

INFIDEL TASK FORCE Interview with Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman
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ITF:
Welcome Dr Farhat-Holzman to the Infidel Task Force and thank you for taking the time to chat with us. You come with major credentials and I\222m sure the readers will enjoy this column

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:
I am delighted to have found you\227and been found by you!

ITF:
When someone hears about a woman living in Iran, the images that immediately spring to mind are of Sally Field in the movie: \223Not Without My Daughter\224. Tell us please how you were introduced to Iran.

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:
I met my Iranian husband at UCLA, and in graduate school, he received a Ford Foundation Grant to study Persian Court Music (an ancient and lovely tradition that was rapidly disappearing). We spent two years in Iran, living with his family and giving birth to our first child.

His family, being old aristocracy, was nothing like the terrible family of the young woman in \223Not Without My Daughter.\224 My experience was during the post World War II period when the young Shah finally roused himself to engage in modernization projects (something his father had done as the first modernizer after centuries of decay). My then-husband\222s family were patriotic, eager to see Iran get out from under the thrall of Islam, and they welcomed me\227their educated and curious American daughter-in-law. Adding to my luck: I had an amazing and unique mother-in-law who was vibrant, beautiful, and wise, and we took to each other and were friends until her premature death right after the Islamic Revolution.

My experience was very different from that of the Sally Field character who went to Iran at the wrong time and into the worst kind of family\227pious merchant class people.

Years after my marriage ended, I was sent to Iran on a project that involved cross-cultural training\227and this was during a period that the revolution was brewing. I did try to notify my Congressman at the time and the State Department Iran Chair, but I was not believed. I was being politically incorrect, it seems.

ITF:
When you first set eyes on the landscape and the people, what went through your mind? Was it excitement, amazement or possibly fear?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:
The landscape around Tehran looked much like that of Utah\227a reality that many Iranian students recognized as they were sent to school in Utah to study agriculture. Our arrival was something of a family event\227and we were much welcomed and (being pregnant) fussed over. As I learned Farsi, and as we traveled around the country, I became much more comfortable. I fell in love with Esfahan, the old Capital, a city that I found as beautiful as Florence, Italy. And Shiraz, a 7,000 foot city full of orange blossoms and wildflowers in the countryside around it, was the home of some of Iran\222s most famous poets\227much loved by everyone. The Caspian Sea region (finally free of malaria by the government eradication program) was as beautiful as Hawaii\227forested mountains and green rice and tea fields. I never traveled anywhere that I had to wear a veil. Modern women did not do that then.

ITF:
The Infidel Task Force is a major supporter of women\222s rights around the world. We see everyday how women are treated in the Islamic countries and it can be repulsive and degrading. I think you can see where I am going with this, and I would like you to give us an overview on how the Iranian women lived at that time compared to how they are treated today.

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I was in Iran at the height of modernization, and I did not know any women who wore a chador (head-to-toe cloak); I only saw them on villagers and the urban poor. At one time, only prostitutes wore them (a story pushed by the government). This situation has been reversed.

Today, young women increasingly defy the government, pushing their headscarves further back on their heads and wearing tight and more revealing clothing. They never know from day to day when the religious morality thugs will beat them for this, but they do it anyway.

ITF:

How did the Pahlavi government engage in the educational aspect of the Iranian women and was there any attempt to modernize Islam as compared to Iran today?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

The Pahlavi Dynasty (Reza Shah and his son) were determined to emancipate women to European standards. The upper classes were the first to do so\227but increasingly this movement was picked up by the burgeoning middle class of professionals and the more prosperous merchants. Bright girls were sent abroad to school (I personally knew one village girl who later became an engineer\227but there were many others.)

The young women who were caught up in what they thought was a wonderful socialist revolution found out quickly what the Ayatollah and his cabal planned for them. The marriage age was once more lowered, complete veiling mandated (violators punished), and such customs as cutting off hands and stoning adulteresses were revived in rural areas.

Mandatory brainwashing and hours of religious training replaced normal school subjects\227much resented by many students, but difficult to defy.

ITF:

If you were to teach us one important factor of Iranian culture past and present, what would that factor be? Are you still in contact with individuals there and do you have any desire to return to Iran?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I would say that Iran (Persia) is far older than Islam, and that it has a continuing identity that even the Ayatollah was not able to wipe out\227although he tried. This is a country with arts, literature, and government practices that were the model for much of the ancient world. They were rivals of the Greeks and Romans\227and later Byzantines---and the educated still know this. The great national epic: The Shahname (Book of Kings) was written in the 10th century while Persia was under Muslim occupation. The language was deliberately Persian, eliminating as much as possible any Arabic words, and the story tracks Iran\222s identity from mythical beginnings until the Arab invasion. This marvelous work is still read by story-tellers all over Iran\227and is on Radio Tehran daily for people to do their exercises to its drumbeats and poetry.

And no, I have no desire to go back until the Islamic government is gone. When that happens, I have promised to lead a tour to the real Iran.

ITF:

The Infidel Task Force has a contributor living in Iran. He tells us that currently, sentiment towards the western world or specifically Americans, is running about 50% against. I believe many of our readers would like to know how did the Iranian people feel about Americans during your time there as opposed to what is happening in Iran today.

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I have heard that the US is the most popular country in the world to Iranians today. What their government hates, they love. I don\222t know who your consultant is\227but I really doubt that assessment.

After World War II, Iranians loved the US, primarily because we had never done anything to them, not the case with the Russians and the British, both of whom were hated. That changed after the abortive coup of Mossadegh was put down. America replaced the British as the hated country\227despite anyone with money sending their children to school here. Now we are loved again.

ITF:

Dr Farhat-Holzman, you say that your perspective on radicalized Islam is a combination of domestic experience, professional experience and your background as a historian. Can you clarify that statement? Did you ever experience the radical aspect of Islam?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

Except for the occasional midnight phone call and letters to the editor complaining about my newspaper columns, I have never been personally threatened. One time in San Francisco, I was lecturing about \223The War Inside of Islam\224 at the Commonwealth club\227and a group of Islamists attended (including women in full hijab) and they tried to disrupt the talk. The audience threw them out.

ITF:

As a professor of Islamic Civilization, how was the subject received by your Muslim students as compared to your American students? I assume you did have Muslim students. Was there ever a case of vocalized militancy?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I had no Muslim students, but I did have plenty of students from Malaysia and Indonesia, Chinese Christians, and a few Hindus, who had no problem with what I was teaching. And in those days, I was much kinder to Islam than I am today. However, in one of my classes, I had the students read The Satanic Verses by Salmon Rushdie. A Muslim student not in my class buttonholed me in the hall to ask why I would teach such a hateful book that was so unkind to Islam. I told him to come back after he read the book, not before he had even opened it. He backed off.

ITF:

A growing number of people in the United States feel that America is under siege by radical Islamic leaders attempting to dismantle the US Constitution and replace it with Shariah Law. This is actually documented in some of your papers. Do you feel it is a real possibility? Or are we Americans truly protected by the Constitution?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I think there are Islamists who would like to see this, but it is not going to happen. We are not only protected by the Constitution, but by the increasingly ugly behavior of Islamists who think they can do this by force. They not only have pushback from us, but from the majority of secular Muslims (such as Iranian immigrants) who will have none of it.

ITF:

Lastly Dr. if you were to say which country is in the most danger of becoming totally controlled by radicalized Islamists, which one would that be?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

Pakistan. I really fear for them. And I am not terribly happy with what is happening to Egypt either.

ITF:

Dr. Farhat-Holzman, the following three questions may be a bit personal. If you wish to by pass them that would be fine. What was the cultural difference between your husband\222s Iranian family and yours and did it put a strain on your marriage?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

No. The cultural differences were not an issue between us. My marriage failed because my husband was a romanatic who loved falling in love, but not staying in love. He was always looking for the perfect women\227a process that gave him four marriages, none of which succeeded. This characteristic is not unique to Iranians, alas.

ITF:

When you made the decision to move to Iran, what kind of mental preparation and self convincing did you have to go through to do it? Or was it something performed on whim?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

I never moved to Iran. It was always understood that we were visiting Iran as graduate students on a project\227and we left after the project was completed. When I went back years later, it was also for a project. I never considered living there.

ITF:
With respect on raising children in an Islamic society, were your children raised in a totally Islamic fashion or a more Western slant? At what point are male and female children separated in an Islamic country?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:

None of this applied. My children were reared here. Both my son and daughter had a short period of staying with their father (I thought they should have that experience) but they returned to resume their schooling here. Since the family I married into was merely nominally Muslim, none of the horrors of Islamic child rearing applied. Islam never played a role.

ITF:
Thank you very much for coming, Dr Farhat-Holzman. I'm sure our readers will want you to come back for another chat. Would you do that for us?

Dr. Farhat-Holzman:
Of course! And thank you.