

MIDDLE EAST

An American innocent abroad in the Middle East

CHILDREN OF JIHAD

A Young American's Travels Among the Youth of the Middle East
By Jared Cohen
Gotham, 278 pages, \$30

REVIEWED BY NADER HASHEMI

The unabridged edition of Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines courage as "mental or moral strength enabling one to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear or difficulty firmly and resolutely." Listed synonyms are "mettle, spirit, resolution and tenacity." A perfect illustration of this concept are the exploits of an American Jewish kid from Connecticut, who travelled around the most anti-American parts of the Muslim Middle East, after the murder of Daniel Pearl, without a guide or an escort, carrying a laptop, a backpack and an authentic curiosity to transcend geographical, religious and ideological barriers.

Jared Cohen is a graduate of Stanford and Oxford universities as well as a Rhodes scholar. He has a reckless affinity for war zones, foreign cultures and adventure reminiscent of CNN's Christiane Amanpour and Indiana Jones. In the prologue to his engaging new book, *Children of Jihad*, he tells us, "If there was no entry to a country or region, I simply snuck in."

While running with warlords and child soldiers in central Africa, he developed an intense interest in Muslim societies and radical Islam. Sept. 11 realigned his political interests. After a crash course in Arabic and a period spent intensely reading on the politics and history of the Middle East, he set out to discover the region with a specific target in mind: Middle Eastern youth.

Cohen's inquiry is an important one. While most postcolonial states in the Middle East have been political and economic failures, gains have been registered in the areas of basic health care and infant mortality. One measure of this success is that today, the majority of the Middle East's population is under the age of 30. How do these young people view the world, particularly the West? What are their social and political aspirations, their frustrations, their



Iranian girls in full chador, with blue jeans and sneakers, in Ruhollah: an important inquiry. JARED COHEN/GOTHAM

ideals? And how do they compare both with their parents' generation and with young people in the United States? These are the questions that Cohen seeks to examine, and which guide him throughout his sojourn in Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Children of Jihad is a personal memoir of these travels. Cohen's reflections on Iran form the largest part of his book. After dumping his government minder, Cohen finds his way to Tehran University, where he befriends students who expose him to a side of Iranian society the clerical regime tries to conceal. He attends parties where bootleg alcohol is served, mixed dancing is the norm and the last thing on partygoers' minds are mullahs, missiles or nuclear weapons.

"I have always found it revealing that young people in the Middle East," he writes, "where supposedly America is most hated, are friendlier, more open and welcoming, and more interested in engaging in conversations than their counterparts in Europe."

In Iran, he felt more comfortable among his peers than he did during his two years in England.

Cohen discovers a side of Iran that rarely gets reported in the media. Young people are inquisitive, highly intelligent, technologically adept and engaging in multiple forms of passive resistance against their authoritarian overlords. To his credit, Cohen provides a nuanced and balanced assessment of social attitudes among Iranian youth. He is able to decipher with accuracy and insight conflicting trends: admiration for the United States, disdain for the ruling regime and the desire to leave Iran.

He concludes that most Iranians are proudly nationalistic, that they admire American society but not U.S. foreign policy, and are motivated by many of the same impulses as young people in the West in terms of recreational activities, jobs, education and human relationships. The contrast between the image of Iran conveyed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmad-

inejad's bombastic rhetoric and the one Cohen has discovered in the lives of Iran's youth population could not be more stark.

Lebanon is Cohen's second destination. A similar youth culture exists there, although it is more attuned to the political realities of Lebanon's multicultural and conflict-ridden context. The most interesting and revealing encounter Cohen has is with young supporters of Hezbollah at the local McDonald's in downtown Beirut. After earning their trust, Cohen struggles with revealing his Jewish identity. He takes a deep breath and states: "I am Jewish, my family is Jewish, and ... I do practise Judaism."

In this reply, Cohen finds cause for hope. The ability to eschew broad generalizations,

avoid collective guilt and distinguish between government policy and national identities is a mark of intellectual and moral sophistication that Cohen suggests bodes well for the future.

This book is not without errors or shortcomings. Cohen's accounts of each country he visited is preceded by a short political and historical sketch that is mostly objective but at times inaccurate. He underestimates by at least a quarter of a million the number of Palestinians dispossessed by Israel in 1948; the Shatt al-Arab region of Iraq is not in Kurdistan and Iranian troops were never on the periphery of Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war.

Cohen's political biases also are on display. Absent from his narrative is any attempt to reflect critically on U.S. and Israeli policy in Middle East and how these policies have generated widespread animosity. When he engages people with radically different political views, he dismisses

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