



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**“Let the Swords Encircle Me: A Journey Behind the Headlines of Iran”**  
*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*  
1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
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**Scott Petersen** presented his new book, “Let the Swords Encircle Me: A Journey Behind the Headlines of Iran,” Tuesday at an event sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Woodrow Wilson Center's Middle East Program. The Carnegie Endowment’s **Karim Sadjadpour** gave a brief response and the subsequent question and answer session was moderated by **Halah Esfandiari**, Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Middle East Program.

After a brief introduction from **Esfandiari**, Petersen began by describing Iran as a “paradise” for journalists. People are open and eager to share their experiences and opinions and the Iranians streets have what he called “extraordinary color and feel.” In his new book, Petersen said, he uses the voices of Iranians from all walks of life to describe how Iran has changed over the past 15 years. Their stories help us to understand significant events like the rise of **Ahmadinejad**-led neoconservatives, the development of the Green movement, and the Ayatollah’s paranoia.

As an example, Petersen described how in 1998 following the US-Iran World Cup match he witnessed Iranians taking burning American flags from militants, extinguishing the flames and absconding with the flags tucked under their shirts. When Petersen spoke with the Iranians they told him “We prevented the flag from being burned because we are with the Americans.” Petersen cautioned that this does not mean Iranians are open to the possibility of American-backed regime change. This is the last thing the Iranians want. The opposition wants to “wage with their own hands” the battle against the current regime.

Petersen then turned to two key points about the current regime in Iran. First, the Iranians leadership has spent a great deal of time dissecting previous regime changes in an attempt to learn from the mistakes of others. The Ayatollah wanted to know how Nelson Mandela and others managed to come to power, even after years of government repression. According to Petersen, the regime failed to learn one important lesson: in many cases, violence after elections is often sparked by the government’s decision to rig the election, which is exactly what happened in Iran.

The second point Petersen made was that the Iran-Iraq War, more so than any other single event, shaped the current leadership’s mentality; it was their “crucible” experience. For them, it was a “sacred war” and by virtue of their survival, they became rightful leaders of Iran. Petersen also noted that the War inspired “a remarkable amount of self reliance” on the part of Iran’s leadership.

**Sadjadpour** then took the floor and began by asking Petersen to comment on how Iran compares to the many other places he has worked as a journalist. Petersen responded that compared to other countries in the region, Iranians have a remarkably strong sense of exceptionalism. He also noted the

remarkable resilience of Iran artists and the flourishing political debate at the street level which, according to Petersen, contrasts starkly with resignation of Iraqis and other Arabs. Sadjadpour then specifically asked Petersen to compare Turkey and Iran since both countries have struggled to balance Islam and modernity over the past century. Petersen responded that even though many drew comparisons between Shah Reza and Ataturk, what has happened in the decades since both men ruled has been completely different. While many secular Turks fear that their country is headed for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution, their paranoia is completely unfounded.

Next, Sadjadpour asked what Petersen thought would happen if the Green movement swept to power. Would there be a “desire for retribution?” Petersen responded by saying that he thinks a gradual evolution is more likely than a violent revolution and in such a situation, the new leaders would have little interest in retribution. Following up, Sadjadpour asked if he thought the Green movement was part of this evolution, to which Petersen responded in the affirmative. Ultimately, Petersen added, the most important lesson is that change, whenever and in whatever form it comes, will be unexpected.

Esfandiari then opened the floor to questions from the audience. The first questioner asked if Petersen thought the Green movement actually represented a majority of Iranians and if the Bush administration’s rhetoric made the rise of the Iranian neoconservatives possible. In response to the first question, Petersen said that the majority of Iranians who voted for Khatami didn’t just disappear. They became disheartened and left the public political sphere. He went on to say that they were still there and from time to time, the most recent example being the protests after the last election, they rise up. On the second question, Petersen said that the process has been “too dynamic” and has had too many players to place the blame on just the Bush administration.

The next questioner asked if the Obama administration’s refusal to press Iran on democracy and human rights has alienated members of the Iranian opposition. Petersen responded that, of late, the Obama administration has been much stronger in its criticism of Iran’s human rights record and that its initial hesitancy was because the administration hoped to engage Iran gradually. This plan was upended when the regime became consumed with preserving its existence following the contested election.

The next question addressed what, if anything, the current regime learned from the Shah. Petersen responded that the Ayatollah had learned a great deal from the Shah’s experience, but in one key instance, he learned the wrong lesson. The lesson he took from the Shah was never to capitulate. What they should have learned instead is that sometimes it is necessary to give in slightly to prevent later escalation.

The final questioner asked why Petersen thinks evolutionary change is more likely, given the prevalence of violence over the past year. Petersen responded that in his view, the Iranian people do not want another revolution or more violence and if they can avoid those things they will.