

# **“Iran: From Theocracy to Democracy”**

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Thank you for the kind and generous introduction Dr. Miller.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good evening.

It is a special pleasure to be with you here tonight at The George Washington University.

As some of you may know, I have a personal connection to this University as my wife, Yasmine, attended GW as an undergraduate, and she also graduated from GW with a Doctorate in Jurisprudence. I recall the many sleepless nights as she worked to meet course requirements and studying for finals. So in a manner of speaking, I have been where you are today, or at least where your spouses are.

Truly, one of my favorite activities, within the context of my duties, is the opportunities to interact with tomorrow's leaders. Tonight, I would like to share with you, not just the facts, but the sentiments of my fellow compatriots.

These are very troubling times for my country. As many of you have witnessed, especially in the past few months, the searing images on YouTube, Facebook and other media have brought the misery of the Iranian people and the brutality of the clerical regime into vivid perspective.

For those of us who have devoted our entire lives to the cause of democracy and human rights in Iran, we had hoped to avoid this day and these tragic consequences. As it turned out, the events surrounding the fraudulent election in June 2009 caused the people of Iran to reach their point of no return, and the regime to abandon all pretenses of faith, national pride, and humanity.

Last summer, the people of Iran achieved something unprecedented in the history of the 31-year-old Islamic Republic. For the first time, the Iranian people coordinated mass-scale demonstrations against this totalitarian theocratic regime. These demonstrations and protests continue even today, questioning – well beyond the election results of last June – the very legitimacy of the regime and the so-called Supreme Leader Khamenei.

The courage and resolve of these everyday heroes in Iran in the face of the tyranny, injustice and brutality of the regime, has earned them the admiration of people the world over. And so begins what has been dubbed the first revolution of the 21st century – the Twitter Revolution – also called the Green Revolution.

The first and most tangible result of the Green Movement is that the world, today, has a far better understanding of the true nature of the Islamic Republic on the one hand, and the true wishes and aspirations of the Iranian people on the other. The black veil has been torn off the face of the regime. Ultimately, I am confident my country will be liberated from this darkness. The Iranian people will prevail. This regime will fall at the hands of its own people. If you recall nothing of my comments this evening, remember this: the struggle of the Iranian people for democracy, human rights and dignity continues, whether you hear about it on the news in this country or not. It will continue until we prevail, thanks to our heroic youth whose eyes are firmly on the future, not the past.

Let's take a step back now and look at what brought us to this historical juncture. Of course, we should be careful not to limit the scope of the Iranian people's struggle to last summer's election and the events that followed it. To do so would neglect a 31-year history of resistance that must neither be forgotten nor underestimated. In truth, what is going on in Iran today has been years in the making. Nevertheless, last summer's events were a watershed moment for my compatriots as it brought together, for the first time, Iranians of all walks of life and all political persuasions in defiance of the regime. This has not been an easy road. As a student of campaigns of non-violent, civil disobedience around the world, I can affirm that the struggle against brutally repressive regimes has never been simple and without great risks.

Throughout the years, the primary obstacle and limiting factor for my compatriots has been the inability to overtly organize and widely coordinate their efforts. Severe restrictions imposed by the regime on communication, information, assembly and speech, has made it impossible for various sectors of Iranian society to come together and voice their grievances against the regime. Historically, opposition to the clerical regime has taken the form of isolated displays of discontent. One day, it would be students, another day workers and labor forces, or women, or teachers. All previous displays of opposition have been swiftly and brutally crushed by the regime's security apparatus. As a result, few around the world even noticed what was building up in Iran over the course of three decades, despite the warnings those of us familiar with the situation.

Whether the regime miscalculated, or their own infighting distracted them, last summer's elections provided my compatriots with a galvanizing national event through which they could organize a diverse and large-scale uprising. For the first time in 30 years, the people of Iran broke the regime's stranglehold on communication with the outside world. For once, the people had a voice, an identity, a movement, and they were leading it. For the first time in 30 years, the world saw the true face of the Iranian people; who they are, and what they want: freedom! For the first time in 30 years, the world finally saw the clerical regime as it truly is: a brazen, cruel totalitarian system singly focused on perpetuating its radical ideology and sustaining its iron grip on power.

Inside Iran, people continue to seize every opportunity to chip away at the regime's authority. Abroad, members of the Diaspora, some of whom have never visited their homeland, continue to raise awareness of their compatriots' struggle back home. For example, they have organized demonstrations on several continents – some right here on the National Mall – showing their solidarity with their compatriots back home by collecting signatures, wearing green wristbands, and writing to legislators and news editors. I am encouraged by and pleased to witness how the terrible events in Iran have galvanized my compatriots around the world. Our collective salvation from this nightmare lies in democracy and an absolute non-negotiable commitment to human rights for every single Iranian. Our unity will expedite our salvation.

Further, thanks to the efforts of many nameless, faceless heroes, the news permeating from inside is now on numerous websites, and video clips can be viewed on major international media outlets. We were all touched and grateful, when this past summer Twitter decided to postpone a routine maintenance shutdown of their system to allow the Iranian people to communicate during planned demonstrations. Compare and contrast their behavior to Nokia and Siemens, who actually provided the regime technology to spy on the Iranian people and intercept their Internet communications.

Another consequence of the events of the summer of 2009 is that people the world over have grown more attentive to the issue of human rights and lack thereof in Iran. The international community continues to monitor developments in Iran more closely than ever. In recent weeks, numerous government bodies and NGOs have spoken out on the human rights crisis in Iran. In its annual report on human rights released last month, the U.S. State Department expressed the opinion that, despite heavy international pressure on the clerical regime, “the human rights situation in Iran has degenerated since last summer’s disputed presidential election.”

The State Department also expressed concern over the continued persecution of religious minorities in Iran. In February, during the Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Islamic Republic promised to abide by international law. However, shortly thereafter it rejected a U.N. recommendation to end discrimination against Iranian Baha’is. Dozens of members of religious minorities, including Baha’is, Christians and Jews remain in prison in Iran on dubious charges. Their trials, in which they are often denied basic rights such as access to their attorneys, represent clear violations of Iran’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Furthermore, Amnesty International has identified other cases of academics, doctors, journalists, artists, and union leaders, all of whom have been denied their basic rights and imprisoned. And, incredibly, just last month, Journalists Without Borders released a report estimating that one third of the world’s jailed journalists are in Iranian prisons.

As I speak with you this evening, the longest serving political prisoner is still under house arrest: Mr. Amir Entezam, who has refused for 30 years to sign a “to’be-nameh” or “repentance and confession proclamation” in return for his release. We have a learned spiritual leader, Ayatollah Boroujerdi who is in prison and subject to physical and mental torture, for having had the audacity to question the regime’s behavior in the name of Shi’a Islam, and for advocating separation of Mosque from State. We have had in recent weeks, a wave of fleeing bloggers, journalists and activists who are currently living in dismal and deplorable conditions in Turkish and Iraqi refugee camps. These individuals cannot and must not be forgotten, as each of them personify the heroic nature of the Iranian people and their predicaments shine a spotlight on the utter intolerance and cruelty of the regime.

My compatriots can no longer tolerate the status quo. More and more, the solution points towards a systemic political change in Iran. The clerical constitution is fundamentally flawed and in order to move Iran forward it must be replaced. This idea of “regime change” causes controversy, especially here in the U.S., because it carries with it the assumption that such change must be achieved by outside forces or foreign governments. This, however, is a false assumption, and I would add, highly undesirable: I have always expressed that foreign interests attacking or interfering with the sovereignty of my country is undesirable, unwanted, wrong, and in every way contrary to the interests of Iran and the international community. It will only embolden the clerical regime and unify the Iranian people in defense of our homeland. It is precisely due to these sentiments that I volunteered to join the Iranian Air force when Saddam Hussein attacked Iran on September, 1980 – though my offer was rebuffed by the clerical regime. An attack on Iran is an attack on every Iranian patriot. Therefore, I believe and would

argue that regime change in Iran can and must be achieved by Iranians and Iranians alone. Change from outside will be neither legitimate nor sustainable.

Aside from what we have seen from the clerical regime in terms of its oppressive conduct and unpopularity, an analysis of the regime's Constitution leads us to conclude that only systemic political change can establish long-term accountability and transparency in Iran's political affairs. The so-called Islamic Regime, as defined by its Constitution, includes too many undemocratic principles and institutions; hence its government could not be in any way representative of and in service to the people. And, as was finally learned last summer, no number of "elections" can remedy the system's shortcomings. Within the confines of the Islamic Republic's constitution, there is simply no legal method by which the people of Iran can hold the regime accountable.

To continue to examine the elections as just one example of the shortcomings of the constitution: Elections in Iran are not free because, in accordance with the constitution, an unelected, unaccountable committee vets and rejects the vast majority of potential candidates. Elections in Iran are a sham because, as we learned last summer, the state is always prepared to carry out fraud to further its interests. Therefore, elections in Iran are in fact not democratic. It is not that just one group committed fraud last summer; it is that the Iranians are systematically robbed of real choice, and this travesty is codified in their constitution.

Through systemic political change, my compatriots will take the requisite step forward in terms of achieving democracy and establishing human rights for all in Iran. Of course, change alone will not accomplish everything. Subsequent to the dissolution of the present political system, Iranians must establish a system of governance and a government that will safeguard their rights and respond to their demands.

For the future of Iran, I have always advocated the establishment of a secular democracy, where there is a clear separation of mosque from state. My personal preference is for a future constitution based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Aside from my own beliefs, I am confident that, given adequate time and discourse in the public domain, a secular democracy will be the choice of the vast majority of Iranians, particularly for today's youth. My experience based on many meetings with members of the opposition – and particularly the Greens – inside and outside of Iran, increases my confidence in this conclusion. When sovereignty is restored back to the people, this time, they will want a government which will be legitimate, representative, accountable, transparent, and thus sustainable.

Throughout this entire process, however, the role of the international community remains quite important. I am asked often: what can or should the international community do?

If one were to assume that, today, the international community is cognizant of my compatriot's true wishes, it follows that the international community must refrain from engaging in conduct that hinders the Iranian people in their struggle for freedom and strengthens the dictatorship against which they are fighting. Just to give you one specific example: the aforementioned companies of Nokia and Siemens should be held accountable and denounced for selling technology to the clerical regime that helps the regime spy on the Iranian people. Concerned, caring citizens around the world could send a strong message to such companies and their respective governments by threatening boycott, writing letters, and protesting as shareholders to discourage their disregard of the rights of the people of Iran. On the other hand, providing similar technologies and software to my compatriots would help them overcome various blockages in communication and ensure some greater measure of safety for users. Other cyber-tech companies could collaborate with Iranians who are focused on technology and

communications to develop useful, safe communication products and counter measures. Foundations could provide financial support for these technologies and for our refugees.

Let me be clear, no one expects the international community to diminish their own interests in favor of the interests of the Iranian people. However, where those interests coincide, the international community can and should be proactive in their support of the Iranian people's legitimate and just struggle against their oppressors.

Let's consider for a moment the international community's interests and concerns as they pertain to or are affected by Iran. A cursory review would include such interests and concerns as: protecting human rights, stopping the spread of international terror, putting an end to conflict in the Middle East, controlling the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and ensuring stability in the Persian Gulf region.

I have stated many times in op-eds and interviews: the lynchpin to addressing all these concerns is democracy and human rights in Iran. All the concerns about Iran's future actions will be alleviated by democratic change in Iran, if for no other reason, then for the simple reason that the Iranian people already see eye-to-eye with much of the world on all of these issues. In other words, while issues such as Iran's nuclear capabilities seem very daunting today, it will resolve itself once the Iranian people have a say in what their government does. One Iranian underground rapper said: "We ask for bread... they give us yellow cake!" I think it says it all about the priorities of the people. I am confident a democratic Iran will be dedicated to peace and non-proliferation, and not weaponization. Our international credibility would undoubtedly ride on our transparency and commitment to our own obligations to the treaties we are signatories to, such as the NPT for instance.

By acknowledging there is a confluence of interests between the Iranian people and much of the international community, the people and governments of the world must recognize it is in their best interest to take an active role in supporting the people of Iran in their quest for freedom and democracy. May I remind you, at this juncture, a call for a more proactive role in supporting the people of Iran does not equate to a call for foreign intervention nor take away from the legitimacy of the Iranian people's movement.

Take as historical examples the Solidarity movement in Poland and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The free world heard their cries for freedom and finally committed to change the status-quo and help bring an end to those undesirable regimes. In both cases, there was a tremendous international support as well as direct pressure on the respective governments at the time. It is important to note that ultimately the most effective element in bringing about change in Poland and South Africa were internal levers of pressure, meaning the people themselves. External levers of pressure, such as economic sanctions, worked in the sense of being a means to that end, rather than the end itself. Even if the goal is to seek behavior change, nothing makes such regimes react more than feeling direct pressure emanating from their own streets. So, as some liberated societies in Africa or Eastern Europe could attest, the appropriate measures of support provided by the international community will be a critical factor in ushering change in Iran as well.

To conclude, last summer's election fiasco and the events that followed created a profound understanding of the true nature of the clerical regime of Iran on the one hand, and the real aspirations of the Iranian people on the other. More definitively than ever, my compatriots have drawn the proverbial line in the sand between themselves and the regime. In the months that have followed last summer's events, they have not ceased to remind us of this paramount distinction. One of their most notable protest chants, directed explicitly at President Obama,

posed the principal choice: “Obama! Obama! Either you are with us, or you are with them” in a less than subtle reference to the regime, declaring in effect: if you are not supportive of the demonstrators, you are by definition supporting their oppressors.

If we are to avoid more dire scenarios of conflict which may become inevitable not too long from now, I can only stress the critical window of time available to both my compatriots as well as the international community. The only win-win scenario is not complicated, but requires commitment to carry through: Empower the Iranian people, and they will do the rest. However, we have to act fast. The time is now!

Last summer, my brave and resilient compatriots illuminated the qualities that separate them from their oppressors. They were peaceful in response to the violence of the regime. They were forgiving in response to the hatefulness of the regime. They were united, while the regime was divided. They became more hopeful, as the regime grew desperate. And when they cried freedom, the regime rained down oppression.

You can all bear witness to your generation’s first great struggle for human dignity. Your brothers and sisters half a world away use the same internet you use to take on one of the most brutal regimes in the world, and they take it on with courage and conviction. Your generation uses new technologies in ways that makes me believe totalitarianism will soon be a thing of the past. Where information flows freely, no man can easily deceive and subjugate another. This we have learned from you. The truth can get around the world in a nano-second. Keep telling the truth about Iran and her people. They need you now more than ever. The salvation of Iran is in the hands of your generation. And take to heart the words of Dr. Martin Luther King who said: “In the end, we will forget the words of our enemies, but we will not soon forget the silence of our friends.”

Thank you