Brothers in arms
As a boy in Baghdad, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad was taught that Iranians were the 'worms of the earth'. Now, 20 years after the Iran-Iraq war, he visits Tehran to seek out veterans, officers, dissidents and Islamists, to hear their stories. How does he feel today about his old enemy?

The Iranian army officer was short, chubby and had a thick moustache. Unlike his fellow officers of the Islamic Republic, he had a flash watch on his wrist, a clean-shaven chin and a glass of red wine in his hand. His wife had filled his plate with lamb stew, a chicken leg and saffron rice. The three of us were guests at a supper in a well-to-do district of Tehran.

In clipped, matter-of-fact sentences, the officer gave me his analysis of the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 80s, in which his country had been at war with mine. "From 1980 until 1982, Saddam had the upper hand, and he occupied bits of south-western Iran," he said. "Then, from 1982 until 1986, we had the upper hand, after taking back Khorramshahr [the Iranian border town that Iraq occupied in the first months of the war], but we wasted lots of men and energy trying to invade Basra and the marches. After 1986, Saddam, with help from the west, started pushing us back." With his fork he drew a line on his plate, moving from the chicken leg on one side to the stew on the other. "When the war ended, Saddam was very strong, but his stupidity led him to invade Kuwait and waste his power."

"And now?" I asked.

He handed the plate to his wife without even looking at her and sipped from his glass, sucking on his wine-dipped moustache with his lower lip. "Now we could capture Baghdad in three days. But we never wanted Baghdad - Basra is part of our sphere of influence." He turned to me: "Have you been there?"

"Yes, what about you?"

He ignored my question and said, "You see how much Iranian merchandise and food there is in the market [in Baghdad]? I had indeed: almost everything - from milk and fizzy drinks to motorbikes and air coolers - comes from Iran.

"If you send food, you can send weapons," the officer said. "And you don't need arms to control a city. You let the others do it for you." By "others" I took him to mean Iraqi Shia militias in the Basra area.

His wife handed him his topped-up plate as he summed up. "In the 80s war, 27 nations supported Saddam - the whole world supported Saddam. Now they are trying to unite against us again, because we are a superpower."

"You shouldn't talk to him - he fought your country," his wife called from across the room.

My first encounter with Iran took place when I was five. I remember standing on my parents' bed, next to my father, looking out through the window. It must have been early in the morning - my mother was still sleeping. I didn't know what was going on. I then remember crouching for hours under a table in the stairwell, with a radio, tea, my grandmother and aunt. Later, my father, with me on his shoulders, stood on the roof with my uncle, pointing at frail white lines in the sky. "Phantoms," [Iranian F4 jet fighters] he said.

It was September 1980 and the first days of an eight-year war that began with air raids and an Iraqi invasion of south-west Iran. But the way I understood it for over a decade, it was we Iraqis
who were "defending ourselves against an Iranian invasion". That's what they taught us at school, anyway.

More memories followed. One day I stood with my father in downtown Baghdad, watching a parade of Iraqi military trucks packed with Iranian prisoners of war pass by. I didn't feel sorry for the defeated men in tattered, khaki uniforms and shaved heads. I was just scared of them. A few years later, the TV broadcast similar images of broken, khaki-clad soldiers, squatting in the desert with their hands tied behind them - this time, however, they were the defeated Iraqi armies.

Our state propaganda machine portrayed the Iranians as cowards, evil creatures, "the worms of the earth". The Iraqis, we were told, were fighting another glorious battle against the Persians, just as the early Muslims had done in the seventh century.

It was this religious imagery, and those pictures of defeated men, that filled my head when I went to Tehran this autumn, some 20 years after that war, and I soon came to realise that the same religious symbols, sometimes even the same verses of the Qur'an, were used in the same way on the other side of the border.

We were walking in the big bazaar in Tehran. A young man, tall and whippy, stopped us: "Carpets, mister? You want carpets? I have tribal kelims."

I gave him a very dismissive no.

He was undeterred. "Where are you from?" he asked with a smile.

Still unsure how Iranians would treat an Iraqi, I hesitated, then said, "My companion is Italian" and, in a much lower voice, "And I am Iraqi."

The carpet seller's face changed. "Why?" he asked urgently. "Why did it happen? My mother's uncle was killed in the war, so many people died. Why did we fight?"

"It's stupid," I replied. "No one I knew wanted to fight." My father, two uncles, my aunt's husband and my cousin had all been conscripted in the war.

"But in Iraq people are educated. Why didn't they try to stop Saddam?" He was half-pleading now.

Because we were scared, I wanted to reply, because people were shot dead if they tried to dodge military service. Instead, I gave him my standard reply: "Saddam was very brutal."

"When the governments hate each other, the people pay the price," the carpet seller said. "Here in Iran, the mullahs said we must fight until we reach Karbala [a holy city] and then all the way until we liberate Jerusalem." He paused, then added sarcastically, "And what's next - New York?"

"That was stupidity," he said, "and now Mr Bush is doing the same stupidity."

Tehran is a true megalopolis: it has a population of 17 million, 30km-long avenues that run from the nouveau riche north to the poor south, and hundreds of flyovers that sandwich thousands of ugly, concrete buildings. It's also a megalopolis where the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic Republic competes with the commercial banality of everyday life. Billboards and posters emblazoned with the leaders' sayings are juxtaposed with adverts for flatscreen TVs, laptops and mobile phones.

The martyrs and the living coexist here. Millions of people jostle, push, honk and drive suicidally in streets named after the dead. The grander martyrs, the founders of the republic, get the big highways; commanders and ayatollahs the avenues; low-level fighters small, potholed alleyways. From street corners and the sides of buildings, the fallen heroes stare down from huge murals, inviting a sense of guilt that you're alive down in the street and not up there, alongside them.

We took the new metro to the outskirts of the city, where the martyrs lie in peace in their own city, Behesht Zahra cemetery, where row upon row of men killed in the war are buried. The graves are decorated with little aluminium and glass altars that hold the martyrs' memorabilia: a copy of the Qur'an, plastic flowers, a bottle of rose water, a piece of blood-soaked cloth imprinted with a picture of the dead soldier. Names of battlefields - Ahwaz, Kurdistan, Ailam, Shalamgah; places in the marches of southern Iraq, Kurdish mountains and small Iranian border towns - are inscribed on the graves. They have become household names for Iraqis and Iranians alike.

After every offensive, our TV screen in Baghdad would flicker with images of the mangled dead. On the 8pm news, the anchor with the thick, Saddam-like moustache would tell us about the thousands of aggressors slaughtered by our heroes. Meanwhile, the alleyways of my city were curtained on both sides with thousands of black notices announcing the deaths of our young, "In
the name of Allah, the most merciful, the most compassionate.

When I went last year to Amara province on the border with Iran, the scene of many battles, there was nothing left but coils of razor wire, rusty helmets half-buried in the sand and the odd turret of a sunken tank. I could feel the ghosts of the "martyrs"; their blood had long since dried, but their memories still haunted us on both sides of the border.

In the middle of the sea of pictures in Behesht Zahra, we came across a plot where the Qassim family is buried. The father was 40, the mother 27, the children, Sumayya, three, Mariam, two, and Abbass, one, when they were killed by an Iraqi aerial attack, part of what was known as the "War of Cities". I remember this war very well. Or, rather, I remember the Iraqi version of it: the mustachioed TV anchor declaring that our brave pilots had inflicted the heaviest losses on the "wicked Persian enemy". I remember, too, our house shaking when an Iranian rocket fell less than a mile away in Karrada, killing a family.

With tears in our eyes, we left the cemetery and went back to jostle in the city of the living.

When I arrived in Tehran, my years of Iran-demonisation under the Ba'athist educational system had been supplemented by the Bush administration's anti-Iranian rhetoric and sabre rattling. "Shia revivalism spearheaded by Iran" has become the new mantra. Iran is perceived as a menacing and shadowy power, backing Shia militias in Iraq, supporting Hamas in Gaza and acting as patron of Hizbullah in Lebanon. Paranoia has swept through neighbouring Sunni Arab countries - also known by the US as the "moderate Arab countries". All of them are now in a de facto alliance with Israel, trying to find ways to counter "Iranian influence" in the region. "The first thing to look for after a car accident in Beirut is the Iranian agents behind it," a journalist friend told me, only half-joking. It is reminiscent of the post-second world war, post-colonial days, when people thought British agents were behind everything that happened in the Middle East.

Another journalist in Qatar had a different take on the dilemma for Arab countries. "Iran is a big problem either way. If the Americans hit Iran, it's a huge problem - the Iranians might retaliate by hitting their interests in the Gulf. But if they have peace with Iran, we have a bigger problem." That is, Iran would become even more dominant in the region.

Iran's image as evildoer has also been enhanced by the alleged apocalyptic prophecies of its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Under the threat of US and Israeli strikes, the atmosphere in Tehran and other Iranian cities has become similar to that in Baghdad in the 90s, during the long years of sanctions that preceded the toppling of Saddam: there are anxieties about a looming war, concerns about the next UN resolution and a question lodged permanently in the back of your mind - "Will they attack?"

The similarities and differences between Iraq and Iran are striking. Sometimes, Iran felt to me like my aunt's cooking - much like my mum's, but with more spices. An Iraqi friend, recently returned from Tehran, was amazed by how much the mullahs' theocracy in Iran resembled the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. "It's like Ba'athists in turbans: the same lies, the same oppression and the same corruption."

As in many other places in the Middle East, a particular kind of claustrophobic repression hangs over the city. Young people are arrested for having "unIslamic" haircuts, "bad hijab" or indecent clothes. Every writer, musician and film-maker has to navigate around taboos and dogma to create a "morally acceptable art". When I asked a prominent musician if the restrictions actually helped him "create", he said, "No, I wish I had all the freedom I want."

Freedom is a very relative idea in the Middle East. With its oppressiveness and religious police, Iran is still a safer and a more organised place than the new post-US invasion Iraq, let alone than the Iraq of Saddam Hussein.

Ali came to visit me at the flat where I was staying in Tehran. He was short, energetic and very fit. We drank tea and devoured the little pink and pistachio cakes he had brought with him. He talked softly and politely about Iran, Iraq and the Americans.

It was hard to imagine Ali as a prisoner, yet he had spent several weeks in Tehran's notorious Evin prison after he had taken part in a student demonstration. "In my last days in prison, I was hitting my head against the wall," he told me. "I was thinking of committing suicide. I was asking myself, 'Will I ever be out again?'"

Ali was beaten and insulted during three days of interrogation and, to intimidate him further, was put in a small cell with three prisoners on death row. Even after his release, Ali said, he was harassed and followed. But he remains level-headed. "We don't need another revolution. I mean,
we need change, but the change should come through reform, not violence. It took us 30 years to kind of settle down. Another revolution will destroy society."

The need now, Ali said, was to educate the people about their rights. "It will take time," he said. "I know this regime will change, but unfortunately my youth will be taken with it. I have to leave; I have to spend some time abroad. When you are here, you are isolated. But maybe, when I see freedom, maybe I will love it so much I'll want to stay."

I later met another student who had been active in the students' political organisation and who, like Ali, spoke of hard times. "The authorities are much harder on organised student movements than before," he said. "Under [Ayatollah] Khatami, they were half tolerated; now they expel them from university or send them to jail." As in Iraq under sanctions, the more pressure that is put on the government, the more it can justify internal oppression as a means of "solidifying the internal front".

As we sat drinking tea, I asked the student if he was scared. With a big smile, he replied, "We are not scared - we have hope and I am still young. I have lots of time to spend in prison."

To many Iranians, the revolution has taken a very Orwellian turn. A revolution that began by overthrowing a corrupt, tyrant king has produced a regime whose chief interest is picking over the dress code while the drums of war sound louder and louder, and while inflation runs into double digits.

I went with Ali, who has a passion for history, to the palace of the old shah, where the 19th-century grandeur could not have been more different from the bare mosque where Ayatollah Khomeini lived, preached and conducted state affairs after the revolution. "In the beginning, they were puritanical," Ali said. "They said electricity will be free, fuel will be free. They were very simple - that's why people loved them. Now, if you say anything against this government, you're against Allah and the Qur'an.

"When I look at old video clips of Farah [the shah's wife] visiting a village, people act the same now with Khamani, jumping and chanting. We should stop worshipping people in power."

In my time in Iran, I also met Kamal, Reza and Sultan, who had all been young men when the revolution started. Their fate, like that of most Iranians, was shaped by the events of that spring in 1978.

On a mountain overlooking the city of Shiraz, where the great Iranian poet Hafez is buried, is a small restaurant set inside a big Turkmen tent. It was here that I met Kamal. With his big white moustache, black trousers, black shirt and black, knee-length jacket, he looked like some Russian bureaucrat from a Pushkin novel. He was mourning the death of a cousin, he explained.

In the mid-70s, Kamal had been studying in Perugia, Italy. As a leftist, he was active in the Iranian opposition, demonstrating outside the Iranian embassy and heckling visiting government officials. "The shah was a killer," he said. "It was a bad, bad government."

So why did he come back? "Because my country needed me. There was a lot to be done, the revolution was starting. When the revolution happened, we Iranian students in Italy were starving, there was no money coming from Iran, we used to eat birds - we chased pigeons and ate them. But I knew I had to come back."

I asked how it was back then - there must have been real chaos with the upsurge of Islamists, leftists, communists, nationalists and democrats? Had he been a follower of Khomeini? "In the beginning there were no Islamists - they came later and took over the country. They started throwing us in jail and did to us what the shah had been doing."

Like other disillusioned idealists, Kamal watched the revolution drift away. After spending two years fighting in the Iran-Iraq war in the southern Iraqi marches, he left to take a job as a construction worker in Japan, fleeing a crackdown on leftists. "I like Allah, but I like beer, too," he told me cheerily. "If you want to pray standing, stand; if you want to pray sitting, then sit. You should have your freedom as long as you don't affect me. Here the revolution became all about religion. I saw people who were far less educated than me overtaking me because they were religious."

Reza, meanwhile, was dressed in the official Iranian revolutionary dress code - a cheap grey suit, a white shirt with no tie, short, cropped hair and a thin, trimmed beard. He had a charming smile, but suffered from a severe cough. I asked how life was in Tehran. "Khob neest [not good]," he said. "This government is not good."
This was unexpected - someone who clearly looked religious and pro-government criticising the government. Reza continued, "Look at the hijab in the streets - it's not good, it's too relaxed; women forgetting Islamic values and this government not doing anything. And the economy is not good - prices are too high and there are too many mustazafin [the Arabic word that means the weak, the oppressed, and which was appropriated by the revolution to signify the poor]."

Was it better under Khatami? "No, no, Khatami was not good - under him, hijab was very bad, the revolution was lost - but the economy was better. Now Ahmadinejad is trying to fix the situation. He is making laws that help the workers and will give more money to mustazafin."

He tapped his chest and said, "Chemical, Halbijah." Reza had been gassed when the Iraqis used chemical weapons against Kurdish and Iranian forces in the town of Halbijah in 1988. He then tapped his right leg; there was a metallic ting - he had lost his limb in the same battle.

Reza's story is typical of the first generation of the Iranian revolution. He joined the Islamic militia in 1978; at the age of 17 he was roaming the streets and imposing order; two years later, he volunteered to go to the front line in the war against Iraq. "I spent 63 months in the war," he said.

In Iran, men served for 24 months only, unless they volunteered for extra service, unlike in Iraq, where people were conscripted for the whole duration of the war.

"The most important thing is Twakul ala Allah," he said. "To put your faith in God and the imams."

I told him this is exactly what Hizbullah fighters in Lebanon say. "I know," Reza said with a big smile. "I was there, in 1982. We volunteered to go to Lebanon and fight Israel. We trained Hizbullah and I stayed two years in the Beqaa. And then, when our brothers were strong, we left and came to Iran to continue the fight against Saddam."

He became more reflective. "You know, after the war I went to Iraq for a pilgrimage, visiting the shrines in Karbala and Najaf. Iraqis are like Iranians - there is no difference - but wars make a difference. The war was very bad, but life in Iran was better during the war. The religion was strong, everyone prayed and there was iethar [self-sacrifice]."

Sultan stopped to give us a lift in his beat-up old Renault when we were walking back from a park in northern Tehran. "You can't find taxis here," he explained. "I'll drop you at the main intersection." He was in his late 60s and had about him an Einstein look, with a bush of fussy white hair; he was as scruffy as his car. He clenched the steering wheel, his face close to the cracked windshield.

Had he lived in Tehran when Imam Khomeini lived here? The house and mosque where Khomeini spent his days after the revolution were just a couple of streets away. "Imam, pah, what Imam?" Sultan said scornfully as he pulled his car to the kerb.

I was stunned - I hadn't heard anyone saying anything bad about the revered Imam; not even Kamal, the leftist, had dared criticise him.

"The Imam killed my life, my family and my job." We had reached the main intersection, but Sultan kept talking. "I worked in the Iranian airlines office in the UK. Twice I lived there - in London and in Eastbourne."

Sultan's mother was a relative of the Queen, he told me, and his grandfather an old aristocrat. For a long time the family had lived a comfortable life, with several houses scattered around the north of the city, with good jobs and good connections. When the revolution happened, all that disappeared. "After the revolution, they took all our property and said that is for the mustazafin," Sultan said. "And now I am mustazafin, but they don't give me anything. They forced me to go to war. At the very end of the war, in Kurdistan - in Halbijah - a bomb fell and a piece of metal entered here," he pointed to his hip. His leg was horribly twisted. "I can't walk and I can't sleep."

I thought of Reza and how democratic wars can be in their choice of victim: the son of the revolution and the enemy of the revolution, both hit in the leg in the same battle. Had they known each other? Had they lain next to each other in the hospital? Had they talked about the revolution and the Imam?

"After the war, they fired me from my job," Sultan continued. "They said, 'You shah people, go.' And now Mr Ahmadinejad comes, and prices go up by 200%, 300%. What do I do? I am tired of this life."

Before the revolution, Sultan said, girls would walk "with skirts this long" and he pointed to the middle of his thigh. "They walked in the streets and no one said a thing. You'd walk a hundred
metres and there would be a nightclub or a bar. Tehran was like Paris. Then the mullahs came, and life finished.” He spoke as if it were only yesterday.

“You are from where?” he asked.

I hesitated, wishing for the first time in my life that I could say I was English, or anything. I mumbled the name of the country that had mangled his leg.

“Iraq?” He pushed himself to the back of his seat, a big smile on his face. “Really? Iraq? Oh my God, what’s happening to your country is bad. I am sorry. Saddam went and now hundreds more Saddams come. Now Shia like me take over the government and make it like Iran. I am sorry. I am really sorry.”

There is something to be said for how polite the Iranians are.

In the war cemetery of Behesht Zahra, I stood in front of one of the graves, writing in my notebook. When I lifted my head, I saw in the small, altar-like box a picture of the bearded martyr. He was looking straight at me. I moved, and he moved with me. I went back a few steps and my heart stopped - I was looking at my own reflection in a mirror.

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