

Oskouei's portrait wins gold at Kyrgyzstan photography festival

Arts & Culture Desk

A portrait titled 'Loneliness' by renowned Iranian photographer, documentarian, and researcher of photographic history Mehrdad Oskouei, clinched the gold medal for Best Portrait at the 6th Annual Viktor Polinsky International Photography in 2024, held in Kyrgyzstan. The festival featured a panel of judges,

including Maja Stosic from Serbia, Alexander Sasich from Ireland, and Mohammad Reza Chaiforoosh from Iran, who evaluated the submissions. In total, seven of Oskouei's photographs were accepted for the competition, with 'Loneliness' earning the gold medal in the portrait category. Plus, two of his other photographs received honorary mentions at the festival, underscoring Oskouei's exceptional talent and versatility.

Viktor Polinski (1965-2013) was a prominent Russian photographer known for his impactful work in Kyrgyzstan, where his images were widely utilized, including on currency, in election campaigns, publications, and books. Beyond his professional photography, Polinski contributed to the field by founding a photography school that bears his name, dedicated to educating aspiring photographers.

The Viktor Polinski Award is organized under the auspices of the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP), the Photographic Society of America (PSA), the Focus Photo Club of Iran, and the International Association of Art Photographers (IAAP). Photographs that succeed in this festival are archived under both FIAP and PSA, and they also count towards the qualifications for FIAP and PSA titles.



Iran signals readiness to establish joint science, technology park with Iraq

Social Desk

Iran expressed its readiness to establish a joint science and technology park with Iraq, in a significant move to strengthen academic and technological ties.

During a meeting between Iran's Minister of Science, Research and Technology Hossein Simai Sarraf, and Iraq's Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Professor Haider Abd Dahed, both sides underscored their commitment to enhancing scientific cooperation in various fields, including student exchanges and research initiatives, ILNA wrote.

Simai Sarraf emphasized Iran's eagerness to welcome a greater number of Iraqi students, particularly in border regions where several prominent universities are located. "We are prepared to accept motivated and talented Iraqi students at our best universities," he stated, while highlighting the necessity of studying in Persian, an idea that has received support from the Iraqi government.

The Iranian minister further elaborated on the potential for collaboration, saying, "While we are ready to establish a joint science and technology park with Iraq, the various dimensions of this project



need to be carefully studied." He noted that the Iraqi side showed a keen interest in leveraging Iran's experiences in developing technology parks.

In response to Iraq's proposal for Iranian students to study in Iraq, Simai Sarraf welcomed the idea and mentioned the allocation of 100 scholarships for Iranian students, contingent upon the establishment of suitable conditions for implementation. Dahed shared insights on Iraq's legislative progress, noting that the successful experience of Iran in developing its technology ecosystem has served as a model for Iraq. "We have drafted legal frameworks for establishing a science and technology

park in Iraq based on Iran's experience," he stated, adding that the specifics of the collaboration will be finalized during an upcoming meeting of Iranian and Iraqi universities in Karbala.

He also pointed out the substantial number of Iraqi students currently studying in Iran, reiterating the importance of these students learning Persian to better understand Iranian culture and knowledge. Dahed extended an invitation to Simai Sarraf to attend the joint meeting of Iranian and Iraqi universities in Karbala, further solidifying the collaborative spirit between the two nations in the realm of education and technology.

Women increasingly participating in Qur'anic studies: Minister

Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Abbas Salehi, emphasized the significant presence of women from the Islamic world, particularly from Iran, in Qur'anic and Islamic studies.

"Women are increasingly participating in Qur'anic sciences and concepts," he added, IRNA wrote.

During his speech on December 26 at the 16th international conference on women Qur'an scholars, Salehi traced the historical journey of women in Islamic scholarship, highlighting three distinct periods since the advent of Islam.

He remarked, "In the first period, during the early years of Prophethood, women were fully engaged in Qur'anic sciences." He elaborated that this initial phase was characterized by the robust involvement of women in Islamic knowledge.

Citing historical accounts, Salehi pointed out that women constituted a significant portion of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, stating, "According to one-seventh of the Prophet's companions, women played a crucial role." However, he noted that the second period saw a decline in women's participation in Qur'anic studies, coinciding with a broader decline in Islamic civilization.



The minister asserted that the past few decades have marked a resurgence of women's involvement, akin to the early days of Islam. Salehi emphasized that the path taken by women Qur'an scholars today is a continuation of the legacy established by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Reflecting on the historical trajectory, Salehi stated that there was a time when women were not considered a secondary gender in Islamic education and understanding. "This enlightened era in Islamic history contrasts sharply with periods when women's roles in scholarly pursuits diminished," he commented. Salehi lamented that women were often confined to harems, further isolating them from the academic and scholarly community. However, he expressed optimism about the current third period, which is marked by the visible presence and contributions of women in Islamic sciences across the Islamic world, particularly in Iran.

Same mistakes, different ...

Despite the memo's foresight, it was largely dismissed by Washington policymakers, buried deep in diplomatic archives, and its author faced significant professional repercussions. Merry's dissenting views, which clashed with the prevailing orthodoxy of promoting free-market economics at all costs, rendered him a pariah within the State Department. After his three-year term at the Moscow embassy, he found himself sidelined, and his career in the foreign service was effectively stalled.

This newly revealed document, declassified after being hidden for nearly 30 years as the result of a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, underscores the consequences of ignoring dissenting voices in policy discussions. It also serves as a stark reminder of the risks of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to foreign intervention. Merry argued that prioritizing market-driven reforms over democratic development was a mistake that could

reignite adversarial relations between Russia and the West—a warning that seems prescient in light of Russia's subsequent trajectory under Vladimir Putin.

Today, this memo is not just a historical document but a call for reflection. It raises urgent questions about the lessons Washington has—or has not—learned as it continues to engage with complex global challenges. Merry's insights highlight the importance of understanding local contexts, respecting the agency of nations, and valuing dissent within policymaking—a message that resonates strongly in an increasingly interconnected and volatile world.

Key insights from memo
Misguided focus on market economics: Merry's memo criticizes the US for overemphasizing free-market reforms in Russia, arguing that these policies, such as the shock therapy promoted by US economists, were ill-suited to Russia's economic reality. Merry warned that the rush to

privatize and implement market reforms against the backdrop of Russia's fragile democracy could alienate the Russian people and deepen economic disparities. He noted that most Russians did not associate market forces with positive ethical outcomes and were wary of economic theories pushed by Western advisors. The memo called for a more nuanced understanding of Russia's needs, stressing that the focus should be on helping Russia develop democratic institutions rather than imposing Western economic models.

Call for respect and patience in US foreign policy: Merry urged a shift in US foreign policy towards Russia, advocating for a "benign respect" that would recognize the complexity of Russia's political and economic transformation. He argued that the US should support Russian democracy but not impose specific economic models. Merry emphasized that US officials were often perceived by Russians as condescending and

overly eager to experiment with their country's future. The approach of "assistance tourists," as Merry described it, not only contributed to the perception of foreign interference but also undermined the legitimacy of democratic forces in Russia. He suggested that the US should prioritize helping Russia develop sustainable democratic structures rather than pushing for rapid economic changes that could destabilize the country further.

Rejection of dogmatic economic policies: Merry's memo also critiqued the dogmatic view that free markets and democracy were inherently linked. He pointed out that while markets may operate without democracy, the reverse was not true: democracies could exist without free markets. The memo's call for a balanced approach—one that emphasized democratic development alongside cautious economic reforms—was a sharp contrast to the prevailing orthodoxy in Washington at the time,

which largely viewed free-market capitalism as the necessary foundation for a democratic society.

Lessons for today: Relevance of Merry's memo

The lessons embedded in Wayne Merry's 1994 memo remain strikingly relevant today. First, it highlights the dangers of imposing one-size-fits-all solutions to complex geopolitical issues. US policymakers' failure to understand Russia's unique context led to policies that not only failed to stabilize the country but also contributed to the rise of anti-democratic forces. Second, the memo underscores the importance of listening to on-the-ground experts, rather than relying solely on abstract ideological frameworks or academic theories. Merry's warning about the consequences of ignoring local realities resonates strongly in today's complex global landscape, where the West's interventions often fail to achieve desired outcomes due to

a lack of understanding of local dynamics.

Moreover, Merry's experience serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of suppressing dissent within government circles. The "dissent channel," which was meant to encourage honest, critical feedback, was ultimately used against those who expressed opposing views, stifling constructive criticism and preventing meaningful policy debate. This lesson remains pertinent in today's political climate, where openness to diverse perspectives is critical for making informed decisions.

In conclusion, revisiting Merry's memo today offers a valuable opportunity for reflection. It serves as a reminder that successful foreign policy is built not on unilateral power or simplistic economic prescriptions, but on respect, understanding, and support for local democratic processes. As the global political landscape becomes ever more complex, the lessons of the past are more important than ever.