

Are we talking about the same topic – Iran?

Impressions from an informative event

by Thomas Scherr*



Patrick Ringgenberg.
(Picture mt)

(CH-S) On 19 and 20 June, "Swiss Standpoint" welcomed the Iran expert Dr Patrick Ringgenberg** to its event venue to speak on the topic "Understanding Iran: Past and Present".

During an evening lecture and a discussion, the following day, Patrick Ring-

genberg succeeded in offering various perspectives on the complex situation in Iran. In doing so, he was able to draw on his profound knowledge and decades of experience in the country itself.

For most of the audience, it was an opportunity to increase or revise their understanding of Iran. It was shocking to realise how little one learns from the media about the country, its society and its millennia-long history.

Even the war of aggression waged by the US and Israel against Iran – in violation of international law – has not led to the media now disseminating realistic information. This made the event with Dr Patrick Ringgenberg all the more valuable.

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Many participants were preoccupied with the question of what sort of state it could be that, to this day, is able to stand up to the world's greatest military power and the battle-hardened Israeli IDF.

However, this question was *not* the starting point for Patrick Ringgenberg's talk. And yet, by the end of the talk, an explanation had emerged.

Here, therefore, are a few subjective key points from the informative and comprehensive talk.

In purely geographical terms, Iran – with an area three times the size of France and a population of 90 million – lies between several high mountain ranges and two seas. The country forms a bridge between East and West, as well as between North and South. Owing to its geographical location, it plays a central role amongst its seven direct neighbours and the nine states connected via the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Iran's population comprises many different ethnic groups and religions. The majority are Persians who follow the Shia branch of Islam.

As a country with a 3,000-year history, and as a nation which, as a great power, shaped the destinies of various peoples for centuries, Iran is hardly known to us. Patrick Ringgenberg took the audience on a historical journey that made it abundantly clear that Iran is not a "mullah state" or a post-colonial construct, but a self-assured nation with roots stretching back millennia before the advent of Islam, and that, as a former empire, the country possesses a corresponding sense of identity and tradition.

The speaker presented the role of Islam in Iran in a highly nuanced manner. On the one hand, Islam became intertwined with the country's pre-existing traditions; on the other hand, differences emerged in relation to the Arab Islamic states due to the religious schism between Sunnis and Shias. Culturally, these influences should not be underestimated, as they continue to play a major role even today.

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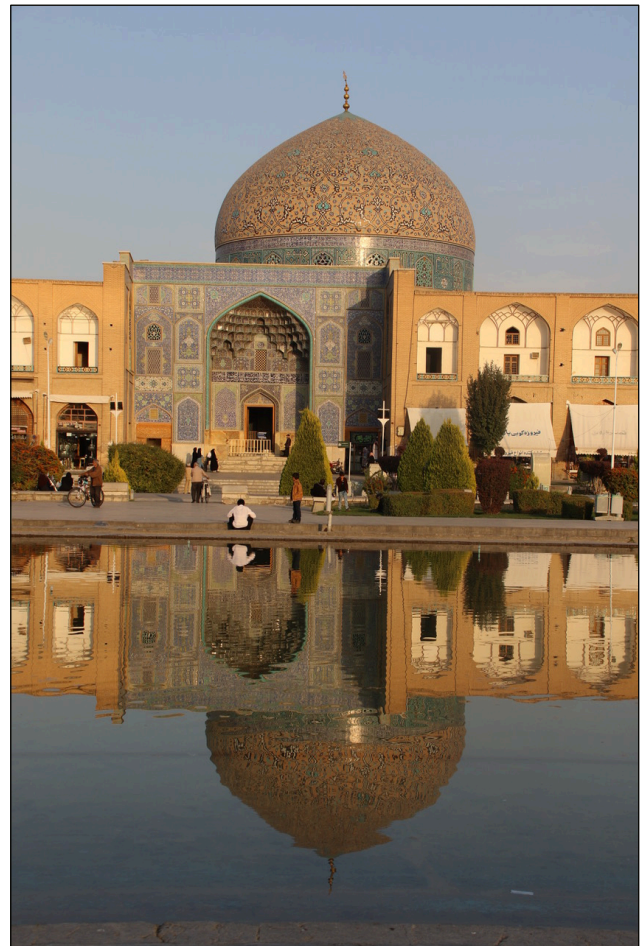
author of some twenty books on Iran, the history of religions and esotericism, as well as medieval and Oriental art, including: "Guide culturel de l'Iran" (2006; 6th edition 2018), "L'univers symbolique des arts islamiques" (2009), "An Introduction to Ferdowsi's Book of Kings (Shâhnâmeh)" (2009), "The Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad" (2016), "Painting the Invisible. Sacred Images of the East and West" (2018), "Understanding Iran" (2021) and the illustrated book "Persia" (2024).

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Our image of Iran, based on the *Islamic Republic of Iran*, is shaped by the realities of the 1980s (Khomeini, Islamisation, an agrarian population, the US embassy siege, the Iran–Iraq War, etc.). Today, the country presents itself in a completely different light. The cities – particularly the capital, Tehran, with its 8.7 million inhabitants – are cosmopolitan and modern; there are also seven other cities with populations exceeding one million, and 75 per cent of the population live in urban areas. The veiling celebrated in Western media comes across as a media-perpetuated prejudice – although traditions certainly persist in rural areas.

Science and culture are highly valued in Iran – contrary to the impression gained by the average media consumer in Switzerland. Iran is capable of competing on a global scale in science and technology, a fact that is frequently and readily overlooked. This is undoubtedly also a consequence of the West’s “sanctions”.

During the discussion with Patrick Ringgenberg, many preconceptions were dispelled and interesting insights into the country were gained. At the end of the event, many attendees wondered how it could have come to pass that the US intelligence services could have misjudged the reality of the country so badly. The idea that a “decapitation strike” against the Iranian leadership could spark an uprising in the country is just as far-fetched as the notion that the country could be “overthrown” in a matter of hours, as if it were some sort of “Venezuela 2.0”.



The Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan. An example of Iran’s long cultural history. (Picture hr)

Patrick Ringgenberg’s talk encouraged the audience not only to engage more deeply with the history and culture of Iran, but also to adopt a more cautious approach when assessing other countries.

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)