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A MEDITATION FOR THE FOURTH OF JULY

## Dreams of freedom: The essence and beauty of America

By HAMID R. TAVAKOLI

INDEPENDENCE Day celebrates the birthday of the United States of America and the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, by our Founding Fathers. It's a day of picnics and patriotic parades, a night of concerts and fireworks and a reason to fly the American flag.

This week, as we celebrate the country's 233rd Fourth of July, most of us will be enjoying festivities alongside friends and family.

I'd like to honor all those who cannot be home to celebrate this important holiday due to our combat operations overseas. They are there in harm's way, not just to protect our nation, but to protect an idea, a philosophy, a way of life called America.

Allow me to share a brief personal history. I immigrated to the

United States from Iran in 1985, when I was 12 years old. I won't bore you with the details. In short, it wasn't much fun over there in the old country. I recall many times hearing the war sirens for incoming Iraqi MiGs, followed by bombings, followed by Scud missiles — and lots of them, too! TV was just as awful. All we saw were angry bearded men in turbans followed by more angry bearded men in turbans. And they all recited stuff in Arabic that most Iranians could not understand (we speak Farsi, or Persian, over there). These recitals always ended with chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."

In recent weeks, as we observed political unrest in Iran and saw people jeopardize their lives and take to the streets demanding justice, I couldn't help but reminisce about my past and those years

spent in Iran when I was a child and preteen. I concluded with disappointment that all Iran ever gave me were the mullahs. They came on a platter filled with hate, war, oppression, fear and ignorance.

America, on the other hand, gave me a new language, exposed me to different people from all over the world, enlightened my perspective, granted me citizenship, educated me and provided me the opportunity to become a medical doctor, then paid for it by allowing me to serve as an officer in its Air Force.

I am an American. I don't accept the label "Iranian-American," either. I don't want any dashes, splits or duality in being an American. I am an American who happens to have an Iranian heritage. I don't care much about the Islamic Republic, but apart from that, I am proud of my Iranian heritage. Just like all other Americans who

at some point in their lives, or their blood lines, immigrated here from a different land, so did I.

I pledge my allegiance to this flag of ours and no other — never, under any circumstance. I represent America wherever I go, regardless of my heritage. And my heritage is now part of America. I could not be proud of my Persian legacy in my nation of origin, but in America, in this new land, I can be proud of my heritage and have found my identity once more.

This recurrent theme in America — in which people from every corner of the world and all walks of life, striving for a better one, come here to fulfill their dreams of freedom — is the essence and beauty of this land. They also come to America hoping that one day America will reach out to their families, their towns and their countries. Because America is not just a na-

tion; it is an idea, a philosophy, a way of life. America is an idea that says we have unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as inscribed by a noble Virginian more than two centuries ago.

I have full faith that one day America will spread to the world. This is not a military invasion of one nation over others. It is the philosophy, the values and the way of life that embody the idea of America, and whose unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are endowed to "all men," all peoples of the world.

During this Fourth of July celebration, let's remember those Americans in military service who have fallen during the struggle to secure these rights. The struggle will continue, but the battle will ultimately be won by champions and guardians of these basic human rights so clearly and explicitly stated in the Declaration of Independence during our nation's birth.

I urge my fellow Americans to commemorate those who give so much of themselves to protect our land, our freedom and our way of life, and to continue their faith in our nation and its values, despite adversity within and outside our borders.

There will come a day when these rights will not be confined to any borders but will be experienced by everyone on Earth, including Iranians. All this is thanks to those who carry on in not-so-pleasant places, all in the line of duty, to protect and preserve America.

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