

The Viper of Kerman by Christian Oliver.
Halban Publishers Ltd 2009

This well-written and extremely pacy thriller is largely set in modern Iran and follows an apparent plot by a senior Ayatollah to seize power from his even more radical colleagues and to change his government's policy in ways guaranteed to change relations for the better between Iran and the West.

The Ayatollah in question, known as the Viper of Kerman, is renowned as an intensely tricky individual, and when his overtures to the West are initially transmitted via an intermediary to a world-weary secret service operative, Andy Trevarthen, there is suspicion. As information concerning his intentions spreads to other countries new players become involved and separate agenda begin to develop, some supportive of the Ayatollah's reported plan, others determined to stop it, and him, dead (literally).

Events begin to unfold on the streets of Tehran and other major Iranian cities as the various intelligence services engage in a race to protect or harm the Viper.

The Viper of Kerman is a story where the balance is beautifully maintained between the characters and the narrative itself, and it also possesses an authenticity that says much for the depth to which Christian Oliver immersed himself between 2003 and 2006 when he was Reuters' Iran correspondent.

The Viper of Kerman is Christian Oliver's first novel, and for its quality, power and credibility it deserves to be highly praised. This is clearly a major new talent whose next book I shall await with keen interest.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh