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The Ministry Of Guidance Invites You To Not Stay: An American Family In Iran



Synopsis

With U.S.–Iran relations at a thirty-year low, Iranian-American writer Hooman Majd dared to take his young family on a year-long sojourn in Tehran. *The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay* traces their domestic adventures and closely tracks the political drama of a terrible year for Iran's government. It was an *annus horribilis* for Iran's Supreme Leader. The Green Movement had been crushed, but the regime was on edge, anxious lest democratic protests resurge. International sanctions were dragging down the economy while talk of war with the West grew. Hooman Majd was there for all of it. A new father at age fifty, he decided to take his blonde, blue-eyed Midwestern yoga instructor wife Karri and his adorable, only-eats-organic infant son Khash from their hip Brooklyn neighborhood to spend a year in the land of his birth. It was to be a year of discovery for Majd, too, who had only lived in Iran as a child. The book opens ominously as Majd is stopped at the airport by intelligence officers who show him a four-inch thick security file about his books and journalism and warn him not to write about Iran during his stay. Majd brushes it off—but doesn't tell Karri—and the family soon settles in to the rituals of middle class life in Tehran: finding an apartment (which requires many thousands of dollars, all of which, bafflingly, is returned to you when you leave), a secure internet connection (one that persuades the local censors you are in New York) and a bootlegger (self-explanatory). Karri masters the head scarf, but not before being stopped for mal-veiling, twice. They endure fasting at Ramadan and keep up with Khash in a country weirdly obsessed with children. All the while, Majd fields calls from security officers and he and Karri eye the headlines—the arrest of an American "spy," the British embassy riots, the Arab Spring—and wonder if they are pushing their luck. *The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay* is a sparkling account of life under a quixotic authoritarian regime that offers rare and intimate insight into a country and its people, as well as a personal story of exile and a search for the meaning of home.

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Customer Reviews

Born in Tehran to an upper-class diplomat family that fled after the overthrow of the shah, Brooklyn journalist Majd has been to Iran many times and written extensively on contemporary politics there for news journals and TV. Then, in 2011, at age 50, he returned to Tehran for a year with his young American wife and their baby son. Never simplistic, his in-depth, insider-outsider perspectives make for a gripping narrative about what is going on, personally and politically, in that troubled country. A relative of former president Mohammad Khatami, Majd has many connections in Iran, even as some regard him as an American spy. His wife must wear a hijab, even to swim. They fast at Ramadan. Everyone talks politics; he has access to Iranian officialdom, and he shows close up how Iran's unique path of modernity fused with religion has very mixed results. In spite of it all, he reports, the literacy rate has been raised to nearly 90 percent. His on-the-spot reporting will engage readers and spark debate beyond the usual headline news of the theocracy and the fear in the Western world of potential Iranian nuclear weapons. --Hazel Rochman

"The Ministry of Guidance reveals an Iran far more nuanced, sophisticated and affluent than most Western readers might imagine. Calling the cable guy in Tehran is not so different from home as is negotiating terms with a babysitter or connecting on Facebook (17 million Persian users, Majd writes). Iranians, it turns out, have a lot more in common with Americans than we've been told the past 30-some years. The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay completes a trilogy that illuminates the politics, society, and culture of modern Iran through the eyes of the decidedly hip, well-connected Majd. But it's not just a book about Iran it's a personal story that will speak to any readers who have ever been disassociated from home (whether by travel or migration), struggled to navigate a new culture (or return to a once familiar one), or attempted to come to terms with their own foreignness as they try to make a strange land a place they can call home. •Christian Science Monitor "No one takes you inside Iran like Hooman Majd, whose keen observations and rich writing tell the story of an illuminating, delightful, and at times, horrifying journey. You will relish this book like a good meal. •Ann Curry "In The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay,

Hooman Majd, a longtime New Yorker, Iranian-born, has crafted a memorable account of his attempt to move back to the land of his birth with his American wife and their baby son. With a keen eye for the telling detail and a refreshingly mordant wit, Majd offers glimpses of life inside the Islamic Republic in all of its unresolved contradictions. —Jon Lee Anderson

Fascinating book on living in a culture many Westerners a) don't know much about, and b) don't quite understand. Engaging, funny, and thought provoking. My only wish is that the author would have elaborated a little more on how he personally negotiated his relationship, so to speak, to his home country. There is a bit more "it just is the way it is" (in terms of how women are treated, enforcing laws, etc) rather than "this is how I reconcile the two different viewpoints." I like and appreciate that Mr. Majd has a connection and appreciation for Iran, but as a reader would have liked a little more discussion of how he emotionally and cognitively reconciled the differences, other than anecdotes of how he and his family avoided patrols and kept quiet and under the radar. Having said that, a really good read.

Hooman Majd's latest book is a very personal recounting of the year he recently spent living in Tehran. It was his first time to live in Iran since his own infancy - Majd grew up living outside of Iran, primarily in the US and UK, and so he was living in Iran for the first time as an adult, bringing his American wife and infant son along with him. Iran today is perhaps the most strategically important country in the world where the U.S. does not maintain a diplomatic presence. We need to understand one another better than we presently do. Although the U.S. is not officially represented in Iran, the UK did maintain an embassy until 2011 - and in fact it was on Nov 29, 2011, during Majd's stay in Tehran, when the British Embassy was stormed and subsequently shut down. The UK immediately expelled Iran's embassy staff from London, and only recently have the two countries began to talk together about reopening their respective embassies. This book attracted me because I want to understand Iran better, at a personal level. Reading Majd's words, I have the impression that he is a very good and decent person. His pride of Iran and of his Iranian heritage is evident throughout. He is very honest in sharing his personal thoughts throughout his stay in Tehran, his anxieties as he lived in Iran and helped his wife and son to adapt to the country. Their adjustment to life Tehran takes time. The pollution of Tehran is severe (Economist magazine in 2011 said that Tehran is one of the most unlivable cities in the world), and his descriptions of the prevalence of small scooters darting through congested traffic, and the adaptations needed to live with a small child in Tehran (they learn that toting a car seat while taking their son with them in taxis

is unworkable), are interesting. Modern Iran is a security state, but on the surface life is ordinary and unremarkable. And despite the pollution, Majd remarks several times to how clean the city is maintained. The life of 'real' Iranians is interesting to observe, although to be fair Majd's experiences are almost entirely with upper-class and affluent members of society, often describing parties held at luxurious homes, behind high walls built for security, and with alcohol openly served. This educated and successful class of modern Iranian citizens, with their satellite television, cell phones, Facebook and twitter accounts, is not so much different from ourselves and others in western Europe and elsewhere throughout the world these days. It makes one wonder - why do people continue to tolerate the rules applied to their society, when so many clearly not only disagree with them, but also openly disregard them? And to that point, he observes that Iran has not shared the "Arab Spring" that has caused such upheaval and change elsewhere in the Middle East. He expresses profound disappointment that the '79 Islamic Revolution in Iran did not lead to a democratic era but instead resulted in the Islamic regime that Iran now endures; and perhaps the experience and disappointment in the outcome of the '79 revolution helps explain why Iran's citizens do not rise up today in another revolution. Majd does provide some good insights into this, and there are also a few places in the book where he shares stories that open the door slightly into the dark side of how the current regime behaves - Chapter 8, for example, recounts the experience of an acquaintance of Majd who had been imprisoned in the infamous Evin cells in Tehran where political prisoners are held. In fact, it was at this point in the book, almost halfway through, that I began to feel that Majd was finally providing something of substance regarding life in Iran today, since the book had so far been almost entirely his personal thoughts while getting settled in Tehran with his family and adjusting to life there. There are other interesting cultural insights. The concept of the "sulk" for example - how Iranian individuals may resort to using the sulk in order to express their disappointments or frustrations, even including the highest political leaders. The 2011 sulk of President Ahmadinejad - Majd refers to it as the "Big Sulk" in chapter 4 of the book - took place during Majd's year living in Tehran. And Ahmadinejad had plenty of precedent, going all the way back to pre-Shah days when President Mohammad Mosaddegh was known to behave similarly. There were a few disappointments in the book too, when Majd has chosen to skim over details of life in Tehran that would be fascinating to read about. For example - he mentions going to an opium party, and obviously participated himself, but beyond mentioning it he goes no further. Here is one instance where he experienced something that few of us in the west would ever have the opportunity to even observe, and yet he gives no insight into it. Better that he left it out completely, than tease us with the brief mention without going any further. This is not a book for

someone who desires a hard analysis of the Iranian regime or political structure today (for that perhaps one of his earlier works would be better suited - either "The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran" or "The Ayatollahs' Democracy: An Iranian Challenge"). It is a personal recollection, and in personalizing the story, Majd again and again discusses his own anxieties regarding the risks he was taking in deciding to live in Iran with his wife and infant son. In the end, he had no serious problems whatsoever while living there, and so perhaps that was the point - emphasizing his fears while making it clear that none were realized.

well-written smart appraisal of current views and events in Iranian daily life generally, however it is less than accurate in its description of a foreign woman's existence in contemporary Iran and its grave limitations and precarious circumstances. This book gives the impression that it is safe for a foreign woman to live in Iran today, that's very far from the truth, even when your husband is an ayatollah's relative.

I went to Iran to work and live in the 1970's . My journey was unusual for an American in that I went along with a good Persian friend and also. In that I had no contact with Americans or their surrogates during my many years there. Yes, like many I was unable to remain in Iran after 1979 but my love for the people and culture of Iran remains intact. This excellent account has helped me much better understand the current state in Iran and has renewed my faith that all of the good parts of the culture remain intact .

I had several tours as a GI under foreign military sales cases in Iran in the 70s. I learned Farsi and, as I was travelling all over Iran, I became very fond of Persians. Dealing with officials was often a complicated, near intelligence test, as reflected by the author. My family was with me on my first tour living high up in Tehran while I was frequently gone 3 to 5 days per week. Mr. Majd's experiences could have been easily predicted. I believe his book should be read by anyone who expects to officially deal with Iranians. Mr. Majd's book made me wish I were able to take my now well-grown family back to Iran to visit such wonderful places as Persepolis, Isfahan, Quom and Tabiz.

Laugh out loud--the best black humor I've read in a long time. Yes, life in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) really is a near-total fiasco, proving C. S. Lewis's dictum that 'theocracy is the worst form of government.' Sometimes you don't know whether to laugh or cry at life under this ridiculous but

tragic regime. Slowly but surely, the IRI is destroying itself, but unfortunately its taking countless innocent lives with it, including many of the best hearts and minds that Iran has to offer. Remember Hamlet saying that 'Denmark's a prison'? Wonder what he would have said about Iran.

I found this book enlightening on the state of Iran, but often found myself rereading passages as the sentences were exceptionally long and often lost their point. I could somewhat imagine his experiences but became confused by all of the political leaders as they were mentioned regularly, in contrast to one another. It did, however make me want to learn more about politics in Iran.

If you have both a taste for travel and adventure this is a great read. How exciting to go live in a foreign culture for a year and have your partner as a former local?

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