

Hugs From Iran

To watch the video, press the play button in the bottom-left corner of the image.

MASHHAD, Iran

My 1,700-mile [road trip across Iran](#) began with a giddy paean to America, reinforcing my view that at the grass-roots level, this may be the most pro-American nation in the Middle East.

“We love America!” gushed a former military commando, now a clothing seller, my first evening in the spiritual center of Mashhad. He was so carried away that I thought he might hug me, and although he acknowledged that his business was suffering greatly from Western sanctions, he said he blamed his own leaders.

“I can’t blame America,” he said. “I love America too much.”

That was far from a universal view. I encountered many Iranians — especially in the countryside — who strongly support the Iranian authorities and resent what they see as American government bullying. But while Iranians are far from monolithic, one feature was ubiquitous: the warmth of Iranians when they discovered I was American.

We passed occasional “Death to America” signs, but our trip was slowed by hospitality, for Iranians kept giving us presents or inviting us into their homes. And in the security line to board a flight from Tehran to Mashhad, a Revolutionary Guard said genially, “We’re not supposed to let batteries through, but we’ll make an exception for you since you’re a foreigner.”

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

Compared with my last visit, in 2004, people seem more discontented — mainly because of economic difficulties caused in part by Western sanctions. Those sanctions are causing bitter pain, yet a surprising number of Iranians seem to largely blame their own leaders for the woes.

Another difference from my last visit: People are more scared now. Iranians feel fairly free to gripe about their leaders, even within earshot of others, yet since the 2009 crackdown there has been a red line: anything approaching activism, including public criticism. One blogger is serving a 15-year prison sentence, and Iranians have been jailed just for giving interviews to foreign journalists. As a result, Iranians are more wary now of being quoted or shown in videos.

"Please don't use the video," implored a young man living near the Caspian Sea, after I interviewed him. "I want to have a future."

One businessman was scathing about the government when we were speaking casually. "We have a terrible economy, all because of our president," he said. Once we pulled out notebook and video camera, however, he began to praise the government. With the camera turned away again, I asked him why he had switched 180 degrees.

"It is not possible to tell the truth in Iran," he said, shrugging.

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

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

When I asked about human rights activists and members of the Bahai faith who are in prison, he shook his head skeptically. "I don't think that in our country innocent people go to jail," he said. "They must have done something."

At the other end of the country, a shopkeeper — also with limited education, also reliant on government television for news — told me that "all the nation backs the leader."

Yet more common were those like the businessman in Adidas sandals and Ray-Ban sunglasses who scoffed, "The Iranian revolution was a mistake." Or the separatist in Tabriz who has given up on Iran and wants the northwest of the country to join Azerbaijan. Or the man at a roadside rest stop who sharply criticized America for bullying Iran, but added, "our leaders have lost their marbles." Or the woman who has aban-

done prayer and religious fasting, explaining, "The biggest factor that has turned people against Islam is this government."

Indeed, I think that the expressions of love for America reflect, in part, the intuitive embrace by many Iranians of whatever the state media condemn.

To me, Iran feels like other authoritarian countries I covered before they toppled. My guess is that the demise of the system is a matter of time — unless there's a war between Iran and the West, perhaps ignited by Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites. That, I sense, would provoke a nationalist backlash and rescue the ayatollahs. More on what I found on my journey in forthcoming columns.