By Elaina Loveland

At Home on Three Continents

An interview with Haleh Esfandiari

HALEH ESFANDIARI IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. In her native Iran, she was a journalist, served as deputy secretary general of the Women's Organization of Iran, and was the deputy director of a cultural foundation where she was responsible for the activities of several museums and art and cultural centers. She taught Persian language at Oxford University and, prior to coming to the Wilson Center, from 1980 to 1994, she taught Persian language and contemporary Persian literature and courses on the women's movement in Iran at Princeton University.

Haleh Esfandiari is the author of *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution* (1997), editor of *Iranian Women: Past, Present and Future* (1977), coauthor of *Best Practices: Progressive Family Laws in Muslim Countries*, the coeditor of *The Economic Dimensions of Middle Eastern History* (1990) and also of the of the multivolume memoirs of the famed Iranian scholar, Ghassem Ghani.

Haleh Esfandiari is the first recipient of a yearly award established in her name, the Haleh Esfandiari Award; this award was presented to her by a group of businesswomen and activists from countries across the Middle East and North Africa region on the occasion of a conference sponsored by the Wilson Center—Women Entrepreneurs: Business and Legal Reform in the MENA Region—held in Amman, Jordan on May 20-22, 2008. She is also the recipient of the Special American Red Cross Award (2008), an honorary degree from Georgetown University Law Center (2008), the Women's Equality Award from the National Council of Women's Organizations (2008), Miss Hall's School Woman of Distinction Award (April 2009), a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation grant, and was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars from 1995 to 1996.

Her memoir, *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran*, based on her arrest by the Iranian security authorities in 2007, after which she spent 105 days in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin Prison, was published in September 2009.

IE: You were born in Iran, received your PhD at the University of Vienna, and taught at Princeton University, making you a truly international educator. How has your exposure to so many different people from different cultures in the classroom environment affected your personal world view and philosophy of education?

ESFANDIARI: I was raised in Iran but exposed to two cultures. My mother was Austrian, my father Iranian. I grew up speaking two languages, German and Persian. Although the two cultures were quite different I felt at home in both. When I went to Vienna for my higher education, I fitted quite easily in my new surroundings. In Vienna my classmates were a diverse group of students, and I learned to understand and appreciate the amazing diversity of cultures we can encounter. When I started teaching in Iran, then at Oxford and at Princeton, I tried to pass on to my students an appreciation of cultural diversity.

Haleh Esfandiari

IE: Living in so many places, and considering your imprisonment in your native Iran, today where do you call "home"? Or is "home" not a physical place?

ESFANDIARI: I have three homes: Iran, the country of my birth; Austria, my late mother's country of origin and where I spent my formative years; and the United States, my adopted country. While Iran dealt with me harshly and my interrogators and jailers made me feel a stranger in my own land, Austria and especially the United States embraced me. Home is both a physical and also a mental place. I can never lose my feeling for the landscape, the sky, the mountains of the country of my birth; but I discovered you also need to feel secure and protected—even in the country that you love.

IE: Why is it important to encourage international exchange of students and scholars to all areas of the world?

ESFANDIARI: I am a strong advocate of student and academic exchanges. The student years are formative years, and you learn to appreciate a different culture and take the best of that culture back with you to your native country. Exposure is the bridge that brings people together; and we are all inevitably shaped by our surroundings. It is hard to believe, for example, that the idea of the rule of law, individual rights, and the value of the individual, once experienced, do not influence people who come from authoritarian systems.

IE: In a politically volatile climate nowadays in parts of the Middle East, particularly in Iran, what are your recommendations regarding student and scholar travel?

ESFANDIARI: Not all Middle Eastern countries are volatile or disordered. If one country is politically insecure, students and academics can choose another country in the region.

IE: How would you describe how you felt when you were taken into custody in Iran after answering questions regarding your work directing the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.? In your view, what did this action reveal about the concept of fear about scholarly activity (and/or about the United States)?

ESFANDIARI: My interrogation at the hands of Iran's Intelligence Ministry, which started in January 2007, was from the beginning intimidating and frightening. After all, these men could have done with me what they wished. They incarcerated me; they threatened to put me on trial; they accused me of activities that carried the death sentence. At the same time, I was astonished how little my interrogators knew about the working of institutions like the Wilson Center. I discovered that paranoia pervades the thinking of Iran's Intelligence Ministry officials. They believe the United States is plotting to bring about regime change in Iran, using academics and academic institutions to bring about in Iran the same kind of "velvet revolution" that overturned regimes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other parts of the former Soviet empire. Don't forget I was arrested during the Bush administration. The "Axis of Evil" speech, and the allocation by Congress of money to promote democracy in Iran, fed this paranoia.

IE: When you discovered that your imprisonment in Iran had generated an outpouring of concern among your family and many supporters around the world, how did you react?

ESFANDIARI: As long as I was in prison I knew nothing of the worldwide publicity my case had generated and the massive international effort that was mounted to secure my freedom. I learned of all this once I was set free; I felt moved and humbled. I hope the world will pay the same kind of attention to the other political prisoners in Iran and around the world. I make it a point wherever I give a talk to speak of the political activists in Iranian prisons. We cannot allow them to be forgotten.

IE: How can safe international exchange be established for students and scholars traveling to regions that may have political disagreements with their home nations? How can students and scholars keep themselves safe?

ESFANDIARI: These are tough questions to answer. There are unfortunately no international protocols to protect students and scholars from mistreatment by governments whose real quarrel is with an individual's home government. We have examples of such victims all over the world. In the absence of enforceable protections, for the student or scholar it will always be a question of weighing benefits against risks.

IE: Since your return to Washington, D.C., has your experience had any impact on your professional life? Have you developed any new initiatives at the Wilson Center focusing on the Middle East?

ESFANDIARI: I returned to work three days after I returned to the United States in 2007 and continued running the Middle East Program as I had done before my eight-month ordeal in Iran. For me, returning to work was the best medicine and a way of saying to my jailers that they could not intimidate me. Our programs remain focused on the region as a whole; but, of course, one becomes more sensitive to human rights issues. Look at what happened in Iran after the contested presidential elections in June 2009: peaceful protests were answered with arrests, prison deaths, psychological torture of detainees, a mass trial, and now long prison sentences. It is natural that we focus more on the implications of such developments.

IE: Your autobiography based on your experience, *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran*, was published in September 2009. What has been the reaction of your book among readers? Have there been any surprise reactions to your story? What key message are you hoping to impress upon readers?

ESFANDIARI: So far, I have had very positive reactions. Many readers have told me that once they started reading they could not set the book aside. It is, I hope, a compelling personal story of my arrest, imprisonment, and interrogation and the manner in which I dealt with this moment of trial and testing. I describe in the book the regimen I imposed on myself in prison to remain alert, to fend

> I am proud to have been a successful professional woman both in Iran and in the United States. I have thrown myself with energy into everything I have done; and the outpouring of affection and care for me when I was imprisoned in Iran has seemed to me an immense, generous capstone to a very rewarding life.

off despair, and keep hope alive. I describe what it means to be in solitary confinement, prison life, dealing with female guards, and male interrogators. But the book is much more than that. It is also a story of growing up in a gentler and more humane Iran; of my career as a journalist, activist for women's rights, and an administrator of museums and cultural centers in a prerevolution Iran in which women were making their way into the workplace and pressing their demands for equality. The book also provides insight into the forces competing for control in the Islamic Republic, the growing power of the Intelligence Ministry and other hard-line elements, and the many factors that have bedeviled Iran–U.S. relations since the Islamic revolution 30 years ago.

IE: What has been your greatest personal or professional accomplishment?

ESFANDIARI: I have tried to be a good daughter to my parents, a good wife and mother to my husband and daughter, a good member of my extended family, and a good friend to those dearest to me. I am proud to have been a successful professional woman both in Iran and in the United States. I have thrown myself with energy into everything I have done; and the outpouring of affection and care for me when I was imprisoned in Iran has seemed to me an immense, generous capstone to a very rewarding life. **IE**

ELAINA LOVELAND is managing editor of *IE*.