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New America Foundation

“Untangling the Paradox of Iran”

1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, 26 September 2008

The New America Foundation invited **Hooman Majd** to discuss his new book, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran*. The discussion was moderated by **Patrick Doherty**, Deputy Director of the American Strategy Program at NAF.

Hooman Majd began by explaining that his book’s goal is to report his observations in order to explain Iranian politics and culture to the American people. The book is not an analysis of events nor does it include overt policy prescriptions. Majd’s premise is that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a political reality, and that it has been relatively stable for thirty years and is likely to still be here in another thirty. **The Iranian people are not in love with their system or their leadership, yet they don’t perceive that they live under a tyranny day to day.** Just like everywhere else, economic, political, and familial issues dominate their concerns. The people hold a deep admiration for the U.S governmental system.

Majd said that lack of respect is the overriding perception dominating both Iranian foreign policy and public opinion. For thirty years the Iranian government and the Iranian people have felt U.S. disdain for their system, and they know the U.S. views their leadership as illegitimate. Iran subscribes to a pan-Islamic perspective that believes 1.5 billion Muslims have been awakened recently, and they will not take orders from U.S. politicians. Majd said this lack of respect has shown itself in the U.S. presidential race as well. He said Iranians have much affection for Barack Obama, but were disappointed when he said he would meet with Iranian leadership at a time and place of his choosing. They view such rhetoric as condescending and offensive. **Most Iranians want Obama to win, but are worried that he will engage Ahmadinejad, thereby elevating and emboldening him ahead of the Iranian elections in 2009, further weakening the reform movement.**

He said the biggest threat facing the regime is the faltering economy. There have been protests over gas prices, regular electricity blackouts, long gas lines, and runaway inflation. Majd noted that sanctions are having a severe effect also. **On the nuclear issue, Majd thinks that Iran is seeking enrichment capacity such that it *could* develop weaponry quickly. The regime has convinced the public that the nuclear issue is a matter of national pride and a defiance of western bullying.** Majd said that nothing short of war will prevent further enrichment.

He concluded by saying that any U.S. support for Iranian civil rights activists immediately weakens them. All legislation and public avowals of solidarity are the kiss of death to local activists.