Alumni

Dateline: Iran

There have been no Western news bureaus in Tehran in a generation, so Kelly Niknejad opened one. Virtually.

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|
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Vernon Doucette

Kelly Golnoush Niknejad is ignoring her BlackBerry. No small task. The message light glows every few minutes. The 43-year-old pulls one of her bare feet up on her parents' living-room couch in Newton, Massachusetts, a well-to-do suburb of Boston. In the dim light, her face looks pale beneath a mop of thick dark hair. When she finally turns over her device, a half hour later, she has 10 new messages.

"That's not bad," says Niknejad '05JRN, '06JRN. "Some Google alerts on Iran and Tehran, some people forwarding me things. There's always something interesting."

The curtains are drawn; outside, snow is falling. For more than a year, this room, adorned with a few framed black-and-white photos of Italian village scenes and a watercolor landscape, has served as headquarters for Tehran Bureau, the must-click-to news source for everything Iran. Here, you can read the latest posts from native Farsi speakers who report from inside the Islamic Republic of Iran — contacts that Niknejad made while conducting academic research and working as a reporter for the English-language daily *The National* in the United Arab Emirates.

The Web site, which logged 130,000 hits in January, has drawn the attention of journalists, academics, dissidents, and intelligence analysts. The site's rapid growth has been dizzying. After little more than a year, Niknejad is moving her news operation out of her parents' living room and into an office at WGBH, Boston's PBS member station, where she has formed a partnership with *Frontline*, the investigative program, which now hosts tehranbureau.com on the PBS server.

"I wasn't expecting it to get this big, this fast," Niknejad says of the enterprise. She shuts her Apple laptop and sets it on a nearby chair to let it cool.

Source Material

What set Tehran Bureau apart from the beginning was Niknejad's pool of sources on the ground, an ever-shifting group of professionals who have included academics, scientists, and journalists. When the site posted a reaction piece from inside Iran to Barack Obama's 2008 presidential win, for example, ABC News and BBC World Service got wind of it and cited it in reports. Ready or not, Tehran Bureau — at the time a blog and barely a week old — was out of the gate, even as its proprietor was still trying to figure out her free blogging software.

Fortunately, Niknejad already had two experienced writers on board. Muhammad Sahimi, a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Southern California, agreed to write exclusive pieces for Niknejad. An Iranian immigrant and a contributor to the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, Sahimi has published extensively on Iran's nuclear program. He recognized that Niknejad had in her sights a nuanced portrait of an often-misunderstood society, and launched a five-part series, among other pieces, on the upcoming Iranian presidential election.

"I wanted to help Kelly create a Web site about Iran in which things are done objectively, rationally, and away from slogans, hollow analysis, and propaganda," says Sahimi, who also blogs for Antiwar.com. "I wanted to help to give the correct information to people about Iran, good or bad."

Former *Financial Times* Tehran correspondent Gareth Smyth started filing reports, too, attracted to Niknejad's balanced editorial agenda. A veteran Middle East reporter, Smyth was stationed in Iran from 2003 to 2007 and has contributed articles to Tehran Bureau on hard-line political strategy and U.S.-Iran relations. He says journalists covering the Islamic Republic face editorial pressure, and not just from Iranian government censors.

"At the *Financial Times*, the Middle East editor often made it clear I should not be writing certain things," says Smyth. "For example, in 2005, the editor was convinced that [Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani would win the election, and I, more or less alone of the Western media in Tehran, was analyzing the situation in a different way." The editor often told Smyth that he was seen as being "pro-conservative" because he spent as much time talking to hard-liners as he did to reformists. "Too often," he says, "there is a line imposed from London or Washington, and this is why so much Iran reporting has been inaccurate and misleading."

In Iran, says Niknejad, the hard-line regime rules the information stream, with opposition Web sites waxing and waning. Foreign journalists are subject to minders and censors, and are routinely expelled. The BBC and Voice of America have added television and Web sites to complement their Farsi-service radio broadcasts, but because Tehran Bureau is not opposition press and reaches out to conservatives and reformers alike, Niknejad says the Web site has become known for its impartiality. "We do our job fairly, and that's probably one reason we're not being filtered by the government."

A New Formula?

The turning point for Tehran Bureau came last summer, during the disputed reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets day after day to protest electoral fraud. Several died at the hands of police, scores were beaten and wounded, and hundreds were arrested. The world was watching, but before long, communications were corked by the government — cell-phone transmission interrupted, BBC broadcasts jammed, and Facebook, popular with the opposition candidates, briefly cut off.

Even Tehran Bureau, despite being the small new kid on the block, was hacked and shut down for several days, Niknejad assumes, by Iranian government agents. She kept the information flowing with Twitter messages, tapping out details from her sources, one 140-character sentence at a time. “It was like using a telex machine,” she says.

Tehran Bureau now has more than 21,000 followers on Twitter. Facebook, too, became a conduit, with Niknejad’s contacts posting updates that confirmed or refuted what she was seeing in Western media. Soon, the *New York Times* and ABC News were looking to Tehran Bureau.

“I wasn’t eating or sleeping,” Niknejad says, brushing her hair from her face. “I was being called for interviews. I turned down as many as I could. I lost all track of time.”

The content on Tehran Bureau involves more than politics: There are stories covering pet exemptions for dog lovers (canines are considered impure in Muslim culture), the rise of “sexting” in the Tehran metro, Iran’s place in the world music scene, and feminism after the 2009 presidential election. Except for the site’s popular Press Roundup, which collects the day’s top stories from the state-run media, all content is original.



Government and opposition demonstrators took to the streets of Tehran on November 4, 2009, the 30th anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. embassy. (The New York Times / Redux)

“Golnoush has worked very hard to make Tehran Bureau wide-ranging,” says Smyth, using Niknejad’s Iranian birth name. “Most Western news outlets rely on the occasional visit to Iran by a reporter. This isn’t enough to know what’s going on in Iran, and another reason why so much of the reporting has been inaccurate.”

Niknejad begins each day with her BlackBerry, launching e-mails from her bed. After combing through messages, she begins coordinating stories, edits articles from the inbox, researches and confirms information, and moderates comments.

“I got chewed out once by a commenter who waited seven hours to see his post,” she says. “I’d been sleeping. People think this is a bigger operation than it is.”

So does Tehran Bureau represent a new formula for covering repressive regimes? Sree Sreenivasan ’93JRN, dean of student affairs and professor of digital media at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism, says Niknejad’s approach — one realized with little money — can apply to any subject that people don’t understand or that the mainstream media don’t deem large enough to cover.

“Kelly’s doing very important work,” Sreenivasan says. “It’s shameful that traditional media have abandoned overseas coverage except for a handful of publications and some TV shows. There was a time when even regional papers had foreign bureaus and covered the world. Not any more.”

Leaving Tehran

Niknejad spent most of the first 17 years of her life in Tehran. She lived through the 1979 Revolution, which swept away the shah and ushered in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s theocratic state. She also was there for the first half of the eight-year war with neighboring Iraq. Today she misses Iran “terribly” and carries fond memories of her great-grandmother’s home and of downhill skiing outside of the city, and even of the blacked-out copies of *Newsweek* on newsstands. When religious laws stood in the way of her and her siblings’ going to college, Niknejad’s parents, an air force liaison officer and a housewife, knew it was time to get out.

They left in 1983 and settled in San Diego the following year.

After graduating from San Diego State University, Niknejad enrolled in law school. She worked briefly as an attorney before wading into journalism, earning two degrees from Columbia's J-school, where she concentrated in newspapers, and politics and government, eventually making her way to the United Arab Emirates in 2008, a listening post for doings in Iran. While reporting in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Niknejad met a large cross section of Iranians: merchants, workers, and smugglers from various provinces of the republic. Given the diversity of their backgrounds, she was struck by their uniform lack of support for Ahmadinejad.

"It was weird," she recalls. "I thought if there was a large turnout, there was no way he could win again. Of course, the turnout was spectacular." Niknejad returned to the States, convinced that the presidential election would mark a defining moment for the country, and resolved to start her own news site right away. Beyond the political contest, she saw plenty of blank spaces in the media portrait of Iran and wanted to counter what she considered the biased agendas, misinformation campaigns, and faulty reporting that were blurring the picture.

On average, Niknejad works with some 20 contributors inside and outside Iran. Some use their real names, while others write under a pen name or simply sign "correspondent." They file their stories through proxies or with scrambling programs. Niknejad plans to begin fundraising so she can pay them decent fees.

Because she works with anonymous sources, Niknejad says she holds herself to higher-than-normal standards and regularly rejects information and turns down unfamiliar would-be contributors, even if that means extra work and sleepless nights — a work ethic she developed at the J-school. Niknejad takes pains to protect her sources — hard-liners and reformers alike — concealing even gender or the language in which they file. Several times, she politely suggests the tape recorder be shut off. "We're all paranoid," she says, leaning forward on the couch.

Coming Home

A week later, Niknejad is settling into her new office at WGBH headquarters in Boston. The walls and shelves are still bare, her scarf is draped over an empty file holder, a cardboard lunch container sits on the desk. Within reach, as usual, are her

BlackBerry and laptop.

“It feels great,” she says, leaning back in her chair. “For a long time, I was saving time by not having to commute or comb my hair. But it’s been so nice to come here and be focused, without the interruptions of home life.”

In 2007, Niknejad worked as a freelance associate producer on an Iran documentary that *Frontline* was producing in London. This past September *Frontline* began hosting Tehran Bureau and posting its own video documentaries on Iran to the site. While they might collaborate on projects, Niknejad says that Tehran Bureau remains independent and that neither outfit holds editorial sway over the other.

As Niknejad was unpacking at WGBH, the Iranian government was commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. In the days leading up to it, several protesters from the summer’s presidential election were hanged and others were sentenced to death. Opposition figures, journalists, and human rights workers were summoned for questioning.

“The intimidation seems to have been very effective,” Niknejad says. “Some of it is just random, and that’s when it becomes scary. The Internet slowdown has already started, and people are having trouble logging onto their e-mails.”

Niknejad says she has developed a following inside Iran, with Tehran Bureau pieces being translated and circulated, and sometimes ending up back in her inbox. Many comments on the site are posted by Iranians, and one of the top ten countries logging onto PBS is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Niknejad wants to add more video content to the site and would eventually like to publish pieces in Farsi, too. But there’s only so much she can do. When she recently posted a controversial wartime letter written in 1988 by the late Khomeini, several readers demanded to know why it wasn’t translated into English. When she commented that she lacked the resources, they apologized.

“The expectations are very high,” Niknejad says. “I take it as a compliment that they think Tehran Bureau is this well-funded organization, dripping with money and resources. But right now, it’s just me.”

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