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Throughout Tehran's unfurled chaos, from its dusty southern reaches, or its boutique lined alleyways in the north, to its heart whose beat is the bazaar's din, the Alborz Mountains serve as a dramatic backdrop. They are an expansive, omnipresent reminder of something beyond the city, grander than any of its myriad skyscrapers constructed or under-construction. They loom dramatically when clouds struggle to cascade over their peaks and they transform into a warm chiaroscuro at dusk and dawn when the sun's setting rays meet their crests.

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Middle East



Tehran, Iran

NARRATIVES OF PAIN, STORIES OF JUSTICE: VICTIMS OF CHEMICAL WARFARE IN IRAN

The fourth of Khordad was no different. The morning sun broke over the distant horizon, grazing the face of the Alborz Mountains to the north, and from Mehrabad Airport I looked onto a city stirring itself softly awake. This early morning I would be making the hour and a half long flight west to Kermanshah, one hundred miles from the Iran-Iraq border. I would be traveling with a group from the Society for Chemical Weapons Victims' Support, an NGO based in Teheran with which I worked.

Our ultimate destination would be Qasr-Shirin, a small and simple town situated along the Iran-Iraq border. Qasr-Shirin would serve as a base camp as we made daily forays into villages scattered throughout the region with one common characteristic—they and their peoples were subject to chemical bombardment during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. As we arrived in Qasr-Shirin, the quiet of late afternoon belied this tragic history. Unlike the dry heat of Tehran, Qasr-Shirin's air was weighed down with the kind of humidity that nurtures groves of date palms.

From Qasr-Shirin we headed southeast to the village of Dereh. Cradled in a valley along the border, Dereh is a plain agricultural village—small, dusty, and backed by a stretch of green pasture. As our minibus approached the village square, villagers gathered eagerly, awaiting our arrival and a chance to tell their stories. They held themselves with a pride that did not begrudge their humble lives. Instead, they embraced the humility of their circumstance. What they also embraced were their stories of anguish, still fresh even years after their exposure to mustard gas. One could not fathom the strategic advantage gained by bombing a place like Dereh, but perhaps total war's ambition is not strategic advancement; rather, it is calculated, total destruction.



I met a young man in Dereh. He was twenty-four years old, only three years my senior. Affable, handsome, and hardened in the fields of Dereh, he was also exposed to mustard agents toward the end of the Iran-Iraq war, only two or three years of age at the time. He did not recollect much, but could relate the stories that would later color his memories—

how as the bombs fell, villagers initially thought it to be simply another aerial bombing, with nothing particularly more heinous behind the deed. When livestock fell to their deaths and lungs and eyes began to burn with insufferable pain, people knew something more insidious was in the air. They ran for the river to cleanse themselves; they sought medical attention at distant hospitals only to be turned away at security checkpoints and often did not receive adequate medical care until upwards of a month later. This was the heart of the no-man's land.

Another village we visited was Zardeh, elevated in a hollow between several mountains, carved on a scale of time unimaginably large. The memory of chemical bombardment was heavy. Scattered between homes and in quiet groves of trees were flat slabs of marble marking burial places. I inspected one row of five in the summer shade. A villager leaned over and whispered, "brothers."

One early morning in the mid-1980s, Saddam's planes dropped mustard gas munitions directly onto the source of the spring that watered the village below, perhaps purposefully, perhaps not. As residents realized the calamity at hand, they clamored to cleanse themselves downstream. Little did they realize theirs was a fatal bath.

These were only a few of the stories I gathered during our visits

to "chemical villages," as they unfortunately have come to be labeled. While hearing them, it slowly began to be impressed upon my mind the place of personal narrative. It is a simple fact—everyone has a story, and everyone ought to have it heard, particularly those on the periphery, dealt a harsh hand and no soapbox.

Perhaps there are too many stories to be heard. Like row upon row of library books, to read them all would be a fruitless challenge, one that ultimately gathers dust. Yet in the valleys and plains along the Iran-Iraq border, villagers patiently awaited an opportunity simply to be heard. I came, listened and transcribed, took photos, and indefatigably tried to prod further, to find an entry point where I could adequately empathize with suffering on a scale completely foreign to me.

The Burch Fellowship gave me an opportunity not only to work with the SCWVS, to take language courses at the University of Tehran, and, for three months, to explore a country and culture hopelessly distant in the eyes of many in the west—it also allowed me to learn enduring lessons of who I am, where I fit into the intricacies of the world, and what justice really means. Justice begins with a receptive audience.

When stories of unconscionable suffering are told, we ought listen in order to promote the change that prevents the cruel irony of history being repeated from being repeated. The Burch Fellowship gave me an opportunity to truly experience this insight. For this, I am ever grateful.

