



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge”

The New America Foundation 1899 L Street NW Suite 400 Washington, DC

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The New America Foundation (NAF) held an event today marking the release of **Hooman Majd’s** new book, “The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge.” Majd was introduced by **Steve Clemons**, Senior Fellow and Director of the American Strategy Program at NAF.

Clemons began his introduction by comparing Hooman Majd to either a rockstar or a CIA agent. This description would prove prophetic, as Majd revealed at the beginning of his talk that he had been accused by hardliners in Iran of being a CIA agent just two weeks prior to the event.

Majd began by defining himself as a writer, not an analyst. **He noted the lack of understanding between the US and Iran which Majd finds troubling because of the increasing prominence of Iran in US foreign policy and the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East.** In Majd’s estimation, the recent “rockstar” greeting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad enjoyed in Beirut had less to do with Ahmadinejad personally (who, Majd said, would not enjoy the same level of enthusiasm in Iran) than it did with Iran’s popularity in Lebanon.

He then moved on to his book, the title of which he said was good prior to the 2009 elections, but less accurate afterward. Majd said that the election and the resulting unrest “may not be the worst thing” for Iran. It exposed some of the rifts between the country’s clerics and its secular leaders. Majd described Ahmadinejad as a “layman” who has treated some in the clerical establishment with “disdain.” This is a problem for the president, this lack of an “Islamic veneer.” **Majd pointed out that one of the major misunderstandings between the US and Iran is that the Iranian people want democracy, but they want a democracy with an “Islamic veneer,” similar to the “Judeo-Christian veneer” that American democracy has.** Majd related a quote from former Iranian president Khatami who said “democracy in Iran is impossible without Islam.” Majd emphasized that any evolution towards democracy in Iran would include an Islamic element for the foreseeable future.

In Majd’s opinion, the main problem during the 2009 election was that the international community misread what was happening in the country. **Majd argued that the aim of the Green Movement was not to “overthrow” the system, but rather to reform it.** He pointed to the leadership of the Green Movement, including Mousavi and Karroubi, both of whom have held high level positions within the government, as examples of the movement’s insider make-up. **To this day, Majd said, no opposition leader has come out publicly in support of a total reinvention of the political system in Iran.** He related that he is often asked how Iran could be a democracy if there is a Supreme Leader. Majd said that, yes, the Supreme Leader has dictatorial power within the current system, but that up until 2009 he had been careful not to exercise it. There are too many checks and balances in the system and there are too many groups that vie for influence and power, which makes overreach risky, even for the Supreme Leader. Another question that Majd said he is often asked is whether or not the Green Movement will

go back to the streets in protest. Majd said that he thought this to be unlikely. **Iranians, not unlike Americans, are primarily concerned with economic security issues like employment and prices of basic goods.** Majd conceded that he did not know the future of the Green Movement but said that he thought any further mass protests would be crushed.

US policy is not helping the reform movement in Iran, in Majd's opinion. While sanctions may be supported by some in the diaspora community and others, the sanctions are ineffective, even taking the recent sanctions on individuals within the regime into account. As Majd noted, the Iranian government has been under sanctions in some form for thirty years, and those in charge presently fought in the Iran/Iraq War and have dealt with incessant American and Israeli pressure for decades. They are not going to crumble because of sanctions, and they are certainly not going to crumble over the nuclear issue. **Majd said that the right to nuclear power (or uranium enrichment) is one of the least controversial issues in Iran. The regime and the leaders of the opposition actually agree that it is Iran's right to enrich uranium.** Regardless, the Green Movement leaders, dissident clerics, and other groups all agree that sanctions are actually damaging their ability to operate in the country. **Majd reminded the audience that pressure on nations often increases nationalism and brings political opponents together, not unlike the US after 9/11.** Majd said that the Iranian foreign minister had recently expressed a desire to talk with the US and even Ahmadinejad offered to sit down with President Obama, albeit in the form of a debate at the UN (which Majd described as Ahmadinejad's "wacky" way of offering negotiations). Majd concluded his statements by noting that political space could be opened for the reform movement in Iran by lessening the pressure on the regime, preferably by coming to some kind of negotiated settlement on the nuclear issue and obtaining an agreement from Iran to reduce its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. He also stressed that Iranians and Americans are not so different. The vast majority of Iranians support the freedom of speech, assembly, and association while detesting the idea of political prisoners. He identified these as areas of common cause upon which to build.

Clemons kicked off the question's by asking what one should believe with regards to the regimes position on the nuclear issue. Clemons mentioned that he had spoken with members of Israel's intelligence community that said that sanctions were actually effective and would soon force the Iranians back to the negotiating table. Clemons wondered where Ahmadinejad and Khamenei stood on the issue at present and if there was disagreement between the two.

Majd said that it is hard to tell. **Ultimately, Khamenei is the "decider," and Khamenei's opinion of Ahmadinejad "wavers."** He recommended watching the Larijani brothers, who are perhaps closest to the Supreme Leader. Majd said the when Ali Larijani (the Speaker of the Majlis) takes his problems with Ahmadinejad to Khamenei, they are dealt with swiftly and quietly. **He described the power relations between the president and the Supreme Leader as "back and forth" and a "balancing" act.** The one area where the president does have Khameneis confidence is in foreign policy. Majd said there was a general feeling that the reformers are "more easily duped" by the West than hardliners in this area, although Majd clarified that the reformers were not thought of as disloyal in foreign affairs because if they were "they would be dead." **The Bush Administration's decision to name Iran as a member of the "Axis of Evil" definitively ended the outreach began by former president Khatami.**

The next questioner asked if, considering the "consensus" about uranium enrichment, Majd thought the Iranians were trying to build a nuclear weapon.

Clemons offered that while in China recently, it was freely spoken that both the Chinese and the Russians believe that Iran is trying to achieve the “Japan Option,” meaning the ability to weaponize uranium quickly in the event of an incident. Majd replied that no one really knows but that whatever is decided, it will be decided by committee, not by the fiat of the Supreme Leader. He did say that he believes they want the capability, but that the Iranians fear the consequences. Majd reminded the audience that Khamenei released a fatwa against nuclear weapons, meaning that if Iran was discovered making a bomb, he would be exposed as a liar. And, in Majd’s estimation, the Iranians know that they would be unable to hide a weapons program for long. He added that the Iranians are genuinely interested in using nuclear energy to diversify their energy production, hence freeing oil for sale to foreign markets.

Another questioner asked about the level of support for Hamas and Hezbollah in Iran. Majd described the level of “moral support” as high, although many Iranians question the wisdom of sending large amounts of money and arms to the groups.

The last few questions were asked as a group. The first dealt with the loyalty of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), the second with the divisions between Khamenei and the clerical community, and the final question was on the Iranian peoples reaction to President Obama’s general silence in June 2009 when the protests were being violently put down.

In response to the IRGC question, Majd compared the Corps to other militaries saying that their loyalties lie with the commander in chief, being Khamenei. He added that he believed they would have supported Mousavi if told to do so by the Supreme Leader. In response to the question about the clerical divisions, Majd said that there was “no doubt” that there was a divide, but that there had always been divisions amongst the clerics. He pointed to Ayatollah Montazeri as the most prominent example of a cleric sympathetic to the reformist agenda. **Majd said that some senior clerics are in a unique position to deal with the Supreme Leader, as they are technically senior to him in the religious hierarchy.** Majd responded to the last question about the Iranian people’s reaction to Obama’s relative silence during June 2009 by saying that it was a bigger issue for the diaspora community than those in Iran. Most in Iran were not looking for overt US support, according to Majd. He added that he thought it was likely that the Obama Administration also recognized that their full throated support would actually damage the reputation of the Green Movement and possibly harm the negotiations on the nuclear issue. Clemons added that, to his knowledge, the Administration was greatly conflicted about how to react. Clemons noted that Vice President Joe Biden expressed privately a desire to be more openly supporting of the Green Movement, but that ultimately a desire to avoid harming the nuclear negotiations won the day.

The final word was given to Majd, who used it to illustrate that sanctions are affecting civilians in Iran. He related the story of a friend who had recently returned from Iran to find that her bank accounts were frozen for trying to pay her bills from Iran.