, so confusing.

The man with the ring said, "Suppose that I came to your country on a student visa, and I went around asking people questions about politics and the economy."

That would be fine, I assured him. He arched his eyebrows, incredulous.

For what it was worth, I told him, he'd see much better coverage in the Western press if Iran's authorities granted us more freedom of movement. It made a poor impression when they treated journalists like criminals.

"Did you say we treat journalists like criminals?"

"Yes." I supposed I had.

The man behind the desk exploded. "You are here to cover an election!" he shouted, waving an arm in the air. "And you are seen everywhere from Tajrish to Shahr-e Rey! You are asking people about the price of chicken!"

"Shahr-e Rey?" I asked. "I was there for a campaign event, along with all the other foreign press."

"No, not then," he said. "On Thursday night, you were seen there, driving south, leaving the city. Why did you leave Tehran on Thursday night?"

This was flat-out false, and if they believed it I was helpless to explain it. I did not leave Tehran, I assured him. On Thursday night, I had dinner at a restaurant near my hotel.

"The driver saw you leaving Tehran. You drove past the Imam Khomeini shrine."

"What driver? I don't have a driver."

“Another driver. He followed you. He saw you on the highway leaving the city at 9 P.M.”

At 9 P.M., I was at dinner. I repeated where. The man on the couch shrugged. “O.K. Maybe it was someone who looked like you. A case of mistaken identity.”

So easily they let it go. I realized later that it was a trick—a way to get me to reveal my movements that night.

The man with the ring let forth another stream of words, from which I picked up, repeatedly, *eqtesad*—“economy.” I preempted the translator: “Can you please tell him that I am not here to cover the economy?”

“You understand Farsi!” the man with the ring exclaimed.

“No,” I said. “Just a few words, from listening to simultaneous translations.”

“Have you ever worked for the police?” he asked, shooting a look at his colleagues.

“No,” I said.

He chuckled. “You answer questions like police.”

“The name of the businessman,” the man behind the desk demanded. “We will need him to come down here and sign a paper, to say that you did not have an improper relationship.”

The name was long, I protested. It was strange. At that moment it did, conveniently, vacate my mind.

“Suppose you don’t go to Dubai tonight?” the man on the couch said. I could not remember telling him where my flight from Tehran was bound.

“My visa expires at midnight,” I said.

Two hours elapsed before I relented. Manesh had toed the official line; nothing would come of it. His card was in a clear plastic envelope, along with my receipts and a few other files. They let me go into the foyer and retrieve the envelope from my translator.

“Call him,” the woman in the chador told me, gesturing toward a phone on the desk. “Tell him to come here and sign a paper.”

The gray-haired official hovered over my shoulder. Showing through the plastic envelope was a slip of paper with the contact information for the Iranian who had connected me to Manesh. The official snatched the envelope out of my hands.

“What is this?” he sputtered, addressing me in English for the first time. His hand shook with rage. “Do you think we are not intelligent? We’re not through!” He stormed from the room with my things. The man with the ring followed him.

The woman in the chador waited with me. I went over, in my mind, the contents of the files he’d taken. My receipts. The International Atomic Energy Agency’s latest report on Iran’s nuclear effort. A printout of an e-mail from an analyst in the U.S., delineating the thirteen main groups of hard-liners running for parliament. A few e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, one of them from someone I’d approached at random in a café. A stack of cards with phone numbers of past contacts in Iran, all of them “seditionists,” some of them now in prison.

The two men came back into the room. The gray-haired official threw my things onto his desk and growled, in English, “We think you are not a journalist. We think you are a spy.”

He dumped my files out. He picked up the I.A.E.A. report and muttered in Farsi. He pored over the e-mail from the analyst, pronouncing the sender’s name with precision. Who was he?

“An analyst in the States.”

“Why do you even come here?” taunted the man with the ring, who stood behind me now.

The man behind the desk rifled through my receipts. He seemed bowled over by the cost of my hotel in Dubai.

“You say you are a freelancer,” he said. “Why are you collecting your receipts?”

“So the magazine can pay me back for my expenses.”

“But you say you are a freelancer. Why are you collecting your receipts?”

I explained the process of reimbursement.

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

After fifty more minutes, the man at the desk sat back in his chair.

“If there is any mistake in what you told us, you can correct it now,” he announced through the translator.

I had an uneasy feeling of finality. “I don’t understand,” I said, stalling. “Are you saying you think I made a mistake?”

“Try to remember everything you said,” he instructed.

“I did not make a mistake,” I said.

There was silence.

“Do you really think I’m a spy?” I asked the man behind the desk, almost joshingly.

“No,” he said. “You are a journalist.”

He handed me back the plastic envelope. Inside was a leftover visa photo and the stack of extremely sensitive phone numbers, which appeared untouched. Everything else was gone.

“You may leave,” he said. “But we are keeping your receipts.”

My translator was sitting in a metal folding chair in the foyer, looking pallid. It had been three hours. When the woman in the chador was first sent in, he figured she was going to beat me: that would have been a woman’s job. They questioned him, too, about my alleged trip south on Thursday night—to Qom, he was told. My things, to my surprise, had sat safely in a locker next to the security desk: my recorder was apparently untouched, the batteries still out, the volume still down, the recordings intact.

I checked out of my hotel, imagining that the men in the green room had already called Manesh and the person who had introduced us. Suppose my contacts revealed that we had met not for dinner but for an interview? Suppose the interrogators found some other discrepancy in my account, however insignificant? There were four hours until my flight left Iran.

As my taxi sped down the bleak southern highway to Imam Khomeini International Airport, a snippet of dialogue played, unbidden, in my mind. Before flying to Tehran, I’d talked to an Iranian economist based in the U.S. He was skeptical that Iran was suffering from wild inflation.

“There’s a way of telling,” he had told me. “Calculate your receipts. If people are exaggerating, you’ll catch them. If they say prices have doubled, you can ask, ‘Why didn’t my cab fare?’ ”

The receipts. All those questions about the economy, the price of chicken—that was what had piqued their paranoia, not my possible contacts in the Green Movement. If only they had left it to Manesh, whose breezy confidence had made the best case that sanctions would only strengthen Iran. Instead, they signalled to me that Ghaninejad was closer to the truth. The inflation, the devaluation of currency, the coming privation when banking and oil sanctions took full hold: this, and not even the election turnout, was what the Islamic Republic wished to hide from foreign eyes.

At the airport check-in counter, a clerk brightened at the sight of my American passport. “We don’t see many of these,” he said. “What were you doing in Iran?” I told him I was there to cover the parliamentary election. He made a face.

“Nobody was voting, right? Did you see anything that surprised you?”

I was surprised that the foreign media had been confined to buses, I told him. A tall man suddenly appeared next to me, leaning against the check-in counter and staring. I looked from him to the clerk.

“What can I say?” I said, lamely.

“I think I know what you are saying,” the clerk said, glancing at the man and sliding me my boarding pass.

The clerk reminded me sharply of the Iran I used to visit, the one now hidden from view. It was still out there, expansive and ordinary, its people neither heroic nor sinister, beset with the very anxiety I had felt from the moment I arrived. It was not enough that Iranians lived under the emboldened repression of a regime that no longer cared about popular legitimacy. They were braced, now, for punishment from outside, in the form of sanctions and war.

At eight-thirty, after passing through security, I settled into a chair at the gate, relaxing for the first time in hours.

My name was being called over the P.A. First in Farsi, then in English: “Please report to the information desk.” This, I thought, was how I almost got out of Iran. Should I just board the plane? No. Security officials would come for me while the plane sat on the tarmac.

The concourse felt endless in reverse. I heard my name again as I reached security.

“They called my name,” I told the employees of the women’s security check.

“Then you have to go,” they said, waving me through.

Past the duty-free shops and the cafés. I should have known that things were different now, with international tensions at their height. I thought about the American hikers who had been seized along the Iraqi border, in 2009. They were held, as spies, for two years.

A knot of people surrounded the information desk. An older gentleman, in gray slacks, awaited me. He spoke to me in Farsi. The only word I caught was “hotel.” We stood looking at each other, shaking our heads. At last he buttonholed a female airport employee. He was holding out his hand.

She translated, crisply. “He wants the receipt from your hotel.” ♦