

Fighting addiction bares emotion in reserved Iran

Group therapy takes hold in a country waging an escalating war against drugs.

By Scott Peterson
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TEHRAN, IRAN

There was backslapping and hand-holding as the former junkies applauded the numbers of days that each one kept off drugs. "I never thought I would stay alive one day without a heroin injection," Kianouche, who has been off drugs for 14 months, told his comrades.

This **Narcotics Anonymous** (NA) meeting might be unremarkable in a self-confessional society like America. But the fact that this bare-your-soul experience is taking place in Iran, where public displays of emotion are rare - except regarding religion - surprises even some Iranians.

"In the US, big-name athletes admit to using drugs, but not in Iran," says Salehi Tabar, who treats addicts at a private clinic in Tehran. "You can say that 99 percent of the men in Iran have tried drugs, but few will admit it. Patients call this office and ask: Is it private? Do you take names, or is it secret? Not even 5 percent will accept to do group therapy."

Still, the waters of the Persian soul run deep, and Kianouche and the other 50 or so men who met in a Tehran basement expressed a remarkable degree of heartfelt feeling.

"My name is Hamid, and I am a drug addict," says one young man in a purple sweater. "Why are we here? Before we came, we didn't know the meaning of life, we had to get our drugs at any cost - even at the cost of wife and family. Now we are convinced that addiction is gradual suicide."

Combating drug flow

Illegal drug use has escalated in the Islamic Republic of Iran in recent years, despite harsh penalties for use. The ruling clerics have committed more and more resources to combating the flow of opium, heroin, and hashish, which often pass through Iran from Afghanistan on their way to Europe.

Last year, Iran seized - and ceremoniously burned - tons of narcotics, and the United Nations Drug Control Program regularly applauds its efforts. Yet so far this year, Iran has lost more than 100 security personnel, bringing the official number of dead in antidrug operations to 2,350. Most died in gun battles on Iran's eastern border against armed and sophisticated drug trafficking groups.

Moreover, the number of addicts has grown because the economy is depressed, and job prospects are dim.

Scores of government centers have been set up to treat drug users - officials have been quick to recognize the problem, openly campaigning to stop it - and specialists advertise in newspapers to help people kick their habit.

For those who can tolerate the in-depth personal scrutiny, or often, these addicts say, when other treatments fail them, there is NA - and a whole new, unexpected support group.

"I didn't come for two weeks, and I missed seeing you," said one man, with a thick, multicolored sweater. "Some of you called me, you were worried about me. Thank you. But all the cells of my body - I have trained every single cell not to ask for drugs. I thank God for making me able to do that, because I pray regularly."

American export

NA first began in Tehran five years ago, brought from Los Angeles - called Tehr-Angeles by Iranians, because of the number of Iranians living there - by a reformed addict who wanted to make a difference. At first he encountered resistance from some authorities who called him a CIA agent. But from a first meeting in a government reform center, it was clear the program worked.

Today NA meetings are held in 18 cities across the country, with 16 locations in the capital alone. Former junkies meet up for activities that range from mountain hiking to soccer matches to early morning runs twice a week.

The theme during a recent meeting was "Giving your dependency up to God," in keeping with a long-standing NA theme written in the group's Basic Text, or guidelines: "At some point, we realized that we needed the help of some Power greater than our addiction," notes the Web site of the Van Nuys, Calif.-based NA.

This idea fits with the monotheistic religion of Islam, so transporting this method of stopping drug use has not been an issue in Iran.

"Thank you God for this beautiful day," spoke up one man, a large Armenian called Andic, who has been off drugs for a year and two days. "I thought God had forgotten me, but if he really did, I'd be dead by now. He showed me the solution."

"NA doesn't care about your religion or your race," confirmed Mohamed, a bushy-haired man with prayer beads.

"I was looking for a place out of politics, just one place where we were all addicts and believed in one God," he adds. "When he saw that I was determined to do something, God loved me."

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