

When a soccer field became a mosque

By HAMID R. TAVAKOLI

I CAN'T tell you about the mosques in New York and the clerics who run them, but I can tell you what mosques meant to me growing up in Iran. I lived there until 1985, six years into the Islamic revolution.

After the Islamic Republic took over, Iran came under the rule of Sharia law (supposedly God's law). Laws were implemented by the Supreme Council, a group of high-ranking clerics and led by the ayatollah. Once Iran, a westernized nation under the shah, came under medieval rules of the Islamic Republic, everything became all about Islam — the only truth as the government saw it.

The revolution began in 1979, when I was in first grade. I had begun the school year while Iran was still ruled by the shah. From a 7-year-old's perspective, my teacher was attractive, with long hair and a broad smile. She was also kind and gentle. Halfway through the year, Khomeini took over. Gone was my attractive teacher; in her place came a woman with a black chador (equivalent to a burqa). I remember her as mean and nasty. She was also illiterate, which didn't help much.

Our curriculum changed drastically. Classes began with religious studies — Islam, of course. Persian literature meant books and

stories about Islam and its glories (not renowned poets like Rumi and Hafez, banned because of their references to wine and women). Math and science classes were more about Islamic achievements than the teaching of those subjects. Then we studied Arabic and the Koran.

One of the changes that irked me most was the building of a mosque at the end of our street on a site we had used as our soccer field. I recall, vividly, being awakened every morning by a guy shouting: "AAALLAAH-HUUU-AAKKBBAARR" (Allah is the greatest).

On weekdays I didn't mind this so much. The call to prayer served as a reliable alarm so I could get ready for school. But on Fridays, when we had no school, I was irked to hear the loud voice from the tower of the mosque.

We were told Allah had blessed us with this mosque and this call to prayer instead of a place to play.

My experiences left me no fan of building mosques. Definitely not in my backyard! It may cause flashbacks.

I appreciate living in America, where all people are, and should be, free to practice their religion. But please, no loud, clanging church bells, and nobody shouting "Allahu-Akbar" at the crack of dawn.

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