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Warmth for Americans in Once Hostile Tehran

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Newsha Tavakolian/Polaris, for The New York Times

Despite tension between United States and Iranian leaders, American products or ones that resemble them are popular in Tehran, Iran's capital. In the foreground, a stop sells peanut-butter chocolate and other flavors of ersatz Baskin-Robbins ice cream.

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**
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TEHRAN — When the shah ruled [Iran](#), the Westernized elite enjoyed Hollywood movies at a small theater in the center of the city. Today, that theater is an Islamic cultural center and a meeting place for fundamentalists.

So it was a bit of a surprise that in the gift shop, where almost everything was infused with a religious theme, the best-selling items last week were American children's movies: "Rugrats Go Wild," "Meet the Robinsons" and "The Incredibles." All bootlegged, of course, and each for \$1.50.

"Yes, we sell a lot of these," said Amin Gorbani, a young bearded clerk at the cash register. Then he stood up, extended his hand and said, "When it comes to disputes between Iran and America, that is between governments. But when it comes to people, I don't see any problem between the people."

America's image in the Middle East is as low as it has ever been. With the occupation of Iraq; the Israeli bombing of Lebanon; and Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, the United States has been cited in polls as the gravest threat to peace in the region. But Iran is different, even the Iran of someone like Mr. Gorbani, who works in a fundamentalist gift shop.

Generally speaking, Iranians like Americans — not just American products, which remain very popular, but Americans. That is not entirely new: Iranians on an individual level have long expressed a desire to restore relations between the countries. But the sentiment seems much more out in the open now.

It is spreading not only on the streets of Tehran, but also in the way politicians talk. A

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former student hostage-taker, the mayor of Tehran, even the supreme leader himself, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), have said it is not out of the question to restore relations with the United States someday.

That change of tone, combined with Ayatollah Khamenei's recent mild criticism of President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#)'s government, seems to have given Iranians license to express their frustration with their current situation and their longing for normal relations.

They do not necessarily see themselves as having any connection to the extreme radical ideas of their leaders, whether in religious or geopolitical terms, and calculate that Americans are equally disconnected from their leaders' decisions, political and social analysts said.

"I think the problem we have with the Americans is the way Americans perceive Iran as a threat, as a rogue state," said Masoumeh Ebtekar, a Tehran city council member who served as spokeswoman for the students who seized the United States Embassy and 66 hostages in 1979. "This perception has to change. I believe if they understand who we really are, the basis for reconciliation will be based on respect and equality."

She framed the conflict as a matter of perception, of misunderstanding. Yet, there was a time when that kind of talk was seen as subversive. Now, there is Baskin-Robbins.

Not the real Baskin-Robbins, apparently, but an Iranian bootleg version with its own display of 31 flavors. "I used to be the one who chanted 'Death to America,'" said Abolfazl Emami, owner of the ice cream shop in Mohseni Square. "It was a slogan that came up during the revolution. People don't mean it now."

With a smile and his hand raised, he said: "I like American goods, and I prefer American people. It's just the government I don't like."

It may be hard to reconcile the images of men punching their fists into the air and chanting "Death to America" with a man serving scoops of peanut-butter chocolate ice cream in pink paper cups and sugar cones. But it is in some ways a measure of how distant many Iranians feel from Mr. Ahmadinejad's administration.

"We never like our own government, never, ever," said Morad Saghafi, a writer and philosopher in Tehran. "So it is a big concern for our government that it is not loved."

This is not to say that Tehran and Washington are about to settle their differences soon. It is not just a matter of policy differences, like a nuclear program, that make this impossible. There are more challenging obstacles to reconciliation, like identity and ideology.

Iran's top leaders still define themselves in large measure by their opposition to the United States. The supreme leader is still the Guardian of the Revolution. The clerics who lead Friday Prayer still keep one hand on a weapon as they preach. Revolutionary identity and anti-Americanism remain inseparable.

"They come in and shut us down periodically because they think we are too American," said Mr. Emami, owner of the ice cream shop.

That is why, Western diplomats in Iran said, the best thing Washington could do to encourage more moderate behavior in Tehran would be to ease off. Less pressure would make it harder for Iran's leaders to keep out Western influences.

"Take the foot off the gas," said a diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to antagonize the Iranians.

Another obstacle to repairing relations involves the deep internal divisions between Iranians. Those appeared the day after the revolution, when the factions that united to take down the shah could not agree on how to run the country. The Islamists won, and to

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this day have marginalized those who sought a softer approach.

“Even the ruling elite recognize that there are good things we can get from opening to America,” said a political analyst in Tehran who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. But, the analyst said, “We know we have to reconcile internally first.”

The headlines here still focus on conflict: the West’s demands that Iran halt enrichment of nuclear fuel and Tehran’s refusal. Yet the hunger for all things Western is once again breaking through on the streets. The signs tend to be most visible in the north of the city, which has always been wealthier and more oriented toward the West, with sound-alike shops: Starcups and Kabooky Fried Chicken.

“Everyone here is thirsting for American brands, it’s that simple,” said Mehdi Mortazavi, who is helping create Friday’s, a restaurant in Tehran. The sign out front looks just like a T.G.I. Friday’s in the States, with red and white stripes. But the “T.G.I.F.” was dropped because Thursday is the last day of the work week here, and the reference to “God” might not have gone over well. But there will be waiters with suspenders decorated with buttons, Cobb Salad and hamburgers on the menu.

“Iranian people respect American business, American mentality, Americans’ demand to always have the best,” Mr. Mortazavi said.

The trend is not exclusive to Tehran’s north.

Nothing symbolizes the state more than the Paradise of Zahara cemetery, lined with the graves of young men who died in the war with Iraq, which raged from 1980 to 1988. “National Unity and Islamic Consolidation,” reads the banner at the entrance to the sprawling cemetery.

One day in late January, Zahra Ahgangram pulled her black chador around herself as she visited the grave of a nephew, Mohsen Yazdani, 20, who died so many years ago. Her son, Amir Ali Muhamadalipour, stood by her side, and when he realized she was speaking to an American, asked that his message be delivered: “Iranian people like American people. We don’t get fooled by governments on both sides.”

Asked to elaborate, he looked down at his shoes and said, “We must self-censor.” And he and his mother walked away.

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