

LIVING THE RAMADAN: My experience in the Islamic Republic of Iran

On May 22 of 2016, I embarked myself on what has been one of the most valuable experiences in my life. I never imagined that I would be sitting on an airplane going to Iran, a country that has been stigmatized in every way possible. During the flight, I was hesitating on my decision, didn't know too much about it except the kind of stories that we read in the media: Nuclear weapons, sanctions, Ayatollah, etc. Last year I also had watched the movie "Argo" which is a bad story –according to Iranians- about the American embassy hostage situation during the Islamic Revolution and how some diplomats are rescued thanks to a CIA mission. As a result, the image that I got from Iran was a country with angry Revolutionary Guards waiting at the airport and people looking at you in a very doubtful way thinking "maybe he is a spy". Furthermore,- an additional special spice to this mix of feelings- I am from Venezuela and we had our own special relation with ex- president Ahmadinejad as our countries including North Korea were part of what former President Bush called the "axis of evil" so of course my family and friends back home were somehow worried about going to Iran.

After a ten hour flight with a short layover in Doha, I landed in Tehran at 11:00 a.m ready for my new adventure. Before leaving the plane, women were putting quickly their veil to comply with one of the country stricter laws. Walking to immigration I was preparing myself for any questioning from the "Argo" Revolutionary Guards, however, it all went smoothly; the official rapidly checked my visa, stamped and in a matter of minutes I was ready to go. I had booked a taxi driver in advance that was waiting for me at the airport. Arash my driver, was a young man that had a little Peugeot car –as most Iranians- and he barely spoke English. In our way to Tehran, Arash was trying unsuccessfully to teach me "Farsi" that is the official language in Iran and one of the oldest languages actually spoken worldwide. The heat was intense and it was a holiday so there were not many cars in the street. Arash accelerated while we were hearing Persian music from what it appeared to be an old CD, he lighted up a cigarette, and at 120 km/per hour he pointed out my first sightseeing of the trip: Ayatollah Khomeini Mausoleum, a colossal building with tall minarets that has been criticized by some Shia clerics describing the structure as "too much" for the frugal man that was Khomeini. You will see the image of Khomeini and current Ayatollah Khamenei everywhere, in every shop, store, or literally in any place that has a door and you can enter. Finally, when I arrived at the hostel I drank my first tea and ate a kebab what became a routine on the following days, I needed to rest and get ready for starting my internship.

My work

I got an internship position in the Drug Demand and HIV Reduction Unit at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Field Office in Iran. The UNODC assists the Iranian Government on implementing policies to reduce the supply and demand of illegal drugs. One of the main challenges for the Iranian authorities is to control its border with Afghanistan the main opium producer in the world and with Pakistan the three countries form the drug production area known as "Golden Crescent".in 2012 Iran accounted for more than 74% of the opium seizures worldwide¹ representing a financial burden for the government and demanding more highly capable personnel in the borders. Most of the opium serves for

¹ UNODC. Retrieved from: <https://www.unodc.org/islamicrepublicofiran/drug-trafficking-and-border-control.html>.

the production of heroin reaching Europe through neighboring Turkey. Therefore, the UNODC gives technical assistance to authorities in border control, been a strategic focal point in the “war against drug”.

Another problem that Iran has been tackling these years is the increasing number of persons that are becoming drug addicts. Having a drug-related issue in Iran seemed somehow unreal for a country that has a hardline judicial system with one of the highest death penalty rates in the world. There are at least two million drugs users in Iran², constituting a defying challenge to the Iranian society. The most consumed drugs have been generally opium-probably by the influence of neighboring Afghanistan- and heroin that had an important upsurge since 15 years ago. Nonetheless, most of the attention has been given to the alarming increase of methamphetamine or “crystal meth” use in Iran. With an estimate of 345,000 crystal meth consumers³ or how is called locally “shisheh”, crystal meth boost has been due to its cheap price as it is produced inside the country. Its popularity does not distinguish social classes, and while men are the majority of users, an increasing great number of female users have been reported recently. Furthermore, every year there are important dismantlement operations of methamphetamine labs by Iranian authorities and Iranian citizens have been arrested in countries like Malaysia, Japan, and Indonesia for trafficking “crystal meth”. There are no clear reasons why drug use is spreading in Iran, it seems that apart from the low price there could be also signs of boredom and lack of opportunities towards the future that might be prompting young people into trying illegal drugs.

I was given the responsibility to compile a report about the relation between drug prevalence and migration focused on Afghans immigrants in Iran. Most of the relevant literature claims that migrants that have a troubled background due to armed conflict or traumatic experiences like torture can be on potential risk of falling in illegal drug use or substance abuse. In addition, migrants that have already reach the country of arrival, can face several acculturation challenges like adapting to new cultural values, discrimination, struggle with language, or economic distress that can also become triggers for using drugs. Others already could bring some substance use patterns that need to be identified, for example the use of opium in Afghanistan has been almost seen as “normal” by some households as well as the use of “khat” a leafy plant that acts as a stimulant that is commonly used in Somalia and its widely present within Somali refugees in Kenyan refugee camps.

Nowadays, there are around one million Afghan immigrants in Iran, most of them from families that have historically escape from conflict and oppression since the Soviet-Afghanistan War in the seventies. The majority of the current Afghan migrants are second or third generation, but there is also an important number of illegal immigrants present in Iranian soil. Afghans play an important role in the Iranian economy by working in low-skill positions and manufacturing accepting lower salaries than their Iranian counterparts. They not only share the same religion as Iranians, but the official language in Afghanistan called “Dari” is very similar to Persian what also makes it easier for them in adapting to Iranian culture. Since the last decade, Iranian policies towards Afghans have tightened as a result of uncontrolled migration after the fall of the Taliban regime. In consequence, a number of voluntary resettle programs coordinated with the UNHCR were launched and mass deportations were also enforced to return as much Afghans as possible. There has been scarce studies on drug prevalence in Afghan migrants in Iran,

² Calabrese, J. Iran's War on Drugs: Holding the Line? Retrieved from: <http://www.mei.edu/content/irans-war-drugs-holding-line>.

³ Rights Council of the United Nations. Retrieved from: http://www.iranhrc.org/uploads/docs/docs_en/writtenstatementdrugs30.pdf

nevertheless what is curious is that several reports of illegal drug use in Afghanistan have claimed that a great number of Afghan drug users have tried drugs for the first time when they were in Iran. Since I didn't had enough data available, it was impossible to demonstrate the reasons for this argument, nonetheless the challenges that migrants have to overcome during their stay in Iran, the conditions they lived in, and the struggles that represent crossing the border illegally can be factors that could trigger potential drug use on them.

We also had the opportunity with other interns to visit some drug treatment centers in Tehran. One of them located in the outer parts of the city treated drug addicts that go voluntarily using a peer support method. Addicts will arrive at the camp and go through different stages for a period of three months until they are fully recovered. The site was run by an organization that received help from the government and it was impressively clean and well maintained. The other center was a "harm reduction" facility located on a poor slum in Tehran where injecting drug users (IDU's) could go and change their injection needles to avoid infectious diseases like HIV or Hepatitis B. These type of efforts are part of Iran's Government recent approach in handling drug addiction from a health perspective instead of a criminal one. However controversy remains, almost 80% of the death sentences in Iran are drug related, thus some human rights activists have asked the UNODC to stop funding Iran's anti-narcotic programs.

Life in Iran

I found a hostel located in central Tehran that became my home for two months and there I had the chance to meet many travelers mostly Europeans. I didn't expect to find so many foreigners as I did, but I learned that due to the low oil price, Iranian Government is promoting tourism as a way to improve the economy. Visas are issued on arrival for more than 190 nationalities for up to three months, and with the recent lift of sanctions, airlines like Air France and Lufthansa are retaking flights to Iman Khomeini Airport. Even Air Asia has introduced weekly flights from Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur that promises to increase Asian tourism. Cities like Kashan, Isfahan, and of course Shiraz (where you can find the mystical capital of the ancient Persian Empire), are just a glimpse of what Iran can offer with rich historical sites and colorful buildings that includes old Sha-dynasty palaces and incredible mosques. Despite this, international sanctions still forbid Iran of international transactions what makes impossible to use international credit cards on Iranian soil, thus an important travel advice is to take enough cash in advance for your trip. Nonetheless, prices are relatively cheap compared to other famous tourist destinations, and you can exchange money in every corner of the major cities. Iran is also considered a very secure country in the region, there has not been terrorist attacks registered in the last few years, and crime rates are quite low. With exception to the borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan traveling within Iran is generally safe and there are easy ways of transportation. For example, you can take a "VIP Bus" with all the commodities for a 6-hour ride for a price that does not exceed 10 USD.

My stay in Iran coincided with the holy month of Ramadan what made my experience even more enriching. This Ramadan was particularly difficult for Muslims in Iran because there were sixteen hours of sunlight so sunset was around 9 p.m. Tourists had to compile with all the rules that include not eating, drinking water, or smoking in public spaces. Restaurants were closed during the day, but it was possible to find some cold food in the supermarkets and some "tourists" restaurants were open in cities outside Tehran. I imagined a stricter atmosphere, but I never saw any incident involving the "Basij" or religious police. As a catholic, I realize that Ramadan was more than just fasting, it was about trying to be more disciplined with yourself and an opportunity to share quality time with your loved ones. Fasting represents

a self-control effort during the day and when you break it with your family or friends, it should be a moment of accomplishment and joy.

Iranians, in general, are maybe one of the friendliest people that I have ever met. If something is easy in Iran is to make new friends; they like to meet foreigners and hosting people. More than once I unexpectedly receive help from random Iranians in the metro bus stop or the streets even if language is a barrier they would try their best to help you. I never witnessed any type of religious or nationalist fundamentalism, on the contrary, almost everyone I met was eager to teach me their culture and learn from mine. Even tough social media pages like Facebook and YouTube are banned in Iran, people use VPN services to stay in touch and the “Telegram app” is quite popular. Alcohol is banned as well as night clubs, so young people usually go to parks or famous coffee shops that are all over the city. Women in Iran should wear the veil and long sleeve shirts while skirts are forbidden. However, policies toward woman are less strict than other countries in the region as they have access to higher education and can hold posts in the parliament and public administration. In the cafes I even could see young women hanging out by themselves or even on a date, some Iranian friends told me that as long you don’t show too many affection in the street everything should be fine. These kind of details gave me an insight of how life really is in the Islamic Republic: a young population trying to live plentifully within the parameters of the revolution.

Iran Politics and Foreign Policy

In my encounters with some Iranian friends, I asked them about their opinion of President Hassan Rouhani government; the general response was a positive feeling in particular for the advances in the negotiations of the nuclear deal with the United States and Europe, still, they will like to see more changes at a faster pace. Of course, my friends were just a small sample of university graduates, however, it gave me a perception of what the young generation of Iranians expects from the future. The economic situation continues to be difficult for them with considerable unemployment rates and expensive housing. There also was a surrounding uncertainty about ex-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad possible comeback to power in the 2017 elections. Some Iranians see Ahmadinejad as a step backward to international isolation and hardline government, nonetheless, he still remains popular in some cities. The campaign apparently will be centered on the benefits of the nuclear deal on which the Iranian Government has claimed that they have already fulfilled their part of their agreement. Other fact is that no one knows to what extent Ayatollah Khamenei will push for a more conservative government and how this will affect the election. Rouhani has been balancing itself between supporting reform policies and keeping in line with the Ayatollah commandments, but some conservative clerics see him as “too weak” towards western governments .

In the Iranian state media, I identify some key international issues that sometimes cross the line to propaganda, but it can summarize Iranian Foreign Policy at least in the two months I was there:

- **Iran Nuclear Deal:** Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif are constantly insisting that Iran already has complied with all the requirements of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed with the United States and the rest of the Security Council countries plus Germany. According to Iranian officials, the United States has not lifted all the sanctions violating the agreement raising doubts about their real commitment. The recent rule of the U.S Supreme Court is freezing Iranian assets valued at 2 billion dollars to compensate the families of the 1983 Beirut U.S Marine Corps bombing

victims -on which Iran was supposedly involved has also been criticized by Iranian officials and Ayatollah Khamenei arguing that this type of actions demonstrates U.S “real intentions”.

- **Israel:** Propaganda against Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu is continuous by attacking Israel settlements in Palestinian territory.
- **Saudi Arabia:** Perhaps one of the “hot” issues during my stay in Iran. After the execution of Chia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr by the Saudis that resulted in violent protests in the Saudi Arabia in Tehran, relations between the two countries has broken off escalating the tensions in the region. Iran banned its citizens from going to the Mecca accusing Saudi Arabia of being incapable on guaranteeing the security of pilgrims and not offering consular support. Iran has also condemned Saudi Arabia attacks in Yemen while the Saudi government has responded that Iran is behind the Houthi rebellion in that country.
- **Iraq:** Iran’s is rapidly increasing its influence in Iraq by allegedly funding Iraq Shia militias in the fight against the Islamic State always mentioned in Iranian press as “Daesh”. It was seen as an important success in the media the takeover of Fallujah and now the efforts are concentrated on taking the northern city of Mosul a process that you can almost follow live in television.

Final Remarks

I want to thank the LKY School of Public Policy for their support on funding part of my internship in Iran that enable me to do my internship at the United Nations and also for giving me the analytical skills that I needed to do fulfill with my responsibilities. I was able to work in a country that many people are not willing to visit, so for me, it was a personal challenge and at the same time an eye-opening experience in many ways. Iran is a country with fascinating contrasts, the religion and spiritual view of the government clashes with a society eager for reforms and fewer limitations on their daily life. Being a country with an amazing historical heritage, Iran promises to be one of the top tourist attractions in the upcoming years and it deserves to be visited. Still, the obstacles and challenges that continue to lay back Iran from the international community requires a shift of direction from the Iranian political class and a less reactionary attitude from the religious leadership in particular towards Israel. My internship taught me about the numerous threats that migrants need to overcome and the harsh consequences that some refugees need to lead with even after they arrive at their final destination. Migration continues to be a controversial issue in these years with the aggravation of the refugee crisis, thus is necessary to continue in the development of proposals that can improve the general well-being of refugees.