



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Elevating Human Rights on the U.S. Policy Agenda for Iran"

Center for American Progress

1333 H Street NW

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The Center for American Progress hosted an event to explore the efficacy of various U.S. foreign policy tools toward addressing human rights in Iran. The massive street protests following Iran's presidential election of June 2009 highlighted Iranians' disapproval of their ruling regime. Continuing protests during subsequent Iranian holidays and observances have showed that Iran's opposition movement remains vital, and also signaled that Tehran's grip on power may be somewhat vulnerable if the international community steadfastly supports Iranians' basic rights. Though the administration has not ignored human rights in Iran, the issue remains an underutilized lever of American foreign policy. With large demonstrations expected during the February 11 anniversary of Iran's 1979 revolution, likely to be followed by another government crackdown, the event's participants examined the policy options currently being debated by the administration, and discussed ways to effectively harness human rights promotion to pressure on the Iranian regime.

Matthew Duss, National Security Researcher at the Center for American Progress, moderated a panel that included **Geneive Abdo**, Fellow and Iran Analyst and The Century Foundation; **Hadi Ghaemi**, Coordinator of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; and **Michael Signer**, Fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute.

Duss kicked off the discussion by asking **Geneive Abdo** to comment on the roots of the opposition movement as well as its place within Iran's current political environment. Abdo claimed that the next few months will reveal the true durability of the Green movement, noting that **although the recent Ashura protests weren't as large, its participants were a lot more determined and fearless, indicating that the movement may now be a permanent force in Iranian politics**. However, she sensed concern within the opposition – particularly the leadership – that many of its fearless young members have started to radicalize beyond the parameters of the original Green movement. "The question," she continued, "is how many people are going to continue to demonstrate, who will they be, will the leadership stay active, and how will the state respond?" As things stand today, "we're locked in this dynamic where we have radicalization on both sides."

Duss followed up by asking Abdo about the degree of collaboration between the Green movement's elite representatives and grassroots activists. She replied that coordination between the leadership and young demonstrators has certainly decreased since June and July, primarily due to fear of movement-wide radicalization. **Some leaders have retreated back into the system, calling for a unity government or exploring various forms of reconciliation with the regime**.

Responding to a question about two Iranian men who were recently executed, **Hadi Ghaemi** observed that we haven't seen such a serious human rights situation Iran since the 1980s. He claimed that the

executed men were falsely accused of participating in the demonstrations, and were simply victims of the intelligence ministry's coercive tactics of entrapment and intimidation. With respect to the larger opposition movement, Ghaemi maintained that the demonstrators want to be recognized not only as a political movement, but as a civil and human rights movement as well. They seek international recognition that these rights are legitimate, and they're asking why the international community isn't holding Iran accountable for violating the many international treaties to which it is a signatory. Despite the **Obama** administration's reticence toward injecting itself into the human rights effort, Ghaemi feels that the U.S. need not be overly cautious about interfering.

Shifting the conversation toward policy formulation, **Michael Signer** referenced the debate surrounding Obama's "relationship to doctrine." **He addressed the tendency among progressives to sway heavily toward pragmatism as a reaction to the previous administration's heavy-handed doctrinal approach.** However, he worries that this new mindset may ultimately collapse upon itself because it's not sure what its overarching purpose is; "it may seem like a doctrine by contrast but it's not different in origin." Signer sees the current environment as an opportunity for the U.S. to stand for the Iranian people, and he believes there are policy tools available to pursue that course.

Duss addressed the debate surrounding the virtues of rhetorical displays of support, and asked Abdo about the sort of relationship the opposition wants from the United States. She replied that **"its easy to assume the opposition is waiting for support, and that may be true for some, but it's not true for many."** There is disagreement within the movement about the value of U.S. involvement, and Abdo reminded the audience that many demonstrators don't have positive impressions of U.S. foreign policy. For the most part, she said, they seek more tangible support (i.e. internet freedom) that would provide them with the ability to overcome regime interference. More broadly, however, **many opposition members fear that the U.S. has prioritized regional security at the expense of human rights.**

Responding to Duss' question about the mechanics of initiating a regime change policy, Abdo noted the regime is very nervous and cognizant of the fact that this movement is the most serious threat in 30 years. However, she emphasized the importance of being realistic about the outcome – **"most knowledgeable people don't believe that there's going to be regime change or another revolution – and that's not even what the opposition necessarily wants."** The state has already made some compromises, and she believes that we may see more if the opposition becomes a lasting political force into the future. Such compromises are more likely in the short-term, and Abdo firmly believes that it would take nothing short of a military attack to induce a full-fledged political overhaul.

The discussion pivoted to the recently passed Iran sanctions bill, and the panelists generally agreed that its provisions won't produce the intended effect. Ghaemi commented that the bill as constructed would weaken civil society while strengthening the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG). The turf war, he said, is over oil wealth in the country, which is largely controlled by IRG-associated companies. Crippling these companies would be effective, but it's extremely hard to determine which companies are directly related to the IRG.

Signer agreed that targeted sanctions would allow for a more surgical, precise attack on the pillars of the regime. But he also noted that **"constitutionalism is a good rubric for knitting together ideas and aims on how we interact with nascent democracies."** He feels it's important to understand public opinion, impressions of the United States, and impressions of the country's own culture and history. Interacting on this level requires an entirely different set of policy tools, but he thinks it may produce positive results with Iran.

In response to a question about the emerging fissures within the clerical establishment, Abdo emphasized the significance of Iran's failure as an Islamic state: **"This is the greatest casualty that's come out of the last seven months; it's difficult to now call Iran a republic or an Islamic state."** Its failure as an Islamist ideal has called into question whether an Islamic state is compatible with democracy. She also called attention to the dearth of Islamist groups expressing enthusiasm, or even support, for Iran's behavior.

A member of the audience asked about the likelihood of a civil war erupting, either between the opposition and the regime or within the regime itself. While conceding that the probability of an all-out civil war is low, **Ghaemi said that fissures within the IRG could be key to solving the political crisis.**

Andrew Albertson, POMED's Executive Director, asked the panel about various policy options the administration might consider in order to positively address Iranian human rights issues. Signer framed the issue around Iranian public opinion, saying that our policy should largely be formulated with the intention of creating a better impression of the U.S. among the Iranian people. He saw the Cairo address as a promising step, and generating greater momentum on this front could produce some upward pressure on the regime from those who are more receptive to U.S. values. **Ghaemi added that multilateralism is the key to addressing human rights.** Working with other countries and utilizing a collective energy in the UN and UN Human Rights Council might open up political space for the opposition movement. Duss responded that there may be a tendency to overestimate the extent to which U.S. policies can affect Iranian outcomes, but wondered whether Obama's open-ended offer of dialogue around the nuclear issue may in fact be putting pressure on Iran from other angles. Abdo was leery about too much U.S. involvement since there is still a part of the Iranian population who believes the regime's propaganda. But she also noted that Iran has always been sensitive about its human rights record. Additionally, because the nuclear issue appears to be at an impasse, she thinks it may be time to apply other types of pressure. An external investigation could be useful, and wouldn't necessarily hurt the opposition since regime would not be able to accuse it of being Western pawns.

Finally, in response to a question about the impact of Iran's social demographics upon its future politics, **Abdo commented that the willingness of young people to challenge the concept of Islamist governance has risen dramatically over the past decade**, which she sees as a sign that Iran's future may involve a significant shift toward secularism. Although Signer acknowledged the same demographic phenomenon, he feels that Iran's political future has yet to be determined. He sees an opportunity, but fears that without the correct policy approach Iran's young demographic might develop anti-western sentiments, thereby undermining future efforts at rapprochement. However, Ghaemi disagreed, stating that the young population of Iran definitely sees its future in a secular republic.