

Opinion Outlook**Quiet rituals of survival in Tehran**

War feels like something that should have been left behind in a more brutal century

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Iranian Red Crescent rescuers at work on March 18 © Iranian Red Crescent/AFP/Getty Images

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The sweetest things arrive at the most brutal moments. In Tehran, under bombardment, the craving comes almost instantly — after the blast, after the tremor, when someone reaches for something sugary. Jam appears. A piece of pastry is broken in half and shared.

It sounds surreal to speak of desserts in a city under sustained air strikes. But the body insists. There are quiet rituals of survival, ways of telling yourself you have endured another explosion, and you are still here.

Since February 28, when the US-Israeli war on Iran began, these small rituals have been holding a fragile line against panic.

There is nothing abstract about fear. In the heaviest strikes, every cell in your body shakes. The sound does not feel external; it travels through you, as if your bones themselves are echoing. In those moments, the mind has questions: is this the one? And, worse still, what if I survive, but someone I love does not? What if we all survive, only to step outside and find that the home that held our lives together is gone?

This cycle repeats itself several times a day and almost every night. Sleep becomes fragile. You lie down knowing you may be pulled awake by the roar of fighter jets or a violent blast. Even in silence, your mind rehearses what it fears most.

And yet, in the midst of this, life insists on continuing. What shall we have for lunch tomorrow? And the day after? The questions are not asked because tomorrow feels certain, but because it does not. Planning a meal becomes an act of defiance, a refusal to surrender entirely to fear. “How about dinner?” someone asks, as if the world has not just shaken.

A friend who sells organic food says she sold more raspberry jam in the first two weeks of war than in the entire previous year. Bakeries remain open, their ovens working through the bombardment, filling streets and homes with the smell of fresh flatbread. These are signals that the city is still alive.

The first need after every explosion is confirmation: we are all alive — so far. Phones light up with text messages. Calls from friends and relatives overlap. Voices tremble with relief. “We’re OK.”

Supermarket shelves remain stocked and people reassure each other: there is food, there is bread, there is enough. But immediately another thought follows: for whom? You eat and wonder who cannot. You sit at a table and think of families struggling to put even a simple meal in front of their children. In a stagnant economy, those who live on daily wages are pushed further to the edge.

There are moments that reveal a kind of dignity that feels almost unbearable to witness. The roads are dangerous, the bombs unpredictable, but people are still insisting on coming to work. It is both humbling and devastating to see how hard people fight for the most basic needs, how much harder life becomes for those already carrying its heaviest burdens.

What makes this war harder to comprehend is not only its violence but its immediacy. This is a modern city, in the present day. War feels like something that should have been left behind, a brutal inheritance of another century.

There are no sirens to prepare you. The first notice is the explosion itself and then the most humiliating feeling one can experience.

The psychological toll extends into the glow of television screens, into competing narratives. Channels are flipped rapidly: state broadcasts declaring resilience and victory, opposition voices predicting the imminent collapse of the regime. Underneath it all, people absorb not only the shockwaves of bombs but the distortions of information, unsure where the truth resides.

Beyond the borders, the world is watching. So is the Iranian diaspora. Some [even celebrate](#). There are images of expatriates dancing, convinced that this war will bring transformation, that destruction will clear the way for something better. It is a distant optimism that feels incomprehensible from within the blast radius. Support for war becomes something else entirely when the missiles land close enough to rattle your windows.

Responsibility dissolves in the noise. Every side deflects blame. Meanwhile, ordinary people stand in the middle, absorbing the consequences. For now, life is measured in small intervals: between explosions, between cups of tea, between messages confirming that another loved one has made it through another night.

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