

IRAN 2.0

Currently experiencing a RENAISSANCE of culture and attitudes, Iran is fast becoming a dynamic hub of ENTREPRENEURIALISM and creativity.

WORDS CHE-MARIE TRIGG

Nuclear weapons, scenes from the Hollywood film *Argo* and women walking the streets dressed in black chadors – for many Westerners, their image of Iran is made up of these most obvious of stereotypes, fed by the media, movies and politicians. But ask anyone who’s been there, and they’ll tell you that to visit Iran is to enter a country with a thriving business industry, varied scenery and enviable street style. Sixty per cent of its population is under 30, sanctions are slowly lifting, and Iran is finally coming into its own.

The local start-up scene began maturing around four years ago, says Hamed Jafari, co-founder of TechRasa, a website that aims to give Iranian start-ups and entrepreneurs exposure.

“Ever since President Rouhani came to office, we have seen many changes in Iran’s IT sector,” explains Hamed. “This includes faster internet, and more support for social media platforms and local IT ventures.”

In 2013, the country’s internet speed was 624 gigabits per second but, since then, it’s jumped to 14,000 gigabits per second. By the end of 2017, it’s projected to reach almost 10 times that. And while speedy internet is crucial for increasing productivity and promoting tech development, Hamed says that a range of other initiatives have sown the seeds for up-and-coming businesses to bloom. “The Vice-Presidency for Science and Technology is currently supporting the various start-up events happening across the country, and they help local accelerators and incubators [with] their program,” he says.

These events include start-up weekends, conferences and talks by local founders who operate in a country where Facebook and Twitter are banned. Sarava, Iran’s first venture capital fund, and accelerators such as Avatech, Setak and DMOND, have funded ideas as diverse as an online food delivery service

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(Reyhoon), digital music streaming (Navaak), video streaming (Aparat), and an Iranian version of Etsy (Artzy). Hamed also believes that the easing back of sanctions, and the signing of the nuclear deal between Iran and major world powers in January 2016, has coaxed enterprising Iranians who had left for greener pastures back into the country. That was the story of Nazanin Daneshvar, who worked in London and Berlin before returning to launch the Groupon-like site Takhfifan, in 2010.

“Many Iranians who had lived abroad for many years decided to come back to Iran to pursue new opportunities here,” says Hamed.

“Many of the university graduates who were also thinking of immigration decided to stay in Iran, as the overall economic situation got better. Every week we [at TechRasa] get emails from expats and foreign investors who are enthusiastic about the market, and this alone shows the golden moment we have here in Iran.”

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Digikala, an Iranian version of Amazon, which is worth over half a billion dollars, controls almost 90 per cent of the country’s e-commerce, and brought in US\$10 million investment from a European fund.

“Because of the language and cultural barrier, founders and investors from other countries tend to co-invest [in] and co-direct the newly founded start-ups,” says Mohammadreza Azali, co-founder of TechRasa. “People outside of Iran who want to start a venture here would find an expat or a talented local to co-found the new venture to minimise the risk. We have also many expats who came back to the country and started a venture here.”

He cites ihome.ir (a property portal), Bamilo (online marketplace), TAP30

And these entrepreneurs aren’t letting borders or the remaining economic sanctions (particularly US regulations that prohibit trade or investment in Iranian businesses or start-ups) keep them from developing a global outlook. Such is the case for one of the country’s biggest start-up success stories,

and Snapp (Uber clones), Wego (a flight comparison site) and Zoodel (a B2B marketplace) as companies that have been started by founders who have taken experience gained overseas and applied it to doing business in Iran. And, like a handful of other up-and-coming economies, the country’s youth is also working in its favour.

“With [a population of] 80 million, and 67 per cent of them under the age of 35, Iran has a young, educated and tech-savvy population,” says Hamed. “Any trend that you see in any place in the world, you can also see in Iran – that includes new phones, gadgets and apps. As for the entrepreneurs, they are hard-working people just like any other place in the world.” However, says Hamed, Iran’s mandatory military service – which was extended from 21 months to 24 months in 2015 – adds a significant degree of difficulty to young entrepreneurial aspirations. At age 18, every male must report for military service or, if they are studying, they may postpone it but only until they finish their studies. The consequence of the latter is that university students are ushered immediately into the military – making their education two years out of date by the time they are finished. And, in the fast-moving tech start-up space, two years may as well be 10.

For youths who do want to go abroad to further their studies, a lack of diplomatic relations throws down an extra gauntlet. >

TECHRASA CO-FOUNDERS (LEFT TO RIGHT): MOHAMMADREZA AZALI, HAMED JAFARI AND ALIREZA JOZI





After completing their undergraduate degrees at the Sharif University of Technology (said to be Iran’s equivalent of MIT), entrepreneurs Shayan Zadeh and Alex Mehr headed for the closest US Embassy – in Turkey – and, due to political tensions that had resulted in cancelled flights, hiked there. Once in the US, they founded dating site Zoosk, which today has more than 33 million members around the globe.

Meanwhile Taskulu, a staff-management platform that targets clients in the US and Europe, was previously forced to give their services away for free because international economic sanctions prohibited clients paying them.

MEETING OF THE MINDS

Since 2014, the annual iBridges conference has gathered together a community of high-tech entrepreneurs of Iranian descent. The first meet-up was held in Berkeley, California – Berlin and Barcelona have also played host to the event.

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But for entrepreneurial Iranians, the easing back of nuclear sanctions (that will now allow Europe and Asia, among others, to invest and trade with Iran) has an impact stretching far beyond the economic.

“Hope is something that has sparked in the Iranian people ever since some of the sanctions got lifted,” says Hamed.

“Iranian entrepreneurs now have more self-confidence to build products for the international community. More international companies and investors are also eyeing the Iranian market.”

Iran’s tourism industry is also growing as the nation

becomes less isolated. Named as the world’s cheapest tourist destination in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness report in 2015, its scenery is as diverse as the various cultures you’ll find across the country. When visiting, for business or travel, it’s always advisable to dress appropriately – think simple headscarves, and covered legs and arms. And while their dress code is enforceable by law, many locals make the most of it – just look at the enviable sartorial expressions on street websites such as the Tehran Times and JooJoo Azad for inspiration.

Although Iran’s start-up scene is mainly centred around Tehran, be sure to check out other regions of the country while you’re there. From ancient Sari, to the ruins of Persepolis, and the weird resort vibes of Kish Island, the country is packed with culture, places to visit and views to see. Now is the perfect time to visit – while the country is still full of hope for what is next to come. 📍

DOING BUSINESS IN IRAN

What you need to know

BUSINESS HOURS

Iranians customarily prefer to do business with people they know, like and respect. Before attempting any business talk, take your colleague or potential business partner for a meal to gain their trust.

TAAROF

Boiled down to its essence, this central concept in Persian culture is all about acknowledging other people. A little humility or a humble gesture goes a long way here – let people enter through a door before you, and offer at least once to pay for dinner.

DRESS THE PART

While Iran has opened up a great deal, there is still a dress code to be adhered to. Women must wear headscarves and loose clothing that covers their knees and arms at the very least. It is not unusual for men to wear Western attire – just avoid shorts and sleeveless tops.

GIVING MOOD

Bring a gift and don’t leave with one. Been invited into a potential client or business partner’s home? Give your host a small gift of thanks. Try to steer clear of complimenting their belongings – it is custom for Iranians to offer up possessions you admire as a gift.

NEGOTIATE, NEGOTIATE, NEGOTIATE

Iranians are born negotiators and, more than anything, seem to enjoy the challenge. Be prepared for this, and leave plenty of time for haggling, whether you’re buying a rug in the bazaar, or trying to reach a compromise on a business deal.

RED TAPE

Like plenty of other countries, bureaucracy in Iran takes its time. Be prepared to wait, and don’t complain – remain courteous throughout the process, and you’ll get through it faster.

TGIF

Friday is a day of rest in Iran – don’t try to book in a business meeting, or you’ll end up with a red face.

IMAGE COURTESY OF HODA KATEBI / PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL CHAE





UNDER COVER

Hoda Katebi is the US-based founder of fashion and activism blog, JooJoo Azad. She researched the UNDERGROUND FASHION scene in Iran for her undergraduate thesis, and published a collection of her photographs in her book, TEHRAN STREETSTYLE.

WORDS CHE-MARIE TRIGG

a burgeoning underground fashion scene in Iran has flourished. While not all the fashion designers who are creating clothing illegally are politically motivated, their pieces are still able to provide commentary on gender and international politics: where inspiration comes from – or does not come from.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE STYLE IN TEHRAN AND OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY?

Yes! Tehran is the fashion capital of Iran, and therefore the multiplicity of styles, ways of dressing, and available fashion is the highest in Tehran. It is also the site of the largest underground fashion industry in Iran. In other, more religious, cities like Mashhad or Qom, the normalised form of public dress is more modest and minimalist for both men and women; in cities like Tehran there is a greater clash of ideas, cultures, inspirations that both women and men navigate through their clothing.

IS IT DIFFICULT TO BALANCE THE ISSUES OF EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN AND PROMOTING ETHICAL FASHION?

Being unapologetically Muslim and pushing for ethical fashion go hand-in-hand: namely because most of the garment workers who are being exploited by the sweatshop fashion industry are Muslim women in Bangladesh, in Indonesia, etc. ■

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN FASHION?

I actually didn't really care for fashion until fairly recently. Being politically active made me start thinking more about clothing and how powerful the art of fashion can be. Wearing a scarf around my neck, as opposed to on my head, won't get me punched in the face or called a terrorist. The way we choose to frame and present our bodies for public consumption is deeply political, and I wanted to explore that.

I started my blog in 2013 as a place where I could 'yell' on the internet, after being subject to abuse, both directly from my experiences growing up as a Muslim woman in the US, but also through Orientalist misrepresentation in mainstream media that were dehumanising me and everyone who looked like me.

WHAT MAKES IRANIAN STYLE SPECIAL?

While there is a national dress code in Iran, it is not usually heavily enforced or abided by. And in the last five years



IMAGES COURTESY OF HODA KATEBI / PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL CHAE



WOMEN

GET THE LOOK

These products will have you boldly TRAVERSING the ancient empire – from mosques that reflect KALEIDOSCOPIIC COLOURS to arid mountains hovering in the distance – in style.

LEFT TO RIGHT: **A.P.C** OH L'AMOUR CREW NECK T-SHIRT AU\$87 matchesfashion.com **MASTER & DYNAMIC** MH40 LEATHER OVER-EAR HEADPHONES US\$400 mrporter.com **PUMA** SUEDE CLASSIC SNEAKERS IN BLACK AU\$110 gluestore.com.au **DR SEBAGH** SERUM REPAIR MOISTURISING TREATMENT 20ML AU\$97 selfridges.com.au **NIXON** MISSION 48MM WATCH AU\$599 nixon.com **ACADEMY BRAND** VINTAGE SLIM CHINO AU\$99.95 academybrand.com



MEN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: **TED BAKER** ARIS SCARF AU\$159 theiconic.com.au **IRO** ANNA DRESS US\$598 orderofstyle.com **GRANA** LINEN BOYFRIEND SHIRT AU\$85 grana.com **KREWE** CONTI ROUND-FRAME ACETATE AND ROSE GOLD-TONE MIRROR GLASSES AU\$347 net-a-porter.com **MANSUR GAVRIEL** PINK LEATHER MINI BACKPACK US\$795 ssense.com





CURATE AND CONQUER

The Iranian ART SCENE is alive and kicking – and achieving what international DIPLOMACY has long struggled to do: find a connection POINT between East and West.

WORDS ELISSA WEBSTER

Every gallery is unique in [its] own way,” says Shirin Partovi Tavakolian. “Every gallery has a different perspective of what they’re doing. But for me, the challenge is very important. It’s not just an exhibition for me, I involve myself in the artist’s life.

“Artists are different in a way; they have eccentricities. Trying to understand the artists and go into their mind, and then try and explain this to another audience and make them understand the work – that is the challenge.”

With more than 10 years under her belt as owner/curator of one of the five best contemporary galleries in Tehran, Shirin has set herself the mission of taking Iranian art to the world.

THE LOCAL MARKET

I once heard from someone that you have to be a billionaire to become a millionaire in this industry. It has to be a passion because... it needs a lot of effort and money to promote an artist and, if you do it right, then hopefully you will make some money out of it! Art is not a routine daily necessity for people. People are always in need of food and clothing, but art is a luxury, not everyone is a potential client. Like any other business, it has its ups and downs – it depends on the market, on the dollar, on the oil – but there has always been a strong local market for Iranian art. And we are starting to see a new collector base among the younger

generation. Traditionally, Iranians believe that your money appreciates when you buy gold or carpet, but now people are seeing that if they buy art, there is appreciation in art investments, too.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

My God! The cultural ministry has a rule about where galleries can be located and what type of buildings they can be located in. But now, all of a sudden, the municipality has decided they want to charge me extra money because I’m operating as a gallery, which is against the rule that they established. I just want to go to work, but I end up going to the ministry... and I say, ‘This is your own rule, this is what is written here.’ They say, ‘No, we need the money so we don’t accept this rule anymore’.

Then there is... censorship. You cannot show anything that’s nude or political, but artists want to show the social and political problems... Last year... one of the artists was showing a girl with a headscarf and a cigarette in her hand and ripped jeans. I had people come in and say, ‘What is this? This painting should

not be on the wall’. They were trying to cause me problems. I had to convince them that it was not against Islamic rule.

THE JOURNEY

Normally art fairs are a risk; you’re not sure if you’re going to sell or not. The first art fair I attended in the States was in 2011 and it was a great success. Everyone was so surprised – they couldn’t believe that in Iran you have art! So I realised there is a demand and there is an opportunity for connection. I could have done it more easily in California or... Washington, DC, but the state for art is New York, so I thought I’d challenge myself and see how I’d do. It’s been four years now that I’ve had the gallery in New York. It can be difficult... but it’s been successful.

Art that is successful can connect east and west together. Even though the artist has their own cultural background and heritage, and that should be shown, it should also connect with the European and American market.

THE VISION

If you imagine yourself out in space and look down at the Earth, it’s very small. But when you’re down here, Iran looks very big, Tehran looks very big. So I always say you have to imagine yourself out there and see the world as it is – round and small! I want to make an impact and have us be internationally active as an Iranian gallery and an Iranian art scene. ■



IMAGES COURTESY OF SHIRIN PARTOVI TAVAKOLIAN / GALLERY OPENING PHOTOGRAPHY: MOHAMADREZA MANDANI



WOMEN TO WATCH

NEGAR YAGHMAIAN – PHOTOGRAPHER

Currently studying documentary-making and photojournalism in Madrid, this Iranian’s photography lends an ethereal quality to the mundane and everyday and has graced magazines, art gallery walls and NGO projects alike.

LEILA ARAGHIAN – ARCHITECT

Born and currently residing in Tehran, Leila is an award-winning Iranian architect who designed the 270-metre-long Tabitat bridge, an architectural jewel of the city.

NINA ANSARY – AUTHOR AND SCHOLAR

This Los Angeles-based scholar, women’s advocate and author was born in Tehran. Her literary debut, *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran*, has won her awards around the globe.

ARIANA BUNDY – CHEF

Since perfecting her craft at the highly acclaimed Le Cordon Bleu, Iranian-American Ariana has fast become an authority figure on Persian cuisine within the culinary world. She is best known for her cooking and travel show on the Nat Geo People channel.



LOCAL START-UP STARS

BLOCKS

A trip to Silicon Valley gave founder Alireza Tahmaseb a glimpse of the world inside entrepreneurship, and he was hooked. Two years later Blocks, the first modular smartwatch, was launched onto the scene, raising more than US\$1 million on Kickstarter in a week.

ALFRED

After graduating from Tehran’s Sharif University in 2002, Nima Asgharbeygi went on to complete a PhD in Electrical Engineering at Stanford, before co-founding Clever Sense, a mobile app that delivered personalised recommendations for nearby restaurants, cafes, and nightlife destinations. His creation was soon snapped up by Google and renamed Alfred. Sharif is now the Tech Lead Manager at Google.

TAXIMODA

The first flash sales e-commerce store in Iran offers both local and international fashion and apparel labels. Originally a graphic designer, co-founder Tohid Tasoujian went back to complete an MBA at the University of Tehran almost five years ago, when e-commerce was on a sharp incline.

CAFE BAZAAR

In a marketplace of more than 100,000 Iranian apps for social media, messaging and other uses, Cafe Bazaar is holding its own. It’s a digital portal where users can do everything from book a hotel to purchase music or suss out the latest trending apps.

