

there is probably hardly any chance of negotiations, and any hope of solving problems would be in vain.

Perthes reviews the history of the Islamic Republic and his conclusion is that in every phase, even now under President Ahmadinejad, national rather than ideological interests ultimately determined political decisions. This means that, despite its clear-cut Islamic and also Islamist orientation, Iran does not act emotionally and fundamentalistically, but makes its decisions after weighing up the realities. If the US and Israel were to accept this realisation, the assertion (serving as legitimisation of a preventive strike) that Iran wants to develop nuclear weapons so as to wipe out Israel would become invalid. After all, people in Tehran also know that an attack on Israel would be suicidal. Remarkable too is the author's view that Iran is not an authoritarian state like those in the Middle East. He main-

tains that it is 'in many respects a hybrid system'. 'It combines republican and theocratic, democratic and authoritarian or despotic (...) and modern and traditional elements.' This ambiguity – writes Perthes – accords with a pluralistic constellation of power, which gives the state stability and offers it the possibility of the rational resolution of crises.

#### ACTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY

What Perthes does not mention is that this characterisation only applies to the Islamic camp where a diversity of trends and focuses of power really does exist, competing against one another. However, the situation is different with regard to the regime's treatment of its own society, which is kept under control with massive deployment of power. In addition this analysis devotes hardly any attention to the widespread Iranian civil society, which despite repression and tight restrictions sets limits on what the regime is able to do.

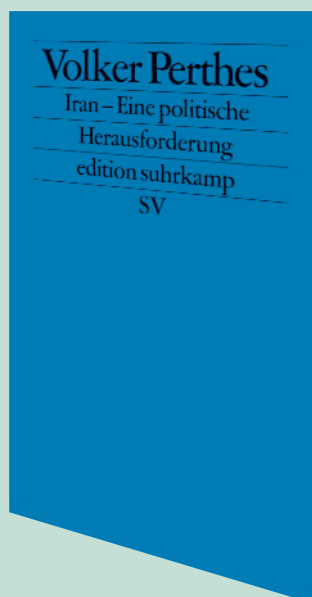
Perhaps Perthes thought that his characterisation of the regime was sufficient to make Western politicians aware that 'the Islamic Republic acts rationally or "logically", weighing up opportunities and risks, and seeking to increase benefits for itself'. The events of recent years have allowed Iran to develop its position in the region. It has great influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, among Palestinians, and in the Gulf states. Yet it feels threatened because it is surrounded by the American armed forces, and because Washington has made no secret of its wish to bring about a change of regime in Iran. If Iran really should now intend to produce nuclear bombs, this would largely result from a need for security rather than from the preventable objective of destroying its neighbours or Israel. According to Perthes, such an analysis should lead – with regard to the nuclear dis-

pute – 'to striving for an agreement envisaging strict limitations on an independent Iranian fuel-recycling programme, far-reaching guarantees of security, and integration of Iranian activities in a multi-lateral structure, rather than continuing insistence on complete renunciation of uranium enrichment'.

Any reader who follows the author's commendable analysis will probably agree with his proposals. There remains the question of why the US has to date always deliberately blocked such proposals, and why it is ready to negotiate with any other state except Iran. Unfortunately Perthes does not investigate that issue. But might it not be possible that, as in the case of Iraq, what is at issue here is not the resolution of the conflict but indeed a change of regime? That supposition becomes all the more probable when one considers that the United States' objective of controlling the entire region is really not possible as long as the current Iranian regime exists.

*Translated by Tim Nevill*

*Volker Perthes:*  
**Iran – eine politische  
Herausforderung**  
**[Iran: A Political Challenge],**  
*Suhrkamp Verlag,  
Frankfurt 2008.*



**Marc Peschke**  
**MYTHS AND REALITIES**  
**'IRANIAN**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY NOW'**

**In the realm of the  
independent art market at  
least, Iran and its capital  
Tehran seem to have little to  
offer. But this turns out  
to be a prejudice**

There are only a few galleries of contemporary art, few collectors, no interactive art scene, and no infrastructure. There is hardly any financial support for such ventures – only censorship. The regime ex-

presses a preference for affirmative, propagandistic art or traditional Iranian crafts, and is scarcely interested in a young art scene. Time and again there is repression, with exhibitions closed down by the security police.

So it is surprising that high-quality art is still produced in Iran. Even though Freiburg's Museum für Neue Kunst last year presented an attractive exhibition entitled 'iran.com – Iranian Art today', little reaches the West – as is apparent when leafing through a new book, *Iranian Photography Now*. Hardly any of the names are familiar. Discoveries can be made.

Many of the photographers introduced in the book, both women and men – such as Shadi Ghadirian and Sadegh Tirafkan – work with similar themes. These often involve the state of flux affecting culture and society, with tradition and modernity both complementing and confronting one another. However, tradition supplies an important element in Iranian contemporary photography with craft products, the achievements of classical calligraphy, and the art of carpet-weaving playing a part, accompanied by rich links with Iranian history.

### CRITICISM OF ROLE-MODELS

One of the most eye-catching photo-series in this book is by Shadi Ghadirian, depicting women wearing a chador, their faces covered by such everyday objects as irons, pots and pans, or brooms – a clear-cut and provocative criticism of social pressures, expectations, and classic role-models.

The best-known of the artists presented here is Shirin Neshat, whose work has often been shown in European museums and galleries. When asked once about her artistic motivation, Neshat answered that it was the existence of limitations, such as censorship in her homeland, that made it possible to penetrate to the heart of things. As a teenager Neshat (b. 1957) left Iran, which she only saw again in 1990 after studying art in the United States.

Since then she has been pursuing the 'heart of things'. She became known for her series 'Women of Allah', in which she shows herself and other women in chadors. However, wherever the veil reveals the women's flesh Neshat inscribes upon it, in Persian script, mysterious texts devoted to the questions that concern her. 'I comprehend my work as visual discourse on the theme of feminism and contemporary Islam, as a discourse that subjects specific myths and realities to examination, and concludes that these are much more complex than many of us would have thought. ... I prefer to pose questions than to answer questions.'

*Iranian Photography Now* (according to the publisher 'the first survey of contemporary photography in Iran') presents thirty-six photographers in both images and texts. This is a very exciting journey into hitherto unknown photographic territory.

*Translated by Tim Nevill*

*Rose Issa (ed.):*  
**Iranian Photography Now.**  
*Preface by Martin Barnes*  
*and Homi Bhabha,*  
*introduction by Rose Issa.*  
*Hardcover, 236 pp, 189 ill.*  
*Ostfildern, Verlag Hatje Cantz 2008.*





Stefan Weidner

## A BOOK IN FAVOUR OF THE PROPHET

‘The Jewel of Medina’

by Sherry Jones is the subject  
of controversy in both  
the UK and the US,  
but the novel about the  
Prophet Mohammed’s  
youngest wife contains no  
material that could be used  
to attack Islam.

When Sherry Jones’ controversial novel about Aisha, the best-known wife of the Prophet Mohammed, hit the German bookstores, there was some curiosity as to what the reaction would be. Would there be threats by radical Muslims, like in the UK, where there was a fire-bomb attack on the house of the British publisher? But so far nothing happened. In the US, though, Random House division Ballantine cancelled the contract with the author out of fear of the reaction of radical Muslims, purportedly after consulting with experts. This provoked a heated controversy, and understandably so: was Random House carrying out the censorship desires of fanatical Islamists?

### THE NECKLACE AFFAIR

Once you read the book, and if you know the sources to which Sherry Jones refers, the case seems completely bizarre. They are the standard works on the life of the Prophet, written by Orientalists and Muslims, among them the voluminous compilation of Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), one of the classical medieval sources for the legends of Aisha, which have partly been translated into English. The novel *The Jewel of Medina* begins with the most prominent of these legends, the so-called necklace affair, in which Aisha was accused of

adultery after leaving the caravan on a campaign and being returned only on the following day by a man from the rear guard. The episode seems to have stirred up so much excitement that, according to tradition, Allah sent down the Koranic verses 11 to 26 from the sura ‘The Light’, which reprimand the slanderers of respectable women. Sherry Jones re-imagines the episode about Aisha’s saviour as a reunion with a childhood friend, but she too, lets Aisha emerge from it untouched. To speak of ‘soft-core pornography’, as some sensationalist reports on the book have, is wildly inaccurate, the more so as the other chapters deal mostly with the jealousy and power struggles among Mohammed’s wives.

If the author is to be reproached for anything, it is for the fact that the book leans all too closely, in the dialogue sometimes even verbatim, on the historical Islamic sources. Were these any more well-known in the West, accusations of plagiarism might have ensued. The complete plot, the dramatic climax, even the narrative perspective are already provided in the Islamic tradition – there, too, it is Aisha who tells her own story. This increasingly becomes a literary problem for the novel. The characters attain no independent existence apart from that which is found in the sources, and as such cannot fulfil the expectations we have developed for a modern work of literature.

### A PERVERSE MAN?

The close dependence on the sources produces a strange effect, which makes the excitement about the book seem even more curious. The author treads so lightly in her treatment of Mohammed that from time to time you ask yourself whether she might in fact be a Muslim. For this is what a novel by one of the Islamic feminists