Navid Kermani

STATE OF EMERGENCY

TRAVELS IN A TROUBLED WORLD

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NAVID KERMANI

TRANSLATED BY TONY CRAWFORD

polity

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The reports in this book originally appeared, in much shorter versions, as newspaper and magazine articles in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Afghanistan I), the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Pakistan), *die tageszeitung* (Palestine), *Der Spiegel* (Iraq) and *Die Zeit* (all other chapters). I thank the editors and the archives of those publications, especially *Die Zeit*, and my editor Jan Ross, for their encouragement, support and advice. I would also like to thank the Goethe Institutes in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Karachi and Cairo, the Goethe Centre in Lahore and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Cairo, which invited me to give readings and lectures. All the other trips were taken on assignment for the publications named.

The travelogues written between 2006 and 2009 have become part of the novel *Dein Name* (published by Hanser, Munich, 2011).

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CAIRO, DECEMBER 2006

The tea house where I was the youngest of the regulars, twenty years ago, has expanded but lost none of its charm. To be exact, a few more plastic chairs have been set out in the narrow alley between two sooty colonial buildings, nothing more; but, in this place, just moving some furniture is a cultural revolution. Because any natural sense of taste seems to have died out in Cairo three, four decades ago, progress mostly takes the definition Adorno gave it: preventing progress. Around one, two o'clock, the tiredest whores in Cairo are sure to turn up for a last cola or a first client, while Umm Kulthum sings, as every night, of 'those days'. The enchantment of the tea house, like that of every hostelry worthy of the name anywhere in the world, consists in the fact that nothing matches and therefore everything, as chance would have it, goes together: the furnishings and the decor, which must have been shabby already when the place opened; the cordial staff who nonetheless overcharge; the most artistic Arab orchestras from the most excruciating loudspeakers; the men regressing to little boys over card and board games; the women likewise acting as if they were still young; and, most of all, the laughter, the loud, chortling, jangling, squeaking, hoarse, malicious, self-effacing, gloating, roguish, jolly, forgiving laughter that is heard more often in Cairo than in any other city, and nowhere in Cairo more often than in the tea house in the evening, and, fortunately, still heard today, I must record, for I am always afraid until I return that the demon responsible for it all may have vanished. An entry in a travel guide

could be the end of it, or a notice in the newspapers by one of the new zealots nostalgic for something that never existed – prostitution is among Cairo's traditions, but not puritanism. There is no way that a symphony like the tea house could be composed today. And of course it never was composed; it was simply there, already a relic on its opening day. All the guests gather and pose for a group portrait, together with the staff and the neighbourhood's shopkeepers, for a daughter eager to take a picture with her birthday present. Then the head waiter takes a picture of father and daughter that by itself is worth the twenty-year journey.

PARADISE IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY

KASHMIR, OCTOBER 2007


N
S
Baltic Sea
Black Sea
Cologne
Damascus
Jerusalem
Mediterranean Sea
Lampedusa
Cairo


Aral Sea
Caspian Sea
Srinagar
Kabul
Lahore
New Delhi
Tehran
Dohuk
Baghdad
Najaf
Ahmedabad
CHINA
Northern Areas
1963 Pakistani-Chinese treaty border
Gilgit
Jammu
1949 ceasefire line
and
Shukur
Kargil
Peshawar
Dal Lake
Islamabad
Srinagar
Kashmir
Leh
Kashmir Valley
Ladakh
PAKISTAN
Jammu
Dharamsala
Lahore
Amritsar
INDIA
Arabian Sea
Red Sea
Indian Ocean

HOUSEBOAT 1

The Paris Photo Service, whose assortment features Kodak film, rows by. Although the sun is shining, the mountains look as if God had dipped them in milk and hung them up to dry. Next comes a shikara, as the gondolas are called in Kashmir, bringing groceries to the houseboat that was recommended to me by my local friends. And in fact it is clean and comfortable, in the British colonial style, like all of Srinagar's eight hundred floating guesthouses, with heavy, dark furniture, oriental rugs, massive armchairs, although it is oriented towards Indian rather than Western tourists because it is close to the city, where Dal Lake is no wider than a river. As a result, the promised experience of silence, space and snow-covered mountains mirrored in the water turns out to be rather less than majestic. I have a view of cars and rickshaws, multi-storey office buildings of bare concrete, and a hill with a television antenna on top. The Indians seem to find the hundred yards that separate us from the noise of the traffic more than enough. But I, against my best intentions, was slightly disappointed, especially since the evenings on the veranda of the houseboat are so cold that I crawl back indoors and under my blanket to write.

Nevertheless, I am gradually discovering more and more advantages of the situation I have landed in. The boat belongs to a family with deep local roots whose thirty-two members can always find exactly what I happen to need and can supply the full spectrum of opinions, demands and desires that Srinagar has to offer, in addition to a driver, a change of travel reservations, a SIM for my mobile phone. My Indian SIM doesn't work here for security reasons. To get a new prepaid SIM, you have to have a fixed abode and

the approval of the army. Now the boat owner's niece will have to do without her phone for a few days. She doesn't seem to use it much anyway – there are no contacts stored on her SIM except the service numbers that came with it: Astro Tel, Dial a Cab, Dua (prayers), Flori Tel, Food Tel, Horoscope, Info Tel, Movie Tel, Music Online, Odd Jobs, Ringtones, Shop OnLine, Travel Tel, Weather. For a city at war, where hardly a street lamp is lit in the evening, the offerings are stupendous. After almost twenty years in a state of emergency, Kashmir has long since grown accustomed to it.

The division of the Indian subcontinent has torn open many wounds: a million people dead, 7 million driven from their homes. Kashmir is one of these wounds that never seems to heal: heavenly Kashmir of all places, whose glaciers, lakes and meadows enchanted more than just poets and voyagers, unfortunately. Foreign rulers had been conquering the valley since the fourteenth century, exploiting it, and often buying and selling it. After the withdrawal of the British in 1947, the larger part of the province fell to India, in spite of its predominantly Muslim population; the west fell to Pakistan; a strip in the northeast was later claimed by China. India promised the United Nations to hold a referendum in which the Kashmiris would decide their own fate. That has not yet come to pass; instead, three wars with Pakistan have. Delhi did accord the province a high degree of autonomy, but in 1989, after a series of patently fraudulent regional elections, an armed rebellion broke out which has since cost hundreds of thousands of people their lives – among a population of 5 million. The Indian army is said to have stationed some 600,000 soldiers in the province, most of them in the Kashmir Valley, which is barely twice the size of Luxembourg. There is no remotely comparable concentration of troops anywhere in the whole world. There are

soldiers everywhere, in every city, in every village, on the main roads and the side roads, the high streets, the lanes and even the tracks between the fields, then in the fields themselves, and of course on the lakeshore across from me, one every fifty yards. To the Indians, it is a war against terror. To the local people, it is an occupation.

IN THE CITY

Dead zones interrupt all phone calls near a military facility – if you're driving, that happens every three minutes. Otherwise, except for the soldiers everywhere, you would never notice during the daytime that Srinagar is at war. But is this war? The army itself, which is not inclined to downplay the danger, sets the number of rebels remaining at about one thousand. The journalists I meet in Srinagar, Indians included, estimate there are a few dozen fighters – at most two, three hundred – plus an indeterminate number of men who work at their jobs in the daytime and at sabotage in the evening. About once a week on average, the newspapers report a skirmish or an attack, often foiled at the last minute. The news agencies issue reports from about eight dead upwards. They write the number of extremists killed, always extremists, whether it is Reuters, AP or CNN. If you read the local press, it is remarkable how many extremists carry address books with them neatly listing the names of their accomplices and ringleaders. A few days later, the same newspapers report a wave of arrests, saying the authorities have struck an important blow against terrorism.

The people, all the people I talk to without exception, are fed up with war. 'Fed up' is the expression I hear the most often by far. All right, to be honest I hear *salamualeikum*

more frequently, or *aleikum salam* whenever I surprise someone with the Islamic greeting. 'Peace be with you': that has a very peculiar sound in Kashmir. As time goes on it sounds like a supplication, and this is more than just my imagination; it is an inkling that each new person I talk to will tell me once more they have had quite enough of war, they are fed up: with the nocturnal searches, the ID checks; fed up most of all with the arbitrary actions of these foreign soldiers – foreign-looking, too, darker skin, foreign language, foreign religion, foreign food, foreign customs, and looking as if they're guarding even the chicken coops with their loaded machine guns. Even at the university, the heart of the movement for independence a few years ago, I meet no one who would still be willing to fight: fed up. Everyone supports the demand for self-determination, I am assured by a professor of English who looks about as old as the Indian state, a professor emerita, that is – but what happens the day after? she asks her students. We need to know that beforehand: none of you has told me anything about that. Will other powers intervene? Neighbouring countries, China, the United States? Will this be another Afghanistan? What about people of other religions? What about women? She can't see a secular Kashmir. One look at the potential leaders of a free Kashmir is enough for her: Islamists. The students are silent. Some of them have founded a magazine, which mainly limits itself to the problems on campus. The whole resistance has shrunk to this, says one of the editors, to these few stapled pages out of the photocopier. Graduating is more important. See that you don't get involved in politics, their parents warn them, many of whom fought themselves for *azadi*, as the magic word was in Kashmir in 1989: for freedom.

In 2002, regional elections were held that are said to have been relatively honest. The coalition in Srinagar is at pains

to curb the human rights violations of the Indian army and demands that the soldiers return to barracks. The army has already withdrawn from the old city centre with its narrow lanes. I am so surprised to find no uniforms there that I find myself watching for them. And then I do spy the occasional soldier: machine guns slung on their backs, they stroll casually, shop, haggle over prices. The Indian tourists on the other hand don't seem to feel safe yet in the old centre, which is so picturesque with its stone and wood houses that one expects to see around every corner a troop of Japanese, a German in a sari or an American in shorts. Since the war, however, tea houses and squares where one lingers aimlessly are no longer a part of Kashmiri culture, but the mosques on the other hand are so well frequented as I have seen only in war zones.

HOUSEBOAT 2

Yes, the Indians are back, recognizable by their clothes, their cameras, their dark skin. On my houseboat too an Indian family has checked in, an engineer from Calcutta with his wife, sister and two children. The engineer and I discover we are the same age, almost to the day. Hey, we have to drink to that, he says, and regrets that the houseboats no longer serve alcohol. His views are just as moderate as those of our host – in other words, irreconcilable. To the engineer, Kashmir is a part of India, 'an integral part, of course,' he emphasizes. No, in the schoolbooks there is nothing about the founders of the Indian state promising to hold a referendum. So the soldiers know nothing about it? No, they don't know; you would have to go to university or otherwise concern yourself with history to find the Kashmiris' cause anything but absurd. India, he says, pumps enormous amounts of

money into Kashmir. He pays twice as much for tomatoes in Calcutta as in Srinagar. Kashmiris want peace, every people wants peace – but the terrorism … if it weren't for the terrorism. The Indian family is going to spend the day in Gulmarg, a skiing town at 9,000 feet. See you this evening. Yes, see you this evening.

The boat owner, an educated man of about fifty, clean-shaven morning and evening, nods to indicate a white building on the bank, a former hotel that the Indian army has commandeered as a barracks. A few days ago two young people were shot there, officially two suicide bombers trying to get in. The boat owner says the young people were brought to Srinagar by the army and executed here. None of the houseboat residents or the local police witnessed anything to do with an alleged attack. In the photos in the newspapers that the boat owner shows me, the faces are disfigured, so they offer no clue as to whether they are Kashmiris or, as the army claims, foreigners. In any case, the boat owner is convinced they were not suicide bombers, but prisoners. The government of Kashmir, he says, is putting pressure on the army to give up the hotel and reduce its presence in the city. The army is presenting its kind of evidence that terrorism is still a threat to the state.

Between the guests and the hosts I am almost a kind of mediator, trying to elicit understanding sometimes for one position, sometimes for the other. They themselves have nothing more to say to each other – although no unfriendly tones are heard – except when the meals will be ready and where the remote control for the television set is: masters on the one side, not as Indians over Kashmiris, but as guests over the staff, free enough of prejudice to spend their holidays among the rebels; servants on the other side, glad that someone at least is staying on their houseboats again.

POLITICIANS 1–4

Kashmiri politicians who have not gone underground live in their own neighbourhood, separated from the population by roadblocks. If you want to visit the mansions in which the Indian state accommodates them, you first have to pass through several checkpoints. The best-known politicians at least seem to be assigned a whole company of soldiers who bivouac on their park-like grounds, using the garden pavilion as barracks, the tool shed as a field kitchen, the gatekeeper's lodge for the officers' quarters. As stylish as the mansions look from the outside, their interiors have all the charm of furnished flats. Of course, to the ordinary people, politicians belong to a caste of their own whose loyalty is richly rewarded by the Indian state. In the mansions themselves, the impression is different. Here the politicians look rather lost amid the furniture that doesn't belong to them, with soldiers outside their windows, their own city a territory in which they hardly ever set foot – they usually traverse it in a heavily armed convoy.

One politician especially, Yussof Tarigami, chairman of the Communist Party of Kashmir, which tolerates the governing coalition, is convincing in his uneasiness, sitting on the sofa as if he was his own guest, a melancholy man in his fifties with black hair, somewhat too long, parted on the side, who could pass for a police detective in an Italian film. I have no choice, he says. Two years ago he barely escaped an assassination attempt, not his first.

The politicians have little good to say about the state that guards their lives. In the mansions I heard the same accounts of arbitrary arrests, continual humiliation, alienation from India. Violence is on the wane, Tarigami feels, but not because the Kashmiris have reconciled themselves

to the occupation: out of exhaustion rather. He himself considered armed resistance wrong from the beginning and decided to carry on the struggle through the institutions. His living in this mansion, yes, a captive, is of course the consequence of having stayed within the system. He too demands self-determination, but points out that the state consists not only of the Kashmir Valley, with its largely Muslim population, but also of Jammu, where the majority is Hindu, and Ladakh, with its many Buddhists. What would happen to them if Kashmir fell to Pakistan? Tarigami asks me, as the English professor asked her students the day before. Independence sounds good, yet a secular, multicultural state is perfectly unrealistic in view of the three giants it would have as neighbours, India, Pakistan, China, none of which would give up its share of Kashmir. There is no perfect solution, Tarigami sighs, and goes on to sketch a plan for a Kashmir that is largely autonomous, though not formally independent, with open borders to the Pakistani part and regional self-government in the three provinces Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. That is exactly what the Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf proposed back in 2003. Vajpayee's successor, Manmohan Singh, expressed something similar in 2005: not to eliminate the borders, but to make them irrelevant.

'All we can do is exert pressure, by peaceful means, so that India and Pakistan finally do what they have basically long since agreed on, Tarigami explains. We have to get public opinion in India and Pakistan on our side. We have to show that peace is possible!'

One of the paradoxes of Srinagar is that it is easier to meet with the leaders of the resistance than with political office-holders or with representatives of the military. You simply ring the bell, and sometimes it is the leader himself who

opens the door of his house, which is modest, but at least belongs to him. What is still more perplexing, however, is that the resistance leaders are demanding the same thing in principle as the government politicians: autonomy, open borders, withdrawal of the army – the solution sketched out by Hojatoleslam Abbas Ansari is no different.

As a leader of the Shiite minority, the cleric Ansari is one of the spokesmen of the Hurriyat Conference, the umbrella organization of the various resistance groups. The English professor included politicians like him in her warning against Islamists yesterday; Ansari himself assures me he rejects theocracy. Sitting cross-legged, his heels pulled up close under him, an impish smile under his white turban, he moves his hands incessantly as if something suspenseful were about to begin, a match or a game, a coup or a revolution. Perhaps because our conversation is in Persian, he describes the disputes within the resistance with surprising candour. Everyone knows, he says, that the armed struggle is over. The opposition must negotiate in order to stand, perhaps not in the next elections, but in the elections after that. The extremists are not so extreme; they are only insulted that no one has invited them to the table. Make them ministers and you'll have them on your side.

'The people say their leaders have sold them out,' I observe, and I emphasize, '*all* their leaders.'

'The people are right,' Ansari answers.

'That means you have sold them out too.'

'Yes.'

'They say the leaders of the resistance have received money from both sides.'

'True. We leaders of Kashmir have failed, one and all.'

'You too?' I ask.

The cleric looks up at the ceiling, as if he would leave it to God to answer that.

If it is a slim majority in Palestine and Israel who know what peace would imply, in this conflict everyone involved knows it: the people, the politicians, the soldiers, the world community – yet for years nothing has happened; there are no more talks, no peace conferences and, since the new Indian-American cooperation, no more international pressure on Delhi and Islamabad. That was different in the 1990s, when the American president Bill Clinton called Kashmir the most dangerous conflict in the world because India and Pakistan both have the atomic bomb. Today India is too strong internationally to have to accept a compromise, and the Pakistani government is too weak domestically to be able to accept one. So peace is limited, for the time being, to a bus that runs once a week between the Indian and Pakistani parts of Kashmir.

Finally I meet a leader who still clings to armed struggle and the goal of an Islamic state. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Syed Geelani is by far the most charismatic politician Kashmir has to offer, an elegant, older man with a snow-white beard, his cheeks and his upper lip shaven except for a thin moustache. His rectangular cloth cap makes his face look still narrower. Weary eyes, soft voice, good English, clear articulation. Two days before, he was prevented by force from leading Friday prayers – not by the army, but by Kashmiris, the adherents of a rival resistance group which has backed away from the demand for a referendum. Perhaps because he still feels the humiliation, he embraces me, a reporter still asking for his opinion, a few seconds longer than is customary, and silently. When he thinks he sees me shiver, he brings me, although he could just as easily call a servant, a heavy wool blanket from the next room, and one for himself too. Then we sit, bundled up, face to face.

I fully understand Syed Geelani's position, the wish for self-determination for which he argues persuasively, with

unchanging composure and firmness. He describes in detail the atrocities of the Indian army, especially the rapes, a twelve-year-old before her mother's eyes, then the mother before the eyes of the twelve-year-old, and so on. The problem is that, unfortunately, he is not exaggerating; at most, he is neglecting to mention that the number of assaults seems to be declining. He dismisses as Indian propaganda the accounts which hold the rebels likewise responsible for abuses and murders. From what I know of Pakistan, I think his advocacy of the annexation of Kashmir by Pakistan is, with all due respect, not such a good idea, although I do not phrase it so directly. Geelani radiates such a dignity that one hesitates, as his junior, to contradict him openly. The Pakistanis themselves have dropped the demand for a referendum, I object at last. As if the Pakistanis had had anything to say in the matter, Geelani counters. Not the Pakistanis, but Pervez Musharraf dropped the demand for a referendum: Kashmir, he says, has been betrayed yet again.

A traitor? To the question whether she considers herself an Indian, Mehbooba Mufti answers without hesitation: 'Yes, of course I am Indian. I am Kashmiri and Indian.' Whenever a Western television team has found its way to Kashmir in recent years, it has been happy to portray Mehbooba Mufti as a figure of hope: a middle-aged woman, divorced, who, as chairman of the People's Democratic Party, calls on her people to put down their weapons and, at the same time, raises her voice against the crimes of the Indian army, a diplomatic, Muslim Joan of Arc, religious and feminist. She persuaded many Kashmiris to vote in the last elections and led her party from a standing start into the coalition government. When I visit her in her mansion, she is much more a politician than I had assumed from the reporting: her answers seem prepared in advance, not because they sound

implausible, but because I'm unable to ask her any questions she hasn't already answered many times. That she is considering leaving the coalition because the state government is not putting enough pressure on the army and on the national government in Delhi is at least worth a mention in the local press, as I will later discover. It is striking, says Mehbooba Mufti, alluding to the 'faked encounters', that a terrorist attack always occurs exactly when calls to withdraw the soldiers get louder.

She takes me along the next day on a tour through the villages of her constituency in her Ambassador – the Indian saloon car we know from Agatha Christie films – and with an escort of fourteen military vehicles. Although she said yesterday that the Kashmiri police were easily able to ensure domestic security, today she admits that the Indian soldiers guarding her are necessary. The route, and especially the spontaneous detours and pauses she commands, are a nightmare for her bodyguards, whose faces show their frustration and tension. Is it a show she's putting on for the foreign reporter? She wins elections by financing a well here and a cemetery fence there, listening to the complaints about an arrested son, listening to the mistreated father, writing down names, promising to look into it. It occurs to me that, if all the members of the Establishment did their campaigning on the rural tracks, the country would at least have more wells and fewer torturers. The people along the roads and tracks welcome the official car.

'What has the whole uprising got us?' Mehbooba Mufti asks, showing signs of agitation: 'That we would be happy today to have the autonomy back that we had before the uprising.'

Kashmir teaches not only how far democracies can go. Perhaps more frighteningly, it also teaches what they can get away with once they declare a state of emergency. One

soldier for every ten inhabitants and extreme harshness – that's enough to break the backbone of even the most rebellious population. When I get out halfway back to Srinagar to return with my own driver, Mehbooba Mufti points me the way to a nearby shrine, the tomb of a mystic.

'Shall I pray there for you?' I ask.

'No, pray for Kashmir.'

NIGHT

Because the city seems so normal by the light of day, it takes a few days before I understand why no one wants to meet with me in the evening. If you have a car, you can drive through the empty, unlighted streets to the house of an acquaintance or to one of the more elegant restaurants, which are open until nine or, at the latest, nine-thirty. Later than that, you could probably find a bar, if you are rich enough to afford the expensive drinks. But there are no taxis to be had after eight and not even a rickshaw after nine. Even my own driver, Faroq, who cherishes me like his own personal state visit, can't be persuaded to go out that late, not for double the fare. The only way I could move him would be to ask it as a favour, but then he wouldn't take money at all. Once, Faroq drops me off in the city at seven because I have arranged to visit someone. They'll bring me back to the houseboat, I reassure him. To deter my hosts from driving me home themselves, I tell them my driver is waiting outside. You always find a rickshaw or something, I say to myself. As I walk through the city for the next two hours, it feels as sinister as a minefield. There's not even a soldier to be seen, even at the checkpoints. At this hour only ghosts are abroad in the city, says the ferryman, who has waited nervously at the dock to take me across to the houseboat. Besides my jacket and sweater, I

warm myself with the sweet jasmine tea that the boat owner brings in a thermos bottle, as every night, before bedtime.

HOUSEBOAT 3

Another Indian family arrived yesterday evening, of about the same composition as the engineer's family from Calcutta, to judge by the noise that kept me awake late: a man; some women; tired, crying children, or perhaps only one child. The man, who has just come on deck, spoke to me before in Hindi and was perplexed that I was not one of the staff. I can't tell whether he doesn't speak English or prefers not to talk to me. The engineer's wife, on the other hand, gives me a greeting. In general, middle-class Indian women do not seem to be in the habit of answering the greetings of male neighbours on the first day. Perhaps out of pity, she nodded to me for the first time when I sat alone at dinner before the tomato chicken – being alone seems to be something only holy men can be expected to bear – she even smiled, and this morning so did her older daughter, who is taller than I am and plump, and looks seventeen, which doesn't make life easier for a thirteen-year-old. When they come back to the boat, she turns on the television set before going to her room – usually quiz shows. Yesterday evening, as I sat freezing in my idyll on the Dal canal, I followed with one eye a TV series about a youth striving after a beautiful girl – in vain so far, but the next instalment is on today.

THE SHRINE

An excursion to Sokkur in western Kashmir, where Ahad Baba, one of Kashmir's highly revered mad holy men, whom