IN IRAN—The Middle Eastern wealthy live little better than the poor; their idle hands let society stagnate. Above, a nomad family.

The Middle East Paradox—
The ‘Beggar Rich’

By F. M. Espaniardi

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IN IRAN, in recent years, several countries of the Middle East have embarked upon extensive land-reform and other needed programs, which are launched vigorously and enthusiastically, but which soon run into obstacles and resistance and then slowly peter out. The reason is that in their eagerness to obtain quick results and win political acclaim, leaders often forget that the economic problems of the region are inextricably tied to deeply rooted traditions and ancient social systems. Basic economic reforms, if they are to succeed, must go hand-in-hand with far-reaching social reorganization. For one of the underlying problems is that, while some are rich and many are poor, the rich are as backward as the poor.

F. M. ESPANIARDI is an Iranian who writes on Middle Eastern social problems for both English and Persian publications. He has written two novels set in the Middle East: “The Day of Sacrifice” and “The Identity Card.”

I saw an illustration of this not long ago in a village of northern Iran. An old beggar woman in tattered clothes hobbled across the dusty road and came up to the car window. “Agha,” she moaned, tilting her head to one side, and extending a supplicating hand to my face. “Agha, for the love of Imam Hassan, please give me something. I am poor. I am unfortunate.”

Automatically, my hand plowed my pockets in search of change, but the lady sitting next to me in the car whispered, “Why do you want to give her money? Leave her alone.”

“She is poor,” I said, still digging in my pockets. “Look at her.”

WITHOUT turning to look at her, the lady muttered, “She is not poor. She is rich. She hides her money under her mattress.”

I stared at her in surprise, then turned and stared at the old woman. For although I had heard of beggars in the Middle East, as well as abroad, who hoarded their money and lived in perpetual penury, it seemed to me improbable that this woman with the sad, dirty face and tattered clothes, now standing before me begging and moaning and pleading for money, could really be wealthy. “How can she not be needy?” I muttered. “Are you sure you are not mistaken?”

“Of course, I am sure. Ask anyone in this town.”

“Agha, may God protect you, may you never go hungry; please give me something. For the love of God give me money. I am poor. I am hungry.”

“Look, the lady here is from this town and she says that you are not poor.”

The old beggar woman stared resentfully at my friend, then with diminished resentment regarded me and groaned, “I don’t have anything. I am only a poor woman. Please give me a little money . . .”

“She says you hide your money under the mattress.”

With that the beggar woman walked away, muttering in disgust. Soon after, I inquired in town about the old woman, and was told that she was indeed not poor, but that she had been a beggar in that town so long that no one bothered to question, much less to castigate her, for living off others. In fact, not only unwary strangers, but some townspeople, too, gave her alms, feeling a need for her “poor old woman’s” blessings.

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THEN went to see the old woman at her home. She lived with a young, undernourished niece in a one-room mud hut, cluttered with tattered, discolored quilts, tin cans and dirty bundles. She regarded me distrustfully and would have surely refused to talk to me, or allow me to stay, had I not quickly made extravagant promises to give her money and cigarettes. I asked her why she had spent all her life importing others, and she muttered that she was a poor, old woman, and that there was nothing else she could do.

“But people here say that you are not poor.”

“I am a poor woman. What do you want from me?”

I gave her cigarettes and said, “They say you hide your money in your quilts and don’t . . .”

“Do you think I’ve lost my brains? Hide it in quilts so people can come and steal it from me? People are thieves, they have no shame, they would even steal from a helpless old woman and think nothing of it.”

“But if you have money why do you need to beg?”

“What do you want me to do? If I spent the money I inherited or that people have given, what will become of me? Who will take care of me?”

The story of the old woman represents a sad, strange phenomenon, in her case extreme, but not singular. It is significant because it reflects a whole cultural pattern. In many parts of the Middle East, as probably in other socially backward areas, the rich live very like beggars—and the result is to be seen in stunted economies, deprived of the progress their wealth could insure.

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HE poor live in dilapidated mud huts; the rich landlords in the villages also live in dilapidated mud huts. The only significant difference is that under the torn and tattered mattresses of the rich rot vast sums are hidden, whereas the poor have no mattresses, stuff it in colorful quilts or tin cans, salt it away in bank vaults. Some of the more enterprising landlords even mortgage their deeds in their quilts and then have nothing more to do with the acquired property. Money is not something to be enjoyed, it is not for buying comfort and pleasure, it is not for any one’s welfare, it is something to be hidden.

The richest man in Rashan, who is also one of the richest men in Iran, lives in a three-room mud hut, uses old kerosene lamps for light, buys water from a water seller at his door, and in the cold of the night has to go outside to have his head plucked and his face washed with weeds and thistles, to get to the outhouse. His rugs are neatly rolled up (Continued on Page 83)
in the storeroom; when on rare occasions a guest arrives, a couple of the rugs are spread out on the floor of the small reception room, and when the guest leaves the rugs are quickly folded and tucked away again.

In Arab, south of Tehran, the rich rarely venture far from home and their mattress boards. They spend very little, eat rice morning, noon and night, have absolutely no recreation, and are reluctant to go to the city, because that entails expense. The numerous servants who toil and sweat for them are serfs who receive no pay.

One obvious reason for this debilitating parsimony is the harrowing insecurity of rich and poor alike. Contrary to a common belief, it is engendered mainly by the political or economic outlook. Rather, it is a pathological insecurity, a fear of a environment ridden with persecution and anxiety. From his earliest years, the individual is made to feel grave doubts about himself and his worth, and unshakable resentment toward a world he has been con-ditioned never to trust. Among the poor, this insecurity and low self-esteem are aggravated by the more obvious insecuri-ties of perpetual hunger and poverty.

The Middle Easterner, having never had the advantage of growing up in a socially stable and reassuring environment and therefore benefited of a peaceable environment, himself and people and life, is understandably not able to give of himself, to help and to be helpful, the twin needs and appetites for ever more and more wealth (usually in the form of land) to quench his deep anxieties and emotional thirst, and grudgingly

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they hammer into the pupils' heads as a rule, out and out.

Most landlords complain about the decent pupils their children attend, and the defenders of the schools say they deserve to be preserved. But if you ask one of these landlords why, with all his wealth and land and in his spare time he builds a new school for his village and help bring more capable teachers, you will get a shrug his shoulders and in- variably reply that it is not his responsibility to help build schools; he doesn't have to or make any contributions for improvements; it is the Gov-

ernment's responsibility to at- tend to all that.

IN Ghazni, Iran, a disgrun-
tied teacher took me through his school and pointed to a dark, foul cells in which chil-
dren, closely huddled together, studied in a show and smutty, lamentably elst, the old, broken benches and desks, the school-
master's cramped office (in which he keeps the teachers' salaries and the uncooked buckets from which children drink water. As we stopped in each class-
room he pointed to the pupils to me and whispered that they were the children of wealthy landlords of that area. "Children can come from families who have land as vast as Switzerland," he told me, as we walked in from room to room, and an oppressor by the foul smell of the latrines. "These are not the children of Europe or America or to Teheran, where they can study at modern schools and receive proper education. But they send them here, to these dirty, frightful schools where, I myself admit, they learn absolutely nothing, perhaps a few superstitions.

"You'd think the rich people of this area would send their children to modern schools and bring educat-
ted teachers from Teheran, for their own children, if not for the children of farmers. But they don't do a damned thing, not a damned thing. We have been begging them for months to give us a plot of land, where at least the children could play and have sports, but they don't even answer.

A RICH Syrian family, liv-
ing on the outskirts of Damascus, had just bought a house on the street not far from the house. Through the months, the refuse has gathered into an obnoxious little mountain. The family of five or six can barely gain sight, the odor and the danger to everybody's health, but when recently a guest arrived, the housekeeper hired a private garbage collector, as others have had to do, the master of the house stared at him in surprise and, with many excuses, said, "But it's not my responsibility to clear away the dirt; after all, why do we have a Government?"

People who have been brought up to feel that every- body can easily be resourceful and independent and do things for themselves, much less for others. The rich landlords in this area, according to their wealth and expect others -- relatives, elders, village fa-
thers, the Government -- to spend money for them. They have the comfort of life meaning what they are poor and needy, and they enjoy nothing more than begging for help and for favor. They would not need the help, but the world owes them everything.

Also contributing to the parsimony of the Middle East is the value placed on the simplest, austere, confined and pleasure-
less existence that entails very little spending. Like people of the Middle East, steeped in trad-
tion, he is contented for the comfort the discomfort. He groans in the rubbles of his plight, swears by all the disciplines of antiquity to remain immobile and move for better life. He does not even when he has the means. He does not even then, if he refuses to wriggle out of his cocoon.

SOME time ago, the oil con-
orporation operating in Iran de-
cided to use a part of the is-
land of Kharg in the Persian Gulf as a test area to develop petroleum centers and build a harbor there to accommodate large foreign tankers. The consor-
tium then offered to present the island generously for the arid land and worthless mud huts it had occupied.

So it was, not in the most com-
fortable for their living and their families. Instead, they remained on the scorched land for years and built a couple of hundred meters from their previous homes, and the present inhabitants were cut off from the mud huts -- indescri-

bly, unhealthily from the mud huts they had lived in when they were impoverished.

NOT far away, in prosper-
ous Kuwait, oil-rich sheikhs and foreign merchants own the marble pal-
ces, import elegant furniture from Europe and America, or-
er expensive clothes and alli-
ments and live in Paris and New York, yet con-
tinue to walk about barefoot, shun the furniture to sit and eat their meals on the stones. The heat is no less than the use of marble, bath-
rooms, trudge across the field from the bed to the old, smelly outhouse.

In the Iranian town the woman who prefers beg-
ning...
glove for alma to spending her own money lives a wealthy landlord who has always walked or used public means of transportation wherever he has wanted to go. In the cold rainy season he and his family struggle on foot through the muddy village, roads, and in the heat of the summer wait for the bus to visit a neighbor town. This is one of their own nearby villages.

Some years ago, under re- its family and friends, the landlord went to the city and bought a car, a sleek, brand new Cadillac. The car arrived in the small town with much of them, people gathered around it, admiring it and congratulating its owner.

The car was seen in town. People, a couple of days, then just as suddenly as it arrived, disappeared. It was taken to a shed behind the house, care- fully covered in quilts and blankets, and it has been sitting there for years. The wealthy landlord and his family continue to walk through mud and slush and dust, and to walk for the bus in rain and heat.

Traditions die hard in these areas. It has often been said that the landlord in the Middle East is very unfair to the peasant, cruelly maintaining the feudal system and refusing to alleviatethe peasants' misery. This is true. Landlords in the Middle East have been abused and ex- ploited the defenseless peasants with impunity. They have made them dependent and unfrocked, threatened them with shares of the crops, and kept them ignorant and impoverished.

But what is all too often forgotten is that the wealthy landlord in the Middle East has been unfair not only to the peasant, but also to himself and to his own children. If he has done nothing for the welfare of his community, neither has he done anything for his own welfare. He has built no schools, hospitals, or other adminis- trational facilities for the peasant, but he has provided no such services for his own children and family either. And the landlord who flogs his peasants more often than not flogs his own wife and chil- dren as well.

Feudal landlords in the Middle East have been trapped in a peculiar sterility from which they have been unable to free themselves, much less to free the unfortunate peasants who are trapped with them.

In recent years, a few landlords have moved to the cities, some have even gone abroad to visit, to invest money, perhaps even to settle. Young landlords who have lived and studied abroad refuse to go back to the villages, prefer instead to live in comfortable villas in the cities and benef- fit from the blessings of progress.

Others who have spent years abroad go back to the inherited land, obey tradition, treat the peasant fairly and democratically, and rather than hoard their money, invest in constructive projects, make donations for public welfare, build schools and hospitals, start factories and industries.

In areas where land reform is being vigorously pushed, this ambivalent trend has been given additional impetus. But the majority of wealthy landlords in the Middle East still hold on to their money and do nothing for their own welfare or the welfare of the peasants and villagers who grovel on their properties. So long as this prodigious wealth lies dormant, the countries of the Middle East will remain poor, and social progress will, at best, be slow. A more liberal educational system and, above all, basic changes in our fami- lial institutions, vigorously launched and pushed by the central governments, will, in the long run, induce in coming generations the sense of security, confidence, respon- sibility and initiative essential to a dynamic economy and to progress. The wealth is here now, among the people; the challenge is the strength to get up and benefit from this wealth.

DESSERT DISPLAY—Oil means money for some—and rich car- pets are laid on the sand for the opening of a refinery in Kuwait.