

Descending from Green Pastures into Hell

By [Matthias Küntzel](#)

Exactly ten years ago – from April 7-9, 2000 – the Heinrich Böll Foundation held a conference titled “Iran after the Parliamentary Elections. The Dynamics of Reform in the Islamic Republic”¹. As a Berlin Conference, it was historic, but for reasons that the meeting coordinators hadn’t planned. On the eighth of April, the foundation forcibly cleared the packed room following tumultuous events. One week later, participants from Iran were hauled before Tehran’s Revolutionary Court and were meted out horrendous punishments. Unfortunately, the Böll Foundation chose to pass over the anniversary of these incidents and a chance was missed for critical self-reflection, as the turbulent events from these days are certainly linked in many ways with the current challenges facing relations between Germany and Iran.

The election of Mohammed Khatami in May 1997 marked the first time that Iranians chose a representative of the reform movement for the office of president. A little over a year later in October 1998, the coalitional red-green reform government led by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer came to power in Germany. The red-green coalition’s Iran policy followed the stated goal of bolstering President Khatami’s reform movement against hard-line elements associated with Khamenei, then leader of the revolutionary movement. Thus the critical dialogue that collapsed in April 1997 due to the Mykonos murder was seized on with new élan under the banner of “constructive dialogue”.

¹ Original German title: “Iran nach den Parlamentswahlen. Die Reformdynamik in der Islamischen Republik”

Following the government's first year in power, the "German-Iranian Chamber of Industry and Commerce" in Tehran had shown positive results: "German interest in existing German-Iranian relations in commerce as well as investment was unmistakably confirmed by the visits of several economic delegations from Germany to Iran." ² In March of 2000, Joschka Fischer became the first German Foreign Minister since 1991 to travel to Iran along with the usual retinue of economic representatives.

The red-green coalition, however, didn't continue with business as usual. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder became the first head of state in the Western world to request that the Iranian president honor the German capital with his visit. His coalition partner from the Green Party went a step further: with the support of the Foreign Office, the closely associated Böll Foundation invited seventeen "Figures from Politics, Economics, Religion and the Media" from Iran to Berlin for an Iran conference. Half of the participants were from Khatami's Islamic reform movement, while the others were secular reformers from Iran.

The conference's sights were set high: according to its own statements, the Böll Foundation wanted to create the "key prerequisites for a successful and peaceful continuation of the reform process" by bringing together the reform elements from the two different camps. The objectives: "guaranteeing human rights" and "ensuring fundamental democratic freedoms" ³. Since this implied changes within the Islamic system, organizations of Iranian exiles who were pushing for regime change were not involved in the preparations or invited as speakers.

² Deutsch-Iranischer Wirtschaftsspiegel Nr. 16, December 1999, p. 5.

³ Press Release of the Heinrich Böll Foundation from April 6, 2000.

For this reason, the undertaking was also criticized in advance by human rights organizations, exile organizations, and Iranian intellectuals like the author Faraj Sarkuhl. In an open letter, Sarkuhl wrote that “the Islamic Republic of Iran has separated the Iranian population into ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of the regime depending on whether they recognize the Islamic constitution in its entirety or want to criticize or reform it. The government seeks to exclude the second group from all cultural and political arenas. In the conference ‘Iran after the elections’, many groups and representatives of important cultural and political movements in Iran have also been excluded... This imitation of the Islamic Republic’s strategy of exclusion cannot be reconciled with the very positive image that I associate with the Heinrich Böll Foundation.” ⁴

At the same time, the Green Party was accused of idealizing Khatami’s intentions and ignoring his actual role in the mullah regime. “With a bloody 20-year history, it is impossible to simply sit down at a table and conduct a friendly conversation,” stressed Azer Drehjan from the Iranian Women’s Association on March 8th. “When the Green Party was still part of the opposition, it was sharply critical of the Islamic Republic. But now they are trying to take over the role of representing Khatami in Europe,” she says. “We see this behavior as a betrayal.” ⁵

When the conference began on the second weekend of April in 2000, there were howls of protest because the people in the room included “those who had had to leave their country,” remembers the German-Iranian publicist Nasrin Amirsedghi, while “the podium was occupied by several participants, who were largely in line with the regime, which had caused over three million Iranians to flee their homeland.”

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⁴ Faraj Sarkuhi, "Open Letter an die Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung & Medien" from April 4, 2000

⁵ Rusen Can, Islamisten am Gesprächstisch, in: Sozialistische Zeitung, May 11, 2000, p. 13.

⁶ Nasrin Amirsedghi, Die Berliner Konferenz als Chronologie eines politischen Karnevals mit fatalen Folgen, (unpublished) letter to the editors of Die Zeit from March 18, 2001.

After the presenters had been allowed to speak, the situation escalated during a discussion session. This was largely due to a performance by the artist Parvaneh Hamidi, who put on a headscarf in the conference room and at the same time undressed down to just a bikini. It was a symbolic action, which hit right at the core of Islamic ideology and “thereby unveiled the blind spot of the talk of reform,” as Fathiyeh Naghibzadeh later wrote. It resulted in outrage from the Islamists and confusion among many of the Iranian opposition representatives.⁷ When this was directly followed by a man who dropped his pants to expose marks of torture, there was no stopping things. Security descended and cleared the room. The next day, the “dialogue” was only continued in front of a handpicked audience. The actual escalation, however, was yet to come: the Iranians’ trip home was to be a descent from green pastures straight into hell.

With the pretext of having insulted Allah and endangered Iran’s security, they were seized upon arrival and put before the Revolutionary Court and the Special Court for the Clergy. Iranian television stations broadcast film segments from the conference’s tumultuous events and used the resulting outrage to ban eight daily newspapers and three weekly newspapers closely associated with the reformers. In addition, the conservatives mobilized tens of thousands of their supporters to take to the streets against the reformers’ “mercenary writers”.

The revolutionary leader Ali Khamenei had shown the world that the elected reform president Khatami, who had provided participants in the Berlin conference with travel permits, had no say. But Khatami did exactly what the Islamic system expected of him: he unquestioningly accepted the attacks on him and his camp. Ensnared by Khomeini’s principle of the revolutionary leader’s dominion, he

⁷ Fathiyeh Naghibzadeh, *Freiheit ist keine Metapher*, in: *Jungle World*, 26/2009.

accepted his decision as appropriate, thereby disappointing his electorate.

It's true that Khatami and his followers have a more liberal understanding of the Koran and a more modern interpretation of Islam than the hardliners. But there is not and has never been dispute between the reformers and hardliners about the Islamic constitution. Both camps have been and continue to be in agreement that all elements of politics are secondary to the will of Allah, i.e. the dominion of the revolutionary leader. Shariah law, which Khatami helped to adopt in the 1980s as the Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance, also continues to be sacrosanct for both groups.

The reformers don't question "What" – the constitution and the objectives of the Khomeini Revolution – but rather "How" – namely how these goals can be better met. While the conservatives attempt to perfect enforced conformity and tyranny, the reformers want the populace to participate in designing the Islamic community. This causes some portions of Iranian society to pin their hopes on them, while it is enough for the conservatives to condemn them as traitors. To this end, Khatami's policy was consistent: he expanded the elbow room within the constitution and immediately subordinated himself, while the revolutionary leader exercised his supreme power as guaranteed in the constitution. The policies followed by Moussavi and Karrubi, the great hopes of the green movement, were inconsistent in comparison. They protect the Islamic constitution, but refuse to kowtow to the revolutionary leader – the alpha and the omega of precisely this constitution! It is this courageous and rebellious action, which distinguishes them from Khatami.

Just a few weeks after the dramatic events of April 2000, President Khatami visited Berlin on the invitation of the Federal Government. While Iranian thugs detained participants of the Berlin conference in

Evin Prison, Khatami's visit in July 2000 ran its course without incident. Otto Schily, the Minister of the Interior, ensured a smooth visit by taking action in the night before Khatami arrived by "detaining 54 Iranian opposition members and potential ringleaders for the registered demonstrations, as a precaution." In addition, "according to statements by opposition members, police and border guards intercepted around 7,000 people opposed to the regime at the border and on access roads." ⁸

President Khatami was in good cheer as he completed his visit and Chancellor Schröder also appeared to be satisfied all around. On the first day of the state visit, he had increased the Hermes Guarantee for dealings with Iran from 200 million deutschmarks (DM) to 1 billion DM.⁹ The fact that proponents of reform were currently in chains because they had accepted an invitation from the government's Green Party coalition partner did not play any recognizable role. To the contrary – when CDU representative Leo Dautzenberg asked the government on July 5, 2000 what had induced them to invite Khatami although "human rights violations and discrimination against women continues", Ludger Volmer, the Green Party Minister of State in the Foreign Office replied "Germany has a special interest in constructive cooperation with Iran in all areas." Khatami's electoral platform had envisioned "a substantial improvement in the human rights situation in Iran." The Khatami administration "has made consistent efforts in this regard and can point to successes despite occasional setbacks." ¹⁰

But still the affair regarding the Böll conference was neither over nor forgotten. Khatami's Berlin visit was followed by a show trial. In January 2001, the court sentenced the 17 defendants to shockingly harsh punishments. Journalist *Akbar Ganji* received a ten-year prison

⁸ Norbert Siegmund, *Der Mykonos-Prozess*, Münster 2001, p. 336.

⁹ Silke Mertins, *Der harmlose Ayatollah*, in: *Financial Times Deutschland*, July 12, 2000.

¹⁰ *Deutscher Bundestag*, Protokoll 14/113, p. 10681 from July 5, 2000.

sentence in addition to a subsequent five years of internal exile. *Said Sadr*, an interpreter for the German Embassy in Tehran, was sentenced to ten years and translator *Khalil Rostamkhani* to nine years in prison. Student coordinator *Ali Afshari* was sentenced for five years and the 75-year old former representative *Ezzatollah Sahabi* got four and a half years of prison. The jurist and women's rights activist *Mehrangiz Kar* and publisher *Shala Lahiji* received four years each. The cleric *Yousevi Eshkevari* was put before the Special Court for the Clergy and was initially sentenced behind closed doors to death, which was later changed to four and a half years in prison. Sentences were suspended for *Kazem Kardavani*, a member of the board of the Iranian Writer's Guild, and *Changiz Pahlavan*, a cultural sociologist, since they had remained in Germany.

In response to my question as to what the Böll Foundation had done to help the individuals who had been sentenced, Bernd Asbach, who heads the foundation's Middle East department said: "There was little or nothing we could do." A letter from the foundation's director Ralf Fücks to the Iranian legal authorities went unanswered. The curtailment of bilateral cooperation along political, economic and cultural lines was not open for discussion. While the Foreign Office summoned the Iranian ambassador in order to communicate the "deep concerns" of the German government, Foreign Minister Fischer "avoided public criticism of the sentences so as not to damage the improved relations with Iran from the past year."¹¹ According to Bernd Asbach, while the Böll Foundation never publicly criticized Joschka Fischer's "very reserved" policy, it was the object of internal criticism.

Furthermore, the red-green government coalition counseled President of the Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse not to cancel his trip to Iran

¹¹ Christiane Hoffmann, Iran betont vor Thierses Besuch gemeinsame Interessen mit Berlin, in: FAZ, February 16, 2001.

planned for February 2001. Arriving in Tehran, Thierse was “reserved” in his statements about the horrific sentencing. With more verve, he announced the intensification of “political and economic contacts with Iran.” He would work in particular “so that in this year a new German-Iranian cultural agreement could be reached.”¹²

Meanwhile, Akbar Ganji, the most prominent participant in the Berlin Conference, experienced the consequences of cultural exchange on his own body. While his prison sentence was reduced to six years in appeal proceedings, he was isolated and heavily tortured in prison despite suffering from illness. On March 16, 2006, the regime deposited him again in his home. “Six years of detainment, solitary confinement, pain and torture have ruined his body,” reports Baham Nirumand. “The 48 year old had wasted away to his bare bones and with disheveled, sparse hair and a long white beard he looked like a 70 year old.”¹³

What has happened to the other prisoners? On April 7, 2010, Bernd Asbach admitted to not knowing: “We don’t know what has happened to them. There is no direct contact.” According to research from Nasrin Amirsedghi and others, all of the prisoners have since been freed: Sadr, Rostamkhani and Kardavani live and work in Germany, Eshkevari was released in 2005 and now lives in the EU, Afshari and Kar live in the USA, Sahabi and Lahiji stayed in Iran, and Pahlavan has also since returned to Iran.

The question of political accountability on the side of the Green Party and the Böll Foundation, however, remains. Exiled Iranian intellectuals including Faraj Sarkuhi and Nasrin Amirsedghi had explicitly warned the foundation about what actually ended up occurring. “Everyone who is even marginally aware of the complexities

¹² Archiv der Gegenwart 2001, p. 44809

¹³ Baham Nirumand, Gandji endlich frei, in: Iran-Report 4/2006, p. 5.

of Iranian society,” wrote Sarkuhi on April 4, 2000 in an open letter, “recognizes that the official and political character of this conference... can be later used by fundamentalists for propaganda against religious reformers and independent intellectuals and writers.”¹⁴ The Green Party’s foundation ignored these voices and endangered the lives of their Iranian guests by attempting to exert direct influence. Even today, one could credit them with having pinned false hopes on President Khatami and therefore dealing in a negligent manner.

But then the worst-case scenario reared its head. Following the brutal detainments of conference participants and Khatami’s silence, the illusions about him should have been shattered. But despite the draconian prison sentences against intellectuals, which had been invited upon them by the Green Party’s initiative, and despite sanctions against the Iranian media, the Green Party continued to court their former great white hope and the regime’s representative during his Berlin visit.

In the end, even the enforcement of the prison sentences did not result in any serious protests, but rather for the acceptance of a new “cultural agreement”. Thus, the government’s Green Party coalitional partner had not contributed to punishing Iran’s conservative wing’s offensive – on the contrary, it was rewarded through the intensification of German-Iranian relations. Events on February 16, 2005 showed that this was not a slip-up in Green Party policy or a concession to its stronger coalition partner.

On this day, the Green Party Foreign Minister congratulated the regime on opening its new embassy in Berlin. Alone the fact that Fischer believed it was appropriate to stop by “to congratulate [Iran’s rulers] on this modern and impressive, very transparent construction,” is remarkable. In his remarks, he vaunted the

¹⁴ Faraj Sarkuhi, a.a.O. .

“traditionally large interest” of Germans in Iran and praised the intensity of the bilateral relations. “Germany is among Iran’s most important trade partners... There is also a long history of close and intensive cooperation in cultural areas.” But the potential “is far from being exhausted. In almost all elements of our relations, there are numerous opportunities to intensify these connections and to deepen contacts.” ¹⁵

Why this emphatic push towards cooperation with a regime that during its last parliamentary elections in February 2004 excluded 2,000 candidates – including eighty serving parliamentarians – in order to ensure the supremacy of the conservative hardliners and the later victory of Ahmadinejad – a regime that even as the speech was being held was detaining and still torturing someone like Akbar Ganji just because he participated in a conference organized by the Green Party?

Maybe the answer is linked to a certain fundamental solidarity that Fischer expressed in a 1979 Pflasterstrand article. “The Persian revolution (hits) at the heart of the West’s belief in progress,” the future foreign minister told his comrades in the scene’s newspaper and expressed sympathy for this “open refusal and rejection of the panacea of technical progress.” Subversives in Frankfurt and mullahs in Tehran had a common goal: “In Persia, the people are trying to escape a type of development that they are standing in the threshold of; we, on the other hand, are trying to do the same from the zenith of this development.” *We are trying to do the same* – Fischer certainly did not stand alone at that time with this diffuse “we-feeling”. At the same time, his solidarity with the mullahs even then belied an astonishing degree of indifference towards their crimes. The fact that Khomeini let

¹⁵ Auswärtiges Amt, Rede von Bundesaußenminister Fischer anlässlich der Eröffnung der neuen Botschaft der Islamischen Republik Iran in Berlin, February 16, 2005.

“thousands of unarmed people walk into the line of machine gun fire” did not disgust Fischer in 1979; it fascinated him.¹⁶

But worse than these early misjudgments was the lack of readiness to deal with the topic. Anyone looking for evidence of self-critical examination in the memoirs of Joschka Fischer or Ludger Volmer will be left empty handed: both books ignore the Green Party’s Iran policy.

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Why haven’t the obvious mistakes of this policy been retrospectively addressed and why was the opportunity that was offered by the tenth anniversary of the Berlin Conference passed up? Even today, this conference seems to continue to have a traumatic effect – like a wound that is so painful that one shies away from dealing with it in an appropriate fashion. Iranian provocateurs living in exile continue to be pushed forth as scapegoats that enabled the subsequent persecution of the Iranian speakers. Even today, hardly anyone expresses anything other than offense in regard to the highly political clothing performance, which Parveneh Hamidi celebrated on April 8, 2000.

Today it is the millions-strong Iranian youth movement, which treasures Parveneh Hamidi’s dancing. Isn’t it high time to move away from Fischer’s foreign policy, which doubtlessly seems like the violation of taboo even today? Whoever wishes to establish contact with a new generation of Iranians, defined by the present Iranian exile situation, doesn’t have any other choice.

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¹⁶ Joschka, Durchs wilde Kurdistan, in: Pflasterstrand Nr. 47, Frankfurt/M., February 10, 1979, p. 28 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. Joschka Fischer, Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Außenpolitik vom Kosovo bis zum 11. September, München 2008 and Ludger Volmer, Die Grünen: Von der Protestbewegung zur etablierten Partei - Eine Bilanz, München 2009.