

EXCLUSIVE

## Moses Keshishian, an Iranian-Armenian journalist

## Iran is a land that cannot be unloved

By Amir Mollae Mozaffari and Zohreh Qanadi\*

**H**ow do we know that we belong to a nation? It's not about papers, that's for sure. Political and anthropology theorists have been arguing about the answer to this question for more than a century. Many candidates have been proposed: A shared language, a shared religion, a shared ethnicity, etc. The list can't be exhaustive. It has to be about experiences.

In the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society of Iran, one has to look beyond the standard menu of the shared characteristics to find out what makes us Iranian. There are some other promising candidates.

"Armenians of Iran are Iranians through and through who have always defended this land with their blood and have strived for preserving and developing this country," said Moses Keshishian in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily on the occasion of January 6, the birthday of Jesus Christ according to Orthodox Christians.

Editor-in-chief of Arax, a biweekly newspaper published in Iran in the Armenian language, Keshishian is a staunch proponent of unity in Iran.

"We have about 100 Armenian martyrs," he said. There it is: Collectively going through as big a trauma as defending the country against an aggressor should do a lot to make a nation.

In the following interview, we have talked about many aspects of the Iranian identity which Armenians share with their compatriots, as well as some things characteristically Armenian.

\*Amir Mollae Mozaffari and Zohreh Qanadi are staff writers at Iran Daily.

#### Would you please tell us more about Armenians? In Iran, Armenians are mostly known as Christians.

Armenians enjoy a distinct identity, language and nationality. Being an Armenian is not dependent on religion. Armenians follow Christianity brought by Saint Gregory in Armenia in 301 (AD). He was a religious leader who converted Armenia from paganism to Christianity. Hence, Armenia was the first state in the world to officially accept Christianity as its state religion.

#### How is the Armenian Church categorized?

In terms of church denominations, the typical Armenian Church is much closer to the Orthodox Church. Armenian Church is also known as Apostolic Church.

#### In what ways would you say that Armenians' religion is different from other denominations of Christians?

the disagreements voiced by the church. In the end, the church accepted embracing cultural symbols in order to increase church attendance. This is how some feasts and cultures have entered the church.

#### Can you elaborate on the significance of genealogy to Armenians?

Armenian genealogies are traced back to clans, not individuals. Therefore, everyone with that lineage is important just because of who they were.

#### Is it true that the genealogy of some Armenians is traced back to Saint Gregory?

Saint Gregory preached Christianity and then became the leader of the Armenian Church, and his children followed the father's path. So, in the past, such stories about Saint Gregory were advanced in connection to some missionaries. Indeed, top figures of the church once had no ob-

include Tehran, Isfahan, Shahinshahr and Tabriz.

Currently, about 50,000 Armenians live in Tehran, about 5,000 in Isfahan and 1,500 in Shahinshahr. Estimates of the total number of Armenians that reside in Iran range from 100,000 to 200,000.

#### How many churches are there in the country?

In Tehran, eight churches are active, the oldest of which is the Saint George Church, built in 1795. Isfahan has the highest number of churches which is 13. Amid the aforementioned relocation at the beginning of the 17th century, Shah Abbas also transferred some stones from the churches in Armenia to build some churches in Isfahan. The cities of Mashhad, Rasht, Anzali, Gorgan, Arak, Qazvin and Kharraqan each have one church.

The Armenian Diocese of Azarbaijan (provinces of East Azarbaijan and West Azarbaijan) has had 223 churches under its jurisdiction

may face in the future. What will happen if we ignore our national interests and national identity? Unfortunately, some people inside the country favor interests other than national interests, and this endangers the country and even the region. Unfortunately, some foreign states, purposefully encourage this. To counter such problems, we must look into these issues consciously and with open eyes, and preserve Iran as a united country while peacefully moving forward. A united Iran would preserve its beautiful colorful flowers.

#### While we are on the subject of preservation, how many Iranian-Armenians were martyred during the Iraq-Iran war?

We have about 100 Armenian martyrs. Proportional to their population, the percentage of Armenian martyrs was more than non-Armenians. In those years (1980-1988), Armenians were active in various fields including repairing

this regard, reaffirming our attachment to the country.

#### Which Iranian cities have you visited?

Since Isfahan is my homeland, I have traveled there a lot. I have also traveled to some other cities, especially the northern cities of Iran.

#### Which cities in Iran do you like the most?

Surely, you meant to add "after Isfahan"! (laughing) Isfahan is my homeland.

However, I've lived in Rasht for two years, and I like this northern city. I also like Shiraz because of its historical past and status. I like every corner of Iran: Tabriz, Urmia, Ahvaz, Khuzestan, etc.

#### We would like to hear a delightful memory from your trips to Iranian cities.

Well, once I was in Shiraz. I believe it was the only Iranian city where its people apologized for not knowing the asked address. That was interesting to me.

But on the topic of delightful memories ... Remembering the back alleys of Isfahan, I can still feel the smell of the wet thatched walls after the rain. I love it.

#### Have you ever been abroad?

Yes, I've visited many countries including France, Sweden, Greece, Russia, etc.

#### Among the countries that you have yet to visit, which country seems interesting to you?

I like the two countries with an ancient history: Greece and Egypt. I've visited Greece but haven't had the chance to visit Egypt yet. They have a glorious past. Greece has a rich history. It is the birthplace of democracy and parliament. However, each place in the world—like India and China, to name a few—has its own beauty and value.

#### Would a guest to your home notice that you are a Christian?

Yes, probably. Maybe because of Christian symbols like the cross.

#### Are you satisfied with living in Iran?

That's a good question. Life has two meanings in my view. One is that you were born here and this is your land and homeland and you cannot be unhappy about it. But, whether you are satisfied with your life situation is another question. I think it's a little hard to be satisfied.

#### So, let me ask this question in another way. If you had the right to choose, as an Armenian, would you like to be born in Iran again?

Yes. I would want to be in Iran. Iran is a land that cannot be unloved.

I should be reminded that Armenians keep the name of Iran with them wherever they go. And it shows that the connection that we feel and the interest we have in Iran are everlasting.

#### Any last words?

I want to add that the Armenian Church is not a missionary church. Despite having an ancient presence in Iran, the Armenian Church has always believed that there is no need for preaching.

It was once succinctly said in a movie, "There is one way to reach God for every individual there is." We Armenians have also accepted that there is no need to propagate our religion, but it might be necessary to propagate humanity, and Iran has always been a place of propagation for humanity. And blessed are such thoughts!

"A relationship that honors humanity is the best kind of human relationship," Keshishian wrote for Iran Daily staff as a memento.

I think the difference between narratives created about the birth of Christ is the core concept I can describe in this regard.

Until the fourth century AD, every existing church and Christian celebrated the birth of Christ on January 6. Then, this date was moved to December 25, mainly to deal with the juxtaposition of how gloriously the birthday of Mithra (the Zoroastrian Sun God) used to be celebrated on December 25. That is why Eastern Orthodoxy celebrates Christ's birth on January 7.

There are other narratives floating around here, including the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in October 1582 as a modification to the Julian calendar, which reduced the average year from 365.25 days to 365.2425 days. Accordingly, the 7th of January in the Julian calendar is the 25th of December in the Gregorian calendar. The date difference can be described in this way, too. In any case, the Armenian Church remains faithful to its first principle, celebrating Christ's birth anniversary on January 6.

#### What about cultural differences? Paint us a picture of an Armenian celebration.

The Armenian Church has always opted to give a cultural, traditional and national character to religious celebrations on purpose. This means that Christian celebrations in an Armenian Church take on the color of old Armenian celebrations, and in some cases, even regional celebrations.

For example, Chaharshanbeh Suri, which is a beloved historically Iranian festival, is also celebrated by Armenians on February 14, but with differences. Iranians jump over the fire and express their best wishes to each other. This festival has entered the Armenian Church now, despite

stale to getting married, but after a certain date, the leaders and top officials of the church were forbidden to marry. As a result, we see that the arguments about family history and genealogy were no longer pursued.

#### Was the settlement of Armenians in Iran established in the Safavid Era?

Yes, that is true. But you must know that Armenians came to settle in Iran in two or more periods of history. In the deep past, you see that the right-wing of the army of Achaemenid kings is the Armenian corps. That is, the existence of Iranian-Armenians is not tied only to the period of Shah Abbas I onwards.

At the beginning of the 17th century, during the war with the Ottomans, Shah Abbas I ordered the ad hoc transportation of the population of the northeastern town of Jolfa to the then capital of Isfahan. According to documents released by some churches, about 600,000 Armenians were relocated. During this trip, half of that population died from diseases or harsh conditions of travel.

Among this population, there were some Armenians who left Iran for Sri Lanka or India. For example, the first Armenian newspaper in the world was published in India by Father Harutun Shemovanian, an Armenian from Iran's southern city of Shiraz. The newspaper was titled Azdarar ('The Messenger').

#### How many Armenians would you say reside in Iran?

No exact statistics are available. The Armenian population has declined since the revolution and then later, after the war [with Iraq]. Areas with a high concentration of Armenians in Iran

throughout history, 42 of which are still afloat. The oldest of the group is the Monastery of Saint Thaddeus, also known as Kara Kilise ('the Black Church'), which dates back to the fourth century, making it one of the oldest churches in the world. Tabriz has four churches, and Urmia has one active church.

The Armenian Diocese of Isfahan and the South has 100 churches under its jurisdiction, 30 of which are still active: 13 churches in Isfahan, one church each in the cities of Shiraz, Ahvaz and Abadan, and eight churches in the villages of Faridan County. The oldest church in Isfahan is Vank Cathedral, built in 1655 during the Safavid Era.

#### Which professions do the Armenian community usually practice in Iran?

All industrial jobs are considered among the typical jobs of Armenians in Iran. In reviewing the history of the country, we see that the first people working in theater and cinema were from the Armenian community. Iranian-Armenians were also the pioneering pilots, mechanics, translators, etc. For example, Avanes Oganians (Ohanian) was the screenwriter and director of the first Iranian film.

#### Do Armenians consider themselves to be from Iran or Armenia?

Armenians of Iran are Iranians through and through who have always defended this land with their blood and have strived for preserving and developing this country. To know them better, one should only live beside them.

#### What are your concerns about Iran?

One of our main concerns is the dangers Iran

tanks and weapons.

#### How does the world view Iranian-Armenians?

Iranian-Armenians are representative of Iran regardless of where in the world they are. The Iranian-Armenian Society of New York is an example of this. The society has been active in the United States for more than a century. That is to say, Armenians keep their deep attachment to Iran wherever they go.

#### Did you have an opportunity to leave Iran for other countries?

Yes, I did, but I never left.

#### Why?

This "why" is a difficult "why" to answer. When you are born somewhere and you depend on it and you feel as if you need it and you consider it your origin and homeland, it is difficult to move from there.

One day, I told a friend who lived outside of Iran that I would never leave Iran. I told him that "when you come back home, you can find me in three places: Here in Tehran, or Tehran, on the Khavaran Road (I meant the Armenian cemetery) or in Armenia. Don't look for me in other places. This is my place. I was born here. My root is here and it will dry here.

This is my belief and it will not change. This is also the belief of many Armenians.

#### Do you feel like this attachment is bothering the enemies of a united Iran?

Unfortunately, we have been the target of enemies including the Israeli and various institutions. We have issued many statements in

