

IRAN

by Monika Savier ■ photos by Monika Savier

In the first week of May 2008, a small delegation of Italian and German breeders of Arabian horses, as well as some ECAHO judges, was invited by the Iranian Arabian Association and started out to Tehran, Esfahan and finally Yazd, where the first official ECAHO show in the history of Iran took place.

The plane lowered its nose for the landing approach to Tehran. From my seat in row 32, I watched women start digging in their handbags, conjuring up various scarves and shawls and using them with practised movements to cover their heads and any T-Shirts deemed too flimsy. When the plane doors opened, we were all standing there well behaved in our disguises, expecting the worst: harassment from officials, trouble with obtaining a visa, or vanished luggage... What actually happened was just the opposite, with check-out and customs clearance quick and obviously unbureaucratic, and with all our luggage arriving on the belt well in advance of us, which is not something I am used to from the Rome airport. Helpful people around us were open, self-assured, and very polite. It was five o'clock in the morning, the air was



Monika Savier, self-portrait in the mirror-hall of a loam house in Yazd

balmy, dawn rose over the vast city and it slowly dawned on us that we had arrived in a modern country with excellent hospitality and with friendly people free of prejudices. Iran has been a member of WAHO (the World Arabian Horse Organisation) since 1976, but after that there was the revolution against the Shah, the Islamic Republic entered in a war against Iraq in 1979, there was continuous trouble with Mr Bush, the trade embargo... many things kept traditions and experiences of Iranian horse breeders from entering the world of horse sports, horse shows, and horse media. The country was zoned out, a "here there be dragons" on the map of horse events. It is well known that Western media has a problem when it comes to reporting independently on Iran, but who was aware that we were systematically deprived of contact with a people rich in a fascinating culture reaching back 3000 years, the cradle of sciences, of art and architecture along the ancient silk roads between Europe and Asia? At

Khosh amadid "Welcome" in the International World of Horse Lovers

least as far as the world of horses is concerned, an end to this oblivious state of mind is finally called for.

Who was there to know of the Asil horses owned by the Bedouins of Khuzestan, of the noble strains from the fertile regions of Iran who are the ones to take the laurels on the race-tracks of Persia? In Bedouin tradition up to today, the Asil horses are bred, traded, and used for sports and for hunting, forming the bridge between cultures and between the people themselves, all of whom are connected by that common passion – no matter whether they live in Tehran, Texas, London, or Jerusalem. After all, everywhere in the world most people have almost nothing in common with their political leaders.

It was in the beginning of the 1990ies when I had my first contact with Iranian Arabians, of the Wadne Khersan strain, famous for their will to perform, their power and stamina. I started to get interested in these Iranian horses and their cultural background. I hoped to approach the origin of Asil horses better than I was likely to find in the gene pool of modern show horses, which is why I brought home from The Sheeba Arabians, Bologna, the Iranian stallion Ibn Insiatur, for the breeding season. He had made an adventurous voyage to Italy from Iran after the 1979 Iranian revolution. This stallion had not only an unbeatable character, but he was patient enough

Loam mosque in Yazd



to put up with my inexperience during my first year of running a breeding station. His offspring were highly convincing too, he produced during his short stay 30 Anglo-Arabians and a handful of purebred Arabians, with many of them taking up successful endurance careers later on. Later on, I found the name of a certain Mary Gharagozlou coming up several times in his pedigree. I learned that she was an icon of Arabian breeding in Iran, with her name a read thread winding through the history of horses in Iran. (See Iran Special Part II).

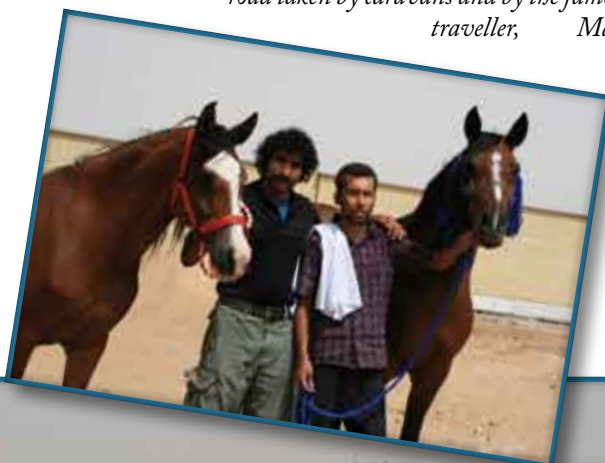
In 2007, I met Mrs. Sharzad Amir Aslani in Damascus where she was a delegate of Iran for the WAHO conference. For years she has been trying to get Iran recognized as a member of ECAHO, enabling the country to stage acknowledged shows and, in the case of Iran opening its borders, to take part in shows abroad with their ECAHO-qualified Arabians. The gulf states, just a stone's throw away across the Persian Gulf, have demonstrated how to do that. However, it did not work that way for Iran. Neither Western foreign states nor the Iranian government had, up to then, given Iranian breeders the chance to take part in international showing or breeding events... That's bitter for a country with a tradition of thousands of years of Arabian horse breeding. After all, the horse-breeding Bedouins did not know any political borders, roaming the area from the Arabian peninsula (today's Saudi Arabia) across Mesopotamia in Syria and Kurdistan in today's Northern Iraq to Arabistan, which is today Khuzestan, a vast province of Iran. With their horses, sheep, and camels, they went to where fodder grew, hunted gazelles, and used their noble mares to take part in ghazzus, plun-

dering raids. Even today, the province of Khuzestan has the greatest percentage of Arabian people in Iran. They call their horses Asils and their traditional Asil Arabian horses are the cradle of Arabian horse breeding in Iran: this is the gene pool of the horses taking part in shows and sports in Iran. Their studbook is WAHO-acknowledged and can, therefore, serve as a genetic foundation for horses to be presented on ECAHO shows. However, Iran had not yet arrived there.

After the Swiss/Italian breeder Willi Luder took over as chairman of ECAHO, the Iranian breeding association applied for admission once more. ECAHO wished to give a sign and promote peaceful cooperation between

Europe and Iran, both from civilian groups within the population, practicing active citizenship, as from non-government organisations. Iran became a member of ECAHO. Nothing was going to stop the first ECAHO show in Iran now.

This first show was scheduled to take place in Yazd, a city built entirely from clay, a small oasis in a desert zone on an ancient road taken by caravans and by the famous traveller, Mar-



Participants with their Asil show horses in Yazd



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co Polo. Yazd was truly a n important stop on the silk road.

It was not easy to find three ECAHO-acknowledged judges and some-body qualified for the Disciplinary Committee (DC), and the ones who finally took the jobs were the Maxwell couple from the UK, Manfred Hain with his wife Heike from Germany, and Christian Moschini, breeder and judge from Italy.

To make good things even better, WAHO president Dr. Hans Nagel with his wife Nawal declared their intent to complete the small delegation. Dr Nagel: "I used to know Iran quite well. It's an impressive and interesting country with amiable, friendly and well educated people everywhere. It's high time for us to take more notice of Iran and have them in the fold of the international horse scene, as they know a great deal about Arabian horses and we cannot but profit from that."

As early as in the beginning of the 1990ies, Dr Nagel had sent the stallion MOBARAK (Salaa El Dine x Myrna) to Mary Gharagozlou in Iran, as her belief was that Iranian Arabians were in need of having their heads refined. We visited Mobarak on the outskirts of Tehran. Aged 17 by now, he is



Mobarak

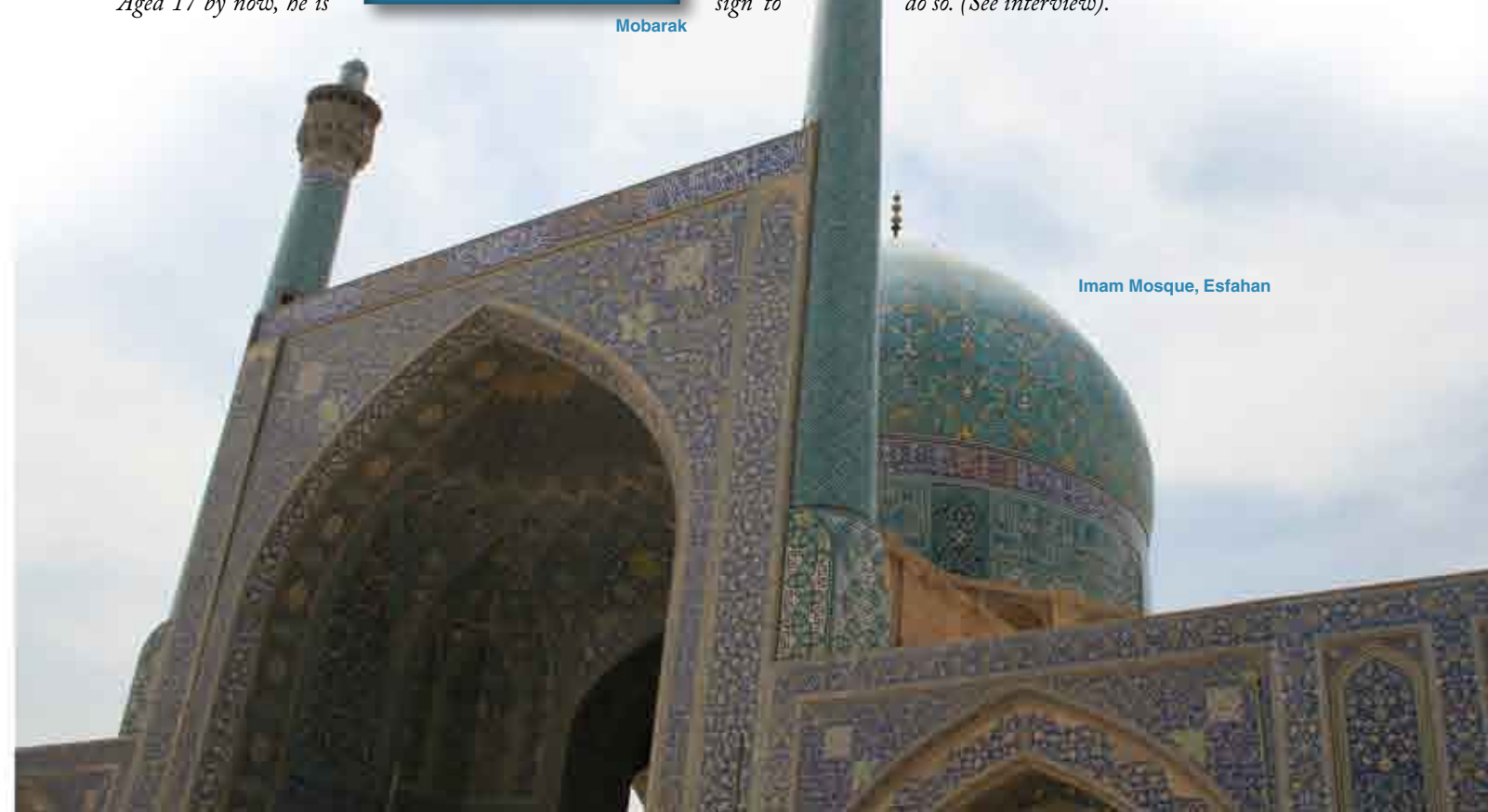
still living in the stables adjoining Mary's traditional country house and still serves Iranian breeders, just as Mary wished it to be before she died. His offspring have left impressive tracks in Iran. Three of the Champion horses and a reserve champion horses at the show in Yazd tailed back to Mobarak directly or indirectly.

The Yazd show took place in a vast indoor arena on the outskirts of the town, in the sand desert. The weather forecast was for a sand storm, which is why the organisers preferred the indoor arena right from the beginning. Everything was perfectly organised. All seats in the stands were filled, with the left side taken by the men and the right side by women and children. In between were the VIP tables. Iranian TV, the press, private sponsors – everybody was there and there was the impression that the organisers were already well versed in putting up ECAHO shows. It was not the same with the protagonists – of 120 horses taking part, some had been ridden to the show, some had arrived in trucks and vans in various stages of eccentricity. There were no box stalls, but young men and women outside of the arena who held the horses by their ropes until it was their turn. Whole clans would surround the horses, grooming them enthusiastically.

When they were allowed to enter the arena, it was the horses' turn to be enthusiastic. They loved the soft ground, with some trying to take a roll or wanting to play catch with the other horses. The handlers had their work cut out for them!

The only woman, the young Hilda Benjamin, among the handlers had obviously prepared her horses well. There were no floating motions to be observed with any of the horses, but with floundering in deep sand, that was to be expected. At any rate, these horses knew stand-up as soon as Hilda gave them a do so. (See interview).

Imam Mosque, Esfahan



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The team of judges from Italy, the UK, and Germany had their problems finding a uniform scale of judgement. The horses differed strongly, some displaying a racehorse type, others being the type of desert horses anybody would have liked to ride into the mountains. With the latest Egyptian blood brought in, however, there were some horses of a more refined type, their heads short, their polls refined, their jaws strong, their necks longer overall – how to judge that? Was the Asil Arabian horse to be the standard to be measured against, or was there a tipping point to be observed here, a reversal of trend initiated by the Mobarak offspring? What was to be the value of good legs and a strong back, under these circumstances? The spectators, that much was clear, wanted the trend reversal. It was obviously the more typey horses who got the loudest applause. It might have been a projection of peoples' own wishes, of their desire to see their country opening her borders and becoming more internationally oriented. After two days, the winners were determined. The champion mare, through her sire Mobarak an Ansata Halim Shah grand grand daughter and with a true Iranian Asil Arabian dam, bred by Mary Gharagozlou, would stand a good chance for a top placing with any of the big European shows. Her advantage



The team of international judges, Mr. Manfred hain (D), Mrs. Joana Maxwell (UK), Mr. Christian Moschini, (I)

as compared with most show horses in Europe: we can be sure she is never bored, for she is a broodmare as well as a riding mount, a racing horse, and a show horse – whatever is required by the situation. And after all, this is exactly what we always claim our horses to be: these noble Arabian horses are all-rounders. □



Zarrin (Ghazal x Sassan)
Owner: Samangane Haji Samei, Shiraz



Champion Mare Samangane
(Mobarak x Safa)
Owner: Hamid Keshvaraz



Championship

Champion Filly: Shahabanou 2006
Sire: Chehelsotoun Dam: Atlassi
Owner: Ali Seifi Kerman

Reserve Mare: Khorshid 2002
Sire: Yaber Dam: Alvand
Owner: Zia Vakil Sadaat Yazd

Reserve Filly: Sheyzar 2006
Sire: Mubarak Dam: chakavak
Owner: Ehsan Mojarab Chiraz

Champion Colt: Shuka 2006
Sire: Wassaf Dam: Samangane
Owner: Said Sharaf Zadeh Ispahan

Champion Mare: Samangane 1998
Sire: Mubarak Dam: Safa
Owner: Hamid Keshavarz Ispahan

Champion Stallion: Zarrin 2004
Sire: Ghazal Dam: Sassan
Owner: Samangane Haji Samei Chiraz



Interview with Dott. Nagel



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Talking with Hilda Benjamin

M. Savier: You present Arabian horses for shows. Isn't that atypical for a young woman in Iran?

H. Benjamin: Presenting them is not so much out of the ordinary, there are a lot of women in Iran who are involved with horses and are quite successful in different aspects.

M. Savier: How are the feelings in the show ring when it comes to your male colleagues, is there competition and tension when you are the one handling the Champion horse?

H. Benjamin: Winning is a good feeling, really good. There is a lot of competition and after all, quite a lot of those young males don't actually approve of a woman winning. But I don't think there is any resentment because the country has a tradition of being Nomadic and women are not only close to horses but they are very good riders.

It is not uncommon in Iran for a woman to be among the winners, as in show jumping, endurance riding or tribal races.

M. Savier: Can you imagine working with horses on a professional basis?

H. Benjamin: Of course, I'd really love that. When I was small, everybody wanted me to go into show jumping, but Mary was the only one who wanted me to take Arabians into endurance races, and in the course of time, I took the



side of Mary and the Arabian horses. I think she would be very proud to see me today, specially seeing me winning would have made her very happy.

M. Savier: How did you come to know Mary Gharagozlou?

H. Benjamin: Mary's mother was an American, and my great grandmother was English. The two of them were well acquainted and good friends. My mother was very close to Mary, they had a lot of common interests. My grandfather was in the cavalry which is how he came into contact with Mary. As for myself, I was eight years old when Mary thought me riding and everything else related to Arabian horses.

M. Savier: Up to now, there have not been too many shows in Iran – where did you learn how to handle and present a horse?

H. Benjamin: I learned the basics from Emma Maxwell when she visited us in Iran.

Emma has a wonderful connection with horses and I learned a lot from her. I also watched many foreign shows and tried to learn from other handlers.

M. Savier: You are having Arabian horses of your own. What do you think about the influence of Straight Egyptians in Iran, as their import is on the increase? Are they

going to crowd out the Asil Iranian horses?

H. Benjamin: No, no way. Everybody here loves Arabian shows, and in order to win, we need horses who are more typey. I am sure we will succeed in maintaining durability, strength, and performance. We need more refined heads, and we can get them with some good imports... Mobarak, the Salaa el Dine son is a good example. Mary got him from Dr. Nagel 15 years ago, and just look at what he has achieved here. Almost all of the horses who won today have him in their pedigrees, some of them more than once. He refined a lot of horses and passed on his good body.

M. Savier: Aren't you afraid the Iranian horses might, in due course and with the increasing import of purely „showy“ horses, lose their good bodies? That's about what happened in the US, in Europe, and in the Middle East. In that case, the typey head would be about the only thing that counts as Arabian noblesse, and judgement of the legs would be severely neglected?

H. Benjamin: Yes, the risk is there, but the horses we like in Iran are those with a strong body and good legs. That's what Iranian Arabians have already, good bodies and legs. I don't believe any Iranian would import horses with faulty legs. We know how good horses look like, horses who have performance in them, and we will aim at better heads without forgetting about the legs.

M. Savier: What are you going to do in the future? Will you engage more in show ring training?

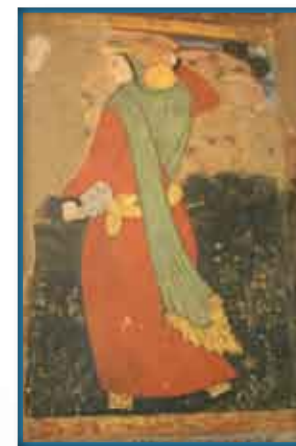
H. Benjamin: I love Endurance Riding, but I'm going to continue training for the show ring as well. To be frank, shows hold an increasing attraction for me. Up to now, I still prefer sitting in the saddle. However, endurance riding is quite limited here, as we cannot take part in international shows with our horses – riding as a sport is still a national affair.

M. Savier: Cannot the Arabian Association try and exert some influence politically, working towards an opening?

H. Benjamin: They have been trying and, a few years ago we were able to take part in the Asian Games in Qatar. Time is going to bring slow changes. We are waiting and must'n lose patience.



Medieval Frescoes in the Chehel-Sotun-Palace, Esfahan



Hilda Benjamin with her famous teacher Mary Gharagozlou, on horseback



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Interviewing Mrs. Sharzad Amir Aslani (Shery)

Iranian breeder of Asil horses, member of WAHO, ECAHO judge and one of the organisers of the first ECAHO show in Iran



M. Savier: How old is the tradition of breeding Arabian horses in the Iran?

Does it stem from the nomadic tribes? Or is it more a strategy of modern lifestyle in the Islamic world?

S. Amir Aslani: There is a very old tradition of horse breeding in Iran which goes back far beyond Islam. Many objects related to horses have been excavated across Persia dating back to the Neolithic.

Nobody can tell for sure at what time the Arabian horse with his particular characteristics appeared on the stage.

It is only with the advent of Islam that written proof is found in the Holy Koran, with many Hadiths insisting on the importance of breeding and caring for horses.

The region of Khuzestan has a tradition of more than 700 years of Arabian horse breeding. With many tribes living in that area, their names are related to some of the strains found in contemporary Arab horses.

M. Savier: Which role does Islam play in motivating people to breed Asil Horses?

S. Amir Aslani: I don't really think that the tradition of horse breeding is only linked to Islam. It has always been a prevailing activity in Persia in the remote past.

Iran is a very diversified country with different regions that have different climates, different landscapes, different cultures and different dialects with different inhabitants.

The same is true for the various breed of horses. In the Northeast of Iran, the Gorgan horse which is the Turcoman horse looks much more like the Akhal Teke but is smaller in size. Further west, the Kurdish horse is a very strong horse which has been bred to survive in harsh terrains. Further south, near the Zagros Mountains, on the lush pastures of the plains, the Aryan horse or the Aseel is believed to have lived in this region since the very beginning of civilisation. Paintings on the walls of ancient caves in Lorestan depict men riding horses. Although exact dates have not been determined, preliminary studies suggest that horses might have been ridden first in the Zagros region. There is evidence that the inhabitants exported their horses to Mesopotamia, taking them to market in Babylon.

There is a famous saying by Darius the Great "this country of Persia was towed upon me by Ahura Mazda. A beautiful land with good horses and good people." This was indeed a very long time ago, before Islam, as Ahura Mazda is the book of the Zoroastrian religion. In the book "Tribal Iran" there is a note that the Persian horse has been an export item for millennia.

"Marco Polo wrote: "the best and most beautiful horses of Asia are found in Persia. Foreign merchants bring the horses to India for quite a price."

M. Savier: Now, Iran is a member of the ECAHO. Does this change something for the breeding goals in Iran?

S. Amir Aslani: It was very important for Iran to become a member of ECAHO because the number of shows was increasing and the need to follow established rules was becoming imperative. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who was so kind in helping us become a member of ECAHO. It was not an easy task and I know that without their help it would not have been possible.

I think some breeding decisions have changed already because now, there is the hope to be able to compete in foreign shows and for that purpose, breeders are striving to breed to the best in order to become more competitive.

M. Savier: Do you see the risk that the "nice" horses are sent to shows and the strong horses to sports? That's what happened in Europe and the US and resulted in the breeders' splitting up into two factions.

S. Amir Aslani: There is a saying in Iran "a horse does not race with his head", which means that a horse doesn't need to be pretty to become a race horse.

I think it is a very good idea to separate them because the conformation of a good race horse differs that from a show horse. I think we all agree that many of our show horses have weak legs which cannot sustain the hard work of an endurance horse or a race horse. On the other hand, a good race horse might have other attributes which might be considered faulty in a show horse.

But I think every breeder longs to breed the "perfect" horse,



Imam Mosque, from left: Valter Betti, Shery Aslani, Nawal Nagel, Dr. Hans Nagel, Christian Moschini

pretty and strong, the one who has haunted our childhood. All of us have wished to own "Black Beauty" at one time.

I think the Russians did a great job with their Arabian horses in the eighties: they used good stallions with strong bloodlines and a very tough selection process.

Actually, they are a good example of having reunited the 3 big areas of use of the Arabian horse in one. As I recall, Russian horses had a lot of impact as for the first time they were winning in shows and on racetracks at the same time.

I think with intelligent selection Iran might also be able to achieve such a goal, let's hope for the best.

M. Savier: Will Iran be able to develop common selection criteria for all three big areas of use of Arabian horses: Show, Endurance, Race-track?

S. Amir Aslani: Iran is hopefully coming out of its own cocoon. Many breeders are very sensitive about the genetic pool within Iran and they were always reluctant to use foreign horses for breeding or, for that matter, to allow them into the country.

I think Iran should do what other countries with OAs (original Arabs) are doing, such as Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain – all of them keep open both directions.

One is to maintain and safeguard our original bloodstock and the other is to go with the flow.

In order to compete internationally, there are no secret ingredients; one should use good stallions with different bloodlines.

M. Savier: How do you see the future of the Iranian Arabian lines in the context of show-breeding?

S. Amir Aslani: Our Pure Iranian bloodlines are a rich untouched genetic pool which can be used when mixed with other bloodlines, to confer type and conformation.

We have already obtained good results among our bloodstock bred with foreign stallions.

Our Iranian lines have many qualities but I don't think they would stand a chance in the show ring and I think it is for the best. They have the strong genetic pool of their origins and should be used as a crossbreeding resource.



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Interview with the young Iranian Breeder Mohamed Bahrain

In order to get a live experience of the first ECAHO show, Mohamed Bahrain had covered more than 2000km from Tabriz in the Northeast of Iran to Yazd. Brimming with enthusiasm, he used the tiny screen of his video camera to show me footage of his mountain home and his pure Iranian horses. As his English was excellent, we were able to conduct a short interview.

M. Savier: What role do Arabian horses play in your life?

M. Bahrain: I had nothing to do with horses until 2 years ago. Up to then, I used to do exciting sports on a semi-professional level (snowboarding and hockey). By chance I met one of my old friends who kept horses. He took me to his farm and that was the first time I experienced riding a horse. And I liked it very much. It was both an exercise for me and also relaxed my mind a lot. As I was not looking for an exciting fast ride and my sole aims were relaxation and some exercise, I did not go for the sports breeds such as thoroughbreds etc. Arabs being the calmest of all horse breeds, I bought my first mare called Helium. I rode her for two months but she was pregnant and I had to stop riding her as she was getting heavy. So I bought another mare called Haniyeh for continuing my riding. And then I started loving my horses more than I loved riding. Watching my horses was even more relaxing and joyful for me and so I started keeping horses not only for riding, but also as my good friends whom I love.

M. Savier: Is this something special in your region or is there (still) a tradition of breeding of Arabian horses?

M. Bahrain: I live in Tabriz located in the East Azerbaijan province of Iran. This is in the North-west of Iran. Keeping and riding horses in my city is not very common. The population of Tabriz is 3 million and we might have 400 horses in all in this city mainly kept for riding. The Region of Origin of the Arabian horse in Iran is Khuzestan.

M. Savier: You've bought straight Egyptian mares in Europe, what is your breeding goal with them? Are you trying to improve the local Iranian lines with the fresh blood or are you breeding them alongside the Iranian bloodlines to keep the genetic pool straight Egyptian?

M. Bahrain: I had 10 Arabian horses, most of them having Mubarak (Salaa El Dine X Myrna) in their bloodlines.

They are either daughters or granddaughters of Mubarak except for two of my horses which are of pure Iranian bloodlines. Comparing these two groups, I personally like the Mubarak offspring better than pure Persian Arabs. And Mubarak being a Straight Egyptian, I said why not import Straight Egyptian mares and also breed Straight Egyptians. And so I imported two Straight Egyptian mares and I would never think of mixing their genetic pool with Persian Arab genes.

M. Savier: What do you think about horse shows? Do they fit with the tradition of the strong ascetic Arabians of the nomads or does this archaic (religious?) approach to breeding need a modern re-set now?

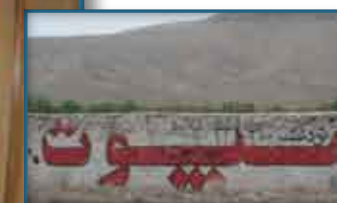
M. Bahrain: Horse shows are a kind of contribution towards both national and international social relations. Time goes on and changes everything, so the tradition of the ascetic Arabians of the nomads will have to change as well. I fully agree with breeding horses for shows.

M. Savier: What is your personal breeding strategy for the future? Are you aiming for the national market or do you perceive an opening of Iran for the future, facilitating the import and export of Arabian horses?

M. Bahrain: I am not breeding Arabs from the business point of view. At the moment this is only a hobby for me. But who knows the future? At the moment I don't see a chance for Iranian breeders to aim at international markets because we neither have the horses to compete nor the export facilities. But time will tell.



Pol-e Jubi Bridge over the Zayande-Rud River, youth night-life place in Esfahan



Mohamed Bahrain



The old Abasi caravanserai, today one of the most famous hotels in Iran

