Memorable events of 1979.

Currently, (or Nowadays) we are quite used to, or even blasé about the discussion of political Islam and radicalisation that devour column inches of our printed press and fill broadcasts of every medium, but we forget how the establishment of the world's first modern theocracy and the phenomenon of Islam at the helm of governance of a state took the world by surprise.

This change of political leadership in Iran was all the more astonishing as it happened in a country that had been ruled for more than 26 centuries by monarchs, yet over a mere ten days in February 1979, Mohamad Reza, the last shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, was overthrown, in favour of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Only a year earlier the shah had been described by the U. S. President, Jimmy Carter, as a much-loved king ruling over an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world. But almost in an instant the images of the cleanly shaved shah in his decorated, military uniform, were replaced by huge photographs of a no-nonsense, austere cleric in black robes and black turban, whose dark knotted brows rarely parted in public to allow a hint of empathy or a smile. Yet, tens of thousands of his devoted supporters who were thrilled by the prospect of change in Iran, lined the streets of Tehran all the way to the airport, waiting for the Air France flight that would eventually bring home the leader of the revolution after 15 years of exile, first in Najaf in Iraq and then in Paris.

The demise of the Peacock Throne and the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran was one of the most staggering events of the second half of the twentieth century which not only transformed Iran but also had far-reaching consequences for the geo-politics of the region and its relationship with the world.

The revolution shifted the dynamics of the Cold War, as the United States lost one of its most reliable and strategic allies in the region. This, in turn, emboldened the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979. The world was still grappling with the sight of Soviet tanks rolling on the streets of Kabul when, a few months later, Saddam Hussein, taking advantage of what he perceived as post-revolutionary chaos, invaded Iran, starting one of the longest, bloodiest, most futile wars of the twentieth century, lasting for eight years and costing over a million lives.

The change of Iranian regime gradually pushed the United States into building an extensive military presence in the Middle East. From only a small foothold in the region prior to 1986, the U.S. now boasts a base in almost every country there with the exception of Iran.

The Islamic revolution germinated a regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two largest and most oil-rich countries of the Middle East. Over the decades since, the chill of the ideological standoff between these two countries has engulfed their smaller allies, too, resulting in conflicts, most devastatingly in Yemen and Syria.

But what of Iran itself, and how has the country and its predominantly young population fared since the ninth year of the 1970s?

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish philosopher and historian, commented that “revolutions are often initiated by idealists, carried out by fanatics, and hijacked by scoundrels”, but in the case of Iran we should add a fourth element to this adage. Revolutions are softened by ordinary, pragmatic people, whose visceral need for survival gradually curtails the most brutal elements of change.

In the early months of 1979 in Iran, leftist factions and militia, ex-middle ranking government officials and the newly-important clerics jostled for positions at the court of Ayatollah Khomeini, and hundreds of thousands of young activists with diverse ideological

beliefs, became alive with the euphoria of a new dawn of political freedoms, and celebrated the end of the crackdowns by the shah's security services, and his kowtowing to the western powers.

But it did not take the new rulers long to demonstrate their dogmatic authority by curbing civil liberties and alienating many of their supporters. Soon, persecutions and mass imprisonment of individuals from across society became the norm. Revolutionary courts sprung up all across the country, conducting arbitrary trials and condemning thousands to death in a frenzy of summary execution. The authorities purged the academic institutions and planted the seeds of cultural revolution.

Iran experienced one of the first mass brain-drains of the twentieth century when more than three million technocrats, captains of industry, skilled workers, medics, poets and writers were either forced into or chose a life of exile.

Women who had fought alongside men, hoping for the transition of an undemocratic regime into a budding democracy, soon realised that they no longer had a choice in what they could wear in public. The Islamic hijab, covering their hair, and concealing the shape of their bodies, had become mandatory. Women were now barred from many work places and professions, particularly the judiciary and the diplomatic and foreign affairs. In less than 50 years, women of Iran had been subjected first to compulsory unveiling in 1936, and then to compulsory reveiling in 1979.

On the positive side the segregation of schools and single-sex education encouraged traditional families to allow their daughters to go to school and gain an education, so much so that in large parts of Iran more than 95% of girls of primary school age are enrolled at school.

Women now make up 65% of university students nationwide, although, alarmed by the drop in the number of male students, some education officials have tried to block female

access to some-university programmes. One of the ironies of the strictly religious, patriarchal leadership of the state is that feminist activism has thrived in Iran.

Many trappings of modern democratic states exist and function in Iran. Iran holds regular presidential, parliamentary, and local elections, with not too much vote-rigging (or electoral fraud), in which men and women are entitled to vote. And yet, mediaeval retributive justice still exists in Iran, and judges, as well as incarcerations, regularly sentence human rights or labour union activists to corporal punishment, such as public lashings.

Although the country remains an Islamic Republic, and despite the endeavours of the clerical ruling class and the octogenarian fundamentalist members of the Council of Guardians, the 60 percent or more of the Iranian population who were born after the revolution, are no more religious than those who were born before it.

Despite crippling sanctions that have been imposed on Iran for decades, the physical and digital infrastructure of the country are as good if not better than those of some of its more affluent neighbours.

The tourist industry is thriving, too, and Iranian consulates can barely meet the demand for visa applications. Shopping malls, some of them several times the size of what we are used to in Europe, are bustling. Iranians know, and so should the world, that Iran is a very young republic, but it's an ancient civilisation, and it will find a happy equilibrium of liberty, modernity, and cultural heritage before long.

I left Iran on the cusp of the revolution, and cosseted in the heart of a protective family and in my single sex girls' high school in the quite northern part of Tehran, I was quite unaware of the storm of impending revolution brewing 15 miles or so across the city. My parents and their generation, however, had an inkling of the gathering momentum for change although they dreaded that it would

be a leftist take over. Even the more conservative circles familiar with the writings or sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini, had envisaged the cataclysmic events that lay ahead in 1979.

But today's Iran is hardly recognisable from that monochrome and war-weary state of the early years after the revolution, and has caught up with all aspects of western modernity, whether it is cutting edge medical and scientific research, or fascination with Instagram and Facebook depiction of life.

I look at Iranian youth of today, especially the girls living under Islamic rule, and I am bewitched by their near obsession with makeup and plastic surgery and every device to enhance their beauty, and I cringe remembering how I had to plead with my mum before the revolution to allow my 18-year old self to wear tinted lip-gloss.

I am saddened to witness that the malady of bling culture has also gripped Iran where the true badge of honour and proof of achievement is the beyond-belief opulence of newly built houses, the lavishness of a wedding and possession of fancy cars that we are hard pushed to see on streets of European capital cities.

I am nostalgic that the small dairy farm that was just up the road from our house and the huge walled fruit orchard across the road are now replaced by modernist high-rise apartment blocks and supermarkets, and while the heavy snowfall of winter used to cut parts of Tehran off for days people can now criss-cross the city on the swish underground network, or instead of waiting for the irregular bus of my younger days they now use an app to call up a Snapp-car- Iran's answer to Uber. I am proud that big architectural projects often with a woman leading the design team, frequently win international awards for their magnificent designs and low environmental impact. I am envious that they young Iranians know their country a lot better than I do, as jumping on a plane for a business meeting or even a day trip to some corner of this vast country to visit friends is the new normal.

The gravitational pull of Islam and its role in shaping Iranian culture and society is undeniable, but the fabric of life and the multi-faceted essence of Iranian identity has been formed over a period of 2,500 years. Added to the mix, Iranian people's affinity with and fondness for many Western values have created a complex society that cannot be pigeonholed as strictly religious, or secular; or modern, or traditional.

I take hope from the extraordinary young Iranians who are patient, forgiving and innovative. While taking pleasure in the simple joys of life such as following their favourite football team, or heavy metal band. They go to the cinema or a bookstore or a cafe, or picnic in one of the many verdant parks that adorn every city, surreptitiously holding the hand of a sweetheart. Despite all the restrictions they young generation simply adapt their lives to accommodate the whims of their leaders as they wait patiently for a better future, for their turn to have some of the opportunities that their peers in Turkey or Pakistan or many of their neighbours across the Persian Gulf enjoy.

After all, Hafez, Iran's beloved fourteenth-century poet from Shiraz, the city of wine, roses and verse, has assured them of that:

Your vanished Joseph will return to Canaan, do not despair
One day, the abode of sorrows will become a rose garden, do not despair
Although stations along the route are hazardous and destination is quite far away,
there are no roads that have no end, do not despair.

یوسف گمگشته باز آید به کنعان غم مخور　　کلبه احزان شود روزی گلستان غم مخور
گرچه منزل بس خطرناک است و مقصد بس بعید　　هیچ راهی نیست کآن را نیست پایان غم مخور

English transliteration of the Persian poem:

Yusof-e gom-gashte baaz aayad be Kan'aan, gham ma-khor
Kol-be-ye ahzaan shaved roozi golestaan, gham ma-khor
Gar che manzel bas khatarnaak ast o maqsad bas ba'eed
Heech raahi nist kaan raa nist paayaan, gham ma-khor