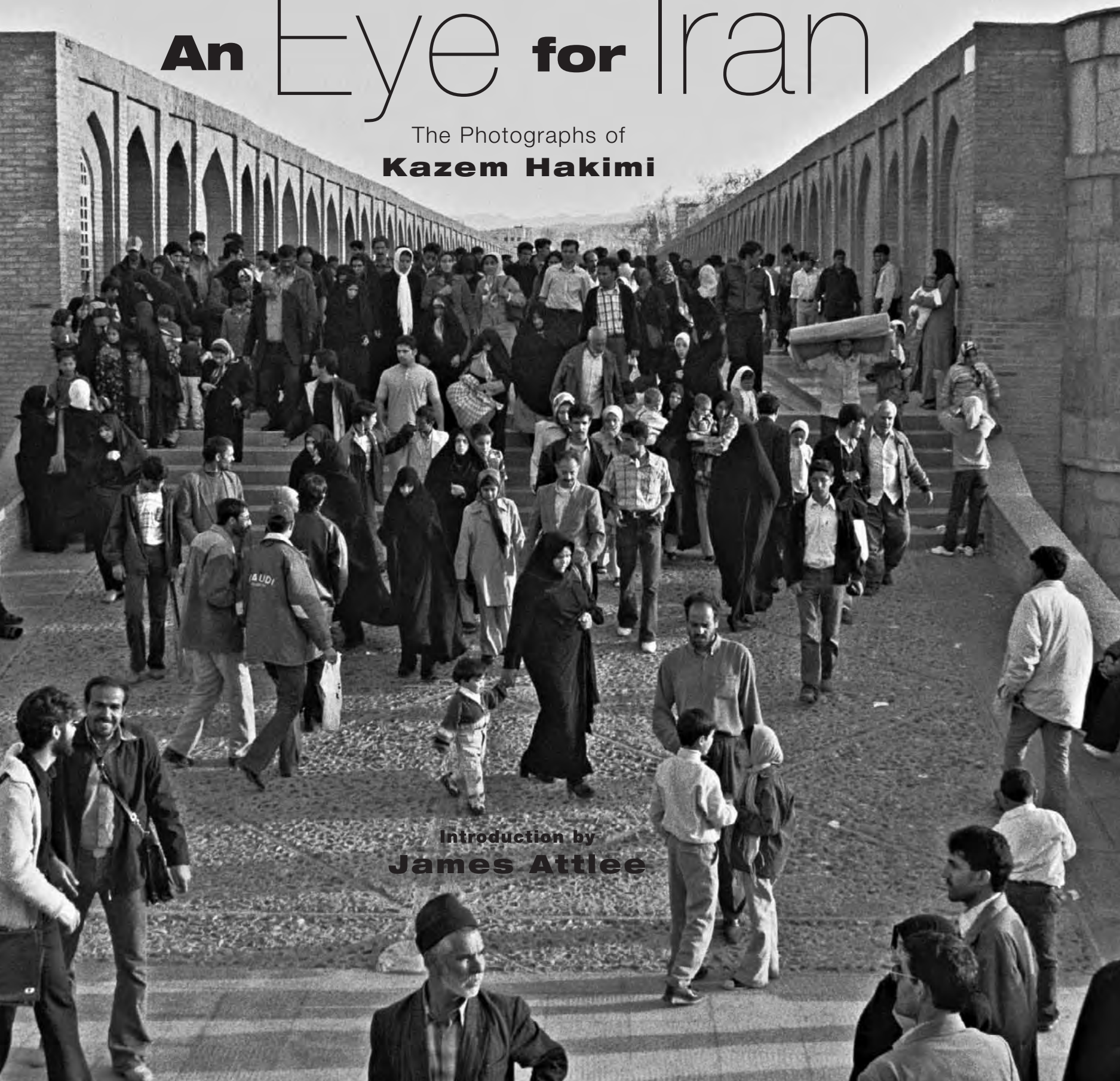


# An Eye for Iran

The Photographs of  
**Kazem Hakimi**

Introduction by  
**James Attlee**



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*For my beloved spiritual master Grand Sheikh Mohammad Nazim  
Adil Al-Qubrusi, who has always blessed me with his endless spirituality;  
and to my dear wife Carolyn for being the most wonderful wife  
and the backbone of my family.*

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# *Introduction*

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A man at the latter end of middle age (although his age is unimportant) strolls down a leafy boulevard, unaccompanied except for his own shadow. Dressed in

a baggy suit that could date from the 1940s rather than the 21st century, with a hat crammed down on his head, he is walking ahead of the photographer, his hands clasped behind his back. There is something at once casual and purposeful about his stride as he progresses into the middle distance, a direction our eyes are led in by a seemingly endless string of light bulbs that hangs between the lamp posts above his head. At the moment the photographer has captured, a puff of wind gently inflates his jacket and he turns his face to his left so that we see him in profile, his expression neither happy nor sad, simply observant.

This is not a photograph for those who are looking for action, narrative or high drama. I first saw it on the wall in an exhibition. Two weeks later, when I happened to run into the photographer, it was still fresh in my mind. I described it to him: the one of the man in the suit walking who turns his head, just as the wind catches out his jacket? Kazem Hakimi grew animated, as photographers tend to do when they discuss their work. “Yes, yes,” he said, “I had to walk behind him for fifteen minutes before that happened. Did you notice how his jacket and the plant pot are the same shape?”

I wasn't sure I *had* noticed, so I returned to the image once more. Sure enough, the stroller, the flâneur if you will, is approaching a concrete planter in the middle of the pavement that looks like a flying

saucer, or the mouth of a lily. The man's jacket, flaring out at the waist, is an inversion of the shape, like a bell. The photographer, stalking the solitary figure ahead of him, has waited for this instant, when the action of the wind and the congruence of physical appearances all come together, and he can press the shutter. This moment, when nothing much happens, is nevertheless a well in which we can immerse ourselves again and again, an intensely experienced fragment of the present.

It is a very European photograph; or at least, it is very much in a European and American tradition of street photography, both in its subject and in the process of its creation – the photographer stalking his, or her, prey, waiting for that moment to arrive in which chance and expectations collide. Even the technology used – black-and-white film loaded into a Canon SLR – is little changed from the first half of the twentieth century. The shadows cast by the trees on the pavement are a motif familiar in dozens of works from the period. The man's clothes are timeless; the streets either side of the pavement are eerily empty of traffic. The photographer has somehow achieved invisibility, able to freeze a moment on film without interrupting the flow of the late afternoon. Yet we are not in Paris or New York, but Isfahan; we know the photograph was taken in 2004. Has the camera become a time machine, transporting us back to an earlier age? Or, indeed, a method of translating for us a foreign scene into a language we understand, letting us breathe the atmosphere of a sidewalk few of us will ever visit, in a country more often represented in the hyperbole of politicians' speeches? We must ask ourselves, as we have to when looking at any

photographic image, who is the photographer and where do they stand in relation to what they are photographing?

Let us consider another image that deals with this question explicitly, the only photograph in the collection to depict visitors from outside the country. The scene takes place in Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, the second largest public square in the world. Three German tourists are sitting on a bench, engaged in friendly interaction with a family group;



the woman among them has covered her head out of respect for local custom, as instructed in her guidebook. An Iranian boy, perhaps 10 years old, is doing a dance for the elderly German man,

who is taking his photograph. The boy's siblings, or friends, look on, amused. Again, the scene is beautifully composed. The dancing boy's outstretched arms echo the crucifix formed by the paths he is standing on; the horizon behind him is formed by the long, low outline of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, unique among mosques for not possessing a minaret. A younger boy, hands in pockets, looks straight at the camera, his face a picture of wry amusement. What we are seeing is a photograph depicting photography itself, a particular type of photography: the photograph being taken by the Germans is a touristic one, perhaps the only kind it is possible at this moment and in this place for them to take, for as foreigners they attract to themselves the attention of small boys and smiling young women. Not for them the possibility of strolling unnoticed down sunlit boulevards scored by shadows, simply

observing the passing scene. The figure in the first photograph, you may have realized, is a cipher for the photographer himself, a wanderer of the streets and squares, a collector of fleeting impressions. By contrast, the man bearing the camera in the second photograph represents the fate of the Western visitor to another culture, condemned to be the centre of attention, whose very presence changes what is happening before his eyes to an extent that makes un-staged photography all but impossible.

This is all well and good. Yet as we look through the images in this book we realize that they too, in a sense, are tourist photographs; many of them are taken at tourist sites, in parks, by the river, at important religious or historic monuments. The photographer has not sought out sensational scenes that would confirm Western preconceptions about Iran; we see no images of mass demonstrations, firebrand politicians or religious zealots. The subjects of the photographs are largely Iranians at leisure. To examine a people at rest is to see something about their society that is not revealed in news bulletins or leader articles. Whereas the public spaces of Paris, New York or London teem with tourists from all over the world, the parks and city squares of Iran, the political climate being what it is, are largely the preserve of Iranians. In these communal spaces families disport themselves, taking the lives they usually live behind closed doors out into the open. They eat together, share stories, play chess, drink tea and photograph each other, acting as tourists in their own land. One picture depicts a tightly knit family group, picnicking together on the grass. Their bodies form a perfect horseshoe shape; a young man, in his late teens or early twenties, is in the centre of the frame. Spoon in



hand, he pauses between mouthfuls. All the energy of the group, it seems, is focused on him. His place in the composition reflects his place in the family;

doted on by his mother, admired by his sisters, looked up to by his younger siblings, he basks in the glow of their attention, confident in his youth and good looks. His back is turned to his younger brother, whose face is contorted by tears; for some reason he is locked out for this moment from the family circle and the photographer has caught this tiny domestic drama. The intimacy of the shot recalls the photographs William Klein included in his book *Rome* (1952), of Italian families relaxing at the beach. “The family in Italy is not a No Man’s Land as it is elsewhere,” he wrote, in words that could as easily be deployed about the Iran Hakimi depicts, “but a mutual admiration society where parents and children adore each other unselfconsciously.”

Hakimi’s passion for photography was born early. “My father gave me his camera – a Contax 3A, a very good camera – when I was little. I used to take family photos,” he remembers. “I travelled a lot with him when I was a child, all over Iran. He was a bit of an adventurer. He was a compassionate man, very optimistic and enthusiastic about life, and he mixed with everybody... It was through him that I learnt to look at the things around me.”

For a period after he came to live in Britain Hakimi put the camera aside, but his interest in photography was reawakened towards the end of his teenage years, when he acquired his first Leica. At Oxford Polytechnic his subject was Civil Engineering,

but he remembers spending as much of his time in the photography department as on his official studies. Still later, he studied for a B-Tech in photography at Richmond upon Thames College in Twickenham. Yet when he returned to Iran with a camera, as a Farsi-speaking Iranian who understood the culture of the people that surrounded him, his position was very different to that of the German tourists. While making these pictures he travelled with his family, visiting places other Iranians love to visit; cameras in such locations are ubiquitous. He was, in other words, the photographer with the perfect alibi, his presence in every way explicable and therefore un-remarked. As well as the people relaxing in these public spaces he focused on those who attend them, for whom these same locations are a place of work or even a home: beggars and street musicians, hawkers and street traders, children. These subjects have long fascinated photographers, from Charles Nègre working in the streets of mid-19th-century Paris right up to the present day. If the poor are always with us, as the saying goes, so are the urban photographers who chronicle their lives.

In the introduction to his book *The Decisive Moment*, published in 1952, Henri Cartier-Bresson wrote: “Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the inter-relationships are on the move.” Hakimi speaks in remarkably similar terms. To walk down a street with him, or even ride in his car when he has his beloved Leica around his neck, can be an alarming experience. His right arm is constantly jerking up into the air, armed with a light meter, taking readings and

checking the settings on his camera so that he can be ready, as he puts it. Even in the car he is waving his meter out of the window in case he spots a scene; (“don’t worry,” he tells me reassuringly, “it’s quite safe”). When something catches his eye he stops the car and jumps out with his camera, before it escapes him. His conversation as we drive is punctuated with the ones that got away. “Look at that picture,” he will say regretfully, with a gesture towards a group of youths sitting on a wall, or a woman in a full Burkha, buying vegetables on a British street. “I’m always looking for beautiful compositions. Ordinary things are happening, but for a few seconds you see the extraordinariness of it. I take most of my photographs at 500th of a second – you have to be very fast to spot it, to anticipate it and take it. Every day is an epic story unfolding. The people I see are characters in an epic event; if you survive and enjoy life and manage to be happy, to overcome life’s difficulties, you are a champion! We are only alive for a few days, a few hours and seconds... Every breath I take, I enjoy. When I wake up, I thank God for another chance...”

I am interested in how he deals with that most tricky of negotiations, the one between the street photographer and his subject. Photographers in the past have used all kinds of subterfuges, from zoom and telephoto lenses to periscopes on their cameras to avoid alerting people to the fact that they are taking their picture. Hakimi will have none of it. “I don’t use a zoom, only a prime lens, a 50mm standard or a wide-angle like 35mm or 28mm. If you use a zoom you don’t get involved. I don’t want to do it from outside; I want to get involved, keep it personal but not intrusive. I like to be right in your face but at

the same time invisible!” But how is that possible, I ask him. “I don’t know, but I do it! That way, when you look at the photograph, you feel you are there. Your eye doesn’t have a zoom lens... If you use a standard lens it is similar to the human eye, you feel you are present. I want the viewer to stand in my shoes, to feel as if they are present in the photograph.”

That he has perfected this technique of cheerful invisibility is obvious from the intimacy of some of the photographs collected here. The image he calls *A fistful of rials* was taken without a zoom at literally an arm’s length from his subject. Two elderly men are concluding a transaction that has taken place on the street; one counts the money while the other watches seriously, perhaps a touch deferentially (his hands together in a submissive gesture), until the deal is sealed. Once more, these figures seem imbued with an archetypal quality; they are not rich, their clothes speak of extended use and their faces are lined not just with age but with years of struggle, yet they are survivors. They have lived through the rise and fall of politicians and presidents; perhaps they have lost sons, or even fought themselves, in wars. Such elderly gentlemen, we feel, continue to make a living around the world, despite the turmoil that surrounds them; perfect examples of the “champions” that Hakimi speaks of so warmly. They wouldn’t look out of place in a market square in France, or Spain, or Greece, or the Lebanon. Neither has noticed the photographer’s approach, to a distance at which he could reach out



and take the money from their hands. Only one of the mannequins in the window behind them, peering out between the bars of the grill, gazes directly and unflinchingly into the camera lens, appearing to recognize the approach of the photographer. Mannequins in shop windows after all have been a subject for street photographers since the genre's earliest days and have experience of such things.

The European artists who travelled to the Middle East in the 19th century, in search of "exotic" subjects – and perhaps even more so those who stayed at home and painted the Islamic world entirely from their imagination – were fascinated by the role of women in the nations they visited. In the lands of the Ottoman Empire it was particularly the mysterious, forbidden harem that provided a rich theme for Orientalist painters. Arguably, some of that sense of mystery and fascination persists into the 21st century in Western attitudes to the *chador* or *burqa*, complicated by legitimate concern for women's rights and fear of attack from an unseen quarter. The women in Hakimi's photographs appear in many guises, from ancient beggars to a swift-footed young goatherd. Some are rendered anonymous by their black covering; one image shows women who



are distributing leaflets to promote the wearing of a type of *chador* that does not even leave the eyes uncovered. *Chador* means tent, and in an ironic detail they have pitched a tent

next to their stall, into which they can retreat when they need to take refreshment, making Hakimi's photograph both a verbal and visual pun. Such

women become abstract elements in the composition of several photographs, echoing architectural features: the windows in a mosque or the arches of the Si-oh-Seh Pol Bridge. Arches and windows are subtractions from the solidity of a structure and in a black-and-white photograph these hooded figures can also look like absences, incisions cut from, or through, the surface of the day. In contrast, other images fully capture the individuality of their subjects. In one, a young woman is seated having her fortune read by the side of a dusty road. Her jeans and stylish headscarf mark her out as one of the new generation, yet she is taking the consultation with the utmost seriousness, as are her mother and younger brother, who gaze down into her palm with knitted brows as if struggling to decipher its message themselves. She, meanwhile, looks unwaveringly into the face of the fortune-teller, her expression one of intense enquiry, reflecting her hopes and fears for the future.



Iran is, of course, a theocracy and religion plays a part in daily life to an extent largely unfamiliar in the West. Religious belief is present, in the photograph of the young boy unselfconsciously praying in the public park, in the old woman holding a candle at the entrance to a shrine, in the vast banner of Ali and his descendents, the 12 Imams of Shi'ism, draped across a house. It is particularly brought home in one striking image. A small car has pulled up on the side of the motorway to allow its occupants to pray. Five people have taken their place on the tarmac in front of the vehicle, while two stand beside



it. (There is no hard shoulder on Iranian motorways.) The worshippers face away from the camera, towards a landscape of desert scrub and distant hills, traversed by a series of small bushes bent by the wind, that have the appearance of a line of pilgrims. In the foreground and towering overhead is an electricity pylon; inevitably, at first glance the subjects of the photographs appear to be bowing down before it. The production of electricity and the extraction of oil are, of course, at the heart of the geopolitics that will shape their lives. If these conventionally devout people were, in fact, worshippers of a source of energy, they would not be the first people who have been drawn to this region through just such beliefs.

As we have established, however, these are not *political* photographs. It is perhaps difficult in these times, when the airwaves are full of talk of impending conflict, not to search them for a polemical message, or for some sign of the influence of the political and religious culture of the nation of which we have heard so much. In one photograph, the legs of a statue of the last Shah's father, clad in riding boots and jodhpurs, still stand outside his palace, severed at the thigh. The image is one of the utmost simplicity. The legs stand at the foot of a flight of steps, against a background of winter trees. A solitary, black-clad figure approaches. As a piece of public art, the disembodied limbs are an eloquent if surreal monument to the popular uprising that



changed the face of the nation. Conventional politics are as absent as the vanished father of the Shah from this portrait of a people. However, photography like this, “involved” photography fashioned with empathy, enables those who view it to bridge the cultural divide between themselves and its subject; as Hakimi explained to me, he is more interested in portraying those things that make us the same than those that make us different. A message does emerge from these pages, one that although it is delivered quietly is as important as any declaimed from a podium or broadcast across the world's media. It is simply this: can the people in these photographs – the dancing boy, the family picnicking in the park, the old men counting rials, the young woman having her fortune read by the side of the road, as well as the many other characters you will meet as you look through the pages of this book – *really* be our enemies? The question is left hanging in the air; the lone pedestrian continues on his way down the boulevard, unaccompanied except by his shadow, his hands clasped behind his back, looking this way and that, simply observing, as he steps casually yet purposefully forward into the eternal present.

James Attlee

*The Photographs  
of Kazem Hakimi*

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1. *Lighting a candle outside a shrine, Isfahan*



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2. *Bike and burqa, Tehran*



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3. *Banner portraying the Twelve Imams, Tehran*



وَلَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ سِرَّهُمْ وَلَا مَكْرَهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ أَتَوْاكَ بِالنِّسَابِ لِغِيَرَتِكَ عَلَيْكَ يُخَفُونَ ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَشَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

مُحَمَّدٌ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

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5. *Impromptu nap in the shade, Tehran*



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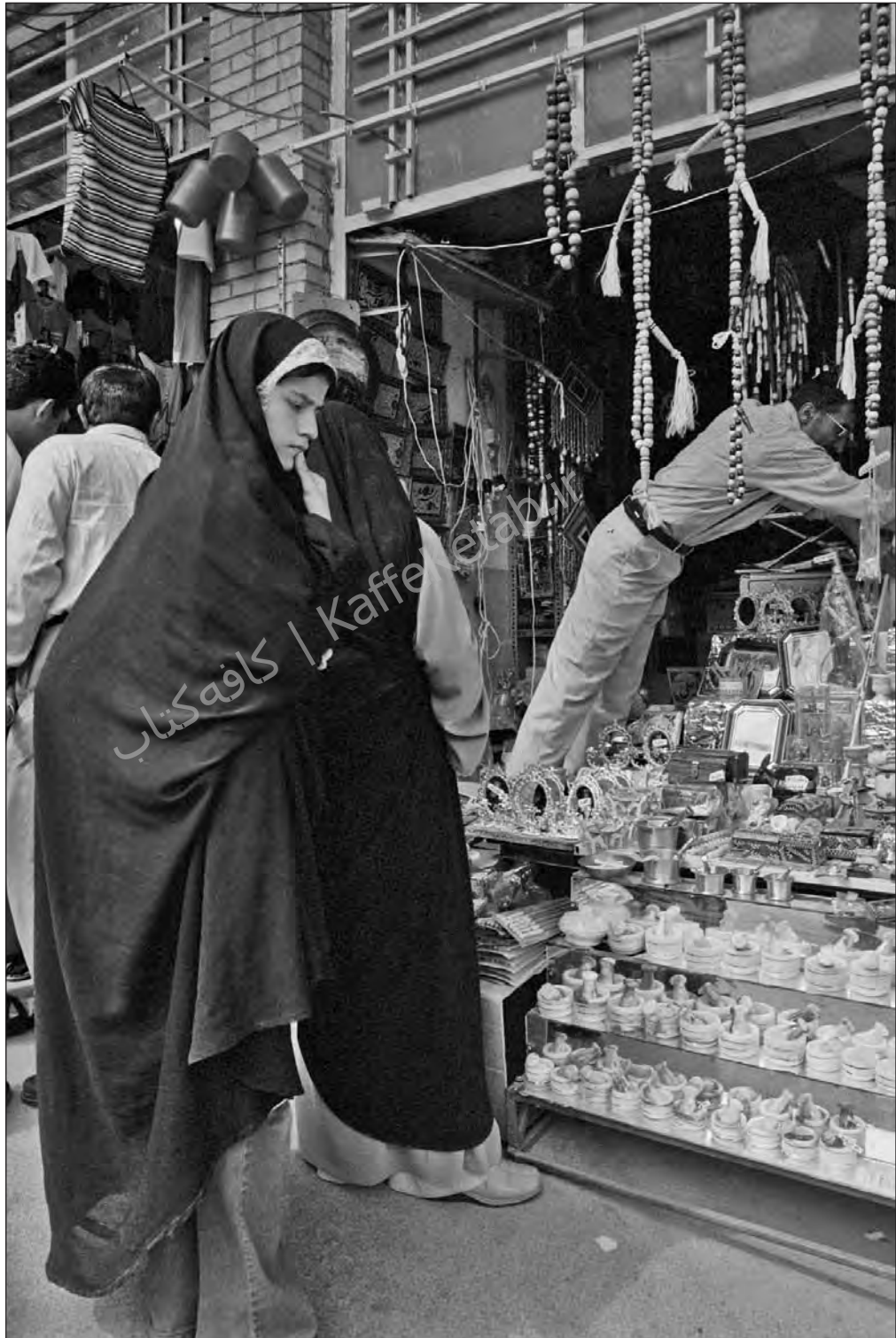
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۶. *Remains of Reza Shah's statue,  
Saad Abad Palace, Tehran*



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11. *The banner maker, Mashad bazaar*



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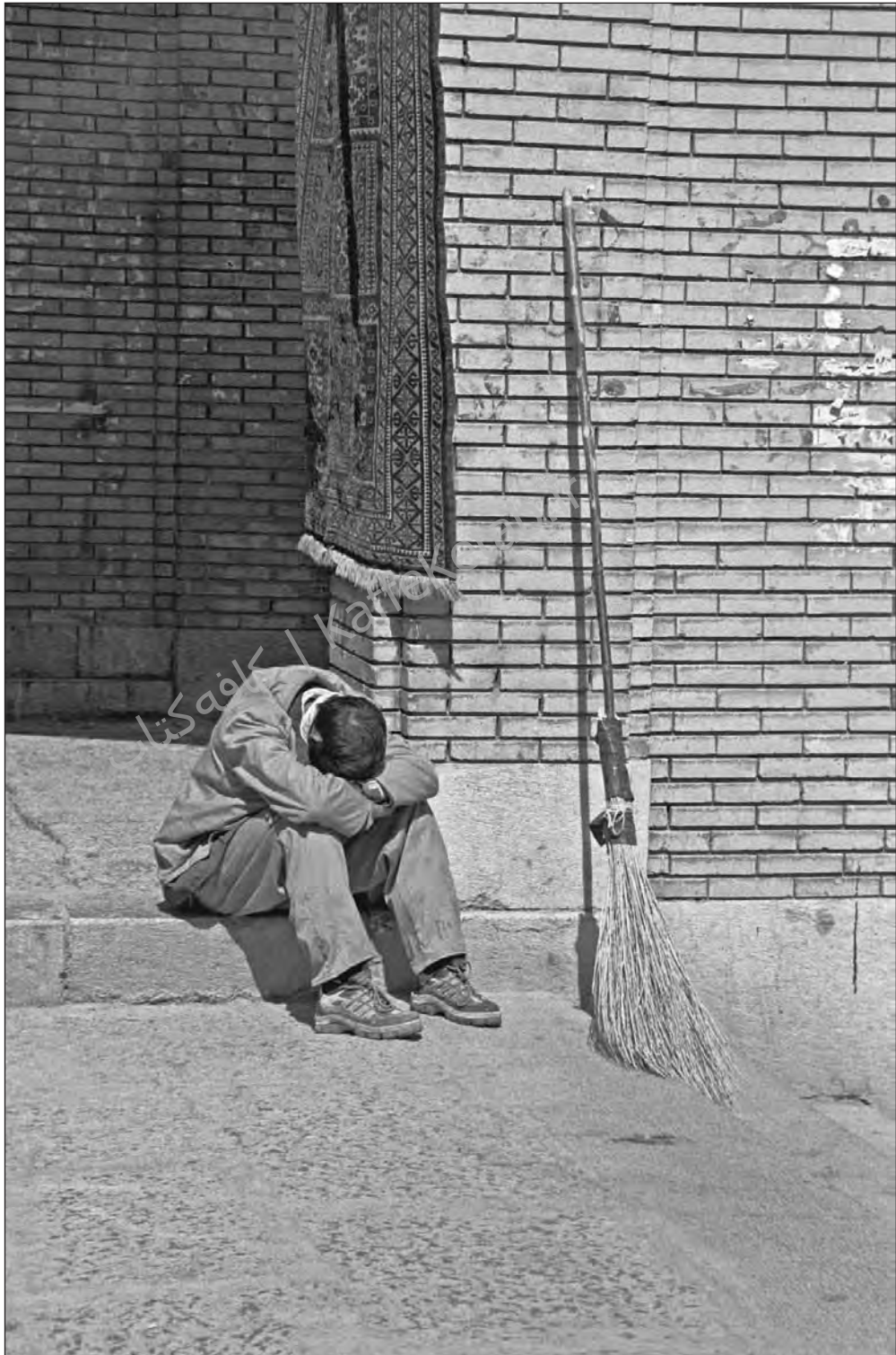


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22. *Picnicking on the banks of the Zayandeh River, Isfahan*



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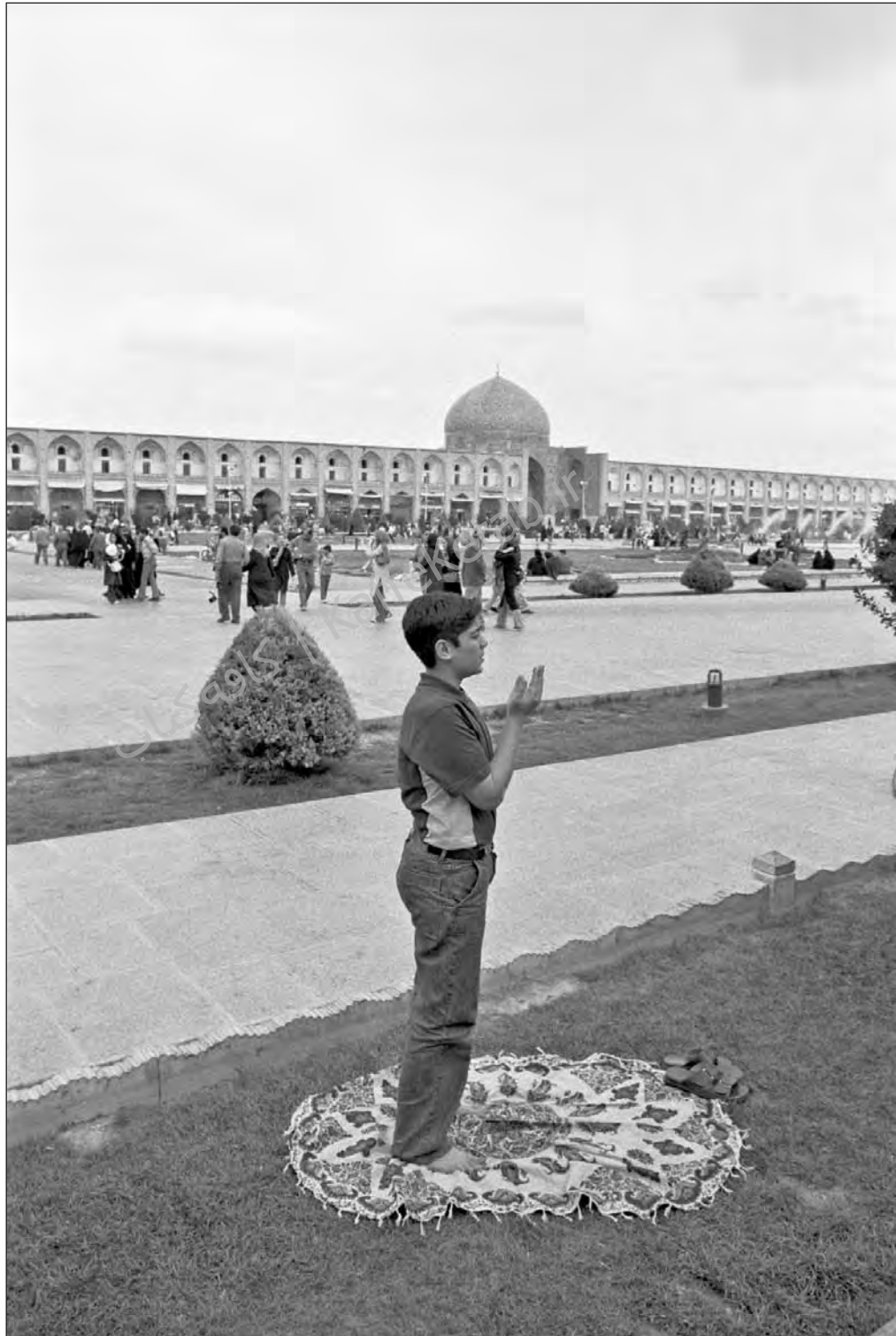




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36. *Imam 's Mosque, formerly Shah 's Mosque,  
Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Isfahan*





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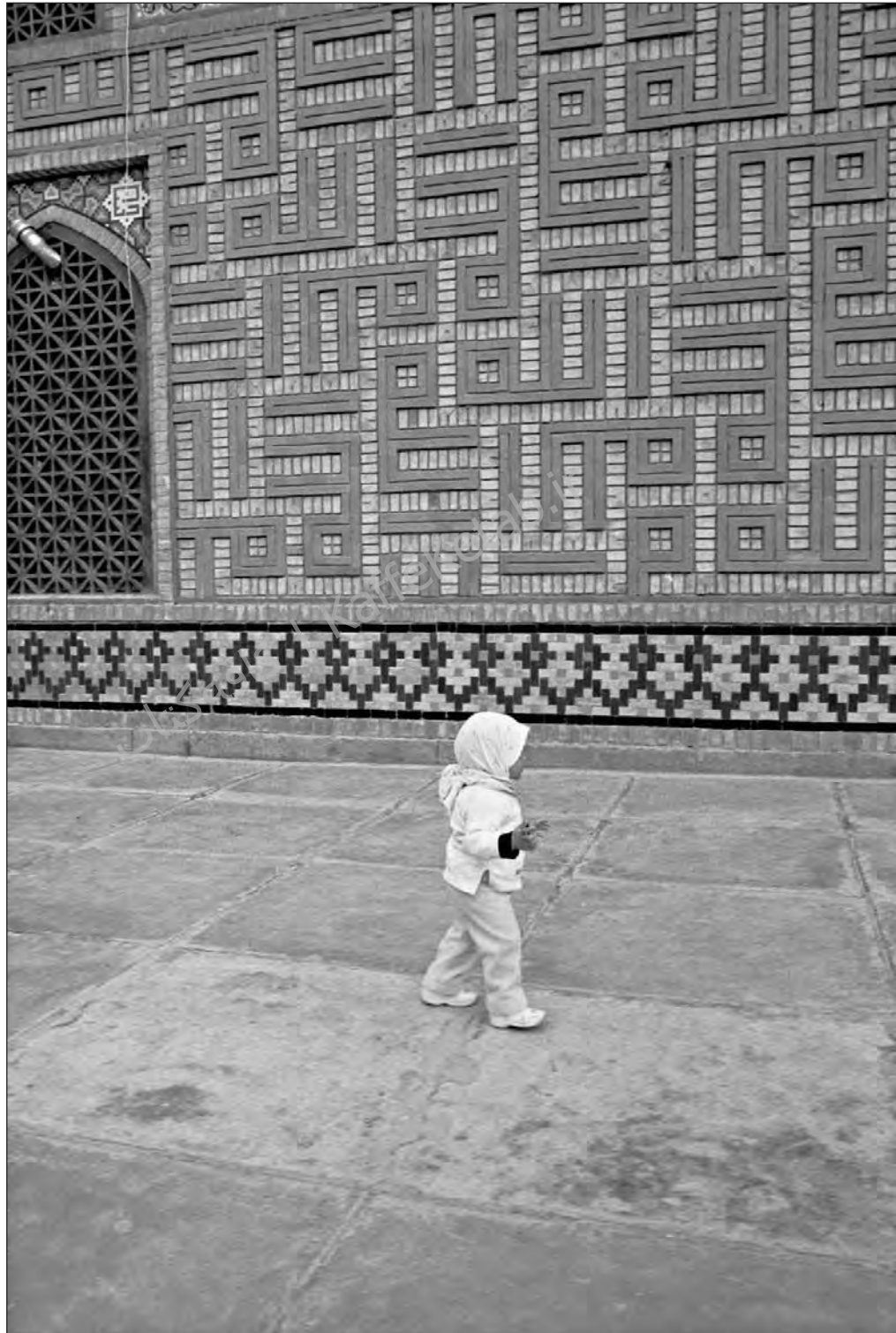
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