

Out of Iran

BY ERIC ELLIS

Squeezed between the mullahs and George W. Bush, and with war and a nuclear future looming, many moderate Iranian families are planning their escape.

A MAP OF AUSTRALIA, crudely drawn at the kitchen table of a middle-class West Tehran family home, seems a little out of place. It's less than zero outside and snowing heavily as shrouded chadoris shuffle through the slush to the neighbourhood mosque. Inside, a warming pot of gorma sabzi – a delicious meat and vegetable stew that alongside kebabs and rice has strong claims as Iran's national dish – simmers on a cooker, sharing a hotplate with some “cooking” opium from Afghanistan, a time-honoured tradition among Iranians who take it much as Australians might a nice merlot.

On the TV, one of 300 illegal cable channels piped into the country screens a newsroom debate in Farsi produced in a studio in Los Angeles, where much of Iran's middle classes fled after Khomeini's 1979 Islamist revolution. Today it's the main source of news for Iranians, countering the numbing programming directed by distant mullahs. There's a break for ads – even propaganda needs to be financed – and *Baywatch*-style babes prance around the screen – ethnic Iranians all. Its not quite what Khomeini had intended.

The wife, Nasreen, pores over the map of a country she's never been to and knows very little about, beyond kangaroos, to ask: “What's this place called Tasmania like?”

Nasreen and husband Kamran are desperate to take their teenage kids and leave the Islamist police state that Khomeini's heirs – “these bloody mullahs”, as Nasreen describes them – have constructed on one of mankind's defining civilisations; Iran, after all, derives from Aryan in ancient Persian. I resist the usual cheap gags mainlanders make about Tasmania and tell them it's a beautiful state. That seems pleasing and they enthusiastically

discuss plans to sell their house and what remains of a business gradually being eaten away by a powerful ayatollah's grasping hands and use the proceeds to emigrate to Australia, replanting the business in Tasmania.

By selling a home that's been in their family for generations, they think they can raise the necessary funds to qualify as business migrants – in their late 40s, they feel they likely wouldn't qualify the usual way. A cousin in Sydney has agreed to help, as have I, though there's concern that Kamran's lack of a passport will pose issues – the Islamist state won't give him one because he's from a faith regarded as heresy by the Shia theocracy, reason enough for him to be jailed for two years. The family is being bled dry.

Nasreen says this scene is being played out among her relatives and across her country – Iranians reluctantly planning to leave their beloved relatives and land of birth. As George W. Bush ratchets up the rhetoric on Tehran, blameless Iranians see little future in staying. While Nasreen reckons US troops would find a warmer welcome among average Iranians than they have next door in Iraq, the American conduct of the Iraq campaign doesn't fill them with confidence.

“War will be horrible here,” she says, “but if this is peace, it's just as bad in many ways.” She remembers the terrible 1980s, a decade of air raids and Saddam Hussein's war that killed a million Iranians. A massive martyrs' cemetery on the outskirts of the capital stands as testimony to its pointlessness, a place that moves to tears even government opponents like my friends. Nasreen lost a brother at the front and says 95% of Iranians oppose the theocrats but that her countrymen are “too laid back” to revolt as they did against the Shah in 1979, the memories of the shattering Iran-Iraq war being too fresh. Besides, she says, “the ayatollahs are clever”.

Few Iranians doubt their government is building a nuclear capacity but when Washington assails Tehran for its belligerence,

the theocrats present it to those with no access to sophisticated media as an attack on Iranians.

Money speaks loudly, too. Post-revolution Iran resembles post-Soviet Russia in the emergence of powerful oligarchs. Khomeini's was a peasant revolution and set up powerful foundations (known as bonyads) which seized property and businesses with the aim of redistributing “illegitimate” wealth accumulated by “apostates” and “blood-sucking capitalists”, most of whom had fled. While Khomeini was alive – a period Iranians now look back at with some nostalgia – it was a system that by and large worked. Housing, schools and hospitals were built. But his death in 1989 ushered in a commercial picnic for unscrupulous and powerful mullahs, who are openly despised and laughed at in the streets of Tehran. One cab driver explained to me that he won't pick up clerics now “because they never pay the fare”.





Khomeini's bonyads now control up to half the economy, vehicles for patronage, corruption and cronyism for a greedy clergy. War would upset the gravy train.

But times are changing. Local elections in December dealt a blow to the hardline camp behind the pugnacious President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He came to office in mid-2005 spouting brimstone at home and abroad. Positioning himself as a champion of the poor, he has yet to do much beyond rhetoric to emancipate them. Falling oil prices in a country that has 10% of the world's reserves may have meant he has lost his chance. Tehran swirls with talk of impeachment but Ahmadinejad has never held as much power as the West gives him credit for. He's just one leg of a complex leadership structure presided over by Iran's elliptical supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The president is believed to have split with Khamenei, who is worried that Ahmadinejad

has overplayed his hand with the US over uranium enrichment and his cosying up to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez.

Ebrahim Yazdi, Khomeini's moderate foreign minister who split with the ayatollah during the 1979-81 US embassy siege, told *The Bulletin* that "Ahmadinejad has been a disaster for our country and I'm not alone in thinking that. There's very little appetite here for a war with the US, regardless of what is happening in Iraq".

Reformers like the ageing Yazdi have new momentum, which could provide daylight over the nuclear issue if the West is prepared to seize it. It's also an opportunity for economic pragmatists like the former president Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, regarded as Iran's richest man. Ahmadinejad beat him in the 2005 poll but Rafsanjani's stocks are again rising.

Moderates like Yazdi are puzzled as to why Washington doesn't engage Tehran when their

ALSO RANS Posters festoon a Tehran street in December for the local elections which resulted in a rebuff for supporters of President Amadenijad

foreign policy objectives are alike. He says Iranians are not as involved in the Palestinian issue as their Arab neighbours and don't support the "adventurism" in Lebanon and Iraq. Instead of being threatened by the US creating client states, Afghanistan and Iraq, on Iran's doorstep, Yazdi says Washington has ousted Iran's most belligerent enemies in the Taliban, al Qaeda's Sunni extremists and Saddam Hussein, while allowing Tehran to exploit the leadership vacuum on both sides. "We have much more in common than many seem to understand."

But as they pore over their kitchen map after "wasting the best years of our lives" in a revolution that hasn't delivered much, families like Nasreen and Kamran reckon the Apple Isle might be their last chance. ●