

In Iran, Power Written In Stone.

By Karl Vick

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Visitors to Ancient Ruins Voice Pride in Country, Support for Peaceful Nuclear Ambitions

PERSEPOLIS, Iran -- Wearing a stocking cap and an air of indignation, Mohammad Ahmadi pointed to the wall in front of him. It bore a splendid frieze dating from early in the millennia-long span of Iran's existence -- as a nation, an empire or simply a group of people who speak the same language.

"These are Armenians," Ahmadi said of three figures carved in vivid profile, one leading a horse. "They were bringing gifts to the king of Iran 2,500 years ago. And now they have a nuclear power plant.

Abolghasem Fotoohi, right, and Hossein Arjomand, 32-year-old engineers, look out over the ruins of Persepolis. Both said they supported Iran's nuclear program. (By Karl Vick -- The Washington Post)

"Do you want to see the Indians?" he said, indicating a lower column.

"They didn't have shoes. Now they have nine nuclear plants.

"I am not a political person. I only finished high school, and I do not have much knowledge. But if I think like this, imagine how the others think."

If any doubt remains that Iranians support their government in its quest to harness the atom, the answer comes quickly and emphatically in Persepolis, the magnificent ruins that symbolize the ancient pride and fading glory bound up with the nuclear issue here.

Ordinary Iranians overwhelmingly favor their country's nuclear ambitions, interviews and surveys show. The support runs deep in the population of 68 million, cutting across differences of education, age and, most significantly, attitudes toward the fundamentalist government that the Bush administration says is intent on using an energy program as a cover for developing atomic weapons.

"Look at all this civilization!" said Mehrdad Khanban, 23, the sweep of his arm taking in the towering pillars and regal staircases of the stone city founded by Darius the Great in about 518 B.C. in the southern corner of Iran first known as Persia. "What has George Bush got? And he's telling Iranians what to do?"

Interviews with Iranians touring the ruins on a holiday weekend here suggest the breadth of the challenge facing Western powers determined to freeze Iran's recently reactivated nuclear program. The Tehran government this month ended a two-year moratorium on nuclear research by removing seals placed on uranium enrichment equipment by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. watchdog on nuclear power. In the diplomatic flurry that followed, European and U.S.

officials began maneuvering toward referring Tehran to the U.N.

Security Council, which could impose sanctions.

The threat has had no visible effect here.

"We will cope," Khanban said with a shrug. A soccer coach from the city of Karaj, near Tehran, he said he was no fan of Iran's ruling clerics or its hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose fiery rhetoric against Israel has alarmed many outside the country. But Khanban separated Iran's government from its aspiration to produce nuclear power -- bad news for Western diplomats who hope to cleave Iran's government from its people on the nuclear issue, perhaps through so-called smart sanctions such as restrictions on official travel abroad.

"There are so many people who don't like our government, who do not like it at all," Khanban said. "But they do not want this country to be ruled by foreigners. Like Iraq, for example."

"Everyone is united on this," said Rahimeh Goodarzi, 52, clutching her enveloping black chador to her chin at an exhibit of artifacts.

"We love our country."

Many Iranians also emphasized that their enthusiasm was for nuclear power, not weapons.

"We really want it. Every country should have it. But I don't think it should be used for military purposes," said Parisa, 28, who was visiting from nearby Shiraz. Enjoying the sun on a stone slab, she declined to provide her surname after criticizing the government.

"Everybody I know says they want it, but they want it for peaceful purposes."

Iran's copious oil and gas reserves will eventually run out, Parisa said, and in any case petroleum has brought little good to the people. "It's black magic," she said. Per capita statistics show ordinary Iranians are less well off than they were 30 years ago, and many see investment in technology, including nuclear research, as a revival of development that had slowed in Iran in recent decades.

"If you look at this place, you realize that 2,500 years ago Iranians were very advanced, more than other people," said Abolghasem Fotoohi, 32, an engineer from the eastern city of Mashhad. "Any Iranian would like his country to improve, and then we would not need other countries. We could stand by ourselves."

Arta Menhadji, who studied metallurgy but works as a soccer coach, found an example in the museum tucked in the center of the ruins, guarded by huge sculptures of a beast with the body of a bull, the wings of a bird and the head of a bearded man. One exhibit showed a bowl used for melting metal in ancient times.

"At the moment, we haven't got much to talk about in metallurgy, especially compared to America. A nuclear industry would involve some things related to that," he said.

"Yes, it's obvious," Khanban said. "I mean, look at this place. At the time it was built, there was no America. See where we were then and where we are now. And see where they were then and where they are now."

Inside the museum, Aboozar Ghalenoi, 24, pointed out a framed declaration. Translated from cuneiform, it was attributed to Xerxes, the son of Darius who ushered Persepolis to a glory that survived only until the city was sacked by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.

"I am not hot-tempered," the text declared. "What things develop my anger, I hold firmly under control by my thinking power. I am firmly ruling over my impulses."

"Did you read that and know that Iranians are not after nuclear weapons?" Ghalenoi asked. "All the great people of Iran have always spoken about peace. We need nuclear power for electricity and for medical uses."

"But countries like Israel, that's not what they want," he went on.

"They want to use it against people. Unfortunately, the Americans support them."

The shift from civilian to military came easily, at least in conversation.

"You see, Israel has got so many of them," said Mohsen Seddighi, carrying his daughter on his shoulders. "And even Jacques Chirac is saying: If any country attacks us, we're going to use it. So why shouldn't we have it?"

At the company he works for, a domestic airline, "99 percent, even 100 percent of people are together on this," Seddighi said. "For civilian use."
