



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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The U.S. and Iran: Between Human Rights, Diplomacy and Sanctions

National Iranian American Council
Dirksen Senate Office Building G-50
9:00 – 12:00 pm, November 4, 2009

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) hosted two panel discussions concerning the internal battle for human rights in Iran and American foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program in light of that struggle. The first panel, entitled "Internal Dynamics: Human Rights and the Battle for Iran," included **Professor Mehrzad Boroujerdi** of Syracuse University, **Dr. Hadi Ghaemi** of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, and **Geneive Abdo** of the Century Foundation. The second panel, "Assessing Obama's Diplomacy," was comprised of **Ambassador Thomas Pickering**, **Greg Thielmann** of The Arms Control Association, and **Ambassador John Limbert**. The president of NIAC, **Dr. Trita Parsi**, moderated the event.

Parsi opened the event by recognizing Ambassador Limbert and **Ambassador Bruce Laingen**, both of whom were taken hostage thirty years ago today when students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The trauma that day has split the United States and Iran, creating divergent narratives. The U.S. views the tense relationship with Iran as a direct result of the embassy takeover. However, Iran cites the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup as the beginning of sour relations. For Parsi, the future has been trapped in the past for too long, but there may now be an opening to improve relations between the two countries. Today, **Ayatollah Montezari** declared the **takeover an error because of the suffering it imposed on the American people, just as the Iranian people continue to suffer at the hands of their government**. Parsi observed that as we speak today, Iranians are bravely confronting the regime on the streets of Iran, despite the real threat of torture, rape and death.

Ghaemi then explained that the **opposition movement in Iran is a civil rights movement more than a political movement**. Diverse groups from across Iranian society have joined forces to demand their fundamental rights. While the militarism and absolutism of the regime has been laid bare, the opposition primarily does not seek regime change, but instead aspire to reform their government. Importantly, the opposition movement has adopted nonviolence unequivocally. While **Mir Hossein Moussavi** has become the figurehead of the movement, he is not the leader. Instead, every citizen is a leader of this movement as well as a media outlet. More than anything else, it is driven by the youth.

Abdo elucidated on the **growing militarization of the regime**. Over the past decade, both civil society and the security apparatus have gained strength. Under **Supreme Leader Khamenei**, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has become a central economic and political power. For the first time, IRGC commanders have openly supported **President Ahmadinejad** without any pretense for neutrality. So while the opposition movement is stronger than ever, it faces a larger security apparatus.

Boroujerdi also emphasized the **broad appeal of the opposition movement**, a factor lacking in previous episodes of protest against the regime. However, the opposition is not a revolutionary movement. With that said, Boroujerdi predicted the emergence of a new group of young leaders who could potentially harbor more radical ambitions than the current leadership. He specifically cited the

example of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in which, after the leadership was expelled from Lebanon, a new cadre of leaders was formed within the territories that spearheaded the first Intifada. Having himself participated in the 1979 revolution, Boroujerdi described the hesitation of his generation to call for a revolution and plunge their country into turmoil once again, instead preferring gradual change.

Abdo elaborated that the opposition does not need or want to resort to violence because they hold the moral high ground. By continuing to emphasize that the **Islamic regime is no longer Islamic**, the opposition can exacerbate splits within the regime and force reform. Ghaemi confirmed that nonviolence is the strategy of both the leadership and the youth of the movement.

According to Ghaemi, while Iranians view **President Obama** as a unique moral authority, they do not expect political support from the United States. Boroujerdi explained that the Obama administration has sent a clear signal it intends to negotiate regardless of the internal situation, as the U.S. reaches out to Ahmadinejad during his “moment of infamy.” He argued Obama must walk a fine line between achieving short-term gains by striking a nuclear deal and the long-term price of ignoring the opposition movement. Abdo detailed how the opposition, while there is still debate, seeks assistance from the United States. They are **particularly disappointed with the decrease of funding to civil society throughout the Middle East**, funding they rely on to publish their newspapers and run their websites.

Therefore, Ghaemi argued decoupling the nuclear issue from human rights would be a mistake and exactly what Tehran wants. Besides, the Iranian government is currently too weak to strike any substantive deal. Boroujerdi agreed, explaining that the regime hopes to make concessions on the international stage in order to divert attention from the strife at home. **If more sanctions are applied, they should focus only on the regime while avoiding harm to innocent citizens**. Ghaemi reminded the audience that broad sanctions would stir anti-Americanism in certain segments of Iranian society. Besides, as in Iraq, broad sanctions would likely only solidify the regime’s hold on power.

Limbert began the second panel by admitting he is surprised that tensions between the U.S. and Iran have lasted for so long. Pickering emphasizes that negotiations will take a long time and won’t be easy. He praised the Obama administration for opening negotiations without preconditions, tolerating some Iranian enrichment, and seeking to reduce nuclear weapons worldwide. Thielmann argued the Vienna proposal is an important opportunity to build trust and explored ways to make it work, such as allowing Turkey to hold Iran’s LEU stockpile instead of Russia or France. However, both Pickering and Thielmann agreed that the Vienna proposal does not resolve the most important outstanding issues, but instead buys time for further negotiations to work.

Limbert warned against the risk of “asymmetric negotiations” when each party is negotiating over different issues. Both parties must first determine what the other side wants and build from there. Given the immense distrust on all sides, symbolic steps are important to gain momentum. Furthermore, Limbert dismissed the use of timelines, citing the importance of patience in the hostage negotiations that eventually succeeded in freeing him and the other Americans detained in 1979. Finally, Limbert asserted that President Obama has presented a serious dilemma for Khamenei. After all, it’s much easier to deal with a clear enemy than a rival. Therefore Khamenei is forced to make rationalizations which, given enough time, will come back to discredit the regime as Obama continues to seek to engage. To conclude, Thielmann reaffirmed the **importance of ensuring U.S. sanctions do not perversely strengthen** the regime and Pickering emphasized how the threat of political isolation, not sanctions, scares the regime.