



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Iran at a Crossroads: Assessing a Changing Landscape”

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Rm 106

March 10, 2010, 9:30 am - 1:45 pm

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) hosted a morning-long event to discuss the prospects for democracy in Iran and to evaluate the current state of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Following some brief welcoming remarks by **Trita Parsi**, president of NIAC, **Rep. Anna Eshoo** (D-CA) delivered the opening address by stating that “Iran is at a crossroads like no other.” As members of the Green Movement fight and die for more basic freedoms, “the world is watching how this popular movement plays out.” Eshoo, whose district has one of the largest Iranian-American populations, **expressed appreciation for the role played by technology in combating the government’s abuse of power**, specifically citing Facebook’s creation of a mobile application that could not be blocked by Iranians and the decision by Twitter to delay maintenance to help dissident Iranians communicate during last summer’s protests. She also **criticized the U.S. invasion of Iraq for emboldening Iran and expressed skepticism about the value of sanctions in achieving U.S. goals**: “We have to work very hard to educate our colleagues of the very failure of sanctions because they will end up hurting the people we want to help.”

Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) next began his remarks by asking how Congress could help support the democratic impulse in Iran without undermining the work of its people. He answered that **although “the U.S. should make its values clear that we believe in democracy and freedom of speech... the freedom of the people in Iran will only be won by themselves.”** He continued: “It can’t be led or directed by Americans. It wouldn’t be successful and it wouldn’t be right.”

Ellison chided previous declarations of Iran as “evil” and previous policies preventing Iranians from attending U.S. universities. He also articulated the importance of people-to-people diplomacy and applauded **Rep. Jim Moran** (D-VA) for introducing a [bill](#) last December that would supply Internet technology to Iranians to circumvent government restrictions. “We need to communicate more, not less,” he stated. “We need to align our rhetoric with our action.” Ellison informed the audience of the “Stand With the People of Iran” Act ([SWIPA](#)), which he introduced to support the human rights agenda within Iran and to place targeted sanctions on the regime and companies that work with it. **“A democratic Iran that respects human rights should be our top priority,”** he stressed.

Recognizing the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, Ellison highlighted the importance that women, such as **Neda Agha Soltan**, played in the Iranian struggle for

human rights. “Iran is not like Saudi Arabia, which is a woman’s apartheid,” he said. However, women and ethnic minorities are still being subjected to harsher treatment by the government. **Ellison also emphasized that human rights in Iran is more important than the nuclear issue, and that the former should not be a means to the latter.** “We need to make this [human rights] the main issue,” he said, promising to be in direct communication with the Iranian-American community throughout the process.

Neil MacFarquhar, a former *New York Times* Middle East correspondent, moderated the first panel discussion, entitled “**A Century Old Struggle for Democracy**,” which included Prof. **Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak** from the University of Maryland, Prof. **Scott Lucas** from the University of Birmingham and Prof. **Muhammad Sahimi** from the University of Southern California.

MacFarquhar first asked “what is the Green Movement and what are its ultimate goals?” Hakkak believed that what began as a protest against last summer’s election transformed into a widespread coalition of citizens that spans across the political and religious spectrum. Like all social movements, this one has visible and invisible aspects to it. Lucas also saw “Green as an umbrella movement” that coalesces around a general desire for civil rights. For some, it is a gradual process that began in 1979 and whose stakes were raised by the elections this past June. “This is a marathon,” he stressed, “not a sprint.” Sahimi explained that unlike previous elections, the June 12th election was a “demand-based election,” whose opposition candidate, **Mir Hussein Mousavi**, was chosen because he represented the demands of the people. Nonetheless, the elections were rigged. Sahimi also agreed that the Green Movement covers a broad coalition of people, ranging from those desiring crippling sanctions to those who see it as a continuation of the revolution.

MacFarquhar wondered whether the movement had a pronounced leadership and whether it even needed a shared set of goals. Hakkak answered that settling on a leadership now with fracture the broad nature of its movement, and that the one who eventually emerges as the leader will probably be different than the many leaders that currently exist. “It’s a young movement,” he said, “and it needs a young leader.” He also said that over time, perhaps decades, the Green Movement will eventually solve Iran’s problems. Sahimi disagreed, saying that Mousavi is the clear leader of the movement, at least of those living in Iran. Lucas highlighted **the political space that the Green Movement opened up for others, such as the conservative Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, to criticize and protest against the government.**

Hakkak also lamented the lack of participation by the Labor movement, whom he believes has been co-opted by the state. “Students are good at launching protests, but are not enough to cripple the state,” he argued. To succeed, the Green Movement must first bring labor groups into its coalition. Lucas disagreed with this assessment, pointing to a number of recent protests by sugar cane workers, steel workers and bus drivers. He also stressed that the Iranian government has to expend a lot of energy to squash the ongoing dissent. **“The regime has to win every time; the opposition only has to win once.”** Sahimi agreed, emphasizing the large reservoirs of resources and psychological pressures that the Iranian government must constantly utilize to control the protests. With reports that Ayatollah **Khamenei** is suffering from a deep depression, the pressure appears to have an impact.

MacFarquhar also asked how the outside can lend support without tainting those on the inside. Lucas recommended “engaging, but not imposing.” He advocated first becoming educated, and then communicating those findings with journalists, academics and people in Iran. He also suggested that **by harping on the nuclear concerns, the U.S. government helps prop up Ahmadinejad.** Sahimi agreed that we are placing too much emphasis on the nuclear issue, when **we should be criticizing Iran for its human rights violations – an issue about which many hard-line clerics are surprisingly sensitive.** Hakkak also reiterated that the U.S. should “give more support for human rights than for democracy.” Lastly, Sahimi warned that sanctions that negatively impact the Iranian people can be used as propaganda tools by the Revolutionary Guards against the Western world.

Trita Parsi moderated the second panel discussion, entitled “**The U.S. and Iran: Back to Confrontation,**” which included Prof. **Juan Cole** from the University of Michigan, Amb. **Robert Hunter** from the RAND Corporation, and **Robert Malley** of the International Crisis Group.

Parsi first asked the panelists to make an assessment of U.S. policy toward Iran. Cole alerted the audience to seeming mutual objectives between both countries, including a desire to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban as well as a desire to ensure a democratic Iraq, whose Shiite population now has a stronger voice. On the other hand, Iran and the U.S. disagree sharply on a number of other elements, such as their posture toward Israel, their nuclear enrichment program and their human rights record, all of which have made it difficult for the Obama administration to move forward on its engagement plans. Hunter argued **that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons or if it is “one screw-driver away” from such a capacity, it will “fundamentally transform Middle East politics in ways that are not positive.**” To persuade the Iranians not to pursue enrichment, we must offer them the security they likely desire. In assessing the U.S.-Iranian relationship, Malley believes that “a lot went wrong, but its not clear that a lot could have gone right.” Serving as impediments to rapprochement, he cited (i) a long history of distrust and estrangement between the two countries; (ii) different definition of normalization (such as a refusal by the U.S. to treat Iran as a strategic power in the region); and (iii) a domestic politics in both countries that make any form of engagement all the more difficult.

Malley also believed that the United States “was too nuclear focused” when it should have aimed for a more strategic dialogue between countries. **The notion that Iran “will give up its enrichment is a fantasy,**” Malley said. Given this reality, the U.S. should define its end game without giving in to “the political metaphor of a ticking clock” – i.e. that other actors will take action. Military action, he argued, would “be a tragic mistake.”

Cole did not think that the Obama administration would be pushed into a military confrontation with Iran. He also expressed that “the Iranians are nowhere near being able to enrich uranium near weapons grade.” The U.S. government has to realized that the Iranians are an energy insecure country that fears over-reliance on the international community. As a result, the U.S. needs to reassure Iran about its security.

Hunter argued that “dealing with Iranians is like dealing with the French,” both of whom are very proud nations with long memories. As a result, any Iranian administration would have a similar position on the nuclear issue. Nonetheless, so long as the U.S. has interests in the

region, Iran will not be a hegemon. With a nuclear capacity, “they will be perceived as a pariah state.” The problem, Hunter foresees, is that the Iranians do not have any nuclear strategists who have adequately thought about this issue.

Malley believed that sanctions “may make us feel good” but “it doesn’t meet the objectives of curtailing the nuclear” threat. Worse, if the United Nations decides to vote against sanctions, U.S. strength will diminish dramatically in the international arena. The reason the U.S. is imposing sanctions is to quell Israeli anxieties and to delay a decision about how to relate to a nuclear Iran. We should use this time not just to gain time, he argued, but to think more creatively vis-à-vis diplomacy with Iran.

In answer to Parsi’s final question about whether U.S. policy has made the region safer, Hunter suggested that no U.S. administration “has had an exemplary record in the Middle East.” More importantly, because the introduction of nuclear weapons in Iran will create even greater instability, we need to work on fostering a nuclear-free Middle East. We need to develop alternative ways to enhance security in the region so countries will lose the incentive to build the bomb. Cole ended by explaining that Iran has taken a certain posture to the world system – one of victimization and a desire to escape dominance by foreign conquerors – that is well grounded in historical fact for the past two hundred years. “The Iranians know well their own history of subjugation and wants to avoid it.”