



Books on the Iran protests

## Fighting for freedom in the "mullah state"

**Women are the main drivers behind the new revolutionary movement in Iran. Four female authors offer inside views and moving snapshots from a variety of perspectives. Review by Rene Wildangel**



Three books have just been published to mark the [mass protests in Iran](#) following the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini. The authors agree unanimously that this is a process of revolution and there is no going back.

They offer inside views of Iran from a number of perspectives: [Katajun Amirpur](#) illuminates recent history, Gilda Sahebi casts light on the feminism at the heart of the uprising, and Natalie Amiri and Duzen Tekkal bring together Iranian women, some well-known, some less so, and chronicle their stories. They may overlap at times, but they are all worth a read.

At its core, Katajun Amirpur's book *Iran ohne Islam – der Aufstand gegen den Gottesstaat* (Eng.: 'Iran without Islam – Rebelling against Theocracy') is not about the most recent wave of protests and instead examines what has caused such popular dissatisfaction with the Islamic Republic.

She observes something that may surprise those without first-hand experience of Iran, namely the fact that in recent decades the "mullah state" has gradually become a post-Islamic society. The term is borrowed from the Persian scholar [Asef Bayat](#).

The Islamists' motto, "Islam is the solution", she says, has been turned on its head in Iran: Islam is now part of the problem – or, at least, Islam as the guiding state doctrine as understood by the Iranian government.

One anecdote at the very beginning illustrates the long-running discontent yet also

the courage of the Iranians and the freedoms they have carved out for themselves.

Amirpur writes about her first stay in the country in 1991, years after the childhood she spent in Iran. Back then, a woman had made her displeasure with Iranian politics known at the top of her voice and had insulted the-then president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, saying he should take off his turban and wear "something sensible" instead.

There were no consequences; she said what many people were thinking. The reviewer himself witnessed a similar scene on a visit to Iran in 2005: he had barely arrived at the former American embassy and now propaganda site when several passers-by immediately rushed over to warn him not to bother with any of the regime's stupid propaganda.

But even if, today, it is more a matter of overthrowing the current system than changing it, Amirpur makes it clear that the debates and criticism of the system coming from the religious camp were incredibly important.

These included instances on the Shia side, such as those from Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, the ousted one-time successor to Khomeini, or scholars like [Abdolkarim Soroush](#) and [Hassan Eshkevari](#). Amirpur recalls how far their demands went and how high a price some of them paid: following the infamous Berlin Conference of 2000, Eshkevari, a cleric, was charged with "moharebe" (declaring war on God) – the same criminal offence for which the government is executing protestors today.

## Missed opportunities under Mohammad Khatami?

The Khatami era (1997-2005), during which these critics appeared, receives particular attention in Amirpur's book. Amirpur still considers this to be a missed opportunity because Khatami and many of his allies wanted to open Iran up permanently and end the systematic violation of rights and liberties.

However, Khatami was largely isolated in the USA and in Europe, due to his being the representative of the "mullah state". In the past, Amirpur claims, far-reaching [U.S. sanctions](#) undermined civil society, while hardly touching the regime.

These observations remain important today amid constant calls for "maximum pressure" on the Iranian government, despite infrequent attempts to spell out exactly what precisely that means. "It could actually work," is Amirpur's brief conclusion on the burgeoning revolutionary movement that has emerged out of a deep-rooted discontent, which goes beyond ethnic or religious identities.

However, more extensive observations might have been preferable alongside Amirpur's illuminating analysis of the origins of the protests, explaining what the revolution might need to succeed now and what a different, better future in a "post-Islamic" Iran might look like.

In light of her analysis, is Amirpur what Gilda Sahebi, author of *Our Sword is Love*, would call a "mullah understander"? Sahebi employs this polemical term to describe an attitude which, in her view, has prevailed in Germany "both in politics and in media reporting".

She sees discussion of "reformers" or "moderates" as proof of this, because "there can be no reformers in a system such as the Islamic Republic".

This is currently undoubtedly true, but is not fair to the debates within Iran in recent decades, which Amirpur describes in detail.

A nuanced and critical discussion about German relations with Iran, including its blind spots, would have paid dividends here.

## Family visits were never normal

This is not the theme at the heart of Gilda Sahebi's book, however. It provides brilliant glimpses into the protest movement, and into its major players.

In the first chapter, Sahebi provides a recap of the events since the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini – she writes about the protestors' bravery and the outrageous brutality of the regime.

She also allows her own family's story to feed into the book, describing the feeling of coming home when visiting Iran, of perfectly normal family visits which were, naturally, anything but.

She writes about the longing and pain she feels since her father and one of her uncles – erstwhile idealistic revolutionaries who opposed the Shah – had to flee the regime's henchmen.

Sahebi has been one of the most noticeable voices on Iran in Germany since the revolution began – both on social media and in her work as a journalist. Time and again, Sahebi has had to carry out her research under difficult conditions, from afar on location, and she also describes this in her book.

In her book, Sahebi also speaks to the major players in this research themselves, usually under pseudonyms. Afra speaks about experiencing discrimination as a Kurdish woman, Jakaw Nick describes the persecution of trans people like themselves. These are intimate portraits that capture in vivid detail the deeply personal discrimination carried out by the regime.

Like the story of Elaheh Mohammadi, one of the first journalists to report on the Mahsa Amini story, or the rapper Toomaj, imprisoned and tortured by the regime – the title of Sahebi's book is taken from one of his protest songs, "Battlefield".

An extensive interview with Nasrin Sotudeh, an icon of the human rights movement, provides deep insights into her decades of work as a lawyer and committed opponent of the death penalty.

Sahebi describes the regime's brutal use of sexual violence, the systematic persecution of female journalists and medical personnel, and how they all keep doing their jobs, despite the greatest resistance. Sahebi succeeds in taking stock of the protests for the first time; she's committed, contemporary and personal.

## The pain of exiles

Finally, Natalie Amiri and Duzen Tekkal are two further key figures helping to familiarise German speakers with the events in Iran. One of their book's great merits is the fact that it offers a platform to Iranian women themselves.

In their conversation logs, fifteen well-known and less well-known personalities discuss the protests from their perspectives, along with the feeling that unites them: "We are not afraid" – and this is where the book gets its name.

Only a few of those featured still live in Iran. They either express themselves anonymously, or accept that there will be consequences – like [Nasrin Sotudeh](#), interviewed in this book, or the human rights activist Narges Mohammadi, whose text had to be smuggled out of prison.

Two young women report anonymously on the systematic disenfranchisement of women by the Islamic Republic and their collective resistance as revolution becomes part of everyday life.

They are not overhyped as fearless heroines; they are given space to speak about their worries and fears in the face of the regime's brutal actions.

The texts that address the background of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities – the Baha'i, the Kurds, the Baloch people – are similarly strong.

They still wear their traditional garments proudly, despite having once been forced to swap them for the black chador.

The pain of those who have been exiled, who had to leave Iran in the decades following the revolution, is often in focus.

The Israeli singer Rita – who fled Iran aged eight and is now, much to the regime's displeasure, famous and adored by many in Iran – describes her memories from her childhood in Tehran and shares her dream: to one day sing 'Baraye', the anthem of the revolution, together with Shervin in Tehran.

For Parastou Forouhar, a famous artist from Frankfurt, Iran is bound up with some particularly painful memories. Her moving story and her boundless courage are acknowledged in each of the three books discussed. Since her parents were brutally murdered by the regime in 1998, Forouhar has travelled to the country every year for the anniversary of their deaths, to mark the event. She even did this in 2022, during the protests, and she talks about this in the book.

## An obvious lack of revolutionary strategy

The voices of the exiled also ultimately include those three women who are leading the recently formed alliance for change: Masih Alinejad, Nazanin Boniadi and Shirin Ebadi. There is very little new to read about them, and it is a struggle to learn anything specific; the only thing offered as a potential course of action is the necessity of listing the Revolutionary Guards as a terror organisation.

But that's not enough for a revolutionary strategy. It would have been nice to hear more from the highly respected lawyer Shirin Ebadi on what the path towards a new, democratic Iran might look like.

The question as to which concrete political steps might now be necessary remains largely unanswered in these three books, but they succeed in providing their reader with expansive, often moving snapshots of the revolutionary protests.

The authors' professional and personal insights, their research on the ground, their empathy and solidarity make them and their books enormously important companions to the revolutionary transformation in Iran, which has only just begun.

*Rene Wildangel*

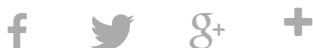
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*Rene Wildangel is a historian whose writing focuses on the Middle East and other fields.*

*Katajun Amirpur, "Iran ohne Islam. Der Aufstand gegen den Gottesstaat", published by C.H. Beck*

*Gilda Sahebi, "'Unser Schwert ist Liebe'. Die feministische Revolte im Iran", published by S. Fischer*

*Natalie Amiri, Duzen Tekkal, "Wir haben keine Angst! Die mutigen Frauen Irans", published by E. Sandmann*



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