



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Netizens' in Iran and the Greater Middle East: A Discussion on the Fate of Iranian Reporters"

The School of Advanced International Studies and Reporters Without Borders
1740 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
April 5, 2010, 12:00 – 2:00 PM

The School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) co-hosted an event to analyze the deteriorating conditions for journalists in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East. **Clothilde Le Coz**, director of RSF's Washington Bureau, moderated a panel of three prominent Middle Eastern voices: **Azar Nafisi**, executive director of Cultural Conversations at SAIS' Foreign Policy Institute and author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*; **Mona Eltahawy**, syndicated columnist and international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues; and **Nikahang Kowsar**, cartoonist and syndicated *New York Times* editor.

Clothilde Le Coz opened by explaining that new technologies in Iran are playing a great role, but also create points of vulnerability because people are worried that the government will find them and their friends and family through facebook and other services. She then handed off to **Nikahang Kowsar**, who asserted that everything starts from freedom of speech in Iran – "we often say that we have freedom of speech, but we don't have freedom after speech." A number of journalists are currently imprisoned, and many more Iranian reporters have become accidental immigrants, living either in camps or hostiles in other countries. He then gave a presentation of various political cartoons, pointing out parallels between the political message of the cartoon and current realities for Iranian journalists.

Engaging in a bit of self-criticism, **Kowsar also addressed the need for all Iranian journalists – particularly those defending human rights – to dismiss their personal biases in order to cultivate a more standardized and value-based system of reporting on objective facts, rather than subjective narratives that are often created and fed to reporters by both the government and opposition leaders.** He insisted that many Iranians are hungry for the opportunity to learn more about the craft of journalism, but they either lack the money or institutional resources (through universities or other services) to acquire the appropriate training.

Shifting gears, **Mona Eltahawy** spent some time discussing citizen journalism in Egypt. Countering what has become conventional wisdom in many foreign policy circles, she reported that young Egyptians are not particularly enthralled with **Mohammad ElBaradei**. They say that they'll continue to meet with him, but are perturbed that he has surrounded himself with certain shady opposition leaders that don't represent their hopes or aspirations. Nonetheless, the debate surrounding his emergence indicates that Egyptian youth – which make up half of the total Egyptian population – are realizing the power of internet tools to challenge the regime and reveal areas of weakness.

Addressing those who warn of the inherent risks of internet exposure, Eltahawy explained that the dangers of the internet can be interpreted in two ways: **young people should be careful because they could be arrested; or, these crackdowns on citizen journalists reveal structural weaknesses within authoritarian governments – the fact that regimes will arrest young internet users for even the mildest of transgressions is not a show of strength or confidence.**

"Citizen journalism is more about the 'I' than the objective approach," she said, admitting that many people have questioned the value of "I" journalism as a way to do anything more than simply "message the ego." But she pointed to an example of citizen journalism in Egypt that had a measurable effect: **a group of female bloggers, annoyed with the lack of police attention toward cases of female groping, started documenting episodes online and drew attention toward the epidemic, leading to a moderate attitudinal change within the country.**

Next, Azar Nafisi discussed how Western countries might address the troubling state of human rights across the Middle East. "The most important thing we can do is to understand," she said. "It is the base of any relationship." However, she went on to say that "It's extremely reductionist to talk about the 'Muslim world' as though it's a single entity." This extracts all of the religion's nuances and ascribes a single identity to the region. **Cultures are fluid, she said, which nullifies the argument that Westerners should not push for human rights standards for fear of offending a particular cultural norm.** "The excuse many use is 'culture,'" she said. But no country in the world is "culturally determined" or exclusively beholden to certain characteristics. As it pertains to Iran, she explained that for 150 years prior to 1979 Iranians had been fighting against political absolutism and religious orthodoxy – "fighting the very laws the Islamic republic imposed on it." Therefore, contemporary social practices should not preclude human rights advocates from exposing the abuses within Iran and other MENA countries.

"Democracy and human rights are not a western thing," she said, "so we should be looking at Iran's civil society and try to understand what they want and what they're fighting for. A lot of people talk about movements only in political terms – but it goes much further than just politics – Iran is showing us that it's also existential." What makes people stand up and fight, she contends, is not political ambition or affection for political parties – rather, it's about overcoming the lies and humiliation and demeaning nature of society that constantly prevents people from expressing their freedom. **"The first step toward democracy is accepting responsibility for your actions – and we should have that discourse with the Iranian and Egyptian people."**

In response to a question about practical tools human rights practitioners might use to combat such repression, Eltahawy recommended boycotting U.S. corporations who manufacture technologies and then allow regimes to use them for nefarious purposes. **Kowsar then addressed a question about journalistic quality, and suggested that citizen journalists seeking a higher level of training should volunteer with organizations or news outlets to learn about their methods and practices.** Eltahawy also pointed out that the future will involve a more substantial convergence of citizen journalism and more conventional journalism – taking advantage of each other's strengths in order to produce a more comprehensive and powerful mode of reporting.