

LIGHTBOX

## See Iran Coming Out of the Shadows

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**Photographer Newsha Tavakolian takes us through the looking glass**



Newsha Tavakolian—Magnum for TIME

An Iranian woman walks through a haze of smoke caused by the burning of the herb esfand. According to popular belief, this ritual drives away the evil eye.

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At Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the government office in charge of accrediting foreign reporters, there is a particular enthusiasm for first-timers.

A journalist who has never actually visited Iran before tends to be wowed by the experience. "It's not like I expected," they say, a sentiment that naturally is reflected in their dispatches.

On my 11th visit I thought I was beyond that sort of thing. Then I took my first trip on Tehran's subway. It was like visiting Scandinavia: sleek, quiet, and boring in a reassuring way, a world away from the capital's cityscape. Both things are true, of course: The gritty streets familiar from Argo, and the network of brightly lit tunnels that undermine every assumption about the Iran.

It's not contradiction so much as counterpoint, and Newsha Tavakolian manages to do the same thing with her camera. She has worked as a photojournalist and as an artist, and you need to be both to capture the subtle dynamics in her home country right now. At the very moment that the Islamic Republic has made a deal on its nuclear program with the U.S. and other world powers, it has also struck a bargain with its own people: Leave politics entirely to us, and you'll be left alone to live your lives more or less as you wish.

It's a trade-off most Iranians appear to be fine with for now, especially when other states in the region have descended into chaos following popular uprisings. But it's not as



Photograph by Newsha Tavakolian—Magnum for TIME

though the people are holding still. As the sanctions come off and the world prepares to beat a path to their door, ordinary Iranians are eager to come out of the shadow of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and meet them, finally proceeding with lives that strike a Western visitor as both familiar, and like no where else.

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