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# **IRAN: SUPPORTING DEMOCRATIC REFORMERS**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international community was preoccupied for much of 2005 to 2010 with the Iranian uranium enrichment program and the challenge it represented to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (“NPT”) regime. The Iranian presidential election of 12 June 2009 showed, however, that the Iranian nuclear program was far from the only issue of concern. It showed that the Islamic Republic of Iran (“IRI”) is not a politically monolithic entity. It reminded the international community of the fact that the majority of Iranian civil society - which is unique in its complexity, richness and level of activity in comparison with the rest of the Middle East region - seeks a life with more personal and social freedom and less control by state or religious authorities. The election also showed that Iranians are willing to mobilize *en masse* to try to achieve these ends.

Over the course of two and a half years, from 2007-2009, at the request of the U.S. Department of State, the Aspen Institute Germany (“Aspen”) convened members of Iranian civil society in a series of small- and medium-sized, confidential, international conferences with the goals of:

- Expanding public space for democratic voices in Iran’s civil society;
- Connecting them with their counterparts in the region and the broader Muslim world;
- Providing a platform for Iran-based, reform-oriented civil society activists safely to share best practices and build consensus on reform priorities;
- Deepening dialog between the Iran, Europe and the United States of America; and
- Raising awareness among key U.S. allies about the problem of human rights and freedom of speech in Iran.

Due to the fact that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, announced in February 2006 that the United States government was devoting \$75 million to democratization initiatives aimed at a change of political regime in Iran, Iranians initially greeted Aspen’s work with considerable

skepticism. Aspen had to work hard in order to earn the trust of persons in Iran whom the institute wanted to recruit as participants. After a number of initial, exploratory conferences, Aspen therefore chose to focus on two key reform-oriented constituencies in Iran: the women’s movement and bloggers, journalists and media representatives. By means of repeated invitations, Aspen was able to build confidence as to its intentions among these groups.

Ultimately, Aspen convened over three hundred participants at thirteen international conferences held in Europe and the greater Middle East. Over half of the participants were Iranians, a significant portion of whom traveled, some times repeatedly, from inside Iran to take part in the Aspen program.

This report describes the Aspen program both in summary form and in detail. From the ensuing pages it will become clear that Aspen succeeded in starting an international dialog on the problems of civil society in Iran, increasing awareness of the importance of women’s rights and the importance of freedom of speech and related problems in Iran. Aspen’s work strengthened the Iranian women’s rights movement and expanded the scope of Iranian digital activist networks in the critical period running up to the June 2009 presidential elections in Iran. Both of Aspen’s target groups made major contributions during the presidential election campaign towards:

- (i) Ensuring that women’s rights issues were addressed by the candidates, far more than they had been in the past, and
- (ii) Providing uncensored reporting on the candidates, the election and its aftermath.

Aspen succeeded in these tasks because it was able to build up and protect an in-country network of activists. Aspen interconnected this network with its peers in the greater Middle East region, Muslim-majority countries, Europe

and the United States. This permitted Iranian activists to learn from one another, exchange ideas and strategize in a protected forum with less fear of repression. The Aspen program also built sustainable support networks for in-country activists, created a number of additional collaborations and networks in Iran and internationally and improved the standards of participants' work as well as their practical skills.

### **Women's Rights and Gender Equality**

Women's groups have always been at the heart of opposition in Iran, if not on the political front lines. The memory of a more liberal past is still alive and the women's movement is more dynamic in Iran than in many other Muslim countries. As mentioned above, the movement can be credited with forcing candidates to take a stand on issues during the June 2009 presidential election and with highlighting the differences between the candidates.

Iranian women at first supported the Islamic revolution in Iran. Ensuing gender segregation may well have led to positive educational achievements for women and have induced conservative families to allow their children to participate in the education system. Sixty five percent of all university students in Iran are now women against a backdrop in which Iranian families are becoming less patriarchal and birth control is spreading to Iran's provinces.

Theoretically, Iranian citizens are guaranteed equal rights by article eight of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran ("IRI"). However, the *Shari'ah* determines key elements of civil law that affect women's rights. Towards the end of the Shah's rule, in 1975, a new Family Protection Law was passed. No longer did the husband alone decide divorce. Family courts regulating divorce, custody and polygamy were introduced and the legal age of majority for minors was raised.

In 1981, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini announced that the 1975 Family Protection Law was incompatible with the *Shari'ah*. This represented a significant setback for women's rights in Iran. Among other steps, the marriage age for girls was lowered to nine years old (since raised to thirteen). Although president Rafsanjānī loosened *hejab* and custody requirements, special consideration was given to widows of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war (after massive protests) and Supreme Leader Ali Hoseyni Khāmene'i loosened inheritance requirements after the 2003 Bam

earthquake, there is still plenty of room for improvement in women's rights in Iran.

The *hejab*, or headscarf, is the most visible indication of this fact. The *hejab*'s status under Islamic law is unclear. This fact notwithstanding, the *hejab* is omnipresent in Iran and is a means of exercising social control that allows the state to consolidate its power over Iranians' everyday lives; it is a shorthand symbol for gender segregation in the Islamic Republic. The other areas of discrimination against women, in what largely remains a traditional and patriarchal society, are significant and include: gender segregation (at the school, the mosque, elevators, the beach and sport), job opportunities, polygamy, divorce and custody of children, inheritance rights and sexual harassment. Penalties under the law for women can be severe and include public whipping and execution by stoning.

Are Islam and feminism reconcilable or is the concept of Islamic feminism an oxymoron of little relevance in redressing such discrimination? It is important, at the outset, to distinguish between "women's movements" in the Middle East and "feminist movements". The leaders of the former were often men such as Qasim Amīn, Tahar Haddad, Muhammad 'Abduh and Jamāl-al-Dīn al-Afghānī. Another important distinction lies between Islamic versus secular approaches to feminism. Traditional, secular feminism involves a liberal notion of individual rights and a commitment to a secular state. Islamic feminism involves a woman-oriented interpretation of the *Qur'ān* and fighting for women's rights and gender equality while maintaining fidelity to Islam. Islamic feminists can be divided into those who promote women's rights, because they see them as consistent with the true meaning of Islam and those who are indifferent to Islam as a faith, but see its teachings as instrumental in the larger cause of gender equality.

The feminist movement in Iran is non-hierarchical and diffuse; it has been criticized as consisting only of academics and elites who are disconnected from women at the grass-

roots of Iranian society. Generational divides in the movement and heterogeneity in the religiosity of its participants lead to differences in assessing goals, selecting tactics, and defining long-term visions for the movement.

There is tension, for example, between Islamic and secular feminists. The two approaches are seen as incompatible, because of fundamental differences over the role of religion. Certain secular feminists are apprehensive towards women who put their faith before their feminism. They are cautious about cooperating with them, fearing the lead will be taken away from secular women and that the incumbent theocratic government will dupe the feminist movement, once again. Cooperation is difficult for Islamic feminists, on the other hand, because of secular feminists' inability to take cultural considerations, such as the preeminent role of religion in everyday life in Iran, seriously.

As a practical matter, these theoretical categories - which can exercise academics for hours, if not days - do little justice to the range of opinions or to the complexities of women's everyday life in Iran. To be "secular" in Iran is not to be neutral, but often means self-identifying as anti-religious. Islam so permeates life in Muslim countries that trying to circumvent it is futile. This judgment constitutes one point of cleavage between differing approaches to advancing women's rights. One school places its hopes on reliance on and appeals to international law, while the other looks to the Islamic tradition of jurisprudential interpretation (*ijtihad*) to achieve greater gender equality.

What place is there for international law in the Iranian women's movement's legal claims for equality? Can activists, in making the case for equality for women, use international law and international conventions? Do such covenants supersede, or possibly replace, *Qur'ānic* law? The body of international law that can be called upon is certainly considerable: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1954 United Nations ("UN") Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the 1979 Conven-

tion for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (“CEDAW”), and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Spreading the word about CEDAW may, for example, be one effective way by which to empower women in Iran. 185 countries are signatories of the convention. Among the eight non-signatory UN member-states, two countries stand out: the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran’s signatory status presents repeated opportunities to contest gender inequality in Iran, by questioning the reasons for Iran’s non-compliance with the convention. This approach to promoting gender equality in Iran could be strengthened, should the Iranian women’s movement succeed in winning the long-term support of the Iranian *Senfi* lawyers’ guild in attempting to ensure the IRI’s compliance with international law. The lawyers’ guild enjoys respect and authority and can provide *pro bono* representation for women and children.

The *One Million Signature Campaign* is a significant development in this connection. Modeled on a similar campaign in Morocco, it is secular and non-partisan, and seeks to connect Iranian women - both elite and grassroots - via a national outreach program. Ultimately, the campaign is seeking a secular law in the framework of CEDAW.

In Turkey, progressive family law came into existence as a result of the outright imitation of European models. In Tunisia and Morocco, however, women gained rights through the application of Islamic jurisprudence. Critically, Moroccan reformers enjoyed royal support. They pointed to Morocco’s culture of patriarchy rather than Islam as the source of injustice for women. Reformers in government worked to portray their new *mudawana* laws as rigorously “Islamic”, thus depriving traditionalists of the argument that the reforms went against Muslim or Moroccan identity.

According to this second school of feminist thought, the

*Qur’an* and *hadiths* are a useful, indeed necessary, starting point for feminist movements in the Muslim world. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) can be used to make the case for gender equality. It is important in this connection to take advantage of the Islamic tradition of jurisprudential interpretation (*ijtihad*). There are opportunities expediently to use *ijtihad* in the interests of attaining gender equality. The problem is not the *Sharī’ah per se*, but an outdated reading of it. Religious texts must be reinterpreted to comport with modern realities and human rights. It is important to establish distinctions between formal religious law and Iranian cultural traditions. The incumbent theocratic government engages in agenda-driven distortions of *Qur’anic* law - presenting inequality both as inherent in Islam and essential to the proper observance of the Muslim faith.

The Iranian women’s movement needs to educate Iranians about alternative interpretations of religious texts by drawing on potentially sympathetic *mullahs*, such as Ayatollahs Hossein-Ali Montazeri (1922-2009) and Mohsen Kadivar and *hojatoleslam* Qabel. If Iranian feminists can portray themselves as authentically Islamic, they may be able to drive a wedge between Iran’s state and religious authority.

Skeptics question whether working within the *Qur’an* would not allow the regime to define the terms and scope of change and thereby diminish the Iranian feminist movement’s prospects of achieving its goals? It can be very difficult to reform the *Sharī’ah* from within - that is through *ijtihad*. Although some clerics supported alternative interpretations of Islamic law when considering the recently defeated, 2009 Family Protection Bill, the true potential for clerical support is unclear. Clerics have a vested interest in the continuation of theocratic government (*velayat-e faqih*) and the theocracy has proven more than capable of replacing critical clerics with those more friendly to the government.

Whichever of the differing strategic approaches to advancing gender equality one prefers, the Iranian government

sees agitating for women's rights as a threat to Islam and to the national well being. Consequently, Iranian authorities try to link feminists' activities to the West and president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad demonizes feminism as a foreign ideology. Although they have been accused of undermining the state, feminists in Iran are not trying to instigate a "velvet revolution", but are simply fighting for their rights. However, given the regime's suspicions, the Iranian women's movement must exercise extreme caution. Fundraising is tricky; the movement needs money, but cannot be seen to be accepting it from the West.

Against this backdrop, media and mass culture, both domestic and foreign, play an important role in the struggle for gender equality in Iran. Iranians are worried about oversimplified western media stereotypes of Iranian women in *chadors* who support Ahmedinejad. Foreign journalists are thought to draw wide and uninformed comparisons between Iran and other Muslim countries. Western media need to cover Iranian politics and society more thoroughly and with more nuance, if they hope to gain credibility over and against a government that ceaselessly seeks to discredit the "imperialist" West.

There is a need for more pressure and closer attention on the part of international media relating to the goals of the Iranian women's movement. Instead of focusing so tightly on the Iranian nuclear program, journalists need to ask more questions about human rights and ask why the Iranian government continues to arrest feminist activists in Iran. The international community and Iranian Diaspora can also play a crucial role in combating the sense of isolation among Iranian activists and in encouraging (legitimizing) the struggle for women's rights by bringing skillful and judicious pressure to bear on the incumbent government. International awards given to Iranian women's rights activists are important tools in this connection, e.g. The Olof Palme Prize awarded to Parvin Ardalan in 2007 or the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Širin Ebādi in October 2003.

### **Bloggers, Journalists and Media Representatives**

Perhaps thanks to its women, Iran, as a society, is extremely pluralistic, bordering on factional. Yet communication and the exchange of ideas among activist groups within Iran and internationally is limited. In theory, the constitution of the Islamic Republic guarantees freedom of expression. In practice the opposite turns out to be the case.

Television is, arguably, the most important form of news medium in Iran. Nepotism and corruption is prevalent at Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting ("IRIB"), Iran's main broadcast network. IRIB's financial connections are opaque and together with other state-owned broadcasting stations, IRIB is unwilling to present a full range of opinions on any issues. IRIB's program is heavily censored and generally in line with government policy, with barely any leeway for dissent. As a result, the Iranian public mistrusts IRIB's news formats, views IRIB as a politically controlled broadcast network and mistrusts television as a source of reliable news. Television soap operas appear to represent an exception. They are used as a means of insinuating reformist messages. Some of the most provocative and covertly political commentary is claimed to take place in Iranian television soap operas. In addition to television, radio too is heavily censored and not seen by Iranians as a reliable source of information.

Alarmed by reformist gains in the 2000 national elections, the Iranian government launched a massive crackdown, closing six newspapers. Despite this development and the fact that the number of print publications in Iran has decreased significantly since the early days of president Mohammad Khātami's presidency, the press in Iran is still remarkably diverse. The government, however, must license all publications and Iranian authorities often pressure independent newspapers and magazines by reducing their supply of newsprint. Certain publications in Iran are also subject to greater official scrutiny than others. As a result,

Iranian readers tend not to trust information that they read in the newspapers.

Censorship in Iran is omnipresent and devastating to freedom of speech. The era of president Khātamī is now seen as a golden age of freedom in journalism and the arts. When president Ahmadinejad came to power, more conservative and religious censors were appointed, with little room being left for free and critical reporting. Censorship in Iran is not only pervasive, but also highly incoherent and unpredictable. Policies on censorship are inconsistent and sometimes in direct contradiction to one another. This may be due to the high level of institutional fragmentation of censorship – there are no fewer than five separate authorities that are officially involved.

Fear of censorship and consequent prosecution puts enormous pressure on all journalists. Chief editors and journalists preemptively self-censor or are forced to look for forms of words that will convey their intent while avoiding unwanted attention from government officials. Accurate reporting on sensitive topics has to take place in a “secret language” of indirection and insinuation, with metaphors often serving to describe political situations. Journalism in Iran requires constant vigilance – editors must always sense and quickly adapt to changing political circumstances. The net result is that public discourse in Iran fractionates into isolated “zones” or cliques, many of which self-select out of the process of national and international dialog.

The Internet has become a powerful tool for strengthening civil society in Iran. Although numbers emanating from within Iran are suspected and disputed, there are anywhere between 60,000 active and one and a half million Farsi language web logs (“blogs”), with Farsi said to constitute the ninth most used language in the “blogosphere”.

Blogs have permitted the spread of information that is otherwise censored. Bypassing official censorship and (artificial) shortages of newsprint, blogs secure the free flow

of information and create a public space more protected from censorship than traditional media in Iran. They provide alternative, sources for news and first-hand information and create virtual gathering points for otherwise marginalized groups. Blogs place believers and secularists, men and women on a more equal footing and have permitted more open discussion of political issues in Iran. They have been used to build relationships between disparate groups in different parts of the country, to publicize corruption and sexual harassment, to raise awareness about human rights abuses by the Iranian government at home and abroad, to forge closer bonds between the native population and the Iranian Diaspora, and subject political candidates to critical examination. Online journalism, blogging and other technologies were instrumental in organizing the protests that followed the June 2009 presidential elections.

The information technology revolution is having an impact on the study of Islamic law (*fiqh*) as well. The organization of religious knowledge is becoming more efficient. Over time this may diminish the authority of senior clerics and help resurrect neglected, possibly more liberal, strains of jurisprudence. New media may be able to advance liberal interpretations of Islamic law much as the printing press spread Protestant ideas throughout sixteenth century Europe. The blogosphere has been used as a space for the publication of new and, in many cases, opposition newspapers that were forced to move online, after increased restrictions were placed on their offline publications. Activists in Iran also use the Internet to share information on their activities, spread their ideas, then ask for support and motivate other individuals to make similar efforts across the country.

The Internet is regarded as a more trustworthy source of information in Iran than newspapers television and radio. The potential for blogs to have a vital impact on public opinion should not be underestimated – yet the potential of reform-oriented, Iranian digital media remains underdeveloped.

Although many western intellectuals assume that the Iranian blogosphere is an “opposition space” filled with “young democrats opposed to the regime”, research by Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society has found this not be the case. There are secular and reformist sites, as well as conservative political and religious web sites. There is a significant Persian poetry cluster of blogs and a “mixed network” of miscellaneous blogs. Half of the most active Iranian blogs directly address political topics and most Farsi bloggers live in Iran. Most are men, though one third of secular bloggers are women. One quarter are in-country, reformist blogs and more than one third are conservative and religious blogs.

Criticism of the regime in Iran is not limited to reformist web sites. Many conservatives complain about inflation, unemployment and corruption. In fact, the influence of Iran’s conservative blogosphere is significant and growing. Domestic issues dominate the conservative blogs. To the extent that international affairs are covered at all, conservative blogs focus on Iran’s nuclear program, the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, and the Iran-Iraq war. Conservative blogs make little effort to engage with more independent and reform-minded groups, but are better than their liberal counterparts at engaging each other and staying on topic. Government-friendly websites are increasingly employing slick web layouts to attract a wider audience. This has led to a war of images, a “hidden front” in the struggle for free speech in Iran consisting of an arms race of different high-tech graphical elements and themes.

Iranian digital media suffer from a number of drawbacks and can be criticized for the lack of clarity about journalists’ roles, deficiencies in professionalism of reporting, and the choice of topics for coverage. The political relevance of new media in Iran can also be questioned along several axes: novelty of information, size of audience, level of cross-spectrum political engagement and political mobilization potential.

It is difficult to draw a distinction in Iran between independent journalists, social or political activists and bloggers. Many Iranian journalists and bloggers are also part of political movements, raising questions of political partisanship and the degree to which it interferes with journalistic objectivity.

As a general matter, there is a lack of qualified journalists, both in official and reformist ranks. If regime mouthpieces dominate the mainstream media, then the new media is overly subjective and derivative. Journalists have little access to state of the art training in international standards of online journalism and relatively few Iranian online journalists and bloggers have received such training. There is a worrying tendency to trust third- and fourth-hand information as fact. Neither bloggers nor the state-sponsored news agencies appear to have a professional commitment to objective, factual reporting. There is a need for well-educated journalists who can provide unbiased and objective journalism in Iran.

The level of knowledge of IT security remains very poor among civil society activists in Iran – even among bloggers. Little access is available in country to the latest technical developments in the area of “digital self defense”.

Bloggers did not turn in a good performance during the March 2008 parliamentary elections. They failed to uncover any new “news” about the candidates or the issues. While they may have performed better in June 2009, bloggers have been asserted to lack large, in-country audiences and there is little evidence that blogs facilitate political dialog and genuine engagement between liberals and conservatives. Blogs are allegedly barely ever used to organize demonstrations, and virtual activism in the blogosphere does not necessarily translate into a willingness physically to take part in demonstrations or protests.

The IRI government tends to assume that journalists who do not work for the Islamic Republic News Agency

("IRNA") or the state-controlled broadcasters are part of the opposition and views them as biased. The government is not pleased with the independence that bloggers enjoy and has undertaken a number of legal measures to regulate their activities, including registration regulations. Other than administrative measures, however, there are no Iranian laws aimed specifically at regulating online speech. Laws related to national security and offending Islam and the state are used to arrest and prosecute bloggers and "cyber-activists". In addition to forcing users to register, the government limits access to the Internet, access to the high-speed Internet as well as access to hardware and software in order to exert control over the digital media space. Censorship is prevalent in the Internet field as well, with a large number of blogs blocked or permanently banned.

Being a blogger in Iran involves a high level of personal risk. For those who question or criticize the government, the risks are considerably higher. Bloggers in Iran bear all potential legal risks personally. While governments frequently use pretexts such as protecting family values in order to censor, it is unclear where the red lines have been drawn in Iran. It is difficult for bloggers to know what kind of speech is allowed and what will be deemed offensive. In this area too censorship is inconsistent with frequent under-blocking and over-blocking of web sites by the government. The government interferes with SMS and landline telephone service, filters Facebook and Twitter, hacks personal websites and blogs, and tracks electronic mail messages.

Censorship and technical disruption are complemented by government attempts to discredit digital media in Iran. Iranian authorities link the use of the Internet and blogging in public opinion with foreign influence and attempts to organize a "velvet revolution" in Iran. The government has also been known to try to tie bloggers to pornography in order to try to discredit them.

When these steps fail, independent-minded journalists in Iran are harassed and intimidated. Bloggers are not only arrested to intimidate them, but to send a message to others as well. Arrests and torture are not common. High profile government arrests and detention of bloggers – e.g. the arrest and March 2009 death in Tehran's Evin prison of Omid Reza Mir Sayafi sent a chill throughout the Iranian digital media space. As a result, Iranian bloggers have not felt able or willing to protest the arrest and even deaths of other bloggers in Iran.

There are no clear recipes for how benevolent Westerners or the Iranian Diaspora can help. European editors constantly demand stories from Iran about the hot topic(s) only. This approach perpetuates a superficial view of the complex social realities in Iran. The West needs to be more careful about the way it "helps", as at times its actions can make matters worse. It is important to coordinate the efforts of well-meaning western activists with the interests and safety of journalists living in Iran. In their push for reform, activists can often interfere with the "quiet struggle" against the government that is taking place within the borders of Iran. Western actors must be aware that publicizing the reformists' efforts does not always constitute a positive contribution.

There are legitimacy and credibility challenges involved in trying to build networks of Non-Governmental Organizations ("NGOs") and Civil Society Organizations ("CSOs") in Iran. More effective engagement is needed from the Iranian Diaspora in this connection; it can be a very important potential connector and legitimizer of foreign and domestic activity in Iran.

The West can help by empowering under-represented groups through video and media training, providing secure Internet access, translating Farsi blogs, helping form a union of independent journalists, providing media and professional training, publishing DVDs (much as Khomeini published cassette tapes), providing more technical support

for journalists and bloggers, funding new media projects, and offering journalism training courses.

Finally, foreign support can simply entail foreign recognition. International awards, statements from worldwide organizations, press coverage and general interest are elements of support from the West that should be encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike in the West, civil society in Iran is unfortunately seen as competing with the government, rather than supporting the entire system of government. Grassroots desire for improvement, combined with international attention and pressure could effect change in support of Iran's frail civil society organizations. However, despite continuing intense international attention to Iran's nuclear program, much of the world is uninterested in the plight of ordinary Iranians. Nonetheless, signs of social dissatisfaction that have, in the past, sparked transitions to more democratic regimes of governance do exist in Iran.

The role of women in the overall reform movement should not be ignored. Iran's tightly integrated network of extended families is now inadequate for guaranteeing the security of widows, divorcees and children. Women represent the biggest potential constituency for reform in the Islamic Republic. The Iranian women's movement is one of the few active reform movements in Iran has a broad impact in society.

Greater and more differentiated western media attention to human rights issues in Iran would definitely help eliminate activists' sense of isolation. While taking care not to attract unwelcome attention, western recognition of reformers in the form of awards and declarations are also of significant help. Professional training for bloggers and journalists can help strengthen this potentially vital group of influence agents as well. And the potential influence of the Iranian Diaspora has only begun to be tapped.

Iran is endowed with a rich and vibrant civil society that, while frail, remains robust, despite concerted, and often violent, government efforts to bring it to heel. The road ahead will undoubtedly not be easy, but the vitality and depth of this lively facet of Iranian culture gives hope for the future – even at the bleakest of times within Iran. The Aspen Institute Germany's staff felt privileged to have been able to

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assist and accompany a fraction of the membership of Iranian civil society on a small stretch of their journey towards a more promising future and hope through their efforts to have made a small contribution towards that end.

# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Aspen Institute Germany has a long tradition of bringing together key stakeholders in international politics to discuss the most pressing issues of the day. After the end of the Cold War, the institute adapted to the new strategic framework and broadened its thematic approach to include the Middle East. Between February 2007 and September 2009, the institute implemented a policy program entitled “Supporting Democratic Reformers”, funded by the U.S. Department of State. Aspen convened thirteen strategy meetings, roundtable conferences and workshops, and succeeded in building relationships of trust with a significant number of active members of Iranian civil society, both from in- and outside of the country.

Up to three hundred participants attended these meetings; on average, over half of Aspen’s conference participants were of Iranian origin, including more than thirty in-country participants. The number of in-country Iranian participants increased constantly from the time of the first meeting (one participant from Iran) to 5-7 in-country participants for each of Aspen’s last three meetings – demonstrating that Aspen succeeded in building trust with in-country activists. Further, despite ongoing repression by Iranian authorities against civil society activists, all in-country activists participating in the program returned safely to Iran.

In accordance with the main strategic goals of the U.S. Department of State’s Middle East Partnership Initiative Aspen’s program aimed at improving mutual understanding, enhancing knowledge about current developments in Iran, and securing communication among Iranian activists, despite political oppression by Iranian authorities. By bringing representatives of Iran’s civil society together with Western policy makers, NGO representatives and journalists the Aspen Institute expanded public space for democratic voices from Iran’s civil society and promoted open dialog between the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Further, the program managed to establish a unique platform in Germany and beyond for in-country

reform-oriented Iranian civil society activists to exchange views with their peers in Iran, the region and the broader Muslim world and to transmit their experience to Western publics and decision makers. One major achievement in this context was that, after participating in Aspen’s program, the German Federal Foreign Office decided to augment its initiatives for strengthening Iranian civil society. Aspen was also unique in Germany in being able to bring several in-country participants into direct contact with top German print and media journalists in the immediate aftermath of the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections. This greatly helped to inform the German public on recent developments in Iran, particularly after the crackdown on the Green Movement following the presidential elections, and it sensitized German media elites to the challenges that civil society in Iran faces on a daily basis. The Iranian presidential elections of 12 June, 2009 demonstrated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a monolithic entity, controlled by a pseudo-democratic authoritarian regime. A significant number of citizens, accompanied by reform-oriented media, internet activists and other Iranian civil society groups showed that an investment in Iran’s democracy movement has the potential to attract wide political interest in the broader Persian Gulf. The protest signs asking “Where’s my vote?” and the ongoing demonstrations of the so-called Green Movement, months after the elections, underscores the fact that citizens’ rights do mean a lot to a significant number of Iranians.

Aspen Germany’s program “Supporting Democratic Reformers” sought to contribute to the strengthening of Iranian civil society, which is unique in its complexity, richness and level of activity in comparison with the rest of the Middle East region. The Iranian women’s movement is almost one hundred years old. Trade unions, journalists, students and various other social movements have also been solid components of the Iranian social structure for some time. By bringing together Iranian civil society representatives, both from in- and outside the country, connecting them with their counterparts in the region and the broader Mus-

lim world, and exposing them to Western views and experiences in this area, the program complemented the debate in the United States and Europe about the dangers of the Iranian nuclear program in important ways.

Consistent with Aspen's longstanding tradition, leading members of civil society, policy makers, intellectuals, representatives from business and the media from Iran were invited to small, confidential, closed-door conferences to exchange ideas and discuss first hand information on current social developments, the status of human rights, democratization and the media in Iran. But due to ongoing repression of various civil liberties by the Islamic Republic, widespread skepticism towards Western organizations supporting civil society groups in Iran dominated Aspen's first contacts with the Iranian civil society community. Aspen had to earn trust and credibility among reform-oriented in-country activists. In the course of the project period, Aspen managed to convince important groups and individuals that it was a trustworthy partner. This resulted in increasing numbers of participants travelling out of Iran in the second half of the project period.

Over the course of two and a half years, Aspen organized thirteen small- and medium-sized conferences involving a total of roughly three hundred participants. The first meetings had a broad thematic focus that included discussion of topics such as the economic situation, human rights, the political role of religion and the clergy, and Iran's regional competition with its Arab neighbors. But the initial skepticism and reservation towards Aspen required a focus on target groups in order to be able to build confidence via repeated invitations to a continuing dialog. Starting in late 2007, Aspen focused its efforts on the two groups deemed most relevant for the democratic reform process in Iran: the women's movement and (2) reform-oriented Persian journalists, bloggers and media representatives. Both groups are key components of Iran's civil society and shape current social developments in Iran in an active and enduring fashion.

### **The Women's Movement**

The role of the women's rights movement in Iran was discussed in-depth during three conferences entitled "Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran". Participants came from the large group of female Iranian academics which focuses on women's issues in the Muslim world and which is mainly based in Europe and the United States. This group of participants is well connected with in-country activists. Aspen also convened female journalists, bloggers and artists, who focus on gender equality in Iran and other related issues. A major issue during all three meetings was the so-called *One Million Signature Campaign* ("Change for Equality"). Though Aspen's program officers managed to establish contact with key activists of this campaign, none of the core campaign members attended the conferences, citing reasons of individual security and their independence as researchers.

All three meetings were chaired by two eminent, U.S.-based female academicians of Iranian origin. Their engagement added additional credibility to these meetings given their international reputation as leading academics in the field of Iranian gender studies. Topics of the meetings varied from Islamic feminism to very concrete activities to strengthen the reform-oriented network. The meetings built enduring bridges between activists abroad and inside Iran.

### **Journalists, Bloggers & Media Representatives**

The second conference series "Digital Media and Journalism in Iran" comprised six conferences and workshops. The target group primarily involved Iranian and international journalists, bloggers, academics and filmmakers who met to discuss the overarching issue of how to maintain freedom of expression in an authoritarian and restrictive

state such as Iran. To this end, the participants examined issues such as computer and Internet security, the filtering of e-mails and of websites, and state censorship of reform-oriented newspapers, radio and online journalists. Further, the role and influence of foreign Farsi-language media such as newspapers, radio and television transmissions and weblogs on public opinion in Iran was the subject of debate during all meetings.

In addition, practical workshops gave Iranian in-country participants the opportunity to improve their IT-security skills and learn about international standards of independent journalism by meeting and discussing this issue with a number of German journalists. In cooperation with Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Aspen also convened a group of leading bloggers, cyber-activists, human rights lawyers, and academics – representing countries from across the Middle East, Europe, Canada and the United States – to discuss challenges for reform-oriented online activists in the Middle East. Over two days, participants discussed a range of topics including a comparative analysis of the Arabic and Persian language blogospheres, Internet filtering and censorship in the region, cyberactivism, and legal frameworks used to limit online speech, and human rights in Iran.

In sum, the program succeeded in establishing a sustained network of in-country and external activists, experts and journalists in the field of human rights, civil rights and women's rights as well as journalism and internet activism in Iran. Aspen managed to overcome significant skepticism on part of in-country, reform-oriented activists who expressed their desire to continue working with the institute should such a program be continued in the future.

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## Strategy and Implementation of Project Objectives

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According to the statement of work between the Aspen Institute Germany and the U.S. Department of State, the major goal of the program was to build a “sustainable network of democracy activists engaged in reform initiatives in country”. The main challenge in implementing this goal was to gain the confidence of in-country civil society activists that Aspen could guarantee their individual safety, given the significant level of government repression they face in their country. Therefore, in line with its mission and tradition, the Aspen Institute implemented the project objectives with maximum discretion and confidentiality. This was critical to obtaining access to new in-country participants and to securing their attendance. Chatham House rules applied to all sessions, allowing openness and frankness by protecting the identity of each speaker. No pictures were taken during the conferences and no additional information, such as conference agendas or lists of participants, was disseminated.

### Achieved Project Results

The results of the project can be measured against the program’s objectives and performance indicators:

- *Objective 1:* An active network of in-country pro-democracy activists
- *Objective 2:* Consensus on reform priorities and coordinated strategies established among members of the network; and
- *Objective 3:* Public availability and awareness, both in country and abroad, of network inspired initiatives.

Following Aspen’s tradition of facilitating open-minded dialog between opposing stakeholders, the above stated goals and principles were implemented through small-sized, closed door conferences and workshops which allowed for in-depth discussions of human rights and freedom of speech problems in Iran in an intimate atmosphere.

Through the establishment and maintenance of an active network facilitated by conferences and workshops, the program aimed to connect Iranian activists with other in-country stakeholders and at bringing external activists, experts, advisors, policy makers, journalists or representatives from the Middle East region, the Muslim world, international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union together to discuss Iranian issues in an atmosphere free from state repression and censorship. Bringing together in-country and expatriate Iranians proved to be very rewarding. For any future program to be sustainable, it is of paramount importance that individuals and groups of Iranian origin feel committed to support in-country structures.

Furthermore, via these meetings, Iranian civil society activists had the opportunity to address their specific areas of interest through in-depth discussions with other in-country and external activists, experts, or journalists. Doing so, they built their capacity in standards of international, independent journalism and/or human rights and methods used by women’s rights activists in different Muslim and non-Muslim countries. They also shared best-practice methods with their Iranian and international colleagues. Through exchange with colleagues operating in the region under similar conditions, problem-solving-oriented approaches were shared. Furthermore, the diverse, international mix of opinion-leader participants gave Iranian activists the chance to raise awareness about the problems of human rights and freedom of speech in Iran among the broader Western public. Through mutual exchange of information and opinion, Aspen encouraged a discussion of

these issues in western media and media from the region, even though a certain amount of discretion had to be exercised in order to protect the identity of in-country participants. To maximize the program's output, Aspen requested participants to respond and give direct feedback to its program activities. This feedback directly influenced the concept and the content of the next meetings.

The program achieved the objective of establishing a sustainable network of civil society activists, academics, policy makers and journalists in- and outside Iran.

In coordination with its network members, one of Aspen's main objectives was to achieve practical results in the aftermath of each meeting. Through its workshops, Aspen managed to increase the IT- and communication skills of the participants related to their pro-reform work. Dialogue in combination with practical learning led to new initiatives and new collaboration among network participants.

The objective of building consensus on reform priorities and coordinated strategies, which would lead to a number of concrete, joint action plans and to the adoption of a national liberalization statement could not be reached as originally intended. Due to the fact that security of communication is very important within the Iranian context, communication concerning political vision and liberal goals among Aspen network members had to occur in a very discrete-fashion. Many of the Aspen in-country network members actively took part in the street demonstrations after the presidential elections in June 2009 as either activists or journalists. Attributing liberalization statements to them would have been too dangerous and might have led to their arrest – or even worse. Although various short lists of reform ideas were developed during the final meetings, participants preferred to see them as internal and confidential documents for their own use.

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## Management Approach and Project Team

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In order to implement the project goals, Aspen Germany built upon a direct management approach which included four phases: conceptualizing the project, planning the project, executing the project and evaluating the project.

In the *conceptual phase*, Aspen's Iran team chose the theme of the forthcoming conference including the most relevant questions to be discussed during the sessions. This was done in close correspondence with specialists outside and inside of Iran, also factoring in the suggestions of previous participants. Research on potential participants and speakers was conducted. At the beginning of the project, potential participants were screened through various sources before being invited to the event. It was crucial to the program's success that potential invitees be able to build trust between each other and work together in an atmosphere of neutrality. It was also very important that the conferences take place in a safe and secure environment. It turned out that most in-country participants preferred Germany as the venue. Dates for the conferences, workshops, and seminars were set in order to ensure the safety of Iranian participants travelling outside the country.

Throughout the entire project, Aspen developed various ways of choosing new conference themes and agendas for meetings. The most effective way to develop an accepted and fruitful conference with measurable results was to communicate with in-country Iranians. Furthermore, in direct communication with internationally respected academics, journalists, artists and civil society activists, Aspen was able to frame the most current topics, and decide the size and composition of the group, as well as the location and dates of the events.

The planning phase involved final thematic planning and organizational logistics. Invitations were sent out two months in advance of each conference, particularly for participants outside continental Europe. The list of potential speakers was finalized at least one month prior to the conference. Logistical operations during the planning phase

included the booking of flights, hotels, translators, and technical equipment. Travel approval was prepared, including travel arrangements for each participant. Aspen also provided extensive support for visa application processes during this phase. The conference participants received all necessary conference information in advance.

Event execution was carried out according to the finalized agenda. In accordance with Aspen's tradition, the conferences, workshops and meetings of the program were held under the Chatham House rule. Through the size, location and duration of each activity, Aspen managed to create an intimate atmosphere of trust in which participants could engage in an open dialog. Simultaneous translation, including Farsi, was a major element of the successful execution of the event. At the end of each meeting, participants were asked to give feedback concerning their experience with the event and recommend or suggest possible future participants.

During the last phase, Aspen staff conducted a detailed evaluation of the event based upon the project's benchmarks and performance indicators. A conference report was completed within four weeks after each meeting. The report provided detailed information about the content of the project activity.

Starting with two, a team of eventually three key personnel – consisting of a Senior Program Officer, a Program Officer and a Program Administrator – directly executed the program activities. A key aspect for the success of the project was having a Farsi speaking member in the project team. This staff member was essential for communication with conference participants, the screening of Iranian newspapers, books, and Farsi speaking websites, and contributed much to creating an atmosphere of trust between the institute's staff and (especially in-country) participants.





<b>Sept. 26-28, 2007</b>	Digital Media and Journalism in Iran, Meeting I	<p>This roundtable focused on digital security in Iran. Participants included NGO and CSO representatives with technology expertise as well as Iranian activists. The discussion was divided into four sessions in which participants debated the social, economic, and technological factors associated with digital security in Iran. Farsi is one of the top ten blogging languages in the world although Iran lies in twenty-seventh place in the number of internet users. With a rapidly developing information technology infrastructure and e-government services, the digital space in Iran is unique compared to the rest of the region. However, Iranian civil society activists and citizens appear to be complacent and willing to accept certain levels of internet censorship by state authorities.</p> <p><i>Project objectives met:</i> Increase awareness among in-country Iranians and external participants about the importance of freedom of speech and the related problems in Iran.</p>
<b>Dec. 12-14, 2007</b>	Digital Media and Journalism in Iran, Meeting II	<p>The event convened fifteen journalists, bloggers, and representatives of non-governmental institutions from Europe, the United States, and Iran. While many participants were optimistic about the democratizing effect of digital media on the country's civil society, they also acknowledged considerable hurdles. These include outmaneuvering censorship and coordinating the efforts of well-meaning Western activists with the interests and safety of in-country journalists.</p> <p><i>Project objectives met:</i> Expanding the scope of the digital activist network; raising awareness of practical solutions to restrictions on freedom of information in Iran.</p>
<b>Jan. 27-29, 2008</b>	Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran, Meeting I	<p>The event convened twenty-nine activists, scholars, journalists, and representatives of non-governmental organizations working throughout the Muslim world, the U.S., and Europe. During six panel sessions, participants explored differences, commonalities, and joint lessons learned. Secular liberals tended to see the term 'Muslim feminist' as an oxymoron; gender equality is a western idea, and Islam remains a patriarchal system fundamentally opposed to women's rights. However, a strong majority of the participants disagreed, maintaining that Islam and feminism can be combined to promote justice for women in regions where religion plays a dominant role.</p> <p><i>Project objectives met:</i> Raising awareness about the importance of women's rights for Muslim civil societies; Strengthening the network of Iran's women's movement with its regional, Muslim world and Western counterparts.</p>

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<b>April 23-25, 2008</b>	Digital Media and Journalism in Iran, Meeting III	<p>The meeting convened sixteen bloggers, journalists, scholars, and activists from Iran, North America, and Europe to provide them with a forum to share their knowledge and to cultivate a network of the most influential progressive figures among Iran's new media community. Over the course of the two-day event, participants addressed the impact of information technologies on conservative mores and Islamic jurisprudence, ways to improve Iranian standards of journalism and the impact, strengths, and weaknesses of Farsi-language foreign news agencies.</p> <p><i>Project objectives met:</i> Increase the active network of pro-reform Iranian digital activists; improve standards of Iranian online journalism.</p>
<b>June 4-6, 2008</b>	Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran, Meeting II	<p>A small group of scholars, activists, authors, and journalists who work in Muslim-majority countries, Europe, and the U.S. convened for in-depth discussion on topics such as: legal reforms and the women's situation in Iran, marriage and divorce laws, the challenges of current gender segregation in Iran, and the current outline of women's campaigns. The group also discussed ideas for future developments and cooperation. One conclusion was that the goals of the in-country women's rights movement had to be closer connected to international attention and pressure in this area.</p> <p><i>Project objective met:</i> Increasing awareness of Iranian women's rights; Expansion of the in-country, regional and international women's activist network.</p>
<b>Nov. 25-27, 2008</b>	Digital Media and Journalism in Iran, Meeting IV	<p>The meeting convened twenty-five individuals, among them journalists, artists, and scholars, including three in-country Iranian participants. The group discussed: the role of new digital media in Iran, challenges for Iranian journalists and potential assistance to them by foreign individuals and organizations. Participants concluded that although censorship in Iran is highly incoherent and unpredictable, it strongly affects the quality and reliability of new digital media in the country. No consensus emerged on how to organize effective foreign financial assistance for pro-reform digital networks.</p> <p><i>Project objectives met:</i> Increasing in-country participation; Improving sustainability of the digital activist network.</p>
<b>February 11-13, 2009</b>	Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran, Meeting III	<p>A three-day roundtable conference brought together members of the Iranian women's rights movement from both Iran and abroad. The twenty-eight participants, included activists, academics, artists, journalists, and members of non-governmental organiza-</p>

tions from Iran, Europe and the United States, examined legal discrimination against women, Islamic and secular feminism, the relationship between Islamic law and social equality, and the role of the Islamic headscarf in Iran.

*Project objectives met:* Expansion of public awareness, both in Iran and abroad, of the Iranian women's rights movement; Increasing the active network in this area.

**April 1-3, 2009**

Digital Media and  
Journalism in Iran,  
Meeting V

In cooperation with the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, Aspen convened a group of leading bloggers, technologists, cyberactivists, human rights lawyers, and academics to discuss blogging and the activist Internet in the Middle East. Participants engaged in a comparative analysis of the Arabic and Persian language blogospheres, filtering and censorship of the Internet, cyberactivism, legal frameworks limiting online speech, and human rights in Iran. As a practical result of the event, a number of online collaborations and online networks were created, e.g. on Facebook and on other platforms.

*Project objectives met:* Raising connectivity and collaboration between in-country, regional, and international reform-oriented networks; Increasing the practical skills of in-country digital activists.

**June 14-23, 2009**

Digital Media and  
Journalism in Iran,  
Meeting VI

Inspired by suggestions from in-country journalists and bloggers, Aspen convened a 7-day workshop to train Iranian media representatives on issues such as internet and communication security as well as standards of independent journalism. Further, participants met with top German journalists to become acquainted with their work and to compare Iranian and German journalistic standards. During a one-day conference, Iranian participants also met with German-Iranian journalists from Germany's most important media outlets to exchange views and to share experiences.

*Project objectives met:* Improving skills of in-country participants regarding international standards of journalism; Increasing the resilience of the in-country network through technical training.

**Sept- 8-10, 2009**

Final Networking  
Congress

The thirteenth and final meeting of the Iranian civil society conference series focused on the topic "Iranian Civil Society after the Presidential Elections". The participants included civil society activists, academics, journalists, and bloggers, all interested in furthering dialog about the current situation in Iran. More than half of the group had participated in previous Aspen conferences, allowing established themes, and to be continued new issues and dialog to be pursued. In the final conference of the series, Aspen

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continued to facilitate and promote the dissemination of information amongst members of the Iranian Diaspora and those living and working in the country.

*Project objectives met:* Raising connectivity and collaboration between in-country, regional and international reform-oriented networks; evaluation of Aspen's project activities.



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# **IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

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## Iranian Civil Society after the Presidential Elections Conference, September 8-10, 2009

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### Executive Summary

The thirteenth meeting of Aspen's Iranian civil society program focused on the topic "Iranian Civil Society after the Presidential Elections". The participants of the conference included civil society activists, academics, journalists, and bloggers, all interested in furthering the dialog about the current situation in Iran. More than half of the group had participated in previous Aspen conferences, enabling established themes to be developed further, new issues to be raised and previous dialog to be continued. Past Aspen Iranian civil society conferences focused on women's rights and the role of technology, bloggers and cyber activists in the Iranian reform movement. The series spanned two and a half years and focused on bringing activists and intellectuals from all realms of study and practice from inside and outside of Iran into the same room for an active discussion on the future direction of Iranian civil society. In the final conference of the series, Aspen continued to facilitate and promote the exchange and dissemination of information amongst members of the Iranian Diaspora and those living and working in Iran.

The overall message of this concluding meeting was that, even in times when Iran is not a front page topic, it is important to maintain a dialog about the main issues facing Iran on a national and international level. While there is currently a major focus on the nuclear issue, matters regarding Iranian civil society - the key participants and the directions of both reformist movements and the regime - have fallen out of regular discussion. The primary focuses of the conference were: what is actually happening within Iran regarding activist groups, human rights issues and the development of civil society and what is the future of the reformist movement? In which manner are the different civil society movements, such as the women rights' movement and the students' movement connected? What are the assets and what are the weaknesses of these movements? What potential political scenarios lie ahead in the future of the reform movement and at what stage of development is

the current civil rights movement? What are the capabilities of Iranians inside the country and how can activists living outside of Iran support the Green Movement? What are the true characters and agendas of the former presidential candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, and what are the public's expectations them?

As a whole, the participants agreed that the human rights issue in Iran should carry great importance within the foreign policy discussions of European and North American countries. A participant stated that the human rights issue has to be the main criterion within the negotiations between the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The need for a human rights focus within foreign affairs was emphasized repeatedly. Nearly all participants were hopeful for the future of Iran given the clear changes in the tone of civil society following the presidential elections. However, despite their agreement that change is occurring, they could not reach consensus on which specific scenario will shape Iran's future in the upcoming months and years. As part of a wide-ranging discussion about strategies and perspectives regarding the democratization of the country, a message that can be taken away from the conference is that, despite obstacles, the majority of Iranians seek a life with more personal and social freedom and less control by state or religious authorities.

### Session I THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

The first session of the conference focused on the Iranian presidential election and its aftermath. The discussion began with a presentation on the political climate, the combination of factors that led to the dynamic changes prior to the election and the situation following the election. Investigated in a sociological context, the panel leader explained, a unique combination of factors was responsible for the

change in the political climate that enabled the elections to proceed in the direction they did. The three major issues that set the stage for the elections were: internal conflict amongst the ruling elite; conflicts between the ruling government and the general public; and a growing legitimacy crisis.

There are problems within the ruling elite in the Islamic Republic: there is an inherent tension between the concept of an Islamic theocracy and the idea of a republic as a democratic electoral popular authority. There are increasingly different approaches to the interpretation and implementation of the constitution among clerics and the ruling elite. A lack of cohesion within the ruling elite has allowed a growing rift to become visible to the public and the contradictions within the rulership cannot be hidden. One of the speakers described the current situation as a monopoly of power resting in the hands of a few. Aware of this, the incumbent ruling elite sees any political participation on the part of the masses as a weakening of the power center. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration worked to establish and reaffirm legitimacy prior to the elections meanwhile suppressing dissent and expressions of freedom by the general public. Organizers of repression remain unified and the regime retains its capacity for coercion and repression. For the time being major pillars of the stability of the Islamic Republic are the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (closely affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]), a branch of Iran's military founded after the Iranian revolution, and the Basij-e Mostazafin' militia ("*Basij*"), a paramilitary volunteer militia founded on the order of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in November 1979. However, despite all efforts of the regime to silence the voices of dissent, there is an established civil society that was able to resist the regime's attempts to stifle its forms of expression successfully.

The visibility of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's and Mir-Hossein Mousavi's candidacies and their political stances

allowed voters simultaneously to realize the problems within the existing government and the tangible potential for change. Both candidates were heavily criticized and a participant noted that the policies of Mousavi appeared to revert back to those of the 1980s. During his presidential campaign and also after the elections Mousavi repeated his intent to return back to the "*Nezam*." The "*Nezam*" was the regimented system under the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini and it was quite distant from democracy. Panelists noted that while Mousavi appeared as the opposition leader, he never expressed a desire to fundamentally change the IRI; he only wanted reform within certain limits. Panelists expressed agreement on this point. Another participant believed that Mousavi, if elected, would have become a reformist leader by default believing he would somehow have been obliged by the expectations of Iranians to change his political approach and attitudes. From reform oriented clerics to political bureaucrats, it seemed that everyone had an interest in maintaining the concept of the IRI as it is their insurance for access to power.

Within the general public there is growing dissent and discontent. Iranians feel increasingly marginalized and humiliated by their current political rulers as inflation and unemployment grow, corruption continues and there is increasing intolerance resulting in crackdowns on dissent. The Green Movement was able to develop and thrive within a growing civil society with an increasing level of mobilization for change. The panel leader described the Green Movement as a social movement that is simultaneously segmented, reticulated and polycentric. Made up of smaller networks without party orientation, the Green Movement was built upon Mousavi's idea that every individual is an "agent of change." As the movement gained momentum, Iranians felt a greater desire and obligation to be a part of the democratic process than ever before. Panel participants agreed that the Green Movement is not just a movement against election fraud, but a movement towards secularism and democracy. The predominant objective of Iranian civil society today is not necessarily to bring down

the regime, but to bring about democracy, civil rights and individual freedom. In this light, the election fraud that occurred activated a powerful phenomenon in which “anger overcame fear”.

The second speaker, a political analyst from Iran, described the situation from an internal perspective. She described the current situation as a monopoly of power resting in the hands of few and that the existing ruling elite sees any political participation from the masses as a weakening of the power center. Due to the overwhelming control of the government, there is no free flow of information in Iran. Following the televised political debate between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, there was a turning point as the masses started listening to the issues and the motivation to participate grew. The role of Iranian media outlets abroad, such as Voice of America, BBC Persian Service, Radio Farda and Deutsche Welle Persian Service, was critical in providing information to Iranians both in- and outside of the country and in promoting dialog about change. While many Iranians are fighting for democracy, the speaker introduced another problem: many Iranians do not know what democracy and liberty actually mean. Many people have an idea of what a democratic and free Iran could be, but in fact Iranians have never experienced it in their history. Based on the discussion, several conference attendees posed the question: how, as members of the Iranian Diaspora, can we develop a discourse on democracy? They discussed the fact that it is important to provide citizens with knowledge about democratic rights and to create awareness about democracy within the framework of civil society, such as within the education system. This does not mean that a western model of democracy should be imposed, but rather a discourse about pluralism, civil rights and the spirit of liberty should be fostered.

Participants discussed two different approaches to voting in the recent presidential election. Many felt that the motivation to vote did not simply appear upon Mousavi’s entry as a leading candidate, but long before with the increasing

progress of civil society groups such as the women’s movement, the teachers’ union, various student groups and the Green Movement as a whole. For instance, the women’s movement can be credited with forcing candidates to take a stand on current issues and highlighting the differences between the candidates and their approaches to the existing system. The greater these differences appeared, the more the voting public realized that boycotting the election would not be a strong enough statement and indeed would lead to more harm than progress. By contrast, the point was made that a portion of the population believed the election would be rigged regardless and that adopting the stance of non-participation would express strength and power. One participant shared an analysis report on the presidential elections comparing the official polling results from 2005 and 2009.

Continuing to address the election’s voting patterns, the group acknowledged the reality that thirteen million Iranians voted in favor of Ahmadinejad and that fact cannot be ignored. One panelist specifically addressed the question of who voted for Ahmadinejad and why. Her understanding was that, prior to the election, Ahmadinejad promoted his administration by giving out financial assistance of various forms across the country. Those who were not well educated and were earning money out of his system fed into his plan and in return gave their support in the form of votes. A panelist presented data on who voted in favor of Ahmadinejad in 2005 and in 2009 respectively. A misconception exists that he received votes solely in rural areas and that Mousavi carried the cities. Data show that he had a following in urban areas as well.

In response to a question posed by the moderator about instances of uprisings in Iranian cities other than Tehran, one participant described the power in smaller cities of the state machinery, making it nearly impossible for people to organize themselves on the streets. Concern was raised about voters’ access to information and panelists in Iran at the time were asked to describe the presence or absence of

communication in both cities and rural areas. Despite all of the factors limiting the capacity to organize and compromising the transfer of information through censorship, people in smaller cities supported the uprisings in a variety of ways shouting “*Allahu Akbar*” on the roofs as others did in Tehran and writing “Death to the Dictator” on ban-knotes.

A participant stated that history, as a valuable teacher, has left us with the lesson that autocratic systems cannot rule forever and that time will run out on the government’s rule. Concluding the panel with a sociological analysis, the panel leader stated that all the elements are in place for this movement to serve as the beginning of the end of the theocracy, however it will not be an expedient or simple end. While many agreed that there is increasing awareness of a weakening government, there is concern about whether discontent is sustainable and how the reformist agenda can be moved forward in an organized fashion, gaining strength rather than weakening with time and continued repression. What kind of leadership will be necessary for the movement to progress?

## **Session II**

### **HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ELECTIONS**

The speakers in this session, two human rights lawyers based inside and outside of Iran, described and analyzed the current situation in Iran in light of the human rights violations that took place in the aftermath of the June 12th 2009 elections. The session opened with two recorded phone calls from a family member of an imprisoned journalist and a human rights lawyer, who described their plight inside Tehran’s biggest prison in Evin.

The first speaker, an Iranian human rights lawyer living in the U.S., began the discussion with an historical review, de-

scribing the human rights issues at hand as going back to before the Islamic Revolution, more precisely to the constitutional revolution in 1905. Although there were limited freedoms under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah, social freedom did exist and, in the years since, freedoms have diminished. She noted a marked change in the way today’s human rights violations are handled in Iran as opposed to the human rights violations of the 1980s. Victims are more willing to talk and new forms of media are available to document and publicize what is really going on. In the 1980s, technological systems were not yet in place to expose and address the mass executions and other violations of the time. Iranians literally did not know the extent of what was occurring. Human rights activists are currently at work during an important period in time, as the dialog regarding human rights is gaining attention and a new group of activists and human rights lawyers within Iran is growing. The speaker then highlighted the role of Mehdi Karroubi and his statements on torture, murder and sexual abuse of imprisoned civilians by the Iranian authorities. Mehdi Karroubi is a figure to whom credit should be given for the evolving discourse on human rights. Coming from the clergy, he has confronted issues that are taboo, such as rape and sexual violence. Though the motivation for his activism is debated, he is part of a growing number of clerics who are criticizing the way that people have been treated following the revolution from a religious perspective. Panelists argued that the broader voice of the Green Movement has set the stage for voices of others, such as Karroubi, to be heard. While Iranians have more access to information now than ever before, opposition to the reality of the human rights violations is not yet strong enough. The silence must continue to be broken by clerics who have concerns yet do not raise their voices. Violations must be acknowledged if accountability and change are to be achieved.

From the perspective of a lawyer living and working in Iran, human rights violations in both physical and psychological form were extensive following the election. He ex-

plained the growing prevalence of “white torture” - a psychological form of torture intended to create isolation, disillusionment and disorientation. He believes that human rights are being violated in two basic ways.

Firstly, laws against human rights have been approved by the regime. Many panelists agreed that the current government is essentially anti-human-rights - anti-women, anti-children, etc. The question of whether human rights are possible in an Islamic state was posed. Participants differed in their opinions, but generally agreed that while most of the people in Iran want religion to be separate from the political system, this does not mean that the religious system would be weakened. Some felt that the religious system could be instrumental in dialog about and implementation of human rights in Iran.

Secondly, existing human rights legislation is not being implemented in Iran. Violations are being committed by the judicial system as it is failing to uphold laws protecting human rights. Actions are often carried out without legal precedent and there are inconsistencies within the law offices and very little transparency regarding how situations are handled. Therefore parallel systems of repression are being implemented through the actions of the regime and the judiciary.

During the discussion, members of the Diaspora asked what role they could play in the campaign for human rights in Iran. There was consensus that the human rights issue is important on both the domestic and international fronts. Participants questioned whether domestic and international human rights campaigns can be complementary, for example opening a campaign about the issue of governmental crimes against humanity in Iran. Concern was raised as to whether the regime could reverse and manipulate an international human rights campaign in favor of its own agenda.

Many participants felt that technology, when used appropriately, can have a strong and positive role within a greater human rights campaign. Those in the foreign Persian, as

well as English language media must consider how human rights issues can be discussed in a way that does not comply with the objectives of the regime, but creates a public awareness of the situation at hand. To build a successful human rights campaign, the trust and confidence of those in the country who have been the subjects of violations must be attained. Trust is essential for success.

Participants emphasized that the interconnection of the different civil rights movements (including those of women, workers’ unions and students) is necessary for a more comprehensive and successful human rights movement. By proceeding in a logical, comprehensive and persistent way, a campaign against Iranian governmental human rights violations can be built for the UN Security Council and brought to the Hague. By building a campaign of this nature, the intent is not to topple the government, but to have a strong affect on the government’s policies relating to human rights.

### **Session III REPORTING ON AND IN IRAN IN TIMES OF ELECTIONS**

The moderator introduced the topic of reporting on and in Iran during elections by mentioning how challenging it was to get credible information in the West. Feeling it was difficult to know what was truly going on, journalists and reporters who were both in- and outside of the country were asked to share their thoughts on their experience receiving, gathering and disseminating critical information following the elections. The resulting discussion focused on several issues: access to media and technology, ethics of journalism and reporting, appropriate and inappropriate roles of the media in politics and the future of reporting in Iran.

A virtual manifesto of demands was created in the period leading up to June 12th 2009 election, as news agencies re-

ported the needs and demands of the Iranian people. By circulating information and publicizing the needs of the people, political discourse became more common which mobilized greater voter participation in the election. By televising candidate debates, public discussions of issues and pre-election developments, Iranian state media increased public interest in the election. While attempts were made to block and shut down independent media sources, information was still accessible through the Internet. However, the issue of access must be considered both in terms of censorship and technology. The contrast between access to technology in cities such as Tehran and access in rural areas was addressed. Lacking domestic infrastructure means that, even if information is disseminated as events happen, many do not have the resources to receive it.

The first speaker in this session, a manager of an Iranian radio station, spoke of his experience and his initial doubt that radio could play a role in news correspondence in the days following the election. But as all systems were employed for delivering up-to-date news and thanks to the cooperation of freelance and full time reporters, the radio station was able to provide updates nearly in real time. The station's mission to convey impartial information to people living in- and outside of Iran was fulfilled. Despite government threats of censorship, the station and other media sources tried to present as much information as possible.

Panelists noted that one must also consider the media as a double-edged sword. While civil society groups used technology and media tools adeptly, the Iranian government is equally adept and can use the media to manipulate and promote its own agenda. When political parties are not free or there is inequality, the media has the potential to play an especially powerful and influential role. There was a plea to all Persian language media representatives outside of Iran to make the maximum use of their potential to present unbiased information to their Iranian audience. The plea was countered by a statement that the media alone cannot bear the responsibility for disseminating the truth. Panelists

felt strongly that the Iranian media is not a policy making force and should not attempt, nor be expected to fulfill that role.

The second speaker described his experiences working in Iran during the time of the elections. Of the problems he faced, the foremost two issues were the practical and ethical ambiguities inherent in the system that made it both difficult and dangerous to do his job. He explained that two parallel authorities are responsible for journalists in Iran: the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Information and Security, however, they do not work together and getting permissions to work as a journalist from both entities is not simple. In Iran, "journalism is seen as a national security threat" and there is an ever-present risk in the act of reporting.

Continuing to work after permission to cover the elections had been revoked, the second speaker was faced with security issues that led to conflicts of journalistic ethics. Finding that sources, due to emotion and fear, would divulge nothing or everything, the truth and credibility of statements was often in question. Due to the circumstances, there were no systems in place to fact-check or confirm the authenticity of the material revealed. He explained that fear and trust are deeply rooted in the issue of reporting in Iran.

In the panel discussion questions were asked regarding how a journalist can elicit trust from sources and furthermore how can one guarantee that the trust will be honored? Fear also has implications for journalists themselves as their ethics are tested and self-censorship to protect sources is often employed. The media was able to follow the aftermath of the elections in a historically new way. As it documented social movements, it directly and indirectly raised the questions: what will happen next? What is the future of the movement and who will become the reformist leader? Many panelists felt that the Green Movement must make serious organizational progress before this discourse can be effectively pursued.

The session addressed the many realities that make journalism in Iran challenging. The absence of a domestic venue for uncensored news was cited as one of the major problems and a reason for Iranians contacting international media despite all the security concerns. Conference participants felt that serious efforts must be made to improve Iranians' access to news and information by means of a national, real-time, uncensored medium. Many panelists were doubtful that such a national medium could truly exist, as it would bear the responsibility of challenging all of the competing issues surrounding reporting in Iran. There was consensus that responsibility rests with media outside of the country, and especially in the West, to try to tell the stories they can, taking part in the discourse and helping to strengthen the popular movement. In doing so, modern information technology must be used in increasingly advanced ways with appropriate security measures, in order to circulate information in a more reliable and safe manner.

#### **Session IV CYBERACTIVISM AND CENSORSHIP IN IRAN**

Considered the first “digital revolution” in history, both speakers talked about the importance of the Internet in the time leading up to and following the June 2009 elections. Weblogs, social networking websites, video sharing websites and cell phones enabled the quick transfer of information within the country and around the world. Following the election, websites transmitting sensitive and critical information were attacked, blocked or shut down. As official sites, formerly used for dissemination of information were compromised or made inaccessible, Facebook and Twitter became two effective media for conveying nearly real-time information. While Facebook and Twitter were originally intended to serve as networks for social use, it became evident that in times of public distress they have the potential to serve as high speed and far-reaching vehicles for com-

munication and information exchange. Mobile telephone SMS messages were also widely effective in communicating before and after the elections until the government shut down network access. YouTube was also noted as an extremely important tool as it allowed viewers worldwide to understand what was happening in Iran by seeing it.

However, while these technological vehicles allowed access and a window into the situation, they were not without flaws and dangers. One must critically consider who is providing information and how one can determine if it is correct or authentic? The bulk of Twitter and Facebook users are youths with no journalistic experience. Therefore incorrect and disorganized reporting was circulated alongside accurate documentation of the situation, leading to confusion and mistakes. It became difficult to determine what information was reliable and accurately representative of the situation in Iran.

A “cyberspace war”, a battle regarding information transfer in the technological realm, developed with attacks from both sides—bloggers attacking government websites and government attacking websites of reformist bloggers and political activists.

By creating a website presenting the faces of demonstrators and asking that the public identify the individuals, the government showed their ability to use the Internet adeptly for their own agenda. Ahmadinejad's administration has imposed limitations and restrictions on the infrastructure and speed of Internet access within Iran, limiting citizens' access to information, restricting freedoms regarding technology and threatening increased limitations and supervision of Internet activity.

Iranians continue to fight for free Internet access to information through the use of non-governmental satellite systems; however technology specialists on the panel warned that this medium is not entirely secure. New technologies are being developed and used for encrypting and protecting

the exchange of information however both Iranian citizens and the government are simultaneously mastering these systems. Panelists shared the fact that some email servers are more vulnerable than others and that simple steps can be taken to increase security while conveying information over the Internet. While communicating about Iranian politics and conflict are generally considered crimes against the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are differences in the perceived severity of these infractions; sending information carries much greater penalties than receiving information.

## Session V

### AN IRANIAN WOMAN FOR PRESIDENT? SUCCESSSES OF WOMEN-LED CAMPAIGNS

Participants discussed the women's movement as its own movement and also in the terms of the larger context of the Green Movement. Panelists as a whole believed that the women's movement has been uniquely successful. A female presenter spoke of women's desire for a place in a male-dominated history. After being systematically suppressed for the last three or four years, she said that women's organizations have faced serious threats. However, working as individuals and as a collective, the campaign has achieved unprecedented success and could arguably serve as a paradigm for future non-violent social and political movements.

Panelists debated whether the women's movement was a social movement or a political movement. Slogans such as "Where is my vote?" played a critical role, but the panel questioned whether they were part of an act of social disobedience or part of a larger political movement. The presence of women was undeniable; however, many felt that there was a marked change in the quality of their presence prior to and following the elections. Some wondered if the women's movement was lost after the election or if women were equally involved, only present in a different capacity?

Participants argued that the movement would be considered less of a threat by the regime if it proceeded as a social movement rather than as a political movement. During the uprising following the elections, women were ever-present and played an important role, however they did so as individuals and not as a collective.

The women's rights movement operated tactically, aware that their presence as a collective could at times make them more vulnerable. Many participants stated that their participation as individuals was a better strategy, as a collective appearance would be easier to break apart using the state machinery of repression. Panelists noted that the written material, the organization of campaigns and demonstrations prior to the elections suggested a unity and momentum unlike that of other movements. Several participants inquired how the women's movement has been documented for history and how it can be preserved in the nation's collective memory. Female panelists said they were recording the movement to the best of their abilities given pressures, limitations and lack of internal or external resources.

Panelists addressed the fact that there are problems and divisions within the movement, just as there are in any movement. Concern was raised that the women's movement consists only of academics and elites and that there is a severe disconnect between the motivation and mobility of the women's elite and that of the grassroots female population. Within the movement, campaigns such as the *One Million Signature Campaign* have aimed to bridge the gaps between the elite and the grassroots populations and to effect a large scale, national mobilization. Panelists also addressed the fact that within the movement there is a "women against women" phenomenon that is hindering progress. While the women of the movement may be united in their dissatisfaction with inequality, they do not necessarily share united definitions of and goals for progress. Additionally, as mentioned in other sessions, if Iranians, in this case women, do not know their rights or the potential

for equal rights, it is difficult or impossible to object to the current system and challenge existing social norms. Panelists made various criticisms of the movement, stating that the quality of the movement should be more important than just the quantity and that the movement should acknowledge and deal with its internal deficits productively.

During the aftermath of the elections and continuing today there is a debate going on as to what the role the women's movement is for women themselves and what its role is within the overall reformist movement? Progress of the women's movement depends on many factors, one being financial support and backing. A panelist asked how the movement is to advance if no one is really willing to pay the cost to of helping women mobilize. Funding the movement is a permanent problem. Panelists reiterated that the women's movement should maintain its independence in the future while maintaining synergy with parallel movements. Women are determined to use the differences within the movement to bring about progress and to work together toward increasing transparency in their actions and finding solutions to existing social lacunae.

### **Session VI THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

The panel leader discussed the challenges facing the future of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the core, the IRI faces an internal challenge fueled by a growing conceptual and practical disparity between "Islamic Rule" and the concept of the "Islamic Republic" and an external challenge of a growing "legitimacy crisis". The two challenges have exacerbated one another bringing the IRI to a point where some argue it must reform if it is to survive. Some predict it will dissolve and others anticipate further militarization of the government in order to maintain the regime's grip.

It can be argued that the IRI rests on two pillars, those being the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the state clergy. Within the state clergy there are different factions namely "reformists", "hardliners" and "conservative clergy". Within this pillar of the IRI there is increasing disintegration as the conservatives try to legitimize their power by declaring themselves agents of God meant to rule over all others and in doing so they are moving farther away from the reformists in the clergy. In today's society, such a theocratic government ruling by "divine legitimacy" cannot exist. For the first time in thirty years, a front of solidarity between the public and members of the reformist clergy has begun to form against the ruling minority, the conservative clergy. The other pillar, the IRGC maintains a united front advocating for violence and increased military power. These military forces supported by the conservative clerics, promote and carry out campaigns of fear and repression within society in order to maintain their authority.

Several tactics were introduced that could increasingly weaken the government. Oil revenue is vital for the survival of both pillars of the IRI and the panel leader suggested that oil sanctions or a full embargo would destabilize both, deepening internal IRI rifts. While sanctions are a proposed method of changing the distribution of power by putting pressure on Iranians, many participants doubted that they would have positive ramifications for the reform movement. The concept of a triangle of power consisting of Ayatollah Khāmene'i, Ahmadinejad and the IRGC was introduced. The triangle of power was able to plot and execute a continuation of the regime's grip on the executive branch. The lengths to which the triangle of power went to maintain control has further compromised its standing in Iran's emerging civil society and compromised the cohesion of the clergy. The clergy lack unity in their endorsement of Ahmadinejad. By identifying the weak links and manipulating them, the Green Movement could potentially create irrevocable rifts in the ruling elite.

Externally, there are factors that the IRI cannot afford to ignore. The demographics of Iran are undergoing rapid transformation, as approximately 70% of Iranians are youths, born after the revolution of 1979. As a driving force behind the Green Movement, also comprised of members of the urban middle class and the educated, this population is increasingly dissatisfied with domestic conditions and seeks a quality of life more in keeping with global standards. They are increasingly aware that, even within the pillars of the IRI, there are divisions and they are disenchanted with the political ploys of the government. By refusing to evolve with the rapidly changing population, the government is becoming progressively more alienated and obsolete. Panelists argued that, in two decades time, the IRI could be a system of the past. Participants argued that it is even to the detriment of the IRI to attempt to preach divine legitimacy as it only incites the collective opposition of the Green Movement. The IRI also faces serious international pressures, specifically with the West and Israel, that must be resolved. Panelists discussed the role of the West and presented both Iranian and U.S. perspectives on how the countries view one another. The IRI believes the U.S. to be weak and not a viable threat to the government. The U.S. is working to redefine its foreign policy under a new administration yet seems unclear as to how it should proceed.

The conversation moved to a broader discussion of the possible futures of the IRI, with many hopeful for its demise, but realistic about its strength. Many expressed concern that while there is an inherent paradox in Islamic and Republic, the system has managed to maintain its control despite this fact. Panelists noted that legitimacy and power unfortunately are not inextricably linked and one can exist without the other. The ruling parties in Egypt and Syria were mentioned as examples of regimes lacking legitimacy but maintaining power. Others echoed that a crisis of legitimacy does not mean the imminent collapse of a government. One participant said that the decisions of Iranian officials are not rational and one should not try to find any

logic in what the ignorant do. Another participant found it difficult to argue that the government has failed but rather feels it has maintained its legitimacy as it has created a new form of delegation, simply redistributing its power in a more limited circle.

There is no clear sign as to the direction in which the government will move as its politics are not inflexible and the administration and its current leader have historically acted in illogical and unpredictable ways. As the future of the IRI is considered, so must that of the leadership, most notably Ahmadinejad, Mousavi, Rafsanjani and Obama be considered as well. What do we really know about them? What do we actually want from their leadership and what can we realistically expect? The Green Movement has an undeniable potential to change the direction of the regime or at least influence its policies. In order to reach its potential and to have a viable future, it must clarify its intentions regarding the direction of its leadership and of its people. The Green Movement has power in the support of the masses and it has the attention of the government, but it must proceed carefully, building on its momentum rather than becoming stagnant and vulnerable to repression. There are increasing changes in the public perception of the IRI and a heightened awareness of its weaknesses, but the consensus of the panelists was that it is too early to predict the imminent downfall of the theocratic state.

## **Session VII CHALLENGES AHEAD – FUTURE TASKS FOR IRAN’S CIVIL SOCIETY**

The final session of the conference dealt with the future challenges facing Iran’s civil society and the tasks it must undertake. Three overarching themes for the future of civil society are communication, leadership and support, both internal and external and they must be applied strategically to the two highlighted issues: human rights and Iranian re-

lations with the West - including, but not limited to, the nuclear issue.

The human rights issue was identified as the primary task and panelists felt the issue must be addressed in order to move the larger agenda of a democratic civil society forward. An Iranian political researcher identified the tasks of civil society: expansion of public awareness of human rights issues, women's rights issues and freedom, while remaining non-political in doing so. The social movement must progress outside of the political sphere where it is vulnerable to governmental repression. He argued that protecting human rights is even in the best interest of the incumbent regime. The second speaker presented a synthesis of the views and perspectives of the West, specifically the U.S., on issues regarding Iran. Based on her experience living in Iran, she felt that the country's civil society has progressed radically in the decade since her departure. This evolution was illustrated by the recent demonstrations and the increasingly vocal public discourse in Iran. However, she noted that there has been a change in the kind of repression implemented by the regime and that repression is becoming progressively more uncivilized. She voiced her concern that Iran will become an ever more militarized state clashing with its ever more developed civil society. She believes that, though Iranians may be religious or want to live in a religious context, despite regime impositions and threats there is a secular civil society in Iran that is quite alive. With the risk of increasing militarization, it is even more vital to keep human rights as the focus of the Green Movement. Panelists expressed the view that Iranian human rights issues need to be addressed both domestically and internationally. The speaker suggested that the U.S. government has not sufficiently understood the demonstrations and movements following the elections nor is it truly aware of or concerned about the underlying human rights issues. President Obama is taking an increasingly distant stance towards current international civil society movements.

Within foreign affairs, the human rights issue remains in the shadows of the larger nuclear issue. A current interpretation of the U.S. administration's policy is that its concerns are focused on the increasing militarization of Iran and the nuclear issue, rather than on social issues. Tensions between Israel and Iran are another priority as time is a critical issue and Israel seems to be moving toward a consensus that the only option left is a military one. The Obama administration does not advocate a military solution but faces increasing pressure. A participant commented that both democratic and non-democratic countries possess nuclear weapons. As it is certain that the nuclear issue is a part of Iran's future, the situation would at least be improved if a more democratic civil society were promoted in Iran. While the nuclear issue is dominating the entire debate in the international forum, panelists stressed that, for Iranians, human rights issues carry more urgency and Iranians are carefully watching the way in which foreign powers address or bypass these issues. Panelists asked one another what role they would like the U.S., as an international power, to play in the promotion of an Iranian civil society. Some participants felt that there was nothing President Obama could or should do and that the changes Iranians want must come from within. Others expressed the view that the U.S. cannot be ignored as a superpower and support of some kind is necessary in order to promote civil society in Iran.

A key issue revisited during the session and recurring throughout the conference was the issue of the role and responsibility of Iranians in Iran and of Iranians outside of Iran. It was stressed that Iranians must work on developing Iran's civil society as part of a global civil society. Approaches to developing Iranian civil society must be established both domestically and abroad. Iranians, both indigenous and Diaspora, must use creativity to establish new programs and to support the progress of civil society. The government may try to limit access to international aid; however that should not prevent social and political movements from being developed internally. There was

strong debate throughout the conference whether NGOs, individuals, and other reliable organizations should be enlisted as part of the process of developing a democratic civil society and promoting human rights in Iran. Many felt that only with external, international support, including funding, can the Green Movement's agenda for a civil society in Iran be realized.

### **Participant Feedback and Conclusions**

Panelists spoke optimistically about the role that individuals and groups can play in the future and believed that there was an opportunity to develop new ideas and promote movements that did not exist prior to the June 2009 elections. The hope was voiced that conference participants will gain enhanced knowledge and promote change and progress in their respective spheres of activity. Responsibility now rests in the hands of those within Iran to support and continue the movement towards a democratic civil society and in the hands of those outside of Iran who have access to different platforms for discourse and collaboration. It is the responsibility of the Iranian Diaspora in the United States, in particular, to seek out policy makers and try to promote the issue of human rights in Iran. Education and communication are essential components in creating an understanding atmosphere and promoting an increasingly advanced civil society.

For the continued development of an Iranian civil society, communication, leadership and support are vital. There are growing opportunities increasing potential regarding the reach of communication offered by developments in technology. Censorship and regime repression will present challenges, but it is the dissemination of knowledge regarding rights, and violations of those rights, that can bring about change. Strong and direct leadership is essential for the advancement of the Green Movement, but this remained a point of concern throughout the conference. In-

dividual social movements as well as the larger Green Movement must clarify their goals and their intended trajectory. Many felt that the integrity of a social movement must be upheld rather than allowing its transformation into a political movement. Support from external sources was a contentious subject as panelists felt that the movements need backing and funding; however they did not want their pursuits to become compromised or redirected. The Islamic Republic has been challenged and weakened yet it remains powerful and in opposition to the development of an Iranian civil society. The conference concluded with optimism and a heightened understanding of the current situation in Iran, but a realistic and clear awareness of the challenges ahead. ■



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# **CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN IRAN**

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## Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran, February 11-13, 2009

### Executive Summary

In recognition of the prominent role Iranian women have historically played in the nation's public life, Aspen Germany has convened a series of conferences on the Iranian women's movement to improve dialog within Iran, and between Iran and the international community.

From February 11-13, 2009, Aspen hosted its third meeting on "Civil Society and the Women's Movement in Iran". This three-day conference brought together members of the Iranian women's rights movement both from Iran and from the Iranian Diaspora. In both presentations and open discussions during six conference sessions, twenty-eight participants made up of activists, academics, artists, journalists, and members of non-governmental organizations from Iran, Europe and the United States, examined some of the most critical issues facing the women's movement. Sessions covered such topics as legal discrimination against women, Islamic and secular feminism, the relationship of Islamic law to social equality, and the role of the Islamic headscarf – the *hejab* – in Iran.

This Aspen conference was especially timely in the light of the Iranian government's recent attempt to enact a revised "Family Protection Bill" in parliament that would codify and magnify gender inequality in Iranian law. In response, a coalition of Iranian men and women mobilized opposition to discriminatory provisions of the proposed Family Protection Bill. This coalition united Iranians with a wide range of political and religious views in both Iran and internationally to oppose and address gender discrimination in Iran, and was an unprecedented development in the history of the Iranian women's movement. The coalition successfully created a majority in parliament to suspend the bill unconditionally.

In June 2009, when Iran holds presidential elections, Iranians will decide whether to retain Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who has repeatedly demonized feminism as a foreign ide-

ology aligned with the imperialist West) as the nation's most visible officeholder. These events called for Aspen to examine issues facing the Iranian women's movement including: the possibility of collaboration between activists within Iran and in the Iranian Diaspora, the place of Islam in the struggle for female equality, and effective long-term and short-term strategies for overcoming discrimination.

### Session I

#### ISLAMIC FEMINISM: ROADMAP FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN IRAN?

The point of departure for the first session was the emergence of what has been called "Islamic feminism" in the Muslim world. In contrast to traditional feminism, which is based on a liberal notion of individual rights and is committed to a secular state as a guarantor of equality for women, Islamic feminism frames women's rights within the context of Islamic law, as derived from the *Qur'an* and interpreted through Islamic legal jurisprudence, or *fiqh*. Islamic feminism's notion of women's rights and gender equality is framed in terms of fidelity to Islam, and for many Iranian women, it offers a culturally relevant alternative to traditional feminism's Western origins and orientation. The remarkable success of the coalition against the revised Family Protection Bill and the ongoing momentum and broad-based appeal of the *One Million Signature Campaign* for female equality in Iran calls for a fresh examination of these categories of feminism to assess the next steps for the movement.

The discussion highlighted the complexities facing the Iranian women's movement, including differences in assessing goals, selecting tactics and strategies for successful activism, and defining long-term visions for a just society. It also revealed the difficulty of applying terminology and theoretical categories to what is necessarily a dynamic, diverse and multi-layered movement of both women and men

in a complex and contradictory society. It also highlighted some of the differences between activists, academics, those who still live in Iran and those living in the Diaspora. Iranian participants were more likely to advocate against radical approaches to change that were directed at fundamentally transforming the theocratic and anti-democratic nature of Iranian society and were much more wary of categorical distinctions such as “Islamic feminism” vs. “traditional feminism,” which they felt did not adequately represent the variety of attitudes and allegiances among Iranian women.

After a welcome by the conference moderator and the Aspen staff, the session opened with presentations by two sociologists who offered assessments of the meaning of these different varieties of feminism, as well as their relevance and implications for the Iranian women’s movement.

The first presenter surveyed what he called the “tendencies” of the Iranian women’s movement by introducing the categories of “secular feminism” and “Islamic feminism”. Emphasizing the tensions between them, he argued that in fact these two approaches to female equality are incompatible. Collaboration between secular feminists and Islamic feminists is impossible because of their fundamental disagreement over the role of religion: for secular feminists, religion is an artifact and tool of inequality to be overcome, while for Islamic feminists religion is the foundation for articulating and justifying demands for equality.

He then moved to the coalition against the new Family Protection Bill, which brought together Iranians with a broad range of opinions about gender and Islam together in their common interest in fighting discrimination against women. The proposed bill discredited Iranian Islamic feminists, however, by showing that the government used them merely as a source of political support rather than taking their demands seriously, as believers committed to both Islam and to women’s rights. Islamic feminism had “left feminism behind and reached a dead end”. The formation

of the coalition and its eventual success was not due to an allegiance between Muslim and secular feminists. Instead, it stemmed both from the softening of traditional feminist attitudes toward religion and from the emergence of what the speaker called “Muslim feminists”, who, in contrast to Islamic feminists, offered a woman-oriented interpretation of the *Qur’an* rather than framing women’s liberation in the context of traditional Islam or its interpretation by the leadership of Iran’s Islamic Revolution. He argued that these shifts in the “tendencies” of Iranian feminism therefore offer newly expanded opportunities for collaboration among feminists with different approaches to gender equality.

The second speaker drew on the first presentation to question the accuracy and applicability of these categories, noting that individuals and the complexities of identities did not neatly fit into general categories based on theoretical distinctions. She traced the tension between secular feminists and religious feminists to the inability of the former to take cultural considerations seriously, as well as to their view of religion as an impediment to progress that should be eliminated not by the will of the people but despite it. She attributed the *One Million Signature Campaign’s* success to its non-hierarchical, non-ideological structure in which activists were willing to take cultural norms seriously and identify points of solidarity rather than division to maximize support among sympathetic Iranians.

She then moved to discuss the campaign’s lessons for the women’s movement. She emphasized the significance of the impending presidential elections, particularly in light of the Iranian government’s attempt to depict the campaign’s activists as anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic by categorizing such concepts as feminism and human rights as Western and therefore both irrelevant and hostile to Iranian society. She also analyzed the regime’s efforts to normalize gender inequality as both true to the Islamic faith and Iranian culture; for example, by using state-run media to depict women as satisfied with polygamous marriages and por-

traying polygamy as part of the fabric of Iranian social life and familial structure.

A spirited discussion followed, contesting both the postulation of such categories as Islamic feminism and secular feminism as well as their relevance and utility for the movement. Several participants noted that theoretical categories did little justice either to the range of opinion among Iranian activists – many of whom were reluctant to call themselves “feminists” of any kind – or to the complexities of Iranian women’s lives, which often required them to adopt different attitudes and express different beliefs as a matter of strategy or survival. One participant mentioned how she was unable openly to express her secular beliefs since doing so would have prompted a backlash from her husband, who “wouldn’t have allowed her to leave the house” and would have prevented her from engaging in further activism. Speakers also noted that the movement faced far more pressing challenges than defining its various factions, in particular, identifying the most pressing needs and interests of Iranian women, especially given the vast differences between Iran’s urban and rural areas.

Many speakers expressed the desire for approaches to activism that are dictated not by ideology or theory but formulated as a pragmatic response to the specific character of the Iranian government, such as the use of Islamic jurisprudence to make the case for gender equality and establishing distinctions between formal religious law and cultural traditions. This raised a question that participants returned to repeatedly over the course of the conference: to what extent is equality possible in a regime based on Islamic law, and what limits does working within a *Qur’anic* framework place on efforts to attain justice for women?

## **Session II LEGAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN: THE SITUATION OF WOMEN & CHILDREN IN IRAN**

The second session focused on the state of human rights for both women and children in Iran and how different legal frameworks, such as the *Qur’an*, the Iranian Civil Code, the United Nations, and international covenants such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), could be used to contest the treatment of women and minors and strengthen the place of human rights in the Iranian legal system. The recent attempt by the Iranian government to erode women’s rights through the proposed Family Protection Bill made the need to examine the states’ use of the legal system to establish and maintain inequality clear.

This session highlighted the potential use of international law and international covenants by activists in making the case for equality for women. However, the use of international law also raises important questions for the movement. Should such covenants such as the UDHR outweigh *Qur’anic* law? Should activists appeal to the government to initiate changes in light of international law or appeal to international bodies such as the UN Commission on Human Rights instead? Activists explored alternatives to using international law by discussing how *Qur’anic* law could be used as a tool for change by taking advantage of Islam’s tradition of jurisprudential interpretation (*ijtihad*). This, too, raised another important question: would working within *Qur’anic* law allow the regime to define the terms and scope of change and possibly diminish the prospects for attaining equal rights for women?

The session’s first presenter identified the most significant areas of legal discrimination in Iranian law: inheritance, polygamy, *mahr* (marriage contract or dowry), and divorce. He also drew upon his experience as a lawyer to detail the problems faced by children in the application of the regime’s interpretation of Islamic law in such realms as

marriage and capital punishment for minors.

In addition to explaining the practical consequences of these laws, he also explained how they were at odds with such international covenants as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While Iran's status as a signatory "with reservations" to these agreements gave the regime a loophole to ignore selected provisions, it also provided an opportunity for activists to contest inequality, since the regime's signing of these agreements constituted acceptance of the principle of human rights and the legitimacy of international law. This inconsistent endorsement of international covenants also served as an example of how Iran's Council of Guardians acted as a reactionary force in the arena of human rights, often in stark contrast to the will of the democratically elected *Majlis* (Iranian parliament), which endorsed the covenants in their entirety.

The presenter advocated a long-term effort to ensure the compliance of Iranian law with international law in both principle and practice through the "*Senfi*", or professional guild, of Iranian lawyers, by offering them training on human rights and international law. Since the *Senfis* are established and respected institutions of Iranian civil society, they are an ideal route for activists to pursue change, because they can provide the reform movement with authority and credibility. He also suggested a campaign to encourage *pro bono* representation of women and children who faced legal dilemmas due to laws that were at odds with principles of equality and human rights, such as women whose husbands who refuse to grant them a divorce or children who face the death penalty.

The second speaker examined the uses of the *Qur'an* both by the regime and by the Iranian women's movement, noting the longstanding power of clerical opinion in Iranian society: even under the ostensibly secular pre-revolutionary

regime, government officials would travel to the clerical city of Qom to seek the *mullahs'* support on various issues. She then went on to explain the variety of interpretations of the religious text possible in Islamic jurisprudence, highlighting the agenda-driven distortions of *Qur'anic* law engaged in by the regime to present inequality as both inherent to Islam and central to the proper observance of the Muslim faith. She noted that the *Qur'an* was used by the government to enforce the power of the ruling elite, and that its discriminatory policies, such as the sanctioning of polygamy, were imposed not in the interest of religious fidelity but as a means of social control. As she observed, the *Qur'an's* discussion of polygamy ends with the injunction that a man really should only have one wife. Other interpretations of *Qur'anic* law that could improve the situation of Iranian women were both possible and legitimate. As revealed by the regime's decision to permit banking fees, which were contrary to Islamic law regarding usury, if an issue had a strong enough constituency, widespread middle-class support and links to political power, the government would adapt accordingly. Yet while the *Qur'an* was not written in stone, the theocratic and anti-democratic nature of Iranian society had to be taken seriously. Attempts to educate Iranians about alternative interpretations of Islamic law would have to be made in the context of a governmental educational and media monopoly.

The speaker continued to analyze the movement against the discriminatory provisions of the Family Protection Bill. Even within the constraints of an authoritarian society, activists devised creative and pragmatic strategies to make their case by skillful use of non-traditional approaches to mobilizing opposition, such as blogs, and by engaging both ordinary men and women as well as widely known figures such as Nobel laureate Shirin Ebādi to insure that the protests would gain international attention. They successfully contested the government's claim that the bill was in the interest of "family protection," and while the government's decision to abandon the most discriminatory provi-

sions of the bill did not offer progress *per se* for Iranian women, it did prevent regression. The question of how to forge an enduring coalition beyond this mobilization around a specific and temporary issue remained.

The discussion focused on the possibility of alternative interpretations of Islamic law and strategies that would interpret religious law “expediently” by drawing upon potentially sympathetic mullahs and making culturally and religiously compelling appeals to Iranians through the media and institutions of civil society. The coalition against the Family Protection Bill, for example, successfully reframed the regime’s attempt to depict the movement as anti-family by clearly articulating how the proposed measures harmed women and families, making a persuasive argument that resonated with many Iranians otherwise uninvolved with the movement. The campaign also highlighted the support of some clerics for alternative forms of *fiqh*, identifying a powerful potential source of credibility and political support in the future. Participants also called for further investigation of interpretations of Islamic law that would have both religious credibility and serve to advance women’s rights.

There was considerable debate about what place international law should have in the movement’s legal claims for equality, and whether such covenants should supersede or possibly replace *Qur’anic* law. Speakers observed that religion had to be taken seriously as a social force even within a secular context and that one had to recognize that progress is necessarily incremental. They also expressed concerns that pragmatic attempts to work within the framework of Islam might mean accepting minimal goals and would perforce mean limiting ambitions for gender equality.

### **Session III LEGAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN: WEARING THE HEJAB AND ITS AFFECTS ON WOMEN**

This session focused on what is perhaps the most visible symbol of gender inequality in Iran: the mandatory wearing of the Islamic headscarf, or *hejab*, by women. Despite its central role in everyday life, the *hejab* has not been a serious topic of action on the part of the women’s movement. Prohibited under the Shah, the *hejab* became mandatory in the wake of the revolution in 1979. While the *hejab*’s place in Islamic law is unclear, it has become a highly charged political symbol and therefore would be an extremely sensitive and controversial issue for the women’s movement to take on.

The session highlighted the use of the *hejab* as a key instrument of social control under the theocratic state. The wearing of the *hejab* has complex religious and cultural roots, but its enforcement by the Islamic Republic has made it into both a potent symbol of the government’s rule and a key element in the maintenance of state security and deterrence against dissent. The *hejab* has a great deal of potential utility to the women’s movement as an issue. However, it is a “red line” both for the state and for many Iranians, and making it the target of a campaign risked tremendous backlash, both from the government and from Iranians who might otherwise be potentially supportive of the movement’s goals. This discussion highlighted the importance of recognizing incremental progress in context, such as the broad appeal and visibility of the *One Million Signature Campaign* and the clerical debates over women’s status in Islam. The role of culture and media as both a force of repression and as a force for change emerged, once again, as an important theme and as a key vector of social change.

The first presenter offered an analysis of the *hejab* as a tool of state power. Mandating the *hejab* was a way for the gov-

ernment to display its power over Iranians in general and women in particular by dictating such basic personal decisions as attire and public comportment. As the speaker noted, this was intended not only to make female “decency” subject to state intervention, but was also part of a larger scheme of power relations in the Islamic Republic in which both women and men are considered less than fully mature individuals who must be subject to the control of clerics. Accordingly, the *hejab* is not just an imposition upon women; every woman wearing a *hejab* is a reminder to every Iranian, male and female, that the power of the state trumps individual rights. In her view, the religious rationalization for the *hejab* and its place in Iran’s cultural traditions are beside the point, since its practical function is as a vehicle of social control to reinforce of the regime’s power over the lives of individuals.

The second speaker drew from her personal experience as an activist who had only recently stopped wearing the *hejab*. She showed how the mandatory nature of the *hejab* in Iran made it a flashpoint of resistance to the regime, even if this resistance took place in small and highly personal forms, such as showing a bit of hair or wearing a colorful scarf under one’s *chador*; these actions were a type of civil disobedience.

She then turned to the *hejab* as a political issue and as a possible point of focus for activists. Like the previous speaker, she saw the *hejab* less as an application of Islamic jurisprudence than as an instrument of state control. The government took a hard line on the *hejab* because it was viewed as a security issue: mandating the *hejab* is a way for the state to consolidate power. Since it serves as an excuse to police the streets and puts any woman at risk of being questioned or arrested if her *hejab* is perceived as improper, it is a way to create a culture of fear and self-surveillance within Iran. As a result, the *hejab* has become a “red line” for the state: since it is a symbol of the ability of the state to impose its power on individuals more broadly, resistance to it is seen as an *entrée* for other forms

of dissent and is accordingly a threat to state security. She also noted the difficulty of assessing popular support for the *hejab*, since women were subject both to the mandate of the state as well as pressure from their families and local communities to wear it. While she acknowledged that the women’s movement should be ambitious in its long-term goals, she argued that a secular government was not a plausible short-term goal. As a result, opposing the *hejab*, which is a highly visible element of Iran’s Islamic character, was not a pragmatic step for the movement. Women should instead advocate for “minimal” forms of resistance to the regime in the forms mentioned earlier.

Due to the ubiquity of the *hejab* in Iranian society and because it has, as yet, not been widely discussed as a possible point of action for the women’s movement, the presentations sparked an especially lively conversation. Speakers offered different analyses of the role of the *hejab* in Islam, in Iranian culture, and in the rule of the government, and how these various roles reinforced or contradicted each other.

The use of the *hejab* in the wake of the Islamic revolution, which transformed it from a religious or cultural practice to a symbol of anti-imperialism and a symbol of state power was particularly important. One participant noted the consistent use of terms like “security” and “control” to justify the imposition of the *hejab* in both Iran as well as other Muslim countries, and suggested that activists could follow the example of women in Saudi Arabia, who had responded to intense social control of the public sphere by using Facebook groups to explore ideas and create a free space for open discussion. Speakers noted the uneven history of acceptance of the *hejab*: the post-revolutionary interpretation of Islam that made the *hejab* mandatory was still a relatively recent development. They also observed how the use of a religious and cultural practice as a political symbol made the *hejab* into a focal point of dissent. They also noted developments in Islamic jurisprudence on the subject, particularly the significance of recent discus-

sions in the clerical city of Qom that took a new look at the *Qur'ān's* treatment of women.

There was heavy debate over the question of what place the *hejab* should have on the agenda of the women's movement and, if so, what form potential protest should take. Speakers noted that the *hejab* had become a tremendous problem for many women, both in terms of jail terms and fines as well as constant anxiety and fear: one participant mentioned that many of her friends were "afraid to leave the house" for fear of harassment or arrest by the Revolutionary Guards, and another mentioned her interrogation for "bad *hejab*" on her college campus that reduced her to a "common criminal... a drug dealer." A speaker noted that many of the highways in northern Iran are equipped with cameras to catch women wearing "bad *hejab*," much in the manner that they are used to catch traffic violations in the West. However, participants also acknowledged the wide range of opinions on the *hejab* among Iranians and the risks of compromising the movement by focusing on an issue that was divisive and was seen as more symbolic than other forms of inequality. Shirin Ebādi, one participant mentioned, had begun to tackle the issue, but as a Nobel laureate she was clearly in "a special situation" and could pursue lines of action that were not available to other activists. The question of whether the *hejab* should be the focus of a campaign by the Iranian women's movement required a careful assessment of the movement's priorities in trying to attain equality for women.

#### **Session IV LEGAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN: INHERITANCE DIVORCE, AND TESTIMONY LAWS FOR WOMEN**

Session IV, the final formal session of the conference, focused attention on some of the most consequential forms of legal discrimination against women in Iran: inheritance,

divorce and legal testimony. Previous presentations and discussions had mentioned these issues, but this session was an opportunity to address them directly and to examine their history, structure, enforcement and implications, particularly in light of the proposed Family Protection Bill and the mobilization of the *One Million Signature Campaign*.

This session focused on how to define long-term goals in light of current political and social constraints and how to select the most appropriate and effective next steps for the movement. The difficulty of making the case for pluralism and equality in an Islamic Republic, and how to apply international conventions to the status of women in Iran were especially important. There was broad support for a recognition that the movement's agenda should focus on the practical realities of women's lives in contemporary Iran, insuring that the goal of equality was guided by a commitment to attaining and maintaining women's economic independence.

The first speaker began his examination of legal inequality by observing that the idea of equality of rights was not an Islamic principle *per se*. The Islamic Republic, as a theocracy, saw individuals not as equal but as members of three different groups: men, women and non-Muslims. The unequal treatment of the latter two groups was based on both religious law and jurisprudence, which, in a theocratic context, was all the government had to work with. Within this framework, there were no "general rights", only civil rights. And while equal rights for all Iranian citizens are theoretically guaranteed through Article 8 of the Iranian Civil Law, key elements of civil law that affected women's civil equality, such as marriage, are determined by the *Shari'ah* and its inherently unequal conception of men and women. There was no possibility of legal equality under the current regime given its reliance on and the ultimate political authority of the clerical Supreme Leader.

He then turned to a discussion of international legal conventions such as the UDHR, which offer a potential alter-

nate framework to the *Qur'ān* for making the case for gender equality. Like the speaker in Session II, he noted that while Iran, like many countries, had joined these conventions “with reservations” on certain issues, Iran’s qualified acceptance of their principles offered activists significant latitude in appealing for equality. Activists could frame their arguments within the context of international law, and ask for jurisprudential explanations for the sections of the conventions that Iran had refused to ratify.

He observed that Iran offers some very particular challenges to activists: while it is a constitutional republic, it is based nonetheless on the ultimate superiority of clerics over non-clerics. Although activists could try to align themselves with potentially “down-to-earth” clerics as a strategy for gaining power and credibility, the power of the clerics reinforced the fundamental inequality at the foundation of the regime. He returned to the same issue raised in the earlier discussion of change within a theocratic framework: what kinds of compromises should activists make and how can they demand equality by working within a system based on inequality?

The second presenter focused more directly on the unequal treatment of women in the areas of inheritance and testimony. She detailed the practical impact of legal discrimination, noting, for example, how the limitation of women’s inheritance to buildings rather than land was a major factor magnifying poverty among elderly women. However, while previous attempts to address these inequalities had gained little public support and little response from the government, in recent years there has been a new openness to discussion. For example, after the Bam earthquake in 2003, the impoverishment of women as a result of existing inheritance laws became particularly glaring. In response, Supreme Leader Ali Hoseyni Khāmene’i changed the law to allow women to inherit land as well as the “mobile goods” traditionally allowed by Islamic law. In context, this should be considered progress.

Like the first speaker, she questioned whether or not equality was a plausible outcome within the existing social order, and encouraged activists to think pragmatically, going beyond a focus on the principle of equality to practical goals, such as ensuring female economic independence. They should make clear, for example, that financial independence was impossible without equal inheritance rights. Equality, she observed, has many dimensions. What do Iranian women have, what do they want, and what can they get?

The presentations prompted an intense discussion of the most effective goals and strategies for the Iranian women’s movement. Underlying the conversation was a central question: should activists fight for equality within the current legal framework of the Islamic Republic, which is fundamentally at odds with the principle of human equality, or base their claims and appeals on broader principles of equality and human rights, such as the UDHR? Speakers discussed the practical steps involved in appealing to the international community, such as filing formal complaints with the United Nations, getting NGOs involved on particular issues and pressing the government for explanations with reference to international law. They also explored how to build on the use of the Internet, via blogs and Facebook groups, as an alternative outlet for civil society and democratic debate.

As discussion continued, this question became part of a parallel issue: should the women’s movement accept a strategy of gradualism or press for more ambitious forms of change? Many participants rejected this as a false dichotomy, and observed that these two approaches should be seen as complementary. Activists could maintain the goal of achieving an equal society and a secular democracy, while noting that incremental progress could make a tremendous difference in women’s lives. Short-term goals should be chosen by acknowledging and working within current social conditions: for example, abolishing alimony as an element of gender inequality did not make sense be-

cause too many women were currently economically dependent on it. Innovative alternative programs, such as insurance for housewives, could help women obtain support that had been traditionally provided by an extended family.

Many speakers were extremely supportive of “expediently” using Islamic jurisprudence in the interest of equality, given both the potential elasticity of *fiqh* and the presence of potentially supportive clerics within the regime. Women could accept help from religious authorities on their own terms by seeking out sympathetic individuals and cultivating relationships with them, without expecting that they would be “rescued by the clerics”.

Participants also acknowledged the importance of current and future social developments. Iran is a rapidly changing society, and many laws and customs that made sense within a tightly integrated network of extended families were now inadequate for guaranteeing the security of widows, divorcees and children. The practical failure of Islamic laws would serve as a powerful case for change.

### **Session V & VI WORKSHOPS**

Rather than dividing into smaller groups for workshops, participants decided to stay together to focus on two topics that had emerged as subjects of particular interest: the role of the *hejab* in the Iranian women’s movement, and defining opportunities and challenges for collaboration – both inside and outside Iran as well as between activists and NGOs and other international organizations. In a workshop-style open conversation, participants appointed note-takers to identify key points and action items.

### **Session V THE HEJAB AND THE IRANIAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENT**

Organizers kicked off the session by posing two questions: what have activists done thus far in addressing the question of the *hejab*, and what was the legal right of the government to determine the attire of individuals under its rule? Participants offered various perspectives on the history of the *hejab* in Islam, including the scriptural ambiguities regarding what constituted appropriate dress, and the *hejab*’s history in Iranian law both during the Shah’s regime, which prohibited the wearing of the *hejab*, and during the Islamic Republic, which made it mandatory. Several noted the lack of systematic studies on the impact of the *hejab* as well as the variety of interpretations as to its necessity and form. They called for the movement to develop a more in-depth analysis of the *hejab* before making it a focus of their efforts, and to proceed carefully in using the work of particular clerics to prevent their being singled out for punishment by the government.

The group offered varying opinions on how the *hejab* fit into the larger picture of discrimination against women in Iran, and how much of a priority it was in insuring the equality of Iranian women. Accordingly, participants ultimately focused on whether the Iranian women’s movement should advocate making the *hejab* voluntary, and if so, what steps the movement should take. Participants discussed how the imposition of the *hejab*, along with other forms of gender inequality, had very different practical implications and consequences for women in different parts of the country, such as rural vs. urban communities, and at different levels of social prosperity and educational attainment. Participants also noted the need to engage men in the struggle for female equality by recognizing that the *hejab* was a symbol of the weakness of individual rights in Iran for both men and women; one participant suggested that sympathetic men don the *hejab* as a gesture of protest and solidarity.

Participants emphasized the important role of the media and mass culture, such as films, radio and television. Filmmakers and journalists were encouraged to take advantage of their roles as public advocates by publicizing the problems the *hejab* posed for women – in 1993, 2,300 women were in prison merely for having “bad *hejab*” according to unofficial estimates by Iranian women rights groups – and by creating alternative images of women. This would help create a social movement, rather than forcing individual women who opposed *hejab* to pay the price in the form of harassment, jail, or fines. One participant noted that a film, which had been made in Iran featuring female actors without headscarves was only temporarily banned, and moreover, that the actors involved were willing to take the risk associated with being part of the film. This revealed both the willingness of everyday Iranians to oppose the state and the inconsistent character of its censorship and punishment of violators.

## Session VI

### **MOVING FORWARD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION**

In its final discussion, the group looked ahead toward the next steps for the movement, discussing how to continue the momentum of the conference and how to establish new avenues for discussion and collaboration.

Activists who were working in Iran highlighted the crucial role of the Iranian Diaspora and international community on multiple levels: to combat the sense of isolation among both activists and Iranians more generally, to encourage international recognition of the struggles and accomplishments of the movement, and to bring skillful and judicious pressure to bear on the regime. Participants from within Iran encouraged organizations abroad to establish relationships with individual activists

and to create opportunities for them to appeal to global public opinion through editorials, interviews, and prizes, such as the awarding of this year’s Simone de Beauvoir Prize to the *One Million Signature Campaign*. They also asked organizations abroad not to be cowed by the state threats in their attempt to be attentive to the vulnerability of activists to interrogation and jail; rather, they should allow activists to make decisions about speaking to the media for themselves. International groups were also advised to choose their partners carefully to avoid associations with extremist groups, which diminished their credibility and gave the government an opportunity to discredit them.

Participants recognized the need to define shared priorities despite coming from very different backgrounds, professions, and perspectives on attaining equality. They also emphasized the importance of identifying the issues most critical to Iranian women when many activists are either concentrated in Tehran or have spent many years abroad. Participants highlighted the importance of informal and non-traditional channels of activism, such as films, and alternative forms of civil society, such as Facebook and blogs. Films by two Iranian filmmakers on various women’s rights campaigns were screened during lunch as examples of past accomplishments and future opportunities. Finally, several participants commented on the need to preserve the momentum of the conference and act on the ideas it generated. They suggested a structured network for participants in the conference as well as other members of the movement to communicate and to continue the conversations sparked by the meeting into the future. ■

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## Legal Reforms and the Women's Movement In Iran June 4-6, 2008

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### Executive Summary

The Iranian women's movement exists in the context of the larger struggle for Muslim women's rights in the framework of the *Shari'ah*. But Iran is set apart by its backdrop of a uniquely liberal history and widespread and growing support for feminist change. Despite positive developments, the current government makes it difficult for women to meet and exchange ideas whether in Iran or abroad.

The international community used to have more sway – albeit limited – over Iran, holding discussions and sending delegates into the country. Now, grappling with the nuclear threat has monopolized international attention, overshadowing the human rights situation. Participants in this conference discussed how women's rights could make progress in light of Iran's precarious situation and the government's suspicion of the West. The participants believed that grassroots desire for an improvement, combined with international attention and pressure could effect change in support of the women's and other civil society movements in Iran.

It was to facilitate dialog between members of the women's movement in Iran, who are spread across the world, that Aspen Germany hosted "The Women's Movement in Iran," on June 5-6, 2008 in Germany. The conference was attended by scholars, activists, authors, and journalists who work in Muslim majority countries, Europe, and the U.S.. During six panel discussions, participants explored topics such as legal reforms and women's situation in Iran, marriage and divorce laws, the challenges of current gender segregation in Iran, the current outline of women's campaigns, and discussed ideas for future developments and cooperation.

### Session I

#### LEGAL REFORMS AND THE IRANIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The first presenter emphasized changing the legal framework as the best way to improve the position of women in Iran. She argued that, unlike most other Muslim countries, the Iranian government has taken a step backward in protecting the rights of women – most notably by repealing the Family Protection Law of 1975. For Iranian feminists the creation of the Family Protection Law, which was written by lawyers instead of clerics was a legal watershed. It was introduced in 1967 and was significantly amended in 1975. One major aspect of the new law was the establishment of family courts. Prior to these legal steps, divorce was decided by the husband exclusively, without any involvement of his wife. Now, the husband was forced to appear in front of a court, which then determined divorce and child custody matters. Article 8 of the new law provided women with a legal venue to argue for divorce, and to protect their own interests when being divorced. The Family Protection Act curbed polygamy by requiring the consent of the first wife before a husband could marry a second. Alternatively, the husband had to prove the illness of his first wife to the court. It improved women's custody rights over their children and raised the age at which minors became legally responsible for their actions to eighteen. The conference members disagreed about how helpful the law actually was to women, with some objecting to the fact that it still operated under a religious framework. But all agreed that it was an improvement compared to the lack of legal rights that preceded it. Under the pre-revolutionary civil code of Reza Shah, men could divorce women "at will, without any legal process." The speaker noted that many women received divorce papers by post, without warning. These women "would be shaking with fear when they talked about divorce," because no financial provisions were made for their well-being.

Women's participation in the Islamic revolution of 1979 was extremely high, "a result of the empowerment of women." One participant said that the revolution was the first time that women's agency was invoked in Iran. After debate, she clarified that it was not the first time that such agency had existed, but the first time it was called upon by a powerful movement. The speaker argued that female participants thought that they would have something to gain from an Islamic state, but that they were wrong. Other participants agreed that women had "helped because they were deceived." After the revolution, "when men wanted to harass or intimidate women they only had to ask for a *fatwa* (religious edict)." Ayatollah Khomeini announced in 1981 that the Family Protection Act was incompatible with the *Shari'ah*, an opinion with which most conference members strongly disagreed. The act was cancelled, effectively returning the country to the time before the introduction of the Family Protection Law: men could divorce women at will; the marriage age for girls was lowered to nine years old (since raised to thirteen).

One legal exception to the worsening status of women was the special consideration given to the wives of men who died in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 and were accorded "martyr" status. Women staged extensive protests, and only then did they receive pensions and custody rights over their children; "demands have their fruit," said the presenter. Most agreed that the rights given to the wives of "martyrs" were unlikely to be conceded to anyone else unless there was another war. There were disagreements over whether changing laws was enough to change *de facto* behavior, but the presenter argued that the laws combined with international attention would mean that "breaking the laws would harm our international reputation too much."

One way to sidestep the new strictures is to draw up a pre-nuptial agreement, but the speaker emphasized that these were not always considered binding legal documents. Girls getting married young would not always know that such documents could be drawn up, added another participant.

Under current *Shari'ah* law in Iran, men could hardly be forced to adhere to these pre-nuptial agreements, even if they signed them. The group disagreed over whether wages paid to women for housework upon divorce were a step forward or not. One argued that it is unacceptable to offer women financial compensation if their right to divorce is still withheld from them. Another pointed out that many "martyrs'" brothers married their brothers' widows immediately so that they could receive some of their pension money. The participants agreed that it was an imperfect solution, but many seemed proud that it had no analogue in the western feminist movement.

## Session II MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE LAWS AND CHILD CUSTODY AND CITIZENSHIP LAWS IN IRAN

"*Shari'ah* law, like any other law, requires interpretation according to context," began the presenter. Some of the participants objected to accepting an Islamic framework for discussions of law, but most took a pragmatic stance. The context for *Shari'ah* law in Iran is the opinions of the religious *mullahs* and is likely to stay that way for the time being. The presenter argued that Iran's post-revolutionary regime read the Family Protection Act in a misogynist context: Khomeini decided that the Family Protection Act of 1975 was "unislamic" and contrary to *Shari'ah*, which led to a "wave of women" divorcing their husbands, prompting an "existential crisis" in Iran. But this reading is not the only one possible under *Shari'ah* law.

The presenter indicated that under current laws there are two financial factors affecting women: galloping inflation, which renders their bride price less valuable, and compensation for housework. By the 1980s, one woman quipped, "My bride price wouldn't pay for my taxi to divorce court." The bride price was later pegged to gold and thus inflation-proofed. Compensation for housework upon divorce is a

concept that has been discussed in feminist circles in the West and was made law in Iran in 1993. Wages for housework are in compliance with an Islamic principle that even those who work voluntarily have a right to be paid.

Child custody is an issue inseparable from marriage and divorce law, and participants called for a separate conference to address the rights of children, in Iran. When parents are divorced, the father gets the property and, in the past, guaranteed custody of children when the son is over the age of two, and the daughter over the age of seven (now the age for both children is seven). The right to beat and punish children feeds the epidemic of children, especially girls, who run away from home. Any possible reforms of laws governing the family must make concessions to *Shari'ah*, but to compromise leaves room for abuse.

During field work, the presenter noted, grassroots change occurring in Iran: women in both urban and rural areas are discontented. Women of all types are becoming more educated; they now make up sixty-five percent of all university students. Paradoxically, the lower the age of marriage set by the government, the later women do marry, on average. Education, healthcare, and birth control have spread to the remote places in Iran. Families have become smaller in number, less patriarchal and more democratic in their functioning. Children are learning negotiation skills in the family.

Another shift is that women activists no longer work in a low-profile way, as they did before the revolution. Now they garner more respect, the Internet facilitates the spread of their ideas, and international awards have made celebrities of some of them. But there are generational divides in the movement, and heterogeneity in the religiosity of its participants.

A new problem is that to be “secular” in Iran is not to be neutral but often means to self identify as anti-religious, even for some intellectuals. And the majority of female ac-

tivists identify themselves as secular. This secularism isn't necessarily in conflict with working within the existing framework of law, but does cause tensions in the movement. Even secular feminists are careful to point out the difference between western feminists and those in Iran, “many of whose idea of equal rights isn't supporting themselves or doing the exact same job as men for the exact same wage.”

“There is room in the *Shari'ah* for a different reading,” said the speaker. But damaging compromises that endanger the health of women and their families must not be made. Debate followed over whether the spirit of *Shari'ah* was incompatible with feminism. One participant mentioned the debate over whether to throw out the United States constitution because it had made concessions to slavery. Frederick Douglas compellingly argued in favour of amendments to rather than destruction of the document, in order to allow its prevailing spirit to remain. Is *Shari'ah* law too historically bound to the repression of women to allow even what some secular women term as its “impulsion to freedom” to prevail? The women disagreed over whether liberalization of divorce and marriage laws was possible under a non-secular government. Those who have been in the country pointed out the difference with western feminism, that some but not all Iranian women want to support themselves like a man – not to do the same work for the same salary.

Most agreed that women had to use the given framework to make short term changes, and that the problem was “not *Shari'ah per se* but an outdated reading of it.”

### **Session III GENDER SEGREGATION IN IRAN**

The *hejab* is shorthand for gender segregation, but forcing women to wear it is only one part of the effort to segregate women in Iran. The official reason given for the introduc-

tion of the *hejab* is so that women may not be exploited or harassed, but it is really about “protecting the man’s asset,” according to the presenter. All other forms of segregation are also based on this premise. One participant said that a “casualty” of segregation is successful marriage. “The two genders no longer know each other,” she said. “So they are like strangers, leading in many cases to divorce.”

Segregation comes in two guises: imposed from above and decided on from below. Segregation is worthwhile only when groups that share common issues decide to self-segregate, like a women’s organization or a public bath. The presenter said that separation imposed from above is comparable to apartheid in South Africa. This top-down segregation is a fact of life in Iran. Coeducational schools were shut down after the revolution. Blankets hung from the ceiling separate classrooms or mosques, dividing the space into gendered areas. Women must sit out of sight in the back of classrooms and buses. In the past few months, a park allotted to women for cycling where they are not required to wear the *hejab* has been enclosed by a wall and guards. There are many separate elevators for women, some in government buildings. Women swim at separate beaches from men, so that families cannot go on beach outings together.

One place where efforts at segregation have failed, at least for the time being, is in hospitals where there are simply not enough male nurses to tend to male patients.

Participants debated whether the positive educational progress of women since the revolution is linked to gender separation. Women make up sixty-five percent of the university students and female students from conservative families attend who might not have been permitted by their families to attend, had the schools been coeducational. One participant countered that, while university was coeducational before the revolution, many segregated schools existed. Another pointed out that women’s outnumbering men in higher education, and even dominance of that

realm, is part of a global trend that extends to non-Islamic countries. She said that it was counter-productive to link this progress to gender segregation. One participant expressed astonishment that in a country like the U.S. there was still high demand for a place like Wellesley, a female-only university. The general consensus was that both coeducational and self-segregated options should be available.

These days, women demographically dominate universities because admission to university is purely score-based. Thus, universities are among the few places where there is no discrimination, the presenter pointed out. Due to this fact, the implementation of quotas for men is already being discussed, in order to secure their presence. At the same time, men in Iran seem to be in a trap. As one of the participants underlined, if a man starts his university education without a wealthy family background he will not be seen as very attractive by most of his female counterparts, due to his lack of income. If he doesn’t study and starts working right away, he might marry a much better educated wife: however, the current family law still gives him the right to prevent his wife from taking a job opportunity – a fact that has been identified by some of the participants as an important source of gender problems.

#### **Session IV INTERNATIONAL AMBITIONS: IRAN’S CURRENT STATUS IN RELATION TO THE CONVENTION FOR THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

The presenter began with a rundown of some of the most important pieces of international legislation governing women’s rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1954 Convention on the Political Rights of Women were first steps. UN Security Council Resolution 1375 was an acknowledgement of women’s crucial role in peacekeeping. The CEDAW (Convention for the Elimina-

tion of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, is the most relevant of these steps to women in Iran, according to the presenter. CEDAW provides for a committee of twenty-three rotating members who meet and evaluate the reports of member countries on the situation of women in their countries. It was the first UN protocol to classify women's rights as a human rights issue. CEDAW reports are usually issued by the government of the signatory countries, which causes problems and inaccuracies in cases like Saudi Arabia, which is also a signatory. Ninety percent of the one hundred and eighty-five member countries of the UN have signed CEDAW. Of the eight countries that have not, Iran and the U.S. are two. There is a protocol by which NGOs or individuals are allowed to transmit "shadow reports," but very few countries have signed this into law. One of the counterproductive aspects of CEDAW is that the signatories are allowed to raise "reservations," identifying parts of the treaty that they will not adhere to – the most common of these is that granting citizenship generously to children born in the signatory's country. Still, spreading the word about CEDAW is one effective way to empower women, said the speaker.

What role does this sort of international agreement play in the lives of women in Muslim majority societies? None, unless they are aware that the legislation exists. In places like Saudi Arabia, knowledge of what women's rights are on paper seems to be relatively low.

The participants disagreed on why Iran is not a signatory. One argued that it was better that they hadn't signed, because the document might have become mere "window dressing, as it is in Saudi Arabia." But another said that CEDAW could have been more dangerous to the regime in Iran, where the memory of a more liberal past is still alive and there is a more dynamic women's movement than in other Muslim countries. Signing CEDAW could have "opened a Pandora's box," she said. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran's "*forte*" is bottom up implementation.

There was a fierce debate at this point over whether participants were exaggerating the size or importance of the women's movement in Iran. "Why should Iran be afraid of signing something like CEDAW," asked one participant, if the government could easily repress any efforts to implement it? All laws are interpreted by religious judges, who have the last word, said another. They would find a way to get around CEDAW. Some participants hotly disputed the idea that the movement's size or effectiveness is exaggerated, citing the *One Million Signatures Campaign* and increased awareness throughout Iran. "Political will plus international pressure" is a potent combination said one. The movement arguably must be glorified, said another, so that women can take heart in a difficult situation and so that international attention can help the movement.

## **Session V**

### **WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ACTIVISM IN IRAN?**

The women's movement in Iran is by its nature non-hierarchical, making it difficult to estimate the number of women involved. Women participate in their own ways, including everything from traditional activism to non-conformism in their private lives. It is not a top down movement, but rather part of civil society: the activists make an effort to reach out, listen to what women want, and incorporate their demands. One participant dismissed this as a utopian phase that the movement would grow out of when it became more successful and better organized. They are establishing solidarity, which one participant compared to "group therapy for women." Another rejected this, saying that there is no pathology in the women's movement in Iran.

Although they have been accused of trying to undermine the state, feminists in Iran are not trying to "instigate a velvet revolution" in the style of ex-Soviet republics, said the

presenter. Nor are they trying to overthrow the current regime – they are working in a much more pragmatic framework. But they are accused of trying to instigate a “velvet revolution” and are repressed because their strategy and organization look similar. Another new aspect of the movement is that many feminists are now combining identities, and campaign for Kurdistan or against climate change, for example, as well as for women’s rights. They try to use their status as mothers to negotiate, most notably in the Mothers for Peace group, which has received some media attention in the West.

Regarding international support for the women’s movement, the speaker stressed the importance of the international awards that were given to the Iranian women’s rights activists. She claimed that the Olof Palme prize in 2007 given to Parvin Ardalan helped Iranian activists significantly in mobilizing and motivating other women to join the movement.

The presenter went on to compare the women’s movement and its international network with labor unions in Iran. In her eyes international labor organizations were quite successful in their campaign to free Hassan Osanloo, President of the Syndicate of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company. There was nothing comparable within the international women’s movement, yet. This approach should be developed in order to organize and raise more attention to the situation of the women’s movement in Iran.

Participants voiced various complaints about western media coverage of Iran. Some worried that it was too cautious, because journalists were worried about not being granted visas to go back and report again. One said that the coverage was too extreme: journalists were too excited to see female lawyers in Iran, so they ignored other realities, or sometimes exaggerated stoning or other retrograde aspects of society. Even Iranians who write for western media have this problem, because they need to impart the truth without endangering themselves by criticizing the

government. Another participant blasted these writers, saying their “one commitment should be to the truth and to objectivity.” Many of the participants worried about western media outlets only showing stereotypes of Iranian women in *chadors* supporting Ahmadinejad. “We don’t want public opinion to see all us women as victims,” said another.

Another participant told the story of being seriously beaten at a protest on International Women’s Day in 2006 in Tehran – so badly that she could not walk for a year afterward.

## Session VI PETITIONS, CAMPAIGNS, AND MOVEMENTS IN IRAN

The *One Million Signatures Campaign* is currently the largest and most internationally rooted effort by Iranian feminists. Inaugurated August 27, 2006, the effort is modeled after a similar campaign in Morocco (see below). “The Iranian government didn’t know what to do when they learned about it,” said the presenter. “They wanted to characterize it as a western, imperialist notion.” After peaceful demonstrations were violently attacked producing minimal outcry in 2006, women’s rights activists decided they needed a new strategy: outreach. The movement required not only “*avant-gardes*,” but needed to educate ordinary women and listen to their demands. Activists trained over one thousand cadres and fanned out over the countryside to collect signatures and to discuss women’s situation. This is a big achievement given the repressive Iranian political environment that the female activists are working in. The model is secular and non-partisan, said the presenter, and makes an effort to be inclusive and multi-ethnic. They are ultimately looking for secular law in the framework of CEDAW, but are working with what they have and go so far as to quote supportive *mullahs*.

The *One Million Signatures Campaign* is intertwined with other campaigns in Iran. They include efforts to open soccer stadiums to women, pass nationality and citizenship for the children of mixed Afghan-Iranian couples, construct or articulate a women's manifesto, and the aforementioned Mothers for Peace movement. The latter is controversial, because the group changed their name from the original "Mothers for Peace and Equality" because they thought they would be more effective if they dropped some of their demands.

So far, forty-three people have been arrested for their involvement in the *One Million Signatures Campaign*, under vague charges such as "working against Iranian national security." The government's strategy seemed to be to imprison younger people who might be more influenced by imprisonment "but people's responses can be unpredictable." Some activists are disheartened by imprisonment; others are hardened in their resolve. The authorities try to link the activists with the West, which makes fundraising a tricky proposition: the movement needs money, but cannot appear to be accepting it from western sources. One way around this, said the presenter, is receiving donations from private individuals. Organizers estimate that they already have 300,000 signatures but cannot be sure, because the signatures will not be gathered together until later. They estimate that the process will take longer than in Morocco because the Iranian government is more repressive, but emphasize that it is more about the conversations, the education of women in Iran and the contacts that the movement initiates than about the tallying of names. A concrete plan for the day after the collection of the millionth signature does not exist yet, admitted one of the attending activists.

As inclusive and heterogeneous as the movement is, it has faced challenges – especially tensions between religious and secular participants. One controversy within the movement concerned the tradition of *Ash-e Nazri*, i.e. cooking a broth and feeding it to the poor, often done to insure that

someone recovers from sickness or is released from prison. This is a religious deed which one of the mothers of the imprisoned campaigners performed, and some secularists thought inappropriate. Participants thought that any deeper expression of religion was not necessarily something that they would participate in, but that something so minor should not be permitted to divide the movement.

One participant said that she was "not comfortable with the movement going in this direction, speaking in a language that I don't speak." Further, she pointed to the historical experience of the Islamic Revolution when secular women joined the movement against the Shah only to be sidelined by the religious faction under the guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini after the revolution. Therefore, she was very cautious about cooperating with religious women who could take the lead away from secular women.

## **Session VII BREAKOUT DISCUSSION OF MEDIA AND WHERE TO GO FROM HERE**

For this session participants suggested a couple of different aspects to follow up on. The majority voted for concentrating on the topic of better coverage of domestic civil society topics by western media and the issue of further western support for the women's movement from abroad.

A difference between western and Iranian media is that the latter does not have the concept of balance deeply ingrained. Iranian media are expected to take sides. Iranian journalists become too cautious and "internalize the red lines" surrounding certain topics, women's rights included. One problem with foreign journalists, according to one participant, is that they draw wide and uninformed comparisons between Iran and other Muslim countries. "Iranian women are better off than those in Saudi Arabia," these journalists conclude, ignoring the unique histories and cul-

tures of each country. Again journalists were criticized for being too cautious to protect their visas. One western journalist pointed out that reporters are not always in control of what they cover, and that at the moment editors may want stories on the nuclear crisis, rather than human rights.

It is not just media that form a link between Iran and the West, but also culture. One German theater group was criticized for performing in Tehran, or giving an “implicit stamp of approval to the government.” But many participants thought that these cultural connections were worthwhile. “People who totally boycott the Iranian government are boycotting the Iranian people,” said one. Cultural exchange on a non-state level was perceived by many participants as worthy of western institutional support.

What is the best way to support Iranians, then, if they cannot accept funds from abroad? Activists have been imprisoned for accepting “imperialist” western money for their causes, one of the participants stated. “We are in a special global predicament without diplomatic ties.” This makes it difficult. Iran’s belligerent stance and paranoia lead the government to conclude that most aid is connected to espionage. “All we can do,” said another, “is try to normalize relations between Iran and the U.S.” Official opportunities are limited, but cultural exchanges and discussion are always possible, rather than simply sending money. A request of journalists from one of the participants was: if they go to a press conference with someone like Ahmadinejad, to reserve the first twenty-nine questions for nuclear weapons, as they inevitably will – but to ask about human rights and why the regime is arresting feminist activists with the thirtieth question.

## CONCLUSION & PARTICIPANTS’ RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the conference the participants had a chance to provide their feedback and suggestions for the future. The participating journalists noted that the conference was not only a great opportunity for building relationships, which is especially relevant for them, but also a great chance to gain insight, background information and an even better understanding of the problems. The activists and other participants also pointed out the significance of such conferences to them. They are a chance for them to meet other activists from different countries and to discuss these important issues together, to exchange information and most importantly to learn from each other’s knowledge and experience. They shared the view that fora such as these are very few and therefore very necessary.

The participants suggested differing topics for future conferences. The first concerns children’s rights in Iran, including problems of education, citizenship, and violence against children and also their future in Iran. The future is also an element in another suggested topic: Iranian youth and its perspectives.

Sociological changes in Iran inside and outside the family and the implications these have for women and their status in Iran are other relevant issues. This could touch on elements concerning social structure, women’s education, quotas, economic and political participation, reform of Islam, the advancements and achievements of women but also the problems caused by these changes. ■

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## Women's Movements in Islam January 29-31, 2008

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### Executive Summary

The Iranian women's movement may be viewed as part of a larger struggle for women's rights throughout the Muslim world. Many of the disagreements, challenges, and forms of oppression that confront women in Iran are familiar to women in other countries, from Morocco to Malaysia, where Islamic culture predominates and *Shari'ah* is the law of the land. Iranian and non-Iranian activists have much to learn from one another. But, under Tehran's current government, it is generally very difficult for Iranian activists to exchange ideas and best practices with counterparts abroad.

It was to facilitate a dialog between Iranian and non-Iranian activists that The Aspen Institute Germany hosted 'Women's Movements in Islam', a two day conference from January 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> in Germany. The event was attended by twenty-nine activists, scholars, journalists, and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working throughout the Muslim world, the United States, and Europe. In the course of six panel sessions which explored the concept of Islamic feminism as well as local situations in Muslim countries from North Africa to South-east Asia, participants explored what set them apart and what brought them together – and what they might learn from each other's experiences.

Secular liberals tend to see the term 'Muslim Feminist' as an oxymoron. Gender equality, their argument goes, is a western idea, and Islam remains a patriarchal system fundamentally opposed to women's rights. But a strong majority of the participants in 'Women's Movements in Islam' disagreed, maintaining that Islam and feminism can be combined, indeed must be combined, to promote justice for women in regions where religion plays a dominant role.

### Session I:

#### INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC FEMINISM

In spite of this broad agreement, there was intense debate, particularly in the first session, as to how exactly Islam and feminism should be combined – in theory and in practice. Defining feminism broadly ("any (idea or action) that helps or protects the status of women"), the first speaker saw the fundamental bases of Islamic law – the *Qur'an* and the *hadiths* – as the useful, indeed necessary starting point for women's movements in the Muslim world. She encouraged activists and progressive scholars to see themselves as part of a larger reform movement within Islam aimed at reinterpreting religious texts to comport with modern realities and human rights. While the roots of this reform movement go back to nineteenth-century thinkers like Muhammad 'Abduh of Egypt and Jamāl-al-Dīn al-Afghānī, it was not until the 1990s that the hermeneutical approach gained momentum among feminists working in the Muslim world. This trend, the speaker claimed, could be attributed to a spike in literacy among Muslim women and wider translation of the *Qur'an* into non-Arabic languages. Today, the struggle for women's rights is not a 'clash of civilizations' between western secular equality and Islamic backwardness, but a 'struggle within Islam, for the future of Islam.' While conservatives attack feminism as heretical and a threat to the traditional family, religious extremists can be Janus-faced, recoiling at the notion of modern gender roles but eager to recruit women for *jihād*.

But not all participants thought that religion could, or should, power women's movements in the Muslim world. The second speaker split 'Islamic feminists' into two groups: those who promote women's rights because they see them as consistent with the true meaning of Islam, and those who are indifferent to Islam as a faith but see its teachings as instrumental in the larger cause of gender equality. For believers, feminism through Islam is a 'necessity'; for non-believers, it's a 'choice.'

This speaker suggested that participants explore the implications of this division in order to lay the foundation for more effective collaboration. But she also expressed apprehension toward feminists who put their faith before their feminism. If belief should become a litmus test for the Muslim reform movement, she argued, does that mean that Muslims should shun or discount the contributions of non-Muslims? More seriously, what if the essential teachings of Islam run counter to the very idea of gender equality, offering women at best a ‘separate but equal’ status reminiscent of African Americans in the segregated U.S. South? Muslim women, she strongly implied, should not accept such an outcome.

This presentation opened an intense debate in which the focus and fault lines shifted swiftly. One basic disagreement involved the nature and origin of Islamic feminism: some said it was a ‘child of political Islam,’ while others saw ‘feminism’ in any guise as an inescapably secular idea. Still others, while acknowledging that feminism may have emerged historically out of western secular traditions, thought that one could still be a Muslim and a secularist at the same time – that is, a believer who holds that religion is a private matter and shouldn’t be used to structure public or political life. The majority of participants believed that Islam so permeates life in Muslim societies that trying to circumvent it is futile, but others acknowledged that even in conservative countries like Iran, the ‘secularist feminist discourse’ of the West has had an undeniable impact.

At the heart of these discussions lay central questions about reform and identity: what role does – or should – a group or individual’s identity (Western, Islamic, or secular) play in women’s movements in the Islamic world?

The first session revealed an array of ideological differences, even among those who agreed on the basic compatibility of Islam and feminism. But it also revealed a common desire to move beyond ideology – or ‘the dictatorship of ideology’ as one participant put it – and concen-

trate on practical solutions. Particularly, the Iranian participants seemed to display less of an interest in the ins and outs of academic debates over identity and reform. Their mindset was more practical.

### **Session II: THE RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK OF WOMENS’ MOVEMENTS**

Session II presented a case study of Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Muslim women’s rights and legal counseling organization, based in Malaysia. Aspen had also intended to include a discussion of a Turkish women’s rights NGO but the presenter had to withdraw shortly before the event due to illness.

SIS’ was founded in 1987 by Muslim women lawyers concerned by the ways in which Islam had been used to perpetuate discrimination against women. The group focuses its efforts exclusively in Malaysia, a multi-confessional society with a population of twenty-seven million, sixty percent of whom are Muslim. The government is a constitutional, elective monarchy with significant powers concentrated in the executive branch. But for the Muslim majority, matters pertaining to religion are adjudicated in *Shari’ah* courts.

SIS activities break down into three categories. First, they raise awareness of gender injustice and promote women’s rights through publications, research and a weekly column in one of Malaysia’s leading newspapers *Utusan Malaysia*. They also hold public lectures and workshops to train grassroots leaders in faith-based approaches to women’s rights advocacy. Since 2003, the group has provided legal counsel in approximately 700 cases a year dealing with gender discrimination. SIS is also the only religious organization in the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), an influential consortium of NGOs founded in 1985

to ‘raise national awareness of violence against women and to campaign for a domestic violence law.’

Recent SIS accomplishments include: providing Islamic arguments to extend legal protections for women suffering from domestic abuse to the Muslim population; helping to lead a group of NGOs lobbying the Malaysian civil High Court in 2004-5 to overturn the ‘*Hudūd Law*,’ which offered husbands a loophole for winning custody of their children by converting to Islam; and researching and reporting on the deleterious effects of polygamy on family life across Malaysia, an ongoing project begun in 2003. SIS is also a leading member of the Article 11 coalition, which upholds the Federal Constitution as the supreme law of the land, and the *Gerakan Mansuhkan ISA* group, which lobbies for the repeal of Malaysia’s Internal Security Act, a law limiting *habeas corpus* and free speech.

SIS owes its effectiveness in part to peculiarities of the Malaysian context. With a multi-party parliamentary system and a diverse population, Malaysians are used to working across ethnic and religious lines on a variety of political issues. With some high-profile members (including one parliamentary candidate), SIS enjoys wide exposure, even among non-Muslims. Its funding comes mostly from Malaysian and international foundations; substantial gifts have also been given by a Chinese philanthropist and a Muslim entrepreneur.

As impressive as SIS is, some wondered about the extent to which the organization could serve as a model for efforts in other countries. One participant from the Middle East was surprised that SIS could raise money from out-of-country sources, which is not possible for Iranian NGOs. SIS has also benefited from Malaysia’s rather stable parliamentary system and the existence of a functional civil society – typified by groups such as the Article 11 coalition and the JAG. What is more, because *Shari’ah* does not apply to the entire population, SIS can pursue an avenue of reform not open in theocratic countries like Iran: lobby-

ing the national government to restrict the jurisdiction of *Shari’ah* on specific points (as SIS did in campaigning against the *Hudūd Law*) rather than having to struggle to reform the code from within.

### **Session III: WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN IRAN**

From a Malaysian success story, discussion turned to the immense challenges facing women in Iran. The speaker offered a four-phase history of the Iranian women’s movement since the 1979 Revolution, an illuminating presentation, which helped to clarify how outside actors might abet the work of in-country activists.

It is easy to forget that, in its early stages, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 augured a better future for women. While still in exile in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini proclaimed that men and women would have equal roles in the new state, and shortly after the take-over of power, the Family Protection Law (1967), which reformers had fought for for years under the Shah, was abolished. But the question of women’s rights was pushed aside with the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. Iran’s leadership pressed women to follow the pious and patriotic “model of Zaynab,” the daughter of ‘Alī and granddaughter of the Prophet who fought in holy wars against the ‘Umayyad ruler Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān. This model became shorthand for a view that considered agitating for women’s rights to be a threat to Islam and national well-being. During this period, education became segregated by gender and the veil was made compulsory.

In the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, the situation for women marginally improved. Pragmatist President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjānī loosened *hejab* requirements and adjusted the Family Law so that mothers could more easily take custody of the thousands of children left fatherless by the war. This

second period, stretching from 1989 to the election of President Mohammad Khātāmī in 1997, also saw the emergence of the *Farzaneh* academic journal and the *Zanan* ('Women') magazine, powerful forums for the discussion of controversial women's issues. Women began to attend university in greater numbers, and general economic prosperity helped women to gain employment. Women became more vocal. The number of Iranian women's NGOs increased, but when some attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, they were harassed by Iranian security forces.

A third phase, from 1997 to 2005, saw the further loosening of restrictions under the reform-minded presidency of Mohammad Khātāmī and the 'intellectuals' he brought into government. Khātāmī appointed an advisor on women's issues and presided over the first cabinet to include a woman member (as director of Iran's Environmental Agency). The number of women's NGOs further increased, and street protests became more frequent. But the theocrats would be pushed only so far.

Participants in a conference held in Berlin by the Heinrich Böll Foundation were arrested upon their return to Tehran in 2000. Some of Iran's most prominent feminists were imprisoned.

Elected in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has reportedly proven "a nightmare," and the situation during this fourth historical stage of the women's movement has proved "the worst since the beginning of the revolution." *Hejab* restrictions have become tightly enforced. A 'fanatical' – i.e. reactionary – Family Law was introduced to the *majlis*. 'Motherhood' is the predominant role that young women are pushed to imagine for themselves. Police beat women in major street protests in March and June of 2006. In January 2008, while this Aspen conference was in session, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance revoked *Zanan* magazine's license to publish, at least temporarily ending the career of the country's most famous women's maga-

zine. On the positive side, petition has become a popular form of activism – witness recent signature campaigns to outlaw stoning and allow women into soccer stadiums.

Faced with grim realities, but buoyed by memories of a recent, more liberal past, how can activists best promote reform in Iran? The discussion that followed focused mostly on how best to integrate the efforts of in- and out- of country actors. Western media such as the Voice of America, the presenter claimed, reach a broad audience and can have a significant impact in Iran. But VOA's programming lacks quality: too many of their "experts" are woefully uninformed about Iran in general and the situation of women within the country in particular. Western news media need to cover Iranian politics and society more thoroughly and with more nuance, if they hope to gain credibility over and against a regime that ceaselessly seeks to discredit the 'imperialist' West.

The Internet was said to be critical. Already it has had a dramatic impact in Iran, often by simply providing access to information. Young women's first exposure to the concept of feminism tends to be through websites, one participant said. Farsi-language blogs based in and outside of the country provide some of the last places where the strategies and tactics of the women's movement in Iran can be openly discussed.

While the presenter seemed optimistic about the impact of western media – "old" as well as "new" – she emphasized that providers needed to do a better job of targeting young audiences, particularly young women. She suggested that the issue of identity – so fraught for most participants at the conference – might be less divisive for younger generations raised in an increasingly global world. One participant, with knowledge of the situation, averred that journalists can only be "thirty percent themselves" when writing for mainstream women's publications in Iran. Weblogs, by contrast, give writers a chance to be "ninety percent themselves."

Public discourse is marked off by “red lines” that cannot be crossed. Sexuality is out of bounds. So is criticizing Islam or the *hejab* laws, though these topics can be more openly addressed on the web. What makes the subjects taboo is to a large extent the regime’s fear that Islam and feminism might “join forces.” If the feminists can portray themselves as authentically Islamic, they may be able to drive a wedge between Iran’s state and religious authority. Ahmedinejad’s strategy is the reverse: by linking feminism with the ‘heretical West,’ he turns patriarchy and Iranian patriotism into forms of piety. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that state and non-state actors should better understand this dynamic.

Loudly threatening Iran and publicly denouncing its leaders, the U.S. and other groups were said to make it easier sometimes for the regime to shore up support at home.

#### **Session IV IRANIAN FAMILY LAW**

From a survey of the place of women in Iranian society, the participants zoomed in on the issue of Iranian Family Law. The history of this deeply complicated area of jurisprudence sheds light on how hard it can be to achieve reform through theological-juridical argument – particularly in a culture whose language, Farsi, lacks a word for the western notion of “secularism.”

Shortly before the revolution, women began making inroads into public life. In 1978, two women served as ministers to the Shah and thirty (out of two hundred and ninety) served in the *majlis*. But the public roles of a small number of women belied a profoundly oppressive domestic situation for the majority. This was less a result of legal strictures than of a general lawlessness in matters pertaining to the family. The Family Protection Law, passed in 1967, made the situation somewhat better. It created special

courts to deal with family law issues. These courts did not apply *Shari’ah*, but rather a civil code, and they were staffed by judges trained in civil law. The Family Protection Law gave women limited rights of guardianship over children, forbade extra-judicial divorce, and required men to seek permission from their wife before taking a second wife.

While it was in effect, the Family Protection Law was not seen as particularly progressive, but after the revolution women began to lament its loss. Indeed, in this presenter’s estimation, in contrast to that of the previous presenter, the situation for women has never since been as good as it was in the last years of the Shah. After 1979, the ranks of Iranian refugees swelled with women and children fleeing repressive measures against women on issues like marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.

There have been no profound amendments to family law since the revolution, though both conservatives and reformers have won minor victories. Barring exceptional conditions (such as the husband’s ‘bad behavior’, ‘non-maintenance’ for up to 6 months, impotence, or insanity), women may not initiate divorce proceedings, while men can do so under any pretext. The legal age for marriage has increased for girls from nine to thirteen, but virgins still cannot get married without their father’s permission. Adultery is punished with one hundred lashes, and women are generally entitled to half the “blood money” (or reparations for damages in the case of physical injury or death) that men are. Under *Shi’ite* religious law, women cannot inherit property, and are entitled to one half the wealth that men are. Their testimony in court counts for half of a man’s.

Despite these discriminatory conditions, some participants averred that Iranian family law was on the whole more progressive than that which has taken shape in Iraq since the U.S. invasion. This serves as a reminder that democratic institutions do not guarantee fair treatment of women.

The presenter interspersed her report with anecdotes that underscored the difficulties of reforming *Sharī'ah* from within – that is, through *ijtihād*, or reinterpretation of religious texts.

For women who have assimilated western notions of secularism, it may be natural to embrace a religious feeling that separates the religious and non-religious realms. But that does not mean it is possible for a majority of believing Iranians to uphold such distinctions.

Other avenues of reform may, however, exist. As one participant mentioned toward the end of the panel, greater thought should be given among reformers to the faith-bound notion of *orfi shodan* – the idea that laws should comport with social circumstances. According to the panelist, this term has no explicit links with the ideas of human rights or liberalism, but it might provide levers for tactfully introduced legal reform that enhances the rights of women through sound Islamic argument.

## Session V MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Session V offered an overview of the history of Arab women's movements with a focus on Morocco, which, along with Tunisia, is known for having the most progressive family law in the Arab world. These presentations put the Iranian women's movement in a broader context and allowed Iranian participants the chance to analyze factors contributing to Moroccan success in securing legal reforms through Islamic jurisprudence.

The first presenter made distinction between “women's movements” and “feminist movements” in Arab history. The former, with roots in the late 19th century, were instigated by male elites (such as the Egyptian Qasim Amīn,

author of *Tahrīr Al-Mar'a* (Liberation of Woman (1899)) and the Tunisian Tahar Haddad, author of *Our Women in the Sharī'ah and Society* (1930)) and pursued demands such as improved education for girls and women's suffrage. The movements promoted and emphasized women's role in the arts. They believed reform should, and would, come gradually, and they often linked gender equality with a larger struggle for independence from colonial rule.

By contrast, what we now recognize as the “feminist movement” emerged in the Arab world much later, gaining momentum only after 1980. If women's movements defined themselves by the goals they pursued (improved education, suffrage, etc.), feminists acted more “strategically.” They pressed governments to pass specific legislation to combat different forms of gender inequality in the home and the workplace. They have tended not to be satisfied with the idea that progress for women should, or would, come gradually. In contrast to the nationalist alignments of many of the earlier reformers, feminists worked together with women activists from around the world and drew authority from international human rights norms.

Both movements generally have looked West for inspiration, and in some cases, notably Turkey, progressive family law came into existence as a result of outright imitation of European models. But in two other recent examples, Tunisia and Morocco, women gained rights through Islamic jurisprudence. The second and third presenters offered an in depth analysis of the 2005 reforms of the *mudawana* (family law) in Morocco, which have drawn interest from lawmakers from Egypt to Iran.

In Morocco, as in Iran, the independence movement raised hopes of greater gender equality only to dash them shortly after native governments took control. In Morocco conservative '*ulamā'* (clergy) passed the first *mudawana* shortly after independence in 1954; despite minor reforms in the late 1980s, it remained a highly repressive code until 1999, when King Muhammad VI ascended to the throne and sig-

nalled his intention to make family law reform a priority. Without the King, our presenter claimed, *mudawana* reform would have been “unthinkable.” He first convened a committee to recommend legislation comprised of ‘*ulamā*’, sociologists, and – crucially – women. These recommendations took stock of international human rights norms but were grounded in interpretations of the legal traditions and holy texts regarding the family law. The reformers in government worked here, to portray their new laws as rigorously “Islamic,” thus depriving traditionalists of the argument that the reforms went against Muslim or Moroccan identity.

This success may be viewed as the culmination of a years-long “Islamicization” of the women’s movement in Morocco. Beginning in the mid 1980s, the secular trend that had long dominated the women’s movement in Morocco began to incorporate religious arguments as well. Women’s leaders began to write in Arabic as well as French. The emphasis slowly shifted from social causes – polemics against the veil, for instance – to the demand for political rights. Women’s NGOs proliferated in the 1990s. During the *mudawana* reform debates of 2004-5, particularly the younger feminists were noted for pursuing religious lines of argument and pointing to Morocco’s “culture of patriarchy,” rather than Islam, as the source of injustice.

The outcome of these debates was a new family law that was hailed almost immediately as a model for reform throughout the Arab world. Most participants at the Aspen conference had at least some knowledge of its statutes and were excited about the influence it has, or may potentially have, in other countries – even while some acknowledged the new law’s imperfections.

Where women had previously been accorded the status of minors, the new *mudawana* makes men and women equal before the law. The minimum marriage age for women has been increased to eighteen from fifteen. Polygamy remains legal but restricted; a husband has to get the approval of

his wife and a judge before marrying a second woman, and Morocco has successfully limited polygamy to only eight hundred known cases countrywide. Women now have the right to initiate divorce proceedings themselves, and men are required to file for divorce; they cannot simply declare their marriage null, as the law stipulates in other countries. Divorced wives have the right to a greater percentage of the property acquired after the marriage.

Reactions to the new laws have been predictable. Conservatives, with support among the poor, have decried the reforms as a threat to Islam and to the family structure, whereas the modernists have by and large embraced them. The rest of the Muslim world – surprisingly, even conservative regimes – have shown interest in learning more about how to adapt these reforms to their own countries: not long after Morocco’s reforms, Egypt and Algeria amended their own marriage laws. Moroccan delegations have presented their ideas to the Iranian and Bahraini governments. But it remains to be seen how widely these liberal measures will be adopted beyond North Africa – or even gain traction within Moroccan society itself. An illiteracy rate of sixty percent and widespread ignorance of the *mudawana* among Morocco’s rural and poor populations blunt the reforms’ impact. As for the broader Muslim world, it is worth considering whether the effectiveness of reforms in North Africa has something to do with the influence of French political ideas – notably the strong emphasis on *laïcité* – among Moroccan and Tunisian political elites. Perhaps these countries are uniquely prone to secular revisions of the legal code.

Moroccan reformers were helped by having the support of the King and the country’s francophone cultural influences. There was another issue as well. In 2003, as the *mudawana* reforms were being debated, a series of deadly terrorist attacks in Casablanca mobilized popular opinion against religious hardliners who might have played a more prominent role in resisting the reforms.

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**Session VI**  
**OCCIDENT, IMAGES OF THE OBLIQUE**  
**WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS**

To what extent do stereotypes of “Eastern Woman” and “Western Woman” obstruct cooperation between reform-minded actors in the East and West? This question sparked lively debate, which grew only livelier as the session went on to address diverse topics, including Iranian family law and honor killings. To conclude the conference, participants offered recommendations as to how Aspen might structure a follow-up meeting.

According to the presenter, Muslim women are often portrayed in the West as “subordinate” to and “less intelligent” than men. Women are caricatured as “black-clad” pariahs who spend “all day in the kitchen,” and “have no political rights.” It’s commonly assumed that Muslim women stand no chance of liberation unless they follow western models of secular feminism. Views of Muslim women in the media, the presenter averred, are further tainted by U.S. racism toward Muslims in general.

In the Muslim world, western women tend to be seen as “promiscuous” and neglectful of their children and families. They work long hours for hypocritical employers who espouse gender equality but in fact treat women as inferior to men. The presenter also suggested that some Muslims see western women as cowardly for not forcefully standing up – presumably as a group – against injustices perpetuated by the U.S. administration.

The presenter called for a concerted effort to combat these stereotypes; some participants seconded her by advocating an ideology aimed at “valorizing the other.” But others questioned whether the problem of stereotypes was not secondary to – perhaps even a dangerous distraction from – the real issue, which was active discrimination and mistreatment of women in the Muslim world. Participants with experience in the western media admitted that portrayals

of Muslim women in the West were sometimes one-dimensional – but that was because Middle Eastern governments rarely permit outsiders frankly to portray the realities women face within their borders – while women are often afraid to speak candidly to the press for fear of retribution. Hand wringing over stereotypes and their academic support-structure, the ‘Orientalist Discourse’, can sugar coat the terrible situation women contend with in their societies.

Still, there was a genuine frustration with what some participants viewed as the “one-sided” relationship between Muslim and western reformers. While it is taken for granted that Muslim women can learn from their western counterparts, the opposite is rarely entertained. Some participants wanted to see a greater openness among western feminists to the insights of Muslim women. It was suggested that particularly the “differentialists” – feminists advocating that women differentiate their roles from men’s, rather than emulating them – might learn from Muslim experience.

At this point, the session shifted topics to address two issues which many participants felt deserved greater attention. The first of these was the situation of women in Iran, which one participant believed had not been accurately represented in Session IV.

Iranian laws are repressive, but social mores are laxer than the law would suggest, she argued, citing a *Zanan* survey that fifty one percent of university students were women, and although the legal age for marriage is quite low (thirteen), the average actual marriage age is twenty-four. These remarks, which sparked some heated exchanges, further highlight the central ambivalence on display in this session: anger and frustration toward the negative image that many Muslim countries have, coupled with a genuine recognition of the need to reform regressive laws and practices in these countries.

Also addressed, in a brief but fruitful exchange at the end

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of the session, was the issue of honor killings – usually murders of women that have brought ‘dishonor’ to their families – which often go unpunished in the Muslim world. Participants suggested that the practice was linked to stridently patriarchal or tribal cultures rather than to Islam *per se*. Hence instances of honor killings in conservative South American societies, as well as the lack of honor killings in Malaysia, which unlike Arab and Persian regions lacks tribal traditions. Tunisia, one participant claimed, had successfully outlawed honor killings while many other countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, have tried unsuccessfully to pass and enforce prohibitions against honor killing. ■





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# **DIGITAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM IN IRAN**

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## Digital Media and Journalism in Iran Meeting VI, June 14-23, 2009

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### Executive Summary

The internet has become a powerful tool for strengthening Iranian civil society. During the 2009 presidential election campaign, activists, journalists and bloggers used digital media to secure the free flow of information and subject all candidates to critical analysis. As the campaign unfolded, Iranians and foreigners alike depended on the internet for information in the form of blogs and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, both activists based in Iran and many external experts agree that the potential of reform-oriented Iranian digital media remains underdeveloped. In addition to facing constant government oppression, Iranian activists and journalists working outside the state-controlled media have little access to state-of-the-art training in international standards of online journalism or the latest technical developments in the area of ‘digital self-defense’. The independent and non-traditional media sectors remain highly vulnerable to external shocks. Though links with regional and Western media have increased, these are still in their infancy.

Aspen’s “*Digital Media and Journalism in Iran*” conference series grew out of debriefings with a number of Iranian bloggers and journalists who attended events organized by the Aspen during 2008 and 2009. It was shaped by their stated desire for both concrete technical training and face-to-face meetings with professional western journalists.

Seven Iranian journalists and bloggers traveled to Berlin for the conference, arriving the day after Iran’s presidential vote. The group’s program began with a practical workshop on information technology and communications security tools. This was followed by a seminar on standards of independent and impartial journalism. Later, the participants spent a week visiting German media outlets in Berlin and Hamburg. The Iranian participants were met with great interest by their German counterparts, who appreciated the opportunity to gain an insider’s perspective on the rapidly unfolding events in Iran. Similarly, the group was warmly

welcomed for a number of background discussions with members of the German Bundestag, foreign policy experts from government, think tanks and NGOs as well as German and foreign diplomats. Aspen also organized two roundtable discussions in cooperation with partners in Berlin: “*The Middle East after the Elections in Iran and Lebanon*” (held in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation) and “*Reporting on Iran – Perceptions and Expectations*”. The latter event brought the program participants together with a group of German journalists of Iranian origin.

The instruction on IT security was efficient and participant-oriented. The journalism sessions began with a general introduction to professional standards of journalism as practiced in Germany then branched out to examine the objectivity of journalism in Iran, a topic that led to some particularly heated exchanges. Further arguments about political and social topics emerged during the workshop sessions. While some participants asserted that there can be no distinction between social and political topics in an oppressive state like Iran, others insisted that there are clear and important differences between these topics. It became apparent that it is difficult to make a distinction between independent journalists, social or political activists and bloggers in Iran, as journalists often use blogs as an avenue for the publication of uncensored opinions or to advocate particular political messages.

Visiting German media outlets, including public sector radio and television stations, gave the Iranian participants a broad-based introduction to the media environment in a democratic state. Since none of the participants work for the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) or other state-run media outlets they had not had access to broadcasting stations in Iran and were eager to get a first hand view of television and radio news operations as part of their visit to Germany. Meetings with German newspaper editors offered participants the opportunity to compare their own working environment to that of their German counterparts,

with particular attention to such issues as story selection, newsroom hierarchies and censorship. Due to political developments following Iran's presidential election, all of the German journalists the participants encountered were keenly interested in the participants' views regarding the political situation in Iran.

The participants had expected neither Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's announced reelection with an absolute majority nor the unrest that followed.

### **Day One | WORKSHOP I**

The two-day technical training program in information technology security focused on the use of tools and software designed to protect and control information in cyberspace and to circumvent state censorship.

The first session was dedicated to identifying critical needs and knowledge gaps among the Iranian participants with the goal of defining overall aims and deciding on the specific software on which later parts of the workshop should focus. The participants listed the tools they are already using, e.g. the social networking sites Facebook and Twitter. Agreeing that Iranians are searching for ways to connect political activists to one another, most said they had experienced tremendous difficulties in communicating with like-minded people due to government interference with Short Message Service (SMS) and landline telephone services, filtering of Facebook or Twitter, government hacking of personal websites and blogs and the tracking of emails.

The second session focused on general methods for protecting data and communications online, such as using different tools simultaneously as a way of reducing security gaps. Also discussed were the use of special email accounts

as a social solution, particular software as a technical solution and secure transmission via websites. Methods of increasing the safety of passwords were outlined, including the advantages of making login accounts specific to an individual computer and differentiating between administrator and ordinary user accounts. The participants tested all of these methods in a hands-on environment. At the end of the first day a questionnaire regarding lessons learned and topics requiring further practice was distributed in order to plan the second day.

### **Day Two | WORKSHOP II**

Responses to the questionnaire distributed at the end of day one indicated that the majority of participants still had difficulty understanding the overall advantages of the different tools and software. In response, the instructors adapted their program by concentrating the second day's training on understanding IT security in a more general sense.

In practical terms, this meant tools from the previous day were more thoroughly explained and more time was devoted to lab sessions during which individuals could practice with a trainer. Additionally, the importance of regularly updating software and of general maintenance of data and files in order to keep the computer free of viruses was emphasized. Anti-virus programs and personal software inspector programs were introduced and, where applicable, installed on the participants' machines. Options for safer online chatting, were covered and participants were offered help in setting up new accounts with these services. Since Iranian Internet connections are often slow, participants took advantage of the opportunity to download a number of updates and software packages using the high speed Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) connection provided during the conference. In the final training session, the participants learned how to protect their data.

A final feedback questionnaire rounded off the two days of training. The questionnaire's results suggest that compilation of digital manuals with detailed information on different tools and software would be of significant use to participants both in their own activities and for sharing their newly acquired skills with personal contacts and other activists.

### **Day Three: PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF GERMAN JOURNALISM**

Conversations over the first two days of the program indicated that relatively few Iranian journalists receive professional training. Iranian students seeking a career in journalism generally study communications science under the auspices of the Assembly of Experts. These state-educated journalists are, in turn, employed mostly within state-controlled media where work is closely monitored and is censored.

Independent Iranian journalists learn their craft in different ways. Participants explained that they prefer to write for reform-oriented newspapers. Some complained of censorship by the chief editors at reformist publications and noted that they preemptively censor themselves to avoid problems. The trainer, however, pointed out that even in Germany editors-in-chief decide the topics of the day for their publications and, in turn, take responsibility for the content of published articles.

The German journalist running the workshop gave a comprehensive presentation on journalistic standards in Germany, including the profession's history in the decades since the "*Stunde Null*," or "new beginning," after World War II and its growth in West Germany after the division of the country. The trainer also examined the differences between journalism in East and West Germany. Post-WWII

West Germany saw the emergence of at least 225 independent daily papers. This growth was encouraged, in part, by the Federal Republic of Germany's Basic Law, which provided constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

A particularly stark difference between the German and Iranian media landscapes is comprised by the existence in Germany of private radio and television stations that compete with their publicly-funded rivals. One of the speakers said Iran's state-owned broadcasting stations are unwilling to present a full range of opinions on many issues, instead representing only the government's interests. The participants indicated a desire to build an Iranian journalistic culture that serves as an outlet for diverse opinions.

Today, Germany was said to boast around 2,000 newspapers and 6,000 magazines. These numbers elicited surprise within the group. Some journalists mentioned that Iranian papers must be licensed and can be closed down if they fail to adhere to standards set by the government. They noted that the number of print publications in Iran has decreased significantly since the early years of Mohammad Khātamī's presidency (1997-2005). In some instances the government stopped the distribution of paper to publishing houses to prevent the publication of reform-oriented newspapers.

The growth of online journalism has affected the German and Iranian media in very different ways. German journalists see the Internet as both an opportunity and a threat. The Internet makes their work available to an audience that transcends national boundaries while, at the same time, increasing time pressures in ways that lower overall quality. Readers can access news online at any time, but by doing so for free they cut into the circulation on which traditional publications base their advertising rates. For Iranians, however, online journalism represents a way to bypass both official censorship and the shortages and/or high prices for paper that often afflict reformist publications.

The Western ideal of the journalist as impartial and objective observer/reporter became a starting point for a lively discussion among group members. They debated whether an independent journalist can confine him or herself to covering the news or whether journalists need to be political activists as well. One Iranian journalist argued that in Iran it is often difficult to separate political topics from strictly social or cultural subjects. Others disagreed, seeing themselves as feature writers and viewing topics such as women, sports, the *hejab* and literature reviews as essentially non-political.

The day wrapped up with a discussion of parallels and differences in the two countries' media cultures, some definitions of standards and a frank conversation about the realities of journalism. As noted earlier, outside of the state sector, most Iranian journalists receive little or no formal training. Independent Iranian journalists write about topics on their weblogs but often need a 'day job' to earn a living and pay their bills. The government tends to assume that journalists not working for IRNA or the state-controlled broadcasting services are part of the opposition, and views them as biased. It surprised the Iranian participants, however, to learn that even in Germany many media outlets have a distinct political orientation. This led some participants to question the meaning of the term 'objectivity' when contrasting conditions in Germany and Iran.

## VISITS TO EDITORIAL OFFICES

Since access to editorial offices in Iran is limited to staff, the program of visits to German newspapers, magazines, radio- and TV stations was highly anticipated. Many of the meetings proved to be as interesting for the German hosts as they were for the Iranian visitors.

### Der Tagesspiegel

The first visit was to the offices of *Der Tagesspiegel* in Berlin where the Iranian journalists met with their counterparts from the paper's political and foreign desks. Unsurprisingly, Iran's presidential election and its disputed results were the main topic of discussion. The German journalists mentioned the difficulties involved in reporting on Iran and its political situation, particularly the lack of reliable information from inside the country. For example, the visa of a *Tagesspiegel* correspondent to Iran expired just before the presidential elections, forcing her to cover the Iranian vote from Beirut. They noted that, while Twitter and Facebook can be useful sources of information about protests inside Iran, they are no substitute for actually having a reporter on the ground. One German journalist asked whether U.S. President Barack Obama's June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo had had a political impact in Iran. One of the Iranian journalists replied that the speech was seen as a gesture of support by some in the reform movement and, as such, increased the pressure on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government. Obama's references to Islam, however, were not particularly interesting for Iranians because most, as *Shi'ite* Muslims, did not feel the American president was addressing them. Another Iranian participant noted that not all Iranians are particularly religious, adding that some people do not even consider themselves Muslims.

## **SPIEGELonline**

At the office of the most important news website in Germany, *SPIEGELonline*, a journalist who covers the Middle East asked whether presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi's Green Movement can be compared to the protests that eventually led to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Iranian visitors replied that the Green Movement's conditions and goals are different from those of the protests that toppled the Shah three decades ago. They added, however, that today's movement is the result of ten years of work and activism. The journalist outlined the reasons why he believed the announced results of the recent presidential election were fraudulent. Another point of interest was whether Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjāni, the chairman of Iran's Assembly of Experts and a former president, was in a position to assist the reform movement. The Iranian journalists answered that Rafsanjāni's influence has declined since a television debate during the presidential race in which his wealth was severely criticized. More importantly, they added, the movement cannot depend on one person, so it would be a mistake to attach too much hope to any particular reform politician. The German journalists also wondered to what degree their Iranian colleagues felt they could side openly with the reform movement in the wake of the arrest of some pro-reform newspaper editors and the closure of their offices. For their part, the Iranian journalists were interested in new developments in online journalism in Germany. The editor-in-chief of *SPIEGELonline* noted that the print and online versions of *Der Spiegel* are both posting good sales figures. The main advantage of online news, he said, is the ability it offers editors to react immediately to stories as they develop.

## **Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)**

The next visit was to Germany's public television broadcaster, *ZDF*. There, the journalists from Iran met Hilke Petersen, the channel's deputy editor-in-chief and the anchor

of its program *Frontal 21*. Petersen explained that she expects her team of 20 journalists to be able to conduct in-depth research on most topics within a week. Because *Frontal 21*'s reports are often controversial and regularly lead to litigation it is vital that the background research be accurate and that it be based on reliable sources. Since Petersen is a woman in a leadership position, the journalists were also interested in whether she faces problems working in a male-dominated environment. An experienced journalist who has worked as a correspondent in Washington D.C., Petersen could not deny that she has had difficulties and must be better than her male rivals. She noted that there is a gender policy at *ZDF* requiring each department to employ at least two women. Some departments, such as politics, remain male-dominated while in others, such as culture and social affairs, women make up a significantly larger portion of the staff. Petersen's observation that 51% of *ZDF*'s employees are women but that few of them occupy leadership positions caused some surprise and led the Iranians to draw parallels to working conditions for women in their home country. Petersen said gender equality remains a long way off in Germany in general. To this day, women earn 23% less than men working in similar positions. Women and people with diverse ethnic backgrounds are gaining more visibility as television-presenters, but still occupy few leadership positions off-camera.

## **Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR)**

At the *NDR* radio station in Hamburg, the Iranian journalists were able to listen to a live interview with the last remaining *NDR* correspondent in Iran. The Iranian journalists were impressed by the technical procedures involved in receiving and processing reports during the live program. The radio journalists showed their Iranian colleagues how they record news, edit material provided by news agencies and use music to separate sections of the program from one another. The Iranian journalists said they hoped someday to gain unrestricted access to the news agencies in order to publish the most important news instantly.

## Die Zeit

At *Die Zeit* the journalists were welcomed by deputy editor in chief Matthias Naß, who described the weekly paper as liberal, international and socially oriented. He said the newspaper tries to be politically independent, but that it is usually perceived as being friendly towards the Social Democratic Party. One of the Iranian journalists asked why the Middle East is so important to a German publication and why the paper published three pages on Iran's presidential election. Naß replied that, for the foreseeable future, the Middle East will remain the world's major energy producer. This, he said, means that political developments around the region have a direct impact on Germany and the West. Additionally, he noted, Europe has historically enjoyed close ties with the region. The Iranian journalists noted *Die Zeit's* large size for a newspaper and asked why it is not published in a smaller format. Journalists from the online and political sections said the editors are aware that paper's size is not very practical, but explained that *Die Zeit* does not want to appear to be simply a smaller version of *Der Spiegel*. In any event, they added size does not appear to be an issue among their target audience.

## Stern

At *Stern* the Iranian journalists became acquainted with another weekly magazine, in this case one focused on photo essays and celebrities. In the photo office, the journalists saw how editors choose photographs and go about linking them together for individual stories.

## Netzwerk Recherche

At Netzwerk Recherche (Network for Investigative Journalism) the journalist Manfred Redelfs, who is also a media researcher for Greenpeace Germany, gave a presentation about the principles and limits of investigative journalism. He started with a definition of investigative journalism: "It is reporting, at one's own initiative and work product, on

matters of importance which persons or organizations wish to keep secret." Investigative journalism, he said, should actively address issues of political, social or economic relevance to society at large. The Network for Investigative Journalism offers young journalists professional training in the research methods essential to the discipline, with the goal of fostering professional networking among journalists. Redelfs showed the visitors websites where journalists can choose whom they want to connect with if they need to publish something about a specific region. He also discussed the campaign for a national Freedom of Information Act, which was initiated to foster journalistic rights and to ensure the protection of investigative journalism in Germany.

## Henri Nannen School for Journalism

At the Henri Nannen School for Journalism the Iranian participants met twenty journalism students and their professors. The students are receiving training, working toward the goal of becoming professional journalists within eighteen months. The students asked the Iranian journalists how they work as journalists in Iran, and each of the Iranians explained his individual working conditions. The Iranians explained how they try to write good stories and publish interesting interviews without being censored. This often involves looking for forms of words that will convey the author's intent while avoiding unwanted attention from government officials. The Iranians asked their German colleagues whether they have blogs. Only three out of the twenty students did. It became clear during the discussion that there is a distinctive difference between weblog writing in Iran and in Europe.

## Jungle World

Visiting *Jungle World*, a left wing weekly newspaper published in Berlin, the Iranians wondered whether the paper's editors were supporters of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in recognition of Ahmedinejad's close ties with Venezuelan

President Hugo Chávez. The German journalists said they would not blindly support anyone simply because he claimed to be a leftist. Before the war in Iraq in 2003, the paper's editorial team discussed whether they could favor a pre-emptive war and agreed that they were not against the invasion. The editors asked the Iranian bloggers and journalists whether they think their country's regime can be reformed from within and become more democratic. They also asked whether the Iranian political system would really undergo significant change if Mir-Hossein Mousavi became president. One of the Iranians said he believed that reforming the system represents Iran's only chance for peaceful change. With Mousavi, one of the young Iranians predicted, the government might not be as repressive as it is now and might be more open to political reforms.

#### **GERMAN BUNDESTAG COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN AID**

Members of the German Bundestag and about twenty foreign policy advisors to various parliamentary groups were keen to solicit the participants' views on the events unfolding in Iran. Asked whether election fraud, which at that point was being alleged, could be confirmed one of the Iranian journalists replied that the vote totals were clearly manipulated. He noted that the Iranian interior Ministry of Interior had, at one point, actually published the real results only later to rescind them. A member of parliament asked whether the Iranian journalists believed the opposition would be successful in its demand for a recount. One of the Iranian participants answered that even if a recount took place it would only wind up confirming Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's reelection as president. The journalist said he believes Mir-Hossein Mousavi will not yield to the conservatives because he fears that Ahmedinejad plans to abolish the Islamic Republic and replace it with a dictatorship under himself as President-for-Life. The Iranian participants also noted that rivalries within the reform movement – particularly the competition for influence among Mehdi Karroubi, Mohammad Khātāmī and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjānī – are weakening the opposition. The German politicians asked what Mousavi stands for and whether the Iranian system would change in any significant way were he to come to power? The Iranians said he stands for a more modern and reform-oriented Iran.

## FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE

As originally conceived, the group's meeting with German diplomats was to focus on civil society and human rights issues. Unsurprisingly, it, too, ended up as a discussion of the election and the controversies surrounding it. The diplomats noted that they had little information on the situation in Iran beyond what was available in the media. To avoid endangering embassy staff posted in Tehran, communication with their colleagues in-country was being confined to administrative necessities. The meeting took place before Ayatollah Ali Khāmene'i, Iran's Supreme Leader, was to speak at Friday prayers on June, 2009. A major topic of discussion was whether the Supreme Leader's remarks would spur further protests and, if so, how the government might react. The diplomats and journalists analyzed the current situation and debated a variety of political scenarios. Addressing the group, the German desk officer for Iran asked what they expected from the German government during the crisis. Because the group members had introduced themselves as human rights activists and journalists, the main question was whether Western interference helps or harms the Green Movement. The group could find little common ground on this question. Some members emphasized that they had accepted Aspen Germany's invitation merely for educational reasons. One member said it was not his place to give advice to another country's government on how to treat Iran and its government.

## Roundtable I: THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ELECTIONS IN IRAN AND LEBANON

This roundtable was sponsored jointly with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Its goal was to explore political and thematic connections linking the recent elections in Lebanon and Iran. Hajo Lanz from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Department for the Near and Middle East/North Africa delivered the opening remarks. Addressing Iran's current political situation, one of the Iranian journalists began by analyzing the positions of the various presidential candidates and their standing among reformists. He said reformists feel this is their time: that after years of organizational work the movement feels the time has come to reap its rewards. The speaker said that the nature of the reform movement and people's reactions to it indicate that events are building toward a great upheaval. Several of the Iranian journalists offered the opinion that the long silence of former President Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khāmene'i's anticipated Friday sermon were of great significance and, between them, rendered the situation unpredictable. Some said they believed the political crisis might have reached a turning point.

A German journalist, Markus Bickel, of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, gave a presentation about the elections in Lebanon. He began by noting that, unlike a European political party, Lebanon's March 14<sup>th</sup> Movement (which won the recent Lebanese election) is not a homogeneous political entity. Despite the March 14<sup>th</sup> Movement's victory, he said, *Hizbollah* remains a strong force in the country and is likely to refuse any demand to disarm its military wing as long as Iran sees an advantage to itself in maintaining an armed proxy in Lebanon. Bickel said he believes that a period of U.S.-Iranian rivalry over Lebanon, stretching back to 2005, is now coming to an end. He noted that the agreement recently negotiated in Doha by Lebanon's parties has established a new, peaceful, way to avoid a Lebanese civil war.

Dr. Guido Steinberg from the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* offered an overview of the political situation of the Middle East after the Lebanese and Iranian elections. The new U.S. policy in the Middle East, he said, has changed the current situation completely. He said a key question going forward will be whether President Obama's administration will maintain its pressure on the Israeli government and continue its calls for a fundamental change in Israel's settlement policy. A historical review of the situation explains the rise of non-state actors such as *Hizbollah* and *Hamas*. After the Israeli army left south Lebanon in 2000, Iran attempted to boost its role as a regional player by supporting *Hizbollah*. Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 was seen as a major success but failed to bring significant political change in its wake. Similarly, Lebanon's latest elections did not improve inter-communal relations or stabilize the state. Steinberg said a clear U.S. policy of increasing pressure on Israel coupled with a push for UN-sponsored sanctions against Iran would be the best strategy to promote a more peaceful Middle East.

## **Roundtable II REPORTING ON IRAN – PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS**

This roundtable brought the program's participants together with eight Germany-based Iranian journalists. Their dialog stretched over three sessions. These were envisioned as both an extension of the Iran-based group's earlier discussions and as a venue for new input and information regarding digital media and journalism in Iran.

### **Session I THE STATUS QUO OF IRANIAN JOURNALISM: BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL OBJECTIVITY**

The first session examined the current state of journalism and blogging in Iran. Many Iranian journalists and bloggers are also part of political movements. Evidence of this could be seen in the strong political mobilization that immediately followed the Iranian presidential election. As the discussion developed, the question of political partisanship and the extent to which it interferes with journalistic objectivity emerged as the central issue of this session. Participants considered whether local reporting in Iran is more politically slanted than is common internationally and exchanged views on how Iran's journalistic standards compare with international norms of "independent reporting". They also discussed whether, and to what extent, subjectivity among Iranian journalists and bloggers impacts the domestic policy agenda.

Several participants noted how dependent the Iranian media is on political funding. The majority of Iran's newspapers and magazines are bankrolled entirely by political parties, foundations and advertisements. All publications must be licensed by the government. The participants

agreed that this situation leaves little room for free and critical reporting and has led to a situation in which journalists, seeking to avoid state censorship, surveillance and political meddling feel pressured to exercise self-censorship. Because it is essentially internal and, therefore, impossible to trace, self-censorship further distorts public opinion. For example, editors-in-chief may feel compelled to alter headlines and news content. These changes often elicit pointed discussions within the newsroom itself, as one Iranian participant explained. Another participant noted how Iranian authorities often pressure independent newspapers and magazines by reducing their supply of newsprint or other essential supplies. *Zanan*, Iran's most important women's magazine, often faced such issues before it was forced out of business in 2008.

Overall, the participants said, journalism in Iran requires constant vigilance. Editors must always sense – and quickly adapt to – the changing political climate. Failure to do so can lead to the loss of one's license and the shutting down of newspapers or broadcasting stations. Freedom of the press remains a long way off in Iran.

## **Session II**

### **COMMUNICATION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD: INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE IN IRAN VS. IRAN'S COVERAGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA**

This session focused on the foreign news media, information Iranians receive through their local media outlets and on Iran's image in the international media: how it is shaped and by whom.

Several participants observed that Iran's media environment is constantly shifting, usually in response to political developments. There was a time, relatively recently, when the restrictions placed on foreign reporters were “moder-

ate” and government controls were manageable. Under the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, however, media working conditions have steadily deteriorated, a process that the post-election turmoil has only accelerated. Several participants noted that, even before the election, foreign broadcasters were required, prior to entering the country, to apply for permission from Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for every interview they planned to conduct and every location where they planned to shoot. The state's control measures are hard to predict, and often arbitrary. In some cases, officials are known to have urged foreign reporters who had broadcast critical reports about Iran to ‘compensate’ by producing a positive documentary. Material shot by foreign journalists is examined by the ministry before it is allowed to leave the country. The participants also noted that the Internet has made it much easier for Iranian embassies and consular offices to monitor foreign media coverage.

One journalist remarked that while the Internet has given Iranians access to a wider world of news and information it also plays into the hands of the authorities. For example, though blogging has led to profound advances in the freedom of speech, being a blogger in Iran involves a high level of personal risk. One Iranian participant explained that bloggers lack the institutional structure – and accompanying protections – of an established media outlet, for example a newspaper's editorial board. Instead, bloggers bear all potential legal risks individually. Noting this, several participants called on foreign correspondents reporting from Iran to take special precautions. Speaking with a foreign journalist may put an Iranian person or organization at serious risk, especially if the resulting article or report highlights political criticism of the regime. Several examples were offered of persons who were imprisoned after appearing in foreign news coverage.

The participants also discussed the range of state media control and censorship in Iran itself. Certain publishing houses, newspapers and radio-stations, such as the now-

closed magazine *Zanan* and the Amsterdam-based broadcaster Radio *Zamaneh* (which is officially banned inside Iran), are monitored in much greater detail than others. Journalists working for these outlets run a particularly high risk of government reprisals.

**Session III  
TOWARDS A MORE COHERENT ACTIVIST  
MOVEMENT:  
JOURNALISTS AND BLOGGERS AS PART  
OF IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY**

Despite the country's repressive government, Iranian life is marked by a large number of activist groups contributing to a lively civil society. Communication and the exchange of ideas between these groups, however, remains minimal. The roundtable's final session sought to find ways to strengthen these social movements and analyzed the role that journalists play within social-political networks. Among the main questions considered were how journalists and bloggers can bring together disparate reformist groups and facilitate understanding among activists. The roundtable also debated what types of internal and external support would best help implement these ideas.

These questions led to a discussion about the character of the various reform and civil society movements. One of the journalists pointed out, for example, that the Iranian women's movement needs to be clearly distinguished from student activism. For many years the women's movement made little use of the Internet and confined itself to social, rather than political, issues. Its leaders tended to address very specific topics, often closely linked to the problems of daily life. The rise of blogging changed this. The net's anonymity has encouraged more open talk about sexuality, as well as broadening the conversation to encompass political issues including: regulations related to Islamic Law, the recently defeated Family Protection Bill and legislation

related to child custody. The Internet has also helped the women's movement build relationships among disparate groups in different parts of the country and, in turn, to connect these groups with activist networks nationwide.

The fact that three of the four presidential candidates openly addressed women's issues during their campaigns was cited as a sign of slow but steady change in the overall perception of women's issues and their importance in the broader public sphere. Several participants stressed the importance of understanding that the Iranian women's movement is not a monolith and is not limited to progressive or reform-oriented members.

The same could be said of Iran's student movements, which encompass every manner of political goals and beliefs. The student movements at Tehran University, in particular, are known for embracing political extremes of all types.

One participant emphasized that the widespread political mobilization immediately following the presidential election should be seen as an essentially emotional reaction. He argued that, during the final weeks of the campaign, people prepared to celebrate Mir-Hossein Mousavi's victory. The official announcement of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection, thus, sparked anger and disappointment and served to unite the protestors. Generally, he said, Iran's civil society movement is neither this cohesive nor particularly strong. It is very hard to predict how events will unfold in the weeks to come. The potential chaos that would accompany the regime's fall was discussed. It was agreed that this scenario was very unlikely. Participants also noted the historically high turnout for this year's election, a development they attributed to the country's first televised candidate's debate. They noted that whatever happens in the coming weeks and months, the views of the roughly 18 million citizens who voted for Ahmadinejad cannot be neglected.

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The participants agreed that online journalism, blogging and other new technologies were instrumental in organizing the protests that followed the election. In closing, one participant voiced the opinion that the American rapprochement towards Iran and the Middle East region, and President Barack Obama's Cairo speech in particular, seemed to spur the movement for change within Iran, especially among reformers and activists groups including online journalists and bloggers. ■

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## **Digital Media and Journalism in Iran Meeting V April 1-3, 2009**

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### **Executive Summary**

From April 1-3, 2009 Aspen Germany and Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society convened a group of leading bloggers, technologists, cyber-activists, human rights lawyers, and academics - representing countries from across the Middle East, Europe, Canada and the United States - to discuss blogging and the activist Internet in the Middle East.

In the course of two days bloggers discussed a range of topics including the comparative analysis of the Arabic and Persian language blogospheres, filtering and censorship of the Internet in the region, cyberactivism, legal frameworks used to limit online speech, and human rights in Iran. At the end of each full day of the conference, participants broke up into self-selected groups to dig deeper into topics of their own choosing, including: practical software training and tactics for staying safe online, how to use the power of crowd sourcing to advance online projects, and examples of successful cyber activism projects in the region.

The objectives of the event were to bring together a diverse group of Internet experts from a range of countries - including Iran, Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf, and Yemen, among other things - to engage in mutual learning and understanding about similar issues that they encounter, share examples of successful projects in the region, identify problems that limit their success and methods by which to overcome these obstacles. The organizers hoped that through a series of discussions and informal networking opportunities it would be possible to build community in this space further and create ties between participants who can draw on each other for help in the future and identify areas of future cooperation. Further, for those that already work together remotely, this type of event allows critical face-to-face networking and relationship building which is essential for the success of cyber activist communities. For those new to the field, opportunities were also provided to learn directly from leading experts in fields as diverse as

IT security, filtering, censorship, online media, blogging, and cyberactivism. Practitioners in the field were also able to ground truth research and identify future research topics that can be of most use to bloggers and activists in the region.

### **Opening Dinner & Welcome Session**

During the opening working dinner, participants got to know one another informally, learned about the objectives of the event from the organizers, and, through a 'speed-geeking' session, participants were able to formally share a bit about themselves and their work through their blogs, web sites, or other online resources. This approach allowed participants to meet each other, begin to think of possible connections in their work, and ensured that the remaining two days focused entirely on discussion and debate instead of framing and introductory sessions.

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**Session I**  
**THE ARABIC AND PERSIAN LANGUAGE**  
**BLOGOSPHERES**

The first session included the presentation of results from cutting edge social network analysis of the Arabic and Persian language blogospheres, as well as more qualitative assessments of the conversations and debates taking place in the region. Early results from the Berkman Center's analysis of the Arabic language blogosphere showed that this network is dominated by national clusters instead of topical based discussions. Compared to Iran, the Arab blogosphere has more female participants, but they are still a minority. Egypt is one of the largest network formations, but Saudi Arabia, the Levant, North Africa, and Kuwait also make up major clusters of bloggers. An analysis of topics of conversation showed that, counter to popular media narratives in the West, the Arabic language blogosphere is not a space used predominately to promote terrorism or extremist organizing, that religion is often discussed but more in terms of personal experiences than political Islam, and that the U.S. and its wars in the region are not major topics of conversation, while criticism of domestic political leaders and other domestic issues are. Researchers also showed how blogs are an emerging part of the Arabic language media ecosystem. An updated Iranian blogosphere map was also shown, revealing that Islamic bloggers, termed "Cyber *Shī'ah*," have expanded and may account for recent efforts in Iran by *Basiji* bloggers to impact the online discussion space. Increased activity has also been observed in the conservative politics cluster, possibly due to increased debate around the upcoming Iranian elections.

An Iranian blogger also shared his views on: how the Iranian blogosphere has changed over time, legal issues, and repression of Iranian bloggers. This individual noted that the Iranian blogosphere began as a space for publishing of new and, in many cases, opposition newspapers that were forced to move online after increased restrictions were placed on their offline publications. Repression of bloggers

and online speech appears to move in cycles of freedom and repression that are often difficult to understand. It is also quite unclear from the bloggers' perspective where the red lines are: what kind of speech is allowed and what will lead to filtering, harassment, or arrest. This has particularly been the case since civil society groups and individual activists started to use blogs and web sites to create broader awareness of Iranian civic activism, e.g. women's rights groups, human rights lawyers, union activists, and environmental activists. The speaker indicated that the government is not pleased with the independence that bloggers enjoy and has made a number of legal moves to attempt to regulate their activities including registration regulations (which were generally rebuffed by bloggers) and high profile arrests and detentions of bloggers. The specifics of the arrest and recent death in Evin prison of Omid Reza Mir Sayafi were also discussed. The fact that the Revolutionary Guards have recently attempted to increase the number of *Basiji* bloggers was noted. Discussion further revealed that the government in Iran is attempting to tie bloggers to pornography in order to discredit them.

A member of a major online blogging community shared impressions of the Arabic language blogosphere and the importance of bridge bloggers, who take the best of online content in Arabic and a host of other regional languages, including Persian, and share that content in English so that it reaches a larger, global audience. This speaker also discussed the need for better statistics and research on Internet use and penetration in the Middle East. The importance of large blog aggregators in the region was also mentioned, which is uniquely different from the English language blogging space. Finally, while a range of issues were discussed, it was noted that the war in Gaza was an important issue across the Middle Eastern blogosphere, and that it allowed bloggers and bridge bloggers to show their importance, since so few traditional journalists were allowed into Gaza. Instead, traditional media relied on bloggers and other online information streams from inside Gaza to understand what was happening during the conflict.

## **Session II INTERNET FILTERING IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CIRCUMVENTION TECHNOLOGIES AND TACTICS**

This session focused on the technical aspects of Internet filtering and an overview of circumvention tools and strategies of use in the region. Researchers shared widely-cited research on global Internet filtering, and results specific to the Middle East, which attempted to place blocking in the region in a global, comparative perspective. A new online project, which attempts to use crowd sourcing to understand in real time what is being filtered and to share that information online instantly, was also introduced. This application will be translated into Arabic, Persian and a number of other languages.

It was noted that filtering is a form of censorship that boils down to two steps. First, states identify the ideas or themes that they disagree with or think should be prohibited, be it political, social, religious or otherwise, and then, second, attempt to shut down those sites, or identify and go after those who are writing disagreeable material.

During this session results were shared from new research that looked at filtering in the Iranian blogosphere by examining pairs of blocked and unblocked blogs next to each other on the Iranian blogosphere map, in an attempt to better understand why sites might be blocked and strategies the state may employ to filter blogs. Early results indicate that there is a lot of inconsistency in how blogs are blocked by the government, echoing frustrations voiced previously by bloggers to the effect that red lines are not clear.

Further, it was found that there is a lot of over-blocking and under-blocking that occurs, meaning that some speech which is totally apolitical and inane gets blocked, while other writing which observers expected the government would consider highly inflammatory was not filtered at all. As an extraordinary example, the creator of an extremely

popular Persian website shared his personal experience both with filtering of the site and with more recent attempts to hack the site using more sophisticated methods. In his investigation he came to the conclusion that to these attacks were initiated or even carried out by Iranian authorities or those sympathetic to them.

An IT security expert and trainer also spoke about practical approaches to circumvention. This individual noted that there are many groups working hard to develop very advanced tools and research that attempts to understand what is being filtered globally. However, when it comes to the average user, most do not have advanced computer skills or the time or technical knowledge to absorb large manuals on the most prominent available tools. This speaker called for greater translation of tools and instruction materials into regional languages, and also called on Middle Easterners themselves to begin creating their own instructional materials in a variety of formats, including video and other easily understood formats. During this session each participant also quickly shared how they got around filtering when they encountered it in the region.

## **Session III CENSORSHIP AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING SPEECH ON THE INTERNET IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Following the technical aspects of limiting speech in the previous discussion, this session focused on legal and political aspects of limiting online speech, and also continued the discussion of personal experiences with filtering of sites and additional circumvention strategies. The first speaker discussed his own experience with filtering of a popular news site in Yemen, which was blocked after coverage of a political demonstration angered the government. After attempting a number of options, this speaker settled on creating a tool, which users can download in order to

access his site, which remains blocked. An Iranian lawyer also gave a detailed overview of the laws that are used to regulate the Internet and laws that have been used to prosecute bloggers and online activists in Iran. The issue of registration regulations was raised, but other than administrative measures there are no Iranian laws aimed specifically at regulating online speech. Instead, in Iran and other countries across the region, laws related to national security, offending Islam and the state are used to arrest and prosecute bloggers and cyberactivists.

The final speaker discussed censorship in the Middle East broadly with several specific examples from the speaker's home country. This individual defined censorship as denying an individual the ability to send a message, or information, via the Internet. This is achieved in a number of ways, including limiting access to the Internet, including both high-speed access as well as access to hardware and software, forcing users to register before they can use the Internet, and arresting bloggers to intimidate them and send a warning to others. Other examples mentioned included the one government's use of the pretext of defending family values to prosecute bloggers. A government web site in another country, where Internet users are able to request that specific web sites be blocked, was also mentioned. The example of a Facebook group that helped organize a strike was debated, and several participants noted that a number of heavy-handed measures were being employed to try to limit any efforts to organize future strikes. During the discussion, participants shared a number of easy methods they use to stay safe online and to get around filtering. This included the very low-tech but effective method of using news aggregators, which are rarely, if ever, blocked due to their wide use, but allow one to access filtered blogs.

### **Breakout Session I**

During the first open 'unconference' session, participants brainstormed about which topics they wanted to go into in greater depth and then broke out into groups based on the topic was of most interest to individual participants. This included a training session for participants from the region who wanted assistance in a small group on how to operate safely online, including help downloading and using a couple free specific software packages, discussion of methods and best approaches for crowd sourcing projects, and examples of recent successful online campaigns in the region. Some participants also broke out to work individually on specific projects that they had arranged to work together on ahead of time that are difficult to work on remotely.

**Session IV  
CYBER ACTIVISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Session IV opened with each of the breakout groups sharing a summary of the discussions that took place, an overview of key outcomes from each of the previous day's breakout groups, and identifying possible topics for that afternoon's session.

In this session, speakers shared information on cutting-edge cyberactivism projects taking place in the region. This included efforts by Global Voices, Rising Voices, DigiActive, and others. Some highlights included the Rising Voices 'Inside Out' project which allows Iranians to create and share videos about their life in Iran. One video shown at the event shares the story of a group of young people who were members of a heavy metal music group. Other successful projects in the region included 'kids with cameras' and MidEast Youth's project to show life in Palestinian refugee camps through children's eyes. The Laila campaign, which allows Arab women to blog about the everyday problems they face, was also highlighted as a successful initiative. Examples of the tools used revealed that instead of specific, expensive tools designed for a one-off purpose, the most effective campaigns seem to be built around widely available platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.

Another speaker highlighted the work of Global Voices Advocacy, which believes that local activists are the best defenders of their own free speech rights. This group identifies and tries to work with the best local defenders of online free speech. Global Voices Advocacy has created a number of guides and materials that are available to assist activists, such as the *Advocacy 2.0* guide, *Blogging Anonymously*, and a guide to mirroring WordPress blogs. This group also has created online applications, the most recent of which is ADVOX, which uses Google maps to show where bloggers have been arrested, what they are accused of, and other background information. Global Voices Ad-

vocacy also offers a free blog hosting service and helps imprisoned bloggers to find local defense lawyers. This speaker concluded that the most successful online campaigns combine the efforts of local bloggers as a first line of defense, combined with international bloggers to amplify issues when necessary. There was a call to ensure that cyberactivists reach out to family members of bloggers that have been arrested in order to ensure that they actually want their family member's case publicized, to ensure that doing so will not cause more harm than good.

A representative of DigiActive also spoke and shared information on Facebook and Twitter activism guides that will be translated into Russian, Arabic, and Spanish. This group has also carried out academic studies on cyberactivism and has tried to map digital activists. This speaker also noted that activists are using mainstream tools and applications that were not designed necessarily with activism in mind, and this is understandable given that 1 in 38 humans in the world use Facebook. Finally, the importance of mutual learning was emphasized, as was the fact that the speaker was inspired to begin working in this field by successful online campaigns in other countries.

A lively discussion ensued over whether progressives and activists in many countries have a preference for text-based platforms, and whether this limits the reach of their message. Iranian and Arab activists agreed that radio and television stations are mostly state controlled, i.e. not accessible for activists. Indeed, most Internet platforms are text-based, but new Web 2.0 tools are used increasingly by bloggers and Internet activists all over the region.

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## **Session V ONLINE VIDEO, YOUTUBE, AND THE INTERACTIVE NET IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

This session was opened by an academic researcher, who studies the usage of YouTube by Iranian activists. This speaker noted that activism, at least in terms of video, is not as transnational as many might think. When one looks at the most popular online videos in Iran, they are not popular content from outside of Iran but almost entirely driven by content that is popular, and usually created within, Iran, including popular music and television programs such as Kiosk and Namjoo. Examples of video captured surreptitiously by cell phones or hidden cameras have also shown the power of video to publicize corruption, and sexual harassment e.g. by a professor at Amir Kabir University, which spread virally across the Iranian Internet. The speaker also noted the use of the Internet as a source of propaganda. Finally, the issues of high speed Internet access and how overt policies to limit such access in Iran might hamper the potential of online video were discussed.

A representative from *Al-Jazeera* also discussed efforts to use the Internet as a new platform to share the network's content. The speaker highlighted the recent decision to put a great deal of their content online for free under a creative commons license. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the network feels that it is a part of a participatory culture, where broadcast networks do not just create content anymore. Everybody is a user and can participate in the creation of news, content, and cultural products, and the station is attempting to tap into the new avenues of user-generated content. For *Al-Jazeera* the war in Gaza was an example of the power of social media to impact and drive international news coverage. The reasons why *Al-Jazeera* decided to use the Internet as a platform are: to bolster their reputation, to experiment with new distribution channels, to empower their community of users, to challenge their competitors, to show respect for their audience and encourage their participation, and for financial reasons.

The final speaker in this session from Yemen shared her work, which seeks to empower under-represented groups in society through video and media training. Examples of video created as part of this project were shared. During the discussion, the efforts of *Al-Jazeera* to release so much of their content online were lauded, as was their support of citizen journalists within the region through training courses. At the same time, the network was criticized for not covering political issues or scandals in Qatar, which bankrolls the network.

## **Session VI HUMAN RIGHTS AND BLOGGING IN IRAN**

During this session a powerful film was shown on the topic of the execution of juveniles in Iran, which is one of the few countries in the world where this still takes place. The speaker noted how blogging has been a tremendous help in raising awareness of human rights issues, both locally and internationally. The participant argued that the Internet even helped to save the lives of some of his clients, once the government was confronted with massive international protest. Regarding the red lines repeatedly mentioned throughout the meeting, the speaker, a human rights lawyer, only once experienced filtering of his blog on the death penalty and juveniles. An IT expert commented that the speaker is most likely under surveillance by Iranian authorities, and, if his experience in other similar situations is any indication, the authorities are just waiting for the right moment to make use of this information.

The session also included an analysis of how activists in Iran use blogs to support their respective initiatives, in particular the use of blogs by the environmental movement in Iran. They use the Internet first to share information on their activities and spread their ideas, then to ask for support and motivate other individuals to undertake similar efforts across the country. Through their online efforts, green

bloggers and environmentalists have shown an ability to organize online, and at the same time have seen their blogs filtered by the government because of it. As mentioned throughout the event, it is difficult for bloggers to know what kind of speech is allowed and what will be deemed offensive. However, it appears that bloggers and activists are becoming increasingly concerned with being associated with any type of organized movement, including online campaigns. This may also help explain why bloggers were not able, or not willing, to protest the recent arrests and even deaths of bloggers in Iran. Due to existing Internet speed limits or governmental filtering the use of Web 2.0 tools such as YouTube and Facebook is underdeveloped. Instead, email and text messaging from mobile phones (SMS) are the primary means of information exchange. The level of knowledge of IT security remains very poor among civil society activists and even among bloggers.

### **Breakout Session**

During the event's second 'unconference', the participants voted to stay together in one large group to discuss two specific issues. First, the group continued the previous day's training on software of use to participants in the region to stay safe online. Secondly, the group discussed a number of successful online campaigns, and a video on the prosecution of bloggers was also shown.

### **Participant Feedback and Conclusions**

Based on participant feedback, this event successfully met all of the organizers' objectives and met or exceeded participant expectations. Participants from a broad range of Middle Eastern countries came together to identify commonalities in their working conditions and interests. Throughout the meeting participants from Arab countries and Iran were surprised by how similar the challenges of censorship, Internet filtering, and surveillance are in both blogospheres and online spaces. Therefore, the need for cross-border cooperation turned out to be a major project for all invitees upon their return. Participants also expressed appreciation to the organizers for bringing together those that already know each other through existing networks in order to reinforce their ties. As a result of the event a number of online collaborations and online networks were created, e.g. on Facebook and other platforms. In a number of cases, those who already work together remotely were able to work together on specific projects face-to-face, and participants built a level of trust in a face-to-face environment that makes cooperation easier than meeting someone online might. The format of the conference and the setting outside of a major city helped create an atmosphere conducive to building trust and networking.

In private conversations with individual Iranian participants, it turned out that concrete project ideas came up among the Persian invitees during the meeting. Requests for practical workshops for Iranian bloggers, who feel committed to social activism in Iran, were discussed in general terms. Iranian participants summarized that it might be helpful to spread the message within Iran's reform orientated blogosphere that Arabic bloggers are much more advanced in using the world wide web to challenge oppressive governments: "it could tweak their Persian pride!"

In terms of suggestions for improvement, some thought the remote location made travel longer than necessary, and

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some said they would have preferred the option of paying the difference for a more direct flight. Some also suggested that the semi-structured sessions could be made more formal along the lines of academic conferences which have panel leaders and formal respondents for each topic. The break out session on day one was very well received but on the second participants day had less energy and creativity, likely due to exhaustion after two full days of conference work by that time. A couple of participants also suggested that it would have been smart to include Israelis for a truly Middle Eastern regional event. ■

## Digital Media and Journalism in Iran Meeting IV, November, 25-27, 2008

### Executive Summary

From November 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> the Aspen Institute Germany held its ninth conference in the series of events on Iranian civil society that was initiated in 2007. The conference's goal was to provide a platform for dialog and networking among Iranian bloggers, journalists, scholars and activists, both from Iran and abroad as well as for Europeans and Americans dealing with Iran, thereby advancing the development of civil society in Iran. It brought together approximately twenty-five individuals, among them journalists, artists, and scholars, including three in-country participants.

The conference was divided into six panels, each of which started with a presentation by distinguished speakers, followed by an open discussion. Although a broad variety of topics was discussed, a number of questions were brought up frequently:

- How is media usage changing in Iran and what is the role of new digital media?
- What specific challenges do critical Iranian journalists face and how do they cope with them?
- How can individuals and organizations from abroad assist them in doing so?

Participants expressed strongly differing views on many issues, but a number of points came up repeatedly. The most important can be summed up as follows.

- Every type of research on social and political issues, such as media in Iran, faces a number of practical problems. In addition to all of the general problems of quantitative social science research, the political situation in Iran makes research on a number of topics almost impossible. Consequently, figures are often unreliable; over the course of the conference their validity and

correct interpretation was often the subject of intense controversy. In short, all data emanating from inside Iran must be taken with great caution.

- Censorship in Iran is not only pervasive but also highly incoherent and unpredictable. This became clear not only during the panel devoted to censorship, but throughout the conference in various anecdotal accounts of personal experiences. Due to the ambiguous nature of the Iranian constitution and the strong institutional fragmentation of the authorities involved, censorship can vary greatly in intensity. Although new digital media offer some ways to circumvent censorship, they are by no means immune to the imposition of restrictions.
- Although Iranian journalists critical of the incumbent government and Iranian activists appreciate support from outside, there are no clear recipes for benevolent Westerners or Diaspora Iranians on how to help. Which measures taken are helpful and which are counterproductive and sometimes dangerous, were the subjects of intense controversy. Fundamental cultural and historical understanding of Iran and its society is a major asset in any kind of foreign cooperation.

### Session I MEDIA COVERAGE IN IRAN

The speaker, a media researcher who is currently writing on alternative media usage in Iran, started by giving a general overview of different types of media and their relevance in Iran. His findings can be summed up and structured as follows:

*Radio* broadcasting, which was launched in Iran in 1941 with a public station that was supposed to emulate the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), still has a huge audience, but its political relevance is questionable. Radio

stations in Iran (thirteen nationwide stations, three entirely *Qur'an* related, plus approximately thirty provincial ones), are heavily censored and not seen by Iranians as reliable sources of information. In radio, the presence of stations broadcasting from abroad is significant with more than seventy stations on the air. The relevance and potential of these stations were discussed in session four.

National television Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which started in Iran in 1967, today is, as in most other countries, arguably the most important form of news media, reaching eighty to eighty-five percent of the population. Today there are twenty provincial and seven national stations (up from two stations in 1998), all controlled by the state. As it is heavily censored, most people do not see television as a reliable news source and consume it mostly for reasons of entertainment; however, as a number of participants pointed out later, this is all but politically irrelevant (see session five). Entertainment formats, such as soap operas, are used as a means of transmitting messages, especially regarding family values and public morals. Satellite television from abroad is obviously common, with more than 40 existing stations and an estimated 50% of the population in big cities having access. But since receiving these kinds of programs is illegal, no comprehensive study of use, content or relevance exists.

The Iranian *press* is still remarkably diverse with more than two thousand papers being published, fourteen of which are national dailies. The latter, which have a combined circulation of 1,800,000, are censored rigorously. Regional, weekly and monthly papers enjoy somewhat more freedom, but are particularly vulnerable to unpredictable censorship (see also session two), with papers often being banned, re-admitted and banned again. Generally, the importance of the press in shaping political information and discourse seems to be in decline since the 1980's. Readers today tend not to trust information in papers and often read it for rather apolitical reasons.

Although Iranian *cinema* is quite successful internationally, its political relevance at home has been in decline since the 1970s. Official figures show approximately three hundred theatres in all of Iran. About fifty films are produced in Iran each year with each citizen making on average one to three annual cinema visits. Although independent, political filmmakers still exist in Iran, most of their work can only be seen at international film festivals abroad.

The *Internet's* (which became available in Iran in 1996) use is particularly difficult to study and all statistics are considered vague, at best. It is estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of the population uses the Internet, predominantly in urban areas. Censorship is prevalent in this field too with more than five million websites being permanently banned for various reasons (pornography, politics etc.). Weblogs are a relatively young phenomenon but have gained a lot of attention since their introduction to Iran in the year 2000. There are one and a half million Farsi blogs, one of the highest numbers in the world. It is quite unknown how many of them are strictly politically-orientated. Access to many of the political and reform-related blogs is blocked in Iran.

In the discussion, some participants questioned the validity of parts of the data presented. The number of women using and producing new digital media was debated. Whereas the speaker had said that new digital media are still used and produced mostly by men, other participants pointed out a high number of women – up to fifty percent in total – using and producing digital media. Some participants estimated that the number of films produced each year is higher, due to the size of the underground sphere.

The Berkman Center for Internet & Society's Internet & Democracy project at Harvard University released a major study, "Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere" in April 2008, which was cited as an alternative source of information; although its content was also questioned by some participants, especially its

way of categorizing blogs and its subsequent estimate that there is a very high number of conservative blogs. Participants agreed on the difficulty of obtaining any reliable data on a politically delicate subject such as media usage in Iran, due to the political situation.

On the question of the political potential of new digital media, the view prevailed that blogs permitted the spread of information that is otherwise censored in other, more state-controlled media. On the other hand, the impossibility of verifying most of this information makes blogs a problematic news source, especially for media outlets abroad. Furthermore, publishing censored information through blogs still comes with serious risk for those who do so, and Iranian authorities are eager to link the use of the Internet, and of blogging in public opinion with foreign influence and with attempts to organize a “velvet revolution” in Iran.

## **Session II CENSORSHIP OF MEDIA AND THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT FOR JOURNALISTS AND BLOGGERS**

The speaker, an Iranian filmmaker living in Europe, described censorship in Iran as omnipresent and devastating in effect. Fear of censorship and consequent prosecution puts enormous pressure on all journalists, writers and artists. Most importantly, censorship is being internalized; anticipating censorship, people censor their own works and speech. The awareness of the constant threat of censorship leads to permanent “double-speak” and finally “double-think”: “you’d better not say publicly what you think privately.”

A very important characteristic of Iranian censorship is its incoherence and unpredictability. Whereas in other authoritarian regimes there are clear-cut red lines that everyone is aware of (the speaker mentioned the German Democratic

Republic (GDR) as an example), the situation in Iran is much more complicated. Although touching upon certain topics is often cited as reason for censorship (Islam, national security, the political system of *velayat-e faqih*) it is by no means obvious which statements exactly cross the red lines.

Nowadays, the era of President Mohammad Khātāmī (1997-2005) is often seen as a golden age of relative freedom in journalism and the arts. However, the speaker pointed out, this is only partially true. Censorship was prevalent under Khātāmī too, albeit with subtle differences. Censors were renamed “advisors” but continued to exert significant influence on journalists and artists. While in the early years of Khātāmī’s presidency greater freedom of expression did indeed exist, in later years conservative forces intensified their efforts to keep control over journalistic and artistic expression.

Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, Iran has seen a further conservative backlash. More conservative and religious censors have been appointed.

Other participants generally agreed with most of the statements made by the speaker, and contributed personal anecdotes about their experience with censorship in Iran. The causes of the described inconsistency were discussed. Two main reasons were given:

- First, the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is ambiguous in character, referring both to human rights including freedom of expression on the one and to *shari’ah* law and *velayat-e faqih* on the other hand. Thus, there is an inherent contradiction in the legal system.
- Second, and more importantly, there is massive fragmentation on the administrative level. Participants named no fewer than five different authorities that are officially involved in censorship (Office of the Supreme Leader, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Min-

istry of Information & Communications Technology, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Intelligence and Security) to which unofficial pressure groups, such as irregular paramilitary units, e.g. *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, must also be added. As these administrative bodies are controlled by different, sometimes competing, factions, their policies on censorship are inconsistent and sometimes in direct conflict with each other. Although the office of the Supreme Leader in theory is the most powerful institution, in practice there is often no clear hierarchy between these institutions.

The other main issue discussed during this session was how journalists, bloggers and artists can successfully circumvent or even fight censorship. Everyone who is publishing anything in Iran is highly aware of censorship and its potentially grave consequences. This has led to elaborate and subtle ways of expression, for example the use of metaphors (animals instead of people) to describe political situations.

Censors, however, have adapted to this use of metaphors. For example a documentary about the possibility of an earthquake in Tehran was seen as a metaphor for social unrest.

The question of how censorship can be challenged within the Iranian judicial system was raised but remained mostly unanswered. Ways to do so exist in theory, but are of little practical relevance. One blogger, who is based outside Iran, reported that after his weblog was blocked by the government he called on his readers to contact the Ministry of Information & Communications Technology to ask why his weblog was blocked. A couple of days later he received a call from the ministry; they offered to open his website for Iranians again if he would immediately stop pushing people to go after them. His personal conclusion can be summarized: don't give up from the very beginning! Be creative and stand united.

In conclusion, censorship is an omnipresent threat to journalists, writers, artists and activists in Iran. No easy ways to avoid it exist and its potential consequences put enormous personal pressure on people. Digital media have offered some means by which to avoid censorship but are not immune to it.

### **Session III**

#### **FOREIGN JOURNALISM IN IRAN AND IRANIAN JOURNALISTS ABROAD**

Due to an incident in Tehran, an invited German correspondent based in Iran was not able to join the conference and give his presentation. Therefore, the remaining speaker, an Iranian journalist with experience living and working abroad, portrayed only the difficulties facing Iranian journalists working outside of Iran.

Iranian journalists living and working abroad face permanent restrictions on their work from two sides: On the one hand, they have to deal with often tough visa restrictions in their host countries, making working and earning money difficult. In addition, they often encounter arrogance and suspicion from western partners or potential employers doubting their professional standards.

In Iran their activity raises suspicions of cooperation with foreign countries, which can lead to legal prosecution upon their return. If they want to keep the option of returning to Iran open, they need to consider the potential consequences of their journalistic coverage particularly closely. As an example of the level of governmental sensitivities the speaker explained the case of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR). IWPR's *Mianeh* dialog project planned to bring ten Iranian journalists to the United States to cover the U.S. presidential elections in mid-October. This trip was temporarily suspended after the group was prevented from leaving Tehran, even though the visit and the detailed

itinerary in the United States were planned in direct communication with the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

In general, Iranian newspapers are very interested in any story from abroad which discredits western countries as role models for democracy and the rule of law. Corruption, abuse of position or other governmental misbehavior are priority topics in this context.

How this group of people can be helped effectively remained unclear. On the micro-level, their cooperation partners in western countries have some opportunities to assist them but the fundamental political dilemmas affecting their work are likely to persist.

On the other hand, the work of foreign journalists in Iran comes with its own problems. Although they are mostly safe from individual prosecution in Iran, their work is permanently challenged through restrictions on research activities and reluctance on the part of many people to talk to them for fear of political consequences. At the same time, their editors in Europe or America offer them very limited space and often demand only stories on the current “hot topics” (e.g. the nuclear program). Although these problems have less grave personal consequences for the individuals concerned, their work can suffer severely, perpetuating a superficial view of the complex social realities in Iran. In this context, the responsibility of news editors in Europe and America was stressed explicitly.

## **Session I BROADCASTING TO IRAN WHAT MISSION?**

The session was introduced by two speakers, representing Radio *Farda* and Radio *Zamaneh*, who presented their work and the operating concept of their respective institutions.

Radio *Farda*, which is essentially an American project in the tradition of Radio Liberty, started broadcasting ten years ago. Although it is financed by the U.S. Congress, the speaker stressed that its mission is not “to tell the American story”, but to provide “free media in an un-free society”. In its early years, most of its programming was produced by Radio Liberty, but now Radio *Farda* is able to produce its programming entirely on its own. Statistics regarding *Farda*’s actual influence are not very reliable but an estimated thirteen percent of the population listens to Radio *Farda* at least occasionally. Their website is blocked in Iran but nonetheless is accessible and is viewed 3.7 million times a month from Iran. Furthermore, Radio *Farda* operates a well-functioning SMS-service for its listeners, which results in more than five hundred short text messages from mobile phone users inside Iran per month. Contact numbers of Radio *Farda* are announced on a regular basis throughout its programs. This way news stories and other information can be shared by Iranian citizens with journalists abroad within seconds. *Farda*’s journalistic work faces a number of difficulties. Their reporters are the target of prosecution in Iran and they have great difficulties verifying information from Iran. Radio *Farda* plans to expand its programs, especially via satellite radio, but funding for those projects is not yet certain.

Radio *Zamaneh*, on the other hand, is based in the Netherlands and owes its existence to the initiative of Farah Karimi, a Dutch member of parliament in 2006. It was originally conceived as a television station but pressure from Iran, which threatened to cut diplomatic relations, led to the cancellation of this plan. Its funds are approved until 2010, future funding is uncertain. The speaker stressed that Radio *Zamaneh* is truly independent and has no political agenda or ties to opposition groups but focuses on long-term social and cultural transformation. *Zamaneh* employs approximately two hundred freelance journalists and is in direct touch with more than three hundred bloggers in Iran, building on their experience and knowledge. Radio *Zamaneh* is dedicated to political neutrality, which sometimes

includes letting Iranian government officials present their side of a story. The speaker further pointed to Radio *Zamaneh's* special dynamic relationship with its audience, not only allowing users to give feedback but also providing links to their sites. Figures on the number of satellite radio listeners do not exist.

Panelists were generally sympathetic with both stations' missions but expressed great skepticism about their actual chance of achieving transformation in Iran. Their mission, and yet at the same time their dilemma, is having to produce a program abroad whose content is relevant for Iranian everyday life, a hugely difficult task. Nevertheless, participants from Iran reported that foreign media have a major influence on Iran's political elite. Topics and discussions covered by VOA, Radio *Farda*, Radio *Zamaneh*, the BBC Persian Service and others are studied in-depth by Iranian parliamentarians, governmental officials and politically active clerics in Tehran.

Several panelists pointed out that in order to reach a truly broad audience it is absolutely necessary to broadcast on FM; both speakers said this is technically impossible as it would require broadcasting within Iran, and hence licenses from the Iranian government. On the positive side, Iranian panelists said that most Iranians trust foreign stations more than any Iranian ones despite efforts in the state media to discredit them as agents of foreign powers.

The question of the regional distribution of both stations' listeners was raised but could not be answered due to a lack of data. It is assumed that most of their listeners live in big cities rather than in the countryside.

## Session V

### IRIB – BETWEEN MODERNITY AND RED LINES

The next speaker gave a comprehensive overview of the history of *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB), called National Iranian Radio and Television until the Islamic revolution of 1979, and its current structure and mission statement.

IRIB was founded shortly after the Islamic revolution, its services were greatly expanded later; today, it comprises seven national channels plus a number of regional ones. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini recognized the importance of modern mass media for influencing the population saying that “television is a university”. Since Khomeini's death, the head of the IRIB has been directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. Most important positions within IRIB are political appointments, not based on qualifications, resulting in a lack of qualified journalists especially in the higher ranks, which are mostly held by former commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The current head of IRIB for example is known to have participated in the hostage taking at the American embassy in 1979; his political positions are unclear and he does not clearly belong to any political camp. Recently, IRIB has seen some efforts aimed at commercialization, e.g. the commencement of commercial advertising in 1996.

Not surprisingly, IRIB's program is heavily censored and generally in line with government policy with barely any leeway for dissent. Since most people are aware of the biased nature of its coverage, which often entirely ignores pressing social issues, and hence mistrust their news formats, IRIB has intensified its efforts to influence public opinion through entertainment formats. Television dramas and soap operas advertise virtuous behavior and often present evil characters as agents of western powers. Contemporary social problems like drug addiction or AIDS do appear in such formats but are often presented as consequences of a decadent western life-style.

Although IRIB has its own, different programming for Iranians abroad, its influence among Diaspora Iranians is generally considered minimal.

In the ensuing discussion, more examples of censorship and political indoctrination were given; some participants described IRIB's programming as "brain-washing". The opaque financial connections of IRIB and widespread corruption and nepotism were also mentioned. Some speakers pointed out that IRIB is still driven by an understanding of television's social role that is rooted in the 1960s and vastly overestimates its influence and is relatively unsophisticated in its methods of indoctrination.

Others hinted at the fact that many progressive people also work for IRIB for lack of other employment opportunities making their fiction program less homogenous than presented. They gave examples of television dramas containing surprisingly progressive portrayals of female characters. This view was clearly rejected by others, especially participants from Iran, insisting that in IRIB's programs, the final moral of fictional stories always confirms conservative views.

In conclusion, IRIB will continue to exist in its current form as a politically controlled broadcasting station. Change will not likely come, unless there is a fundamental political shift in Iran.

### **Session V INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY – WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

The session was initiated by three speakers representing two organizations from Europe and the United States that are dedicated to supporting journalists and civil society abroad. Both offer help to journalists and bloggers threatened by prosecution. Possible measures include financial

support to pay for legal defense and providing secure Internet access. Furthermore, they offer services such as the translation of blogs, media training and support in building international cooperation and networking. They have had a substantial role in the creation of a number of grassroots initiatives in Iran lately.

The speakers and participants stressed the dangers of such work for people in Iran if their cooperation with foreign organizations becomes public. Everyone offering such services must be highly aware of the potential consequences and act accordingly, i.e. not make their cooperation public.

When asked what would help their current work most, participants named various points:

- No threat of military action
- Reliable news sources for activists
- Iranian bloggers should know that outside organizations can help them
- A union for independent journalists in Iran is absolutely needed
- The West needs to be more careful in helping, as at times its actions can make things worse
- Foreign funding is needed, but dangerous for people inside Iran
- Be aware of the situation in the country, and help with the local context; be very cautious
- Media training: professional training, there is a lack of independent Iranian news agencies
- Create & improve ways for journalists to carry their news to the outside world
- Bring news to those who don't have access to the internet inside Iran

Regarding the last point, one of the speakers shared information on a Wikipedia Persian-DVD, which has been produced and distributed by a Western NGO amongst Iranians living in the countryside with huge success. The following

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debate on media training was particularly controversial: Whereas some participants called it necessary and said that many Iranian journalists lack professional standards, others rejected this as an expression of western arrogance.

In conclusion, regarding the situation of digital media and journalism in Iran, the participants repeatedly emphasized four points and partly disagreed on them.

*First*, one speaker underlined the need for well-educated journalists who can provide unbiased and objective journalism in Iran. Another speaker latched onto this point in order to urge more technical support for bloggers and journalists in Iran. Whereas, another participant argued that support for established media outlets like BBC and Deutsche Welle would be more efficient. Generally, the journalists condemned reporting that simply followed the political interests of a particular country.

*Second*, transparency was seen as an important enabler of mutual trust at the governmental level.

*Third*, it is easier for Iranians to take part in conferences organized by universities. Universities are perceived as a neutral place with no interests.

*Fourth*, the suggestion was to stay connected on an Internet portal. The situation for journalists, bloggers and human rights activists can be easily supported by a network which should be available in Persian and English. All participants agreed that international solidarity despite domestic intimidation of Iranians is vital. ■

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## Digital Media and Journalism in Iran

### Meeting III

#### April 23-25, 2008

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### Executive Summary

What signs of freedom of expression remain in Iran today? Sixteen bloggers, journalists, scholars, and activists traveled from Iran, North America, and Europe to answer this question at the Aspen Institute's third workshop on "*Digital Media and Journalism in Iran*". Some had taken part in previous gatherings; others were at Aspen for the first time. The discussions furthered Aspen's long-term goals of: cultivating a network of influential progressive figures among Iran's new media community, and providing them with a forum to share knowledge, form connections, and foster an awareness of common challenges.

The workshop began with an overview of the latest and most comprehensive research available on the size, content, and communication patterns of the Iranian blogosphere. In working sessions that followed, participants gave short presentations initiating discussion on five subjects: the conservative blogosphere; the Internet and youth culture; the differing news coverage of the March 2008 parliamentary elections; by "classical media" vs. the blogosphere foreign news agencies and their strategies for engaging Iranian audiences; and Iranian art and political expression.

Over the course of the two-day event, participants frequently returned to three key issues: First, the impact of information technologies on conservative mores and Islamic jurisprudence, i.e. is new media simply enhancing Iranians' access to like-minded voices, or generating tolerance and engagement between different viewpoints? Second, many participants regretted that the reformist bloggers are not generally as well-trained in objective, factual reporting as journalists are – a shortcoming which hinders their impact. Finally, the impact, strengths, and weaknesses of Farsi-language foreign news agencies were discussed.

### Session I

#### OVERVIEW OF THE USE AND USERS OF THE INTERNET IN IRAN

There are an estimated 18 million Internet users among Iran's population of 71 million (25.5 per 100 inhabitants). Of the country's 11.1 million Internet subscribers, only a small minority (465,000) have broadband access. The cost of connecting to the web from home is high, and many Iranians sign on from school, work, or cafés. Government censors block hundreds of sites. Despite these obstacles, the Farsi blogosphere is large and diverse, and centered around roughly 60,000 active (i.e. updated at least once a week) sites devoted to issues ranging from Iranian politics to poetry, pop culture, personal religious experience, and Islamic law.

This session's first speakers, two researchers, presented the findings of an ongoing, 11-month study of this core group of active sites. Their work focuses on determining who the Iranian bloggers are, what they are talking about, and which sites they link to. Although many Western intellectuals assume that the Iranian blogosphere is an "opposition space" filled with "young democrats opposed to the regime", this was not found to be the case. Rather, the Iranian blogosphere seems to be divided into four thematic groupings or "poles" (clusters): one comprised of secular and reformist sites; another focusing on conservative political and religious sites; a third devoted to Persian poetry; and a fourth which the researchers termed "mixed network", made up of social networking sites, personal diaries, and pop culture fora. Perhaps half of the most active Iranian blogs directly address political topics, though the presenters cautioned that the political dimensions of blogging as a form of expression - relatively resistant to censorship, highly individualist - ought not be overlooked, and indeed became a topic of discussion in later sessions.

The presentation introduced many interesting findings. Most Farsi bloggers live in Iran, though there are significant voices

among the Diaspora. Most are men, though women make up about one third of secular bloggers, roughly one quarter of the in-country reformist blogs, and, possibly more than one third of the conservative and religious bloggers. Conservatives use pseudonyms far more often than reformist and secularists. The reasons for this are unclear, but two possible explanations were given. Conservatives are more likely than reformists to have political careers and want to protect them. They are also more likely rigorously to adhere to cultural and religious strictures against egotism and personal immodesty. Criticism of the government is not limited to the reformist sites. After extensive surveys of blog content, the researchers found many conservatives complaining about inflation, high unemployment, and corruption. But while it seems that they are ready to attack President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, they shy away from attacking the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khāmene’ī and the clerical leadership.

The presenters also reported on what they learned about the bloggers’ patterns of reference and communication – so-called ‘link trails’. The most linked-to sites – among conservative and in-country reformists alike – are mainstream news sources such as *farsnews.ir* and *isna.ir*. Voice of America and Radio *Farda* are popular with some reformist and secular sites. YouTube and Wikipedia are making inroads, even with a handful of conservatives, but are still not widely utilized.

The second presentation, from a speaker joining the meeting via live video streaming, was challenged by technical difficulties. His research also focused on link trails, specifically those of the more popular reformist and secular sites. Among these, the Dutch-based interactive news site Radio *Zamaneh* and the BBC’s Persian-language news service are regularly the most referenced; other news sites such as *roozonline.com* and Radio *Farda* also receive significant attention.

In the discussion that followed these presentations, participants asked about intercommunication between the blogosphere’s reformist and conservative poles. Although the political extremes rarely engage one another in substantive debate, there is recognition of the existence of the “other side,” and conservative and reformist bloggers do occasionally exchange views with each other. They also share a reliance on mainstream news sources. The researchers concluded that the Farsi blogosphere was, on balance, not significantly less polarized than the American blogosphere and far more integrated than other countries they had studied, notably Russia.

## **Session II**

### **CONSERVATIVE BLOGS AND WEBSITES / ONLINE FATWAS: ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE ON THE INTERNET**

The influence of Iran’s “conservative” blogosphere is significant and growing. This session examined its two major wings: political blogs broadly supportive of the Iranian government and theological-juridical blogs, many of which are based out of the *hawzahs* (religious seminaries) of the holy city of Qom.

Domestic issues dominate the conservative political blogs. The sites discuss the character and speeches of clerics and politicians as well as government policies. Somewhat less frequently, discussion will turn to international issues such as Iran’s nuclear program and broader Middle East politics (especially the Israeli-Palestinian dispute). The Iran-Iraq War is a touchstone. The format of these blogs is not very different from western sites: bloggers encourage and respond to readers’ feedback. President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khāmene’ī both have blogs; both prominently feature responses to posts that are presented as reader input. While links to mainstream news sources are common, conservative sites (and reformist sites, for that matter)

have a tendency to trust third- and fourth-hand information as established fact – one facet of the problematic Iranian attitudes toward journalistic objectivity, a topic speakers returned to in later sessions. Conservative posts tend to be longer than reformist posts, which by and large follow the western model of short and punchy commentary.

If information technology is transforming Iranian political discourse, it is having an arguably greater effect on the study, organization, and interpretation of the key sources of *Ja'fari fiqh* (the sources of the *Shi'ah* interpretation of Islamic law) as found in the *Qur'an*, the *hadiths*, and legal rulings or *fatwas*. Qom, the center of *Shi'ah* scholarship, houses one hundred and fifty research centers where students can access databases of the over five hundred textbooks of *Ja'fari* jurisprudence. The second speaker averred that the *hawzahs* of Qom boast greater information technology capabilities than the state run universities.

The precise effect of these technologies on Islamic jurisprudence is still not easy to determine, but certain features are clear. The organization of religious knowledge is becoming more efficient. Seminarians no longer need to rely exclusively on rote memorization or spend time tracking down precedents. Instead, they can search databases like the Encyclopedia of *Shari'ah* Jurisprudence (the *al-mojam* program). This capability, the presenter speculated, may over time diminish reliance on the authority of senior clerics. It may also help bring scholars' attention to how interpretations have evolved to keep pace with the times and may also help to resurrect neglected, possibly more liberal, strains of jurisprudence.

The Internet is also opening theological discourse to more players, including reformers from the Diaspora. One example of this is the controversy sparked by a February 8, 2008 online interview with the University of Berkeley-based Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush in the newspaper *Kargozaaran*. Soroush's controversial views – he understands the *Qur'an* as a historically-bounded rather

than eternal text which expresses not God's literal words but the Prophet's interpretation of them – have been in print for years, but they seem only to have caused real debate among conservative theologians in the wake of the recent online interview. The speaker also pointed to online discussions of a set of liberal *fatwas* regarding headscarves from the blogs of reformist clerics Ayatollah Montazeri and *hojatoleslams* M. Kadivar and H. Qabel.

After the presentations, participants debated the extent to which technological innovations would actually liberalize *Shi'ah* jurisprudence. Some doubted that the new voices would have much effect: the Internet was simply making discussion among “a small group of ‘*ulamā*’” more efficient, not more open. The theological-religious blogosphere is surely not a free market of ideas. But other participants were optimistic: one asserted that new media were advancing liberal interpretations in the same manner as the printing press spread protestant ideas through sixteenth-century Europe. Another pointed out that in order to refute liberal views, conservative clerics had either to reiterate them or link to them, thus publicizing them, albeit in negative light.

### **Session III**

#### **HOW DO NEW MEANS OF COMMUNICATION INFLUENCE IRAN'S YOUTH?**

From conservative bloggers the discussion moved to Iranian youth, who comprise the majority of Internet users in a country where sixty percent of the population is under the age of twenty-eight. How much time are young Iranians spending online, and how do online communities influence youth culture, social interaction, and political sensibilities?

The first speaker began with an exploration of how Farsi has evolved in the face of a new, more direct and sponta-

neous online discourse. The language's two registers – an elaborate and formal written idiom and a much less formal spoken one – have been gradually collapsing into an “on-line” Farsi prominent in blogs and social networking sites. These fora have encouraged what the speaker termed “good egocentrism,” encouraging young Iranians in particular to discover their own identities and voices. This shows how the Internet has significantly expanded the level of individualism inside the country. Online communication is also remolding attitudes toward public and private spheres. More than one participant echoed the provocative point that Iranians find something “erotic” in how online discourse dispenses with traditional propriety (particularly limitations on male-female interaction) and encourages open expression of emotions, reactions, and thought processes.

The Internet is also fostering closer bonds between the native population and the Diaspora. Some Iranian expatriate authors have started blogs of their own and are using them to win audiences inside the country. The presenter signaled out the case of Reza Ghassemi, a Paris-based writer, who published his recent novel in serial form on the Internet, incorporating reader feedback as he went along.

The second speaker expanded the discussion to other elements of online culture, beginning with the “cafénets” where many young people sign on. These are public places where the gaze of others may limit what users feel comfortable writing – or which sites they are comfortable visiting. Overwhelmingly, the speaker claimed, pop culture and social networking sites are bringing young people online in the first place. He lamented that the youth seem more interested in music, gaming, and gossip than political and news blogs. Much popular music such as hip-hop and rock n' roll, is banned in Iran, resulting in a brisk online trade in mp3 files. One particularly interesting amalgam of old and new are the so called “eulogy sites,” where young people post original pop music compositions praising clerical leaders (who have roundly denounced this form of publicity).

The youth's apathy toward “serious” political issues, the speaker argued, was at least in part due to the poor standards of Iranian journalism. Neither the blogs nor the state-sponsored news agencies are committed to objective, factual reporting, and their lack of professionalism trivializes them. In society at large, journalism as a vocation does not enjoy the respect it has won in the West, particularly over the last forty years; doctors and lawyers are considered greater intellectual authorities. But as a long term side effect the web-based political culture has helped to raise a new kind of tolerance among the different political and social communities.

Although social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are banned, resourceful users access them. Many young Iranians have discontinued their multiple personal blogs in favor of these sites, which might help to account for the significant decline in active Farsi blogs. The majority of the group agreed that blogs have been a kind of “fashion” for young people during the last five years.

Questions in session three focused largely on a factual issue. Participants disagreed as to how many Iranians access the Internet from their homes. Some contended that personal computers were hard to find and Internet connections costly. Others said that, particularly with the government's recent purported installation of 30,000 km of fiber optic cable, Internet access is widely available and that “anyone who can afford a personal computer” has one. The Iranian government has been seen by some speakers as slipping into a catch-22 situation: their interest in introducing modern IT-technology to improve the Iranian economy collides with their permanent attempts to control the virtual activities of civil society activists.

**Session IV**  
**PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN IRAN:**  
**DIGITAL AND CLASSICAL MEDIA COVERAGEV**

These audiences offer not only feedback but also, critically, news itself. Roughly one third of the reader mail sent to DW-World offers updates or rumors about Iranian affairs. Many editors at foreign publications have been out of the country for years, and their agencies are not allowed to keep correspondents in Iran. Getting a sense for “what’s news” in Iran is very hard. Most western sites take their cues from the Iranian mainstream press. The BBC World Service Trust has to some extent circumvented this problem by offering online training courses for Iranian journalists. Through closed-access sites (“virtual newsrooms”), these young men and women work with London-based editors in honing their reporting and writing skills. They also provide scoops that the outside media might otherwise not pick up.

Most of the foreign news agencies also look to the Iranian blogosphere for stories, though these are sometimes untrustworthy. NGOs and in-country informants are used, when possible, to confirm reports. Subjects that are taboo in Iran receive some attention in the foreign press, but not too much; frankness on topics like homosexuality and dating has been found to turn off some Iranian listeners. Some participants argued that the foreign news agencies should report more on sensitive topics that receive no press coverage in Iran, while others thought they should make a greater effort to reflect Iran’s “collective consciousness” and show respect toward Islamic culture and customs.

The liveliest debate of the session was over how – or whether – foreign news services should try to be balanced and objective. It began when the speaker presenting on Radio *Farda* criticized the BBC Persian News Service for being insufficiently critical of the Iranian regime. The group split between participants favoring the strictly neutral standards of the BBC and those who felt the foreign media were not just observers of but also participants in the struggle for reform. Some expressed a general distrust of all out-of-country journalists: “They always have an agenda,” said one participant who cited the example of the

Iraqi Diaspora press and their support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Others pointed out that Iranian audiences expect bias in news media, and foreign agencies should not pull their punches. The speaker presenting on Radio *Farda* also announced that the agency’s editors in Prague occasionally feel pressure to avoid issues that might offend their U.S. funders, such as the Abu Ghraib affair.

## Session VI

### TALKING ART: ANOTHER FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION?

In addition to foreign news agencies, art is becoming a controversial topic in Iran. In the final session, two Iranian artists – one living in Iran and the other in exile – reflected on censorship, the politics of artistic expression, Iranian clichés, and the market for Iranian art in the West.

Ahmadinejad’s government has censored art more aggressively than any administration since the 1980s. Still, in choosing targets, the authorities do not apply consistent standards, and their strategy seems to be aimed at spreading a sense of fear and uncertainty rather than at actually eliminating all offensive artwork from the public realm. But even artists who are not censored run the risk of becoming victims of Islamic vigilante groups who deface artwork and report individuals to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Less tyrannical than the censors, but still frustrating, are western notions of how Iranian society “should” be depicted in art. The first speaker noted that an artist whose work portrays women in *chadors*, poverty, and oppression is far more likely to find a receptive western audience than one who focuses on more uplifting or apolitical sides of Iranian life. When participants asked what western audiences could do to help the artist community in Iran, the speaker encouraged greater openness to “new narratives”

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of Iranian life. He also mentioned that some of the most provocative and covertly political commentary was taking place via an art form appreciated by very few in the West, namely the Iranian soap opera. ■



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## Digital Media and Journalism in Iran Meeting II December 12-14, 2007

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### Executive Summary

New media is the latest battleground in the struggle for freedom of expression in Iran. In recent years, thousands of independent, Iranian-run web sites have sprung up in and outside of Iran. Farsi has become the ninth most-used language in the blogosphere. But supporters of the government have Internet tactics of their own: censors block sites critical of the government, official newspapers create attractive, image-rich home pages, and conservative bloggers occupy a substantial share of Iran's crowded bandwidth. The Internet connects Iranians with one another and with the outside world, but the more specific dimensions of its impact on Iranian politics, culture, and society are poorly understood.

How do new technologies shape the challenges facing independent journalists and international activists seeking to promote more open public discourse in Iran? This was the central question addressed at *'Digital Media and Journalism in Iran,'* a two-day conference held from December 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> at the Aspen Institute. The event featured six panels and fifteen journalists, bloggers, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from Europe, the United States, and Iran. While many participants were optimistic about the democratizing effect of new modes of expression on the country's civil society, they also acknowledged considerable hurdles. These include obvious issues – outmaneuvering the censors – but also more serious concerns such as coordinating the efforts of well-meaning western activists with the interests and safety of journalists living in Iran.

### Session I

#### THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FREE EXPRESSION

The first session focused on the idea of free speech in international law and Iranian society. Like the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Iranian constitution includes the right to freedom of expression. As recently as the late 1990s, reformist newspapers played a prominent role in public life, providing a backbone of support for former President Mohammad Khātami's liberalizing agenda.

The year 2000 marked a turning point. Alarmed by reformist gains in national elections, Iran's clerical leadership (*velayat-e faqih*) initiated a massive crackdown, closing six newspapers, arresting editors, and hauling reporters before what came to be known as the Press Court. Internet sites were also targeted. Today, of Iranian's roughly 200,000 home grown blogs, only 6,000 are active (that is, updated within the last 90 days), and the majority of these avoid discussion of political topics.

But even while politics is taboo, new media are driving important cultural changes. Participants emphasized that blogs, by creating a platform for self-expression, aid in the development of individual and group identities – crucial building blocks in the development of liberal political consciousness. Moreover, the anonymity of the Internet creates a world where believers and secularists, men and women, are, theoretically at least, on an equal footing. Though Internet access can be slow and expensive, circumventing state filters is not impossible – apparently, some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) simply charge a small fee for censorship-free access.

Despite these positive developments, the effects of new media are likely to be felt only over time – through gradually evolving attitudes rather than direct political change. One participant even suggested that the government allows blogs to operate as a kind of 'safety valve,' releasing the

pressure created by a small group of dissenters before it can boil over into a general uprising. Whether this is truly the government's strategy or not, the fact remains that new media provide a much-needed public space – more protected from censorship than traditional media – in which Iranians can practice the skills of civil debate and rational engagement on which functional democracies are built.

Throughout the session, participants returned to the critical role of Islam in debates over free speech. To outsiders, religion can appear to be nothing but an obstacle to reform. The *velayat-e faqih* outlaws dissenting voices as “un-Islamic.” To be effective in the long run, activists will need to learn to root their claims in the principles of *Shari'ah* (Islamic law), or risk discrediting themselves. This is true regarding not only the right of free expression but human rights more generally: reform requires a process of *ijtihad*, or revision of ossified interpretations of Islamic law to fit evolving realities. As one participant noted, the fate of free speech will be decided “in the context of a theological and legal discourse.” The more effectively reformers can debate conservatives on religious terms, the stronger will be their credibility in Iranian society at large.

## Session II THE ENVIRONMENT FOR IRANIAN JOURNALISTS

From the place of free speech in Islam, the discussion turned to a more concrete matter: What is it like being a journalist in Iran? For those who question or criticize the regime, the risks are considerable. Even when their writing is not censored outright, independent-minded journalists are persistently harassed and intimidated by the government. When reporters cross the line, arrests and torture are not uncommon. Journalists must constantly adapt to the sensitivities of the state; they lack job security and must submit their writing to careful self-censorship. As one par-

ticipant remarked, “journalists in the free world sit down and ask: ‘what shall I write about today?’ Whereas Iranian journalists have to ask: ‘what shouldn't I write about today?’”

The problem is not just repression *per se*. Participants noted that, among loyalists and independents alike, there is little sense of a professional commitment to objective reporting. Media outlets tend to fall into three categories: ‘activists’ (mostly exiles, commenting on Iran from the outside), ‘reformers’ (liberal minded journalists inside of Iran pushing for reform), and ‘scribes’ (state-supported mouthpieces of the regime).

Accurate reporting on sensitive topics, averred one participant, has to take place in a ‘secret language’ of indirection and insinuation. Sometimes, these restrictions give birth to creative and nuanced commentary, but they also mean that Iranian journalists remain unpracticed in the basic skills of sound journalism – checking sources and facts, providing both sides of a story, separating fact from opinion. The popularity of blogs – where rumors and opinion flow freely and subjectivity is celebrated – does not augur well for the development of professional journalistic standards, even among the regime's critics.

## Session III THE CONTRIBUTIONS AND ADDED VALUE OF IRANIAN BLOGGERS

Session III took up the question of blogs in depth, focusing on their positive and negative effects on Iranian civil society. Many of the former have already been noted: blogs provide new forums for self-expression, gathering points for marginalized groups, and alternative sources for news and first-hand, unfiltered information. In a country where, according to one participant, the Internet is regarded as more trustworthy than newspapers, television, and radio

(this based on a 2004 Islamic Society of North America poll, no longer available online, but reported on in the blogosphere), the potential for blogs to have a vital impact on public opinion should not be underestimated.

On the other hand, not all bloggers are progressives. Hard-line and fundamentalist blogs are common; colleges in the religious capital of Qom recently started to offer blogger training courses. While conservative commentators are by no means a monolithic group – heated debates frequently flare up, for instance, over whether or not *Hamas* is justified in using terror tactics – they make little effort to engage with the more independent and reform-minded groups. Numerous participants pointed to a recent study by John Kelly of Columbia University, who identified four ‘clusters’ or communities in the Farsi blogosphere – a liberal cluster, a conservative cluster, a ‘poetry and culture’ cluster, and a fourth cluster labeled ‘mystery,’ comprised of an assortment of blogs devoted mostly to culture, generally with a conservative bias. Identifying groupings of common words and phrases, Kelly argued that conservative blogs are better than their liberal counterparts at engaging each other and staying on topic over successive posts.

In the U.S., critics accuse the blogosphere of fragmenting political discussion insulating left and right from one another’s worthy criticisms. An analogous situation was said to hold in Iran. True, new media connect like-minded individuals both within and beyond the country, and in this regard, they can serve as a valuable galvanizer of progressive opinion. But there is as yet little evidence that the form facilitates genuine engagement between liberals and conservatives, which will be an essential element of long-term political development.

Moreover, it is not the case that ‘virtual activism’ in the blogosphere translates into a willingness physically to take part in street demonstrations or protests. Many participants commented that blogs are barely ever used to organize demonstrations or political gatherings (though instant mes-

sages and cell phone texts help to coordinate meeting times and movements in an *ad hoc* manner).

#### **Session IV: NEW MEDIA ALTERNATIVES: RADIO, TELEVISION AND FILM**

New media may hold exciting possibilities, but most Iranians still get their news from newspapers, television, and radio. These media, more prone to central control and censorship, offer little space for alternative voices.

One exception is Radio *Zamaneh* – an Internet-based clearinghouse for audio recordings of music, news, and commentary. Radio *Zamaneh* listeners can download programs and listen to them at their convenience; likewise they can make their own recordings at home and upload them (though content is edited). Based in Amsterdam and funded by the Dutch government, Radio *Zamaneh* has yet to be censored by the Islamic Republic.

According to self-administered surveys, Radio *Zamaneh* listeners – 72% of whom reside in Iran – see the website as an “interesting and different” – that is, neither ideologically left or right – source for news and features. Other foreign-funded media are not so well received. The Islamic Republic often decries foreign-funded programming (notably Radio *Farda* and the Voice of America) as imperialist propaganda. Isolated and not exposed to objective information, it is easy for Iranians to be suspicious of western-based media projects, even when they do not directly challenge the government.

Toward the end of this session, participants addressed a divide separating in-country actors from international activists. In their push for reform, activists can often interfere with the ‘quiet struggle’ against the state that is taking place within the borders of Iran. When outside groups cel-

celebrate or draw attention to dissenting voices inside Iran, this can discredit or even endanger them. While the challenges are considerable, western actors must be aware that publicizing the reformist's efforts is not always a positive contribution – in fact it can have quite negative consequences.

**Session V:  
IRANIAN STATE RESPONSES TO CHANGING  
MEDIA PARTICIPATION**

The past seven years have seen a sustained crackdown on Internet freedoms in Iran. At the same time, government-run and government-friendly sites have ramped up their digital capabilities, producing sleek web layouts to attract a wider audience. Exploring state responses to new media, this session focused on an intensifying confrontation between conservatives and reformists – a showdown often waged on the level of images rather than arguments.

One recent confrontation involved in the arrest of a young Tehran-based blogger, Reza Valizadeh, who reported on his blog that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had paid \$150,000 apiece for German-bred security dogs. The move was incendiary not only for linking the President with the image of dogs (deemed dirty and disgraceful in Muslim culture) but also for alleging that he paid so much for them (average monthly salaries in Iran are roughly 800,000 Rial, or \$180). After being denounced by the state-run newspaper *Fars*, Valizadeh was arrested and forced to issue an apology on his blog – his last post to date, apparently made from prison. The incident attracted attention in the international press.

Meanwhile, the war of images continues in more subtle forms. Vibrant colors and high quality digital photos add visual appeal to the predictable headlines of official Iranian sites, leaving no doubt that Iran possesses the technical –

if not yet the political – infrastructure for sophisticated on-line public discourse. On the reformers' side, images posted from recent student protests have featured banners showing the faces of arrested dissidents – an emotional appeal that protesters have rarely dared to use in the past.

What do these confrontations foreshadow? Arrests, protests, and an “arms race” of high-tech graphics points to what one participant called a “hidden front” in the struggle for the right to free speech. Officially, Tehran dismisses blogger critics as like Valizadeh as outlying troublemakers. In fact, however, the government pays close attention to this growing domain of civil society, clearly aware of the potentially destabilizing effect it can have.

**Session VI:  
INTERNATIONAL ACTIVISM**

The final session offered discussants a chance to reflect on their analyses of Iranian media and society and discuss concrete strategies for pushing reform, as well as ideas for future dialog. As at a number of previous meetings, some participants emphasized that although new media allow for a digital community that, transcends national boundaries, effective reform, when it comes, will take place at the instigation of in-country actors.

But the international community can play crucial roles, from funding new media projects such as Radio *Zamaneh*, to offering journalism training courses for reporters from inside the country (as has Press Now, a Dutch non-profit supporting independent media). Bloggers among the Diaspora can attempt to engage more with their conservative counterparts in the hopes of initiating a more fulsome exchange of views. Participants emphasized the need to attract more journalists and bloggers from within Iran – even members of the conservative press. They also suggested that participants prepare for a follow-up meeting in

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2008 by conducting research on some aspects of the Iranian press or civil society and distributing their findings to participants in advance. ■



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## Digital Media and Journalism in Iran Meeting I December 12-14, 2007

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### Executive Summary

Digital security applies new technology to an old concept. Whether securing digital data or physical space, the end goal is to ensure safety and protection from abuse. This Aspen roundtable focused on digital security in Iran, and the participants included non-governmental organization (NGO) and civil society organization (CSO) representatives with technology expertise as well as a number of activists. The one-day discussion was divided into four sessions in which the thirteen participants debated the social, economic, and technological factors associated with digital security in Iran.

Farsi is one of the top ten blogging languages in the world, and Iran occupies twenty-seventh place worldwide in the number of Internet users. With a rapidly developing information technology infrastructure and e-government services, the relatively large digital space in Iran is unique, compared to most other closed political systems.

Starting in 2001, ease of access and anonymity caused weblogs by both women and men on political and sensitive social topics to flourish in Iran. An Iranian government crackdown followed in 2003 with ten million web pages being blocked, Iran has since risen to fifteenth place among governmental suppressors of the Internet, but Iranian government Internet censorship is still under-developed, spotty and relatively uncoordinated. Determined users can outmaneuver it relatively easily, if they want to, and viable strategies – both personal and technological – exist to maintain or improve existing levels of Internet access.

The biggest challenge for Iranian civil society activists in implementing tighter Internet security practices is the human factor. A number of organizations that can help do exist, but security is above all a behavioral issue, requiring significant investments of both time and money to correct and/or implement. Implementing tighter security risks attracting unwanted attention, presents a tradeoff with an or-

ganization's transparency goals, and distracts organizations from their main mission. Implementing tighter security could also create even greater levels of factionalism within Iranian civil society than already exist.

Iranian civil society activists and citizens appear to be complacent and willing to accept existing levels of Internet censorship in Iran, as long as these do not become more intense.

### Session I

#### THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN IRAN

Farsi is one of the top ten blogging languages in the world, with an estimated 200,000 recorded blogs. Iran is ranked twenty-seventh globally in the total number of Internet users. With approximately ten percent of the population already using the Internet, and the number rising, the government has an interest in maintaining and even improving the digital welfare of its citizens. Those who need help buying laptops and personal computers (PCs) can obtain loans, and Iran has invested seriously in e-governance services. With around one hundred Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and a growing infrastructure, Iran is listed amongst the digitally developed countries. However, even though many people have access to the Internet in Iran, fees for Internet usage are relatively high. One participant reported that the charges are normally around 2,500 Rials (0.19 Euro cents) per hour. Internet access is mostly obtained via dial-up connections and is very slow due to Internet speed restrictions imposed by the government. The question among the participants of this session was, "How is Iran unique in a developed and digitalized world?"

The answer boiled down to the matter of the Iranian operating paradigm. Digital development in itself is not unusual; however Iran is noteworthy due to its current sensitive political environment. As in other digitally developed countries, the online space in Iran is used for com-

munication and networking, be it for business, political, or social purposes. Iran is a closed system, both socially and politically. Existing limitations on communication pushed many Iranians into adopting a new, digital form of communication after the Internet was introduced in Iran in 1996. Easy availability and anonymity provided an outlet through which many people began to express themselves openly, primarily through blogging. The popularity of blogging along with the politicization of blogging led eventually to a crackdown on online activities. Among the 200,000 recorded blogs in Farsi, only 6,000 (3%) are currently active – meaning sites that have been updated in the past ninety days. Limitations on and censorship of the Internet in Iran do not preclude use of this digital space, but the restrictions have increased the level of apathy among ordinary Iranians, leaving them asking, “Why bother?”

Regardless of these constraints, the Farsi blogging explosion has caused others to turn their heads. According to the participants, the anonymity and availability of blogging originally attracted political commentary, especially in a country where political discussion has many boundaries. Blogs were not only political, but also personal. Bloggers, both women and men, often continue to share life stories, experiences, and thoughts they would never voice in public, mainly by using pseudonyms. In a society where individualism is not a cultural norm, blogging provided a platform for individuals to post their opinions but still fit in culturally. However, the government has progressively restricted the freedom available on the Internet. Cultural discussions rather than political ones now characterize many blogs, and many have simply limited their activity or stopped posting.

Some hopeful openings still exist. Many of the Internet Service Providers (ISP) are ill equipped or slow to implement censorship requirements, leaving room for Iranians to access a less censored version of the web via less stringent ISPs. One participant stated that if an Iranian wants to access a specific page on the web, it is possible to outmaneuver filtration. Another participant mentioned that

proxies and encoding can help individuals protect data and privacy. The relatively large existing digital space is unique to Iran, compared with most closed systems where censorship is much stronger. However, social networking on the Internet in Iran has become more factionalized than integrated.

## **Session II STATE CONTROL AND CENSORSHIP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Though the Iranian government is not the most extreme censor of the Internet in the world, the country is still named as one of the top fifteen suppressors of the Internet by Reporters without Borders. The country has detained and even tortured bloggers. Iran is breaking its own freedom of speech laws by filtering and blocking websites, and there has been an accelerated crackdown on Internet freedoms under the current president (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). It is estimated that over ten million web pages are filtered or blocked from viewing in Iran. Other restrictions include a ban on broadband or high-speed Internet in private residences and a prohibition on the use of proxies and encryption.

There are, however, a number of positive elements that make Iran unique. Iran has a very large Internet user population in relation to other closed societies, and the accessible Internet space is rather large. For the 10 million websites that are filtered or blocked, there are millions more that can be accessed. The population in Iran is young, educated, and computer literate; solid online communities already exist and are thriving because of these facts. As mentioned above, the expanding infrastructure affords increased levels of access throughout the country, and the government’s provision of e-governance services will only help accelerate this phenomenon. Nevertheless, censorship continues to be a problem for the NGO/CSO community

in Iran. Technological advances leading to digital freedom, followed by censorship crackdowns is a cat and mouse game that activists must constantly engage in.

Censorship is divided into two tiers: central level censorship by the government and Internet Service Provider censorship, centrally directed by the government. The first tier is characterized by one central telecommunications company that controls all access ports to the Internet. Iran is known to have a couple of hundred ports, or gates to the Internet. By way of comparison, China only has four. By controlling access in this way, the central government can limit the amount of information and type of information available within Iran by filtering websites – mostly those in the English and German languages.

The participants indicated that most Farsi web page filtering is done at the second tier, ISP level. There are over one hundred ISPs in Iran. Some of them are quite unsophisticated and their filtration of Farsi is less than predictable. Although weekly efforts to block forbidden words are undertaken at the ISP level, not all ISPs comply. Even when the ISPs have sufficient capacity to constantly monitor and prevent certain web searches, doing so slows access speed and eats bandwidth. Customers complain when the Internet is too slow or stops working. ISPs may therefore be slightly disinclined to regulate their customers as strictly as the central government might wish. Communication between the Iranian central telecommunications company and ISPs seems to be substandard with occasional lists of forbidden words reportedly being sent to ISPs by post.

Despite these inconsistencies, content filtration seems to be the censorship method of choice in Iran. Words associated with the following topics are filtered: pornography, women's issues, politics, religion, human rights, homosexuality, satire, and miscellaneous items such as proxies, encrypters, or blogging tools. These categories start to explain some of the government's behavior. It tries to block websites that it fears might cause social unrest or threaten the

current Islamic Republic. Some of the filtration software originates with U.S. companies, namely software called SmartFilter; however the participants mostly insisted that the origin of the software is not the primary concern. The implications of its use are most important for those inside Iran. For western NGOs, the point of discussion should be the role of their government in legalizing filtering software, the consequences thereof, and controls on production and export of such potentially dangerous technology.

Knowledge of censorship in Iran is widespread, and web-censorship is only one piece of the puzzle. Media – television and print alike – are subject to control, rather than just filtration. Many Iranians, therefore, trust the information they receive on the web more than they trust traditional press or news media outlets. Since this space already exists on the Internet, the government may find it difficult to take it away. Strategies to gain more access to Iranians using this existing Internet space can be divided into technological and personal strategies. Technological strategies include improving security, installing proxies, or circumventing existing Internet ports by using satellites. Personal strategies include citizen protests when access is limited or interdicted, use of languages other than English or German to avoid filtration, and establishing controlled access to secure, trusted, personal networks. Most Iranians do not receive their information from the Internet. Those who do are young and educated but afraid of breaking with the *status quo*. Iranians view Internet censorship as tolerable as long as it does not get worse.

### **Session III DIGITAL SECURITY AND PRIVACY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS**

The concept of security is not new, but the application of digital security requires behavior adaptation as well as technological knowledge. Whether for an individual or for

an organization secure data and communication means more than e-mail encryption and using phone cards. It begins with the knowledge that nothing is one hundred percent secure and continues with training on three levels: communication, censorship circumvention/anonymity, and backup tools.

Communication security tools are heavily dependent upon localization. Language barriers, compatibility, user-knowledge, and sustainability contribute to security, and all of these challenges must be overcome with training. Several NGO/CSOs exist to assist in technology training, but the problems associated with localization affect the people as well as the technology. The example of a young, foreign university student trying to teach a women's organization to use email encryption software illustrates the disconnects, both in generational knowledge and in language. In fact, digital security is the easier challenge because computers will faithfully execute the commands that they are given. The difficulty lies in overcoming the human factor. The implications of using security technology are significant, and the use of security measures raises questions regarding the value of transparency versus the need for security. Again, the women's movement provides a helpful example. Wouldn't a women's group interested in cultural events and education cause suspicion if it started using e-mail encryption? This also raises questions about training people with general technological knowledge to adapt to new technological tools. Such tools require a significant investment and sustained training by skilled activists.

Censorship is best avoided by circumvention, but such maneuvers most often result in more censorship. The game played between the two uses of technology turns into a vicious circle, termed the "technological arms race". Most NGOs, in any country, are not equipped to compete in this race, nor is competing in the race their primary mission. Rather, most groups need simple technology and the skills to use it. Technology becomes outdated as new programs are developed. Problems are also created when tighter se-

curity is implemented or censorship is circumvented. When one group or individual implements tighter digital security, so do other groups or individuals. This eventually leads to the isolation of some groups, which exacerbates existing factionalism in today's Iran. Security measures used by individuals can also be replicated on a mass basis, further accelerating the technological arms race.

Backup tools are simply the tools used to secure work, data, and systems. The tools can prevent loss of information through software or equipment failure and are part of general digital security. One participant emphasized that security cannot be viewed as a commodity, but must, rather, be seen as a behavioral pattern. Digital security is a part of information security. For NGOs/CSOs in Iran, such security is necessary to operate – especially for organizations advocating social justice. The backup tools for CSOs/NGOs can include everything from hardware, software, databases, and communication media to the network of people they work with. Backup tools are not limited to technology and are only as strong as the network of people using those tools. The successful implementation of such tools and those discussed above is dependent upon consistent, sustained adherence to standard operating procedures. One participant stated that in order to increase one's digital security, choose one method and stick with it. Frequent strategy changes lead to mistakes.

#### **Session IV FUTURE PERSPECTIVES FOR IRAN'S DIGITAL REALITY**

Iran's digital infrastructure is expanding but freedom of Internet access is not expanding along with it. While the legitimacy of censorship is debatable, the lack of freedom and the eavesdropping upon civilians in Iran – sometimes leading to imprisonment – is a notable abuse of new technologies. Iran's young population is quick to adopt new

technologies, but limits on access, on high-speed access, and on the external Internet are constraining. The red lines in Iran are still largely unknown among the users of the Internet, especially among bloggers.

Other factors contributing to Iran's digital future include economic strains, foreign policy, infrastructure, and corruption. Some participants believe that these factors are, at the moment, creating a complacent society, where the maintenance of the *status quo* is preferred. Iranian participants strongly emphasized that the end of complacency would come only at Iranian instigation. On the other hand, Westerners can provide tools and training for the improvement of digital education and security in Iran, whether for NGO/CSO activists or for basic individual needs - such as securing banking information.

The difficulties for most western NGOs lie in determining which groups in Iran are compatible cooperation partners. Many western participants expressed the desire to understand and amplify the voices of Iranian civil society; however the pluralistic, but closed, nature of Iranian society complicates outsiders' efforts. It is difficult to understand who the players are, what roles they have, and how to work within this system. Several western participants posed these questions, but did not receive specific answers. Some suggestions were asked about groups in Iran that are, as yet, under-utilized, such as: women's organizations, minorities, teacher's unions, students, lawyers, and environmental groups. Groups that have not yet established an international digital presence are the underground music scene and the children's rights movement. ■

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# INITIAL MEETINGS

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## Iran Practitioners' Workshop & Roundtable Berlin, September 12-14, 2007

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### Executive Summary

This three-day practitioners' workshop and roundtable focused on the activities of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran. The meeting began with a group of practitioners discussing the purposes, motivations, and goals behind the operation of civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs within the country. On the third day, a broader group of journalists, academics, other CSO/NGO representatives, and members of the wider Iranian-German community deliberated on themes of interest in Iran. Organizations were chosen based on their level of expertise and activism. In five separate sessions a total of twenty-two participants, seventy percent of Iranian origin, discussed constraints on accepting western money, networking processes, political restrictions, and the activities of CSOs/NGOs in the region.

The discussions centered on the legitimacy and credibility challenges faced in trying to build networks of CSOs and NGOs in Iran. While participants agreed that credibility was vital, there was little agreement on how to develop or improve in this area. Credibility improves when organizations pursue cultural or humanitarian versus political goals. It also improves when funding comes from non-governmental sources as part of a continuous, cooperative process characterized by attempts to show understanding of the complex set of social actors found in Iran. There is, on the other hand, a legitimate need for political advocacy for basic human rights and freedoms in Iran and a need for support of the families of victims of abuses in these areas. A number of participants characterized a credible and legitimate civil society as one that is free to accept funding from any source and one that is bereft of heavy-handed government interference. They said that it was important to legitimize acceptance of foreign government funding in Iran rather than accede to government restrictions. Participants highlighted the tension between organizations' desire to be open and transparent in their activities in Iran and the need to protect activists in Iran against possible

reprisals. The practitioners called for more effective engagement by the Iranian Diaspora – viewing it as a very important potential connector and legitimizer of foreign and domestic activity in Iran.

The task of engaging and empowering Iranian civil society will remain difficult as long as Iran remains a closed society. Practitioners emphasized the need for patience and an attitude of respect towards Iranian counterparts. Given the post World War II history of Iran, Iranians were said to be acutely sensitive to any hints of patronizing behavior or paternalism on the part of representatives of western countries – official or non-official. Once this barrier and chronic Iranian tendencies towards secrecy and conspiracy theories are overcome, the most fruitful opportunities for network building were said to lie in the areas of new media aided by the connections of the Iranian Diaspora. The practitioners emphasized the need to engage Iranian society at all levels, but also highlighted the potentially critical role that the Iranian middle class can play in view of the economic strictures that the country is currently experiencing. The participants suggested a two-track strategy focusing on building both internal and external networks dealing with Iran. They also suggested adopting an “indirect approach” in which non-political cultural activities serve as a bridge by which to establish contacts, which might later result in discussion of more substantive political topics.

### Practitioners' Workshop

#### Purpose

The two-day workshop concentrated on the challenges of networking, funding, and programming in Iran, and brought together seven practitioners from European NGOs and organizations working on Iran. Four of the seven practitioners were of Iranian origin, which gave the workshop greater credibility and depth.

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## **Session I SHORT INTRODUCTION OF PRACTITIONERS AND PROJECTS**

Each representative described their organization's purpose and activities. Organizational expertise included emerging media, politics, human rights, women's rights, and cultural exchange. The goals of each organization were equally diverse. The discussion initially focused on legitimacy. Participants suggested that all organizations and individuals should ask themselves not only what their projects involve, but also why they are being undertaken. Convictions and respect emerged as fundamental motivating factors for many practitioners; many said that politics should not be the prime motivating factor under current circumstances. The activists also advocated practicing cultural respect while continuing to work for human rights and a free civil society.

The discussion moved on to the general philosophy of an open society characterized by the absence of heavy-handed government intervention. One participant mentioned, for example, that western organizations' freedom to receive money from the state and concomitant ability to remain free from government policy interference testifies to the stability both of that society and of the given government. Iranian civil society seems weak by comparison. Some participants insisted that, even though these systemic weaknesses are limiting, foreign NGO activism should come only at request of Iranian civil society. All seven participants agreed that activists within Iran had better insight into Iranian needs. Personality, individual connections, patience, and cultural respect are four fundamental qualities needed for sustainable CSO/NGO activity in Iran.

Another challenge mentioned was termed the 'human agency factor.' Since networks are dependent upon individual recommendations, the difficulty of building networks in Iran is monumental. The secrecy factor and Iranian tendencies toward conspiracy theories are even further complicated by personal opportunism.

## **Session II DISCOVERING PRACTICAL TIES WITH IRAN'S CIVIL SOCIETY**

This session focused on the constraints Westerners experience in working with Iranian civil society. The participants discussed how to create workspaces by using the networking openings provided in the fields of new media and technology. The discussion also touched on the challenges of working with the Iranian Diaspora. The practitioners made three basic recommendations for NGO activity in Iran: (i) establish clear goals, (ii) keep expectations realistic and culturally sound, and (iii) be patient.

The representatives identified many limitations on working with and in Iran. The first is the need for security. As many organizations try to maintain transparency, a paradox is unsettled and dangerous for many activists, and a fear of being discredited deters some organizations from working more actively within the country. They also hesitate to accept government funds. The potential for arrest of activists and the limitations imposed by the parlous economic situation are equally serious. Some groups use pseudonyms or try to protect their Iranian network by operating in secrecy. This can exacerbate an NGO/CSO culture already laden with conspiracy theories, and the value of operating in this manner was questioned. The participants were torn between the agreed need to be credible and transparent versus the need to protect Iranians from their own government.

A second important set of topics, discussed at length, was the use of blogging, new media, and journalism. The problems associated with working in Iran are similar to those faced in most other closed societies. Strong nationalistic feelings, limited freedom for civil society, and a climate of conspiracy and fear impede progress between western and Iranian journalists. This creates ‘zones,’ or cliques, many of which self-select out of the process of international networking. According to the practitioners, the problems lie not only in the internal situation in Iran, but also in the approach of western journalists. While intentions are usually benign, the frequent use of terms such as ‘training’ or ‘teaching’ Middle Eastern journalists to apply international standards can be insulting for activists and journalists in Iran. The practitioners emphasized the need to use terms such as “cooperation” rather than “teaching” in order to demonstrate respect towards Iranians, thereby creating a better relationship between Iranian and western organizations and journalists. In the experience of some participants, this credibility is best gained via slow, cautious collaboration.

A third problem identified involves the challenge presented by the Iranian Diaspora. The Iranian exile community has vast potential, both for international networking and for fostering mutual understanding. The Diaspora was termed “the connector” by one participant. For some Iranians living in the West, this means the opportunity to inspire a younger generation. For others, this means acting as a mediator or perhaps translator for those living in Iran. Many participants felt that the reasons underlying this community’s ineffectiveness need further discussion and development.

Many western organizations still express confusion or even exhaustion with the complexities of international cooperation under the current Iranian government. Participants agreed that Iran as a society is extremely pluralistic, bordering on factional. Some participants said that the best opportunities to establish contacts in Iran are found in

non-political entities and programs. Existing organizations are largely not interested in regime change; rather they represent universal goals such as human rights, freedom of speech, and women’s rights. However, due to the diversity in Iran and the mutually hostile, almost paranoid, factions within the country, these universal concepts are very difficult to promote.

### **Session III FOREIGN FUNDING – CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES**

After agreeing on fundamentals, such as human rights, the participants disagreed on the question of financing. All seven practitioners agreed that sources of financing are key to establishing credibility; however they were divided on the implications. Two ideas emerged. First, accepting money from government sources seriously damages organizational credibility amongst the Iranian population and endangers Iranian activists; therefore organizations should openly state that no western governmental money should be given to Iranians. The goal of this approach is to eliminate secrecy and conspiracy theories before they begin, especially with regards to money originating in the United States. Confusion arises when organizations accept government funds, but do not give these funds to Iranians inside Iran. Many organizations feel that this approach is the best way to eliminate risks for in-country activists. While the goal to protect activists in the country is noble and necessary, the margin for error under this approach is quite large.

In contrast, the second approach states that CSOs/NGOs, regardless of the origin of their funds, are not extended arms of government. They operate under their own mission statements and governance. Therefore, organizations should not impose limits on themselves, accept some state funds if needed, and dispel the Iranian conspiracy theories connected with such financing. Many participants stressed

that appeasing the Iranian government by refusing foreign funding was not the answer, particularly when it comes to accepting funds for projects. However, the sensitivity of the current political situation causes activists to consider the implications carefully before accepting funds from international sources. It is important to eliminate the myth that CSOs/NGOs are actually well-hidden governmental bodies by prevailing in the struggle to gain acceptance for foreign government funding. Due to the fact that accepting such funding currently has negative impacts on organizations' safety and credibility, the situation in Iran is not flexible. Donor organizations must still protect Iranians from the potential negative consequences of accepting foreign funds.

The debate came down to a question of transparency. One participant mentioned that a paradox exists for all organizations wanting to be involved in Iran, which is that western NGOs strive for transparency in a non-transparent country. This problem is coupled with a seemingly unpredictable government. Many organizations want to offer assistance for programs that Iranians are interested in but pointed out that they are constantly confronted by the Iranian government's shifting 'red lines'. Several women's organizations, for example, were shut down in March because they accepted funding from the European Union. Organizations must ask themselves not only "does the project add value?" but also "does the project cause problems for Iranian recipients?"

While the practitioners stressed that the western tendency simply to dole out money is wrong, there is also a legitimate need to provide support. For example, families of political prisoners are in tight situations, and the worsening economy affects everyone, except the most privileged upper echelons. However, the West's desire to help families or to work for human rights or women's rights is often met with skepticism and doubt in Iran. The practitioners agreed that each funding opportunity must be carefully weighed against the potential consequences on a case-by-case basis.

## **Extended Audience Sessions**

### **Purpose**

After two days of intense discussions among practitioners regarding activism in Iran, the conference expanded to include a wider audience consisting of journalists, academics, other NGO representatives, and members of the wider Iranian-German community. The purpose was to discuss challenges facing all organizations interested in Iran. The two main topics that were discussed were the behavior of the Iranian government towards NGO/CSOs and how Iranian citizens are affected by the current economic situation.

### **Session IV**

#### **ACTION & REACTION – PAST AND PRESENT GOVERNMENT BEHAVIOR**

The session began with agreement that activity in Iran is constrained, and the view from outside is that life in Iran seems to be constantly deteriorating. The economic situation appears unstable and the political situation almost irrational. Regardless of different propensities for activism among the participants, there was a clear call for creative, apolitical, and patient engagement with differing levels of Iranian civil society.

While the group basically agreed that the political situation is difficult, lack of understanding of government behavior was also said to create a distorted perspective from the West. Internal dynamics and the difficult political environment suggest that a more managed form of civil society exists in Iran. Basing themselves on their cultural knowledge of Iran and on a close examination of the current political situation, participants reiterated a theme mentioned during the practitioners' workshop: change should only come from within. Several participants also noted the need to focus on opportunities for young people within Iran. The theme of political and organizational cred-

ibility permeated the discussion once again. While it was a source of debate, participants agreed that the Iranian Diaspora needs to re-energize its efforts to improve the credibility of western NGOs' networking activities in Iran.

The reaction of the Iranian government, of course, is the real challenge for all involved. Some participants spoke of success in their endeavors, especially regarding non-political exchanges and projects. Other participants spoke of the difficulty stemming from Iran's lack of infrastructure and Iranian hesitation in expanding cultural exchanges. These deficits were termed the battlefield of perceptions. The uncertainty of the political situation causes anxiety on both sides and – as was pointed out several times during the day – individuals or groups operate differently when fear is the prevailing motivator.

**Session V:  
ECONOMY AND DEMOCRACY  
PROMOTION – HELP OR HINDRANCE?**

Economic data on Iran are unreliable. Based on reports and discussions during the conference, the participants concluded that the signs of social dissatisfaction that have in the past sparked transitions to more democratic regimes of governance elsewhere do exist in Iran. However, the details of the Iranian political situation make the probability of such change in the near future unpredictable. There was broad consensus that inflation in Iran is significant – lying somewhere between 10-15%. The rise in the price of basic goods is having an impact on the average citizen in Iran. Prices for housing are rising rapidly. Gasoline rationing is affecting many small businesses and commuters and is creating a black market. The implications of this deteriorating situation were debated.

Some participants claimed that President Ahmadinejad remains popular despite the country's economic troubles;

others strongly disagreed. These differences of opinion were at the root of disagreement on the potential for change in Iran motivated by social dissatisfaction. The argument that no broad base for social change exists was said to depend on Iran remaining a closed society. Despite continuing international attention to nuclear discussions, much of the world is uninterested in the economic plight of everyday Iranians. Additionally, the Revolutionary Guards successfully quell strikes and reporting on strikes, notwithstanding the frequency of industrial action in Iran. Many human rights activists, however, do believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran is susceptible to outside pressure. International public debate, regarding human rights violations in Iran has prevented some executions from taking place and has caused judgment on others to be deferred. There are, therefore, some hopeful signs.

In the end, most of the participants agreed that: (i) Iran views the security of its own citizens versus the security of the rest of the world as a zero sum game and will act accordingly; (ii) the economic elite, the clergy, and the government are communities that are strongly inter-connected easily misunderstood and willing to protect the current power structures and (iii) the economic situation of the middle and lower class is critical in the current situation with there being little clarity on means by which the government can improve it. ■



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**Strategy Meeting  
June 12-14, 2007**


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**Executive Summary**

The Aspen Institute series on Iran continued from June 12-14, 2007. The strategy meeting focused on gaining a full understanding of civil society in Iran, including influences from religious structures, political limitations, foreign influence, and internal motivations. Participants had a diverse array of backgrounds and expertise, and included one Tehran-based activist.

In terms of structure, holding a joint session in connection with another conference held by People in Need and other Central European NGO's was interesting, but the outcomes of the joint sessions were more academic in nature. The relevance of East European historical experience to Iran remains to be seen. As a contrast, the smaller group sessions were much more intense. Since several of the participants were exiles from Iran, their experience in politics, business, and academia was extremely valuable, and their observations were welcomed by European political and academic participants.

The discussions regarding the role of civil society in Iran were very detailed, and the following summaries seek to extract the most important observations from the seven sessions.

**Session I**
**IRAN'S CIVIL SOCIETY**

The introductory session regarding the current state of Iranian civil society was detailed and thorough. The overarching discussion was two-pronged with much debate over the actual development or existence of civil society groups in Iran and also whether foreign aid is helpful. Regarding the former, most participants agreed that the use of oil income by the state has allowed it to disregard its responsibility to its citizens. Because of this lack of interest, and the current financial crisis, the Iranian system was said to be teetering, and its leaders said to fear their own population. Indeed civil society is seen as competing with the government rather than supporting the entire system of government. Evidence of this is seen in the recent arrests and clampdowns on civil society. The hierarchy of arrests illuminates the priorities of the state. For example, the government seems to be more lenient on teachers (who strike) than on students and more lenient on bus drivers than on women's groups. The rationale for these choices is reflective of the regime's anxieties, namely that many of these 'non-political' groups are being funded by western governments or organizations. This type of support from the West, regardless of actual intentions, is seen as a threat by Iranian power elites.

Because of this stigma, civil society groups are wary of accepting western and U.S. money. Most of the participants agreed that future leaders of an Iranian government would need both respect and legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian population, which makes accepting western funds problematic. Due to the anxieties of the Iranian government and the negative reputation of U.S. democratization efforts, many civil society organizations cannot accept foreign funds or will not even apply for various development projects. Even the use of European funds, such as the Dutch Fund for Media Diversity, can cause problems. Despite the desperate need for capacity building, the danger connected with accepting western money is very high. Traditional regime

supporters – mainly unions or workers interest groups – have mounted many significant actions or protests in Iran. Western money is neither wanted nor necessarily relevant for such organizations.

Additional questions were also posed regarding the utility of western money and support. One participant suggested that the ‘double-bind’ of the United States makes it difficult for that nation to do anything. They are criticized when they try to support civil society at the ground level but are also criticized when they do nothing. In regards to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s proposal to allocate \$75 million for democracy promotion in Iran, some of the participants agreed that this money was a way for the United States to spend more money on itself. On the other hand, the allocation of funds is significant since it proves that the United States is willing to spend large sums to accomplish its stated foreign policy goals. The second element of foreign support can simply entail foreign recognition. International awards, statements from worldwide organizations, press coverage, and general interest are elements of support from the West that should be encouraged. The option of taking military action remains. One participant asked about the utility of taking military action against Iranian targets outside Iranian borders in order to encourage civil society. The conclusion was that the reaction of Iranians, at this point, is unpredictable. Given the realities of living under constant pressure from the Iranian government and of genuine fear of foreign attack, reactions on the streets of Iran are almost impossible to foresee.

Finally, the participants generally agreed that the women’s movement was most hopeful and still active within the country. Despite setbacks and arrests, women’s activists are being careful, regrouping, and taking small steps. The student movement is at a standstill, and the unions’ demonstrations are mainly a signal of economic hardship. One participant vividly detailed the challenges of working in Iran by describing the problems of youth migration. This ‘brain drain’ from Iran is becoming more of a problem as

many young students and professionals are unable to find fulfilling academic positions or employment.

### **Sessions II, III, IV THE RELEVANCY OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE**

The joint session with the People in Need conference entitled ‘Reforming Repressive State Apparatus: The Central European Experience’ focused on democratic transitional lessons from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Reports were given on the reform of intelligence services, interior ministries, police, archives, and the army. Many of the reports did not hold too much relevance for the Iranian participants; however they were given a chance to make a few statements during the second session as well as to take advantage of opportunities to make useful contacts. One point related to the religious culture in countries such as Iran. Operating under a theocracy differs from the East European experience where the church often provided protection for opposition groups.

### **Session V & VI RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND IRAN’S CIVIL SOCIETY**

After a very detailed report on the religious structure and power plays between the various Ayatollahs (individually and ideologically), the discussion regarding the relation of civil society to religion focused primarily on the influence of religious education and the various religiously-based, non-governmental political groups.

The most important changes that have taken place in the religious education system are in curriculum and structure. The curriculum of the *hawzah*, or seminary, is now par-

tially secular, allowing the study of languages, classical philosophy, international studies, and sociology. Some of these schools have very modern libraries with fully-stocked collections. Women are allowed to study. On the other hand, the courses are pre-approved by the office of the Supreme Leader and the scholarship and stipend process is increasingly handled by politically connected Ayatollahs. Some argue that reformist Ayatollahs are active in these schools, but the type of reform they can promote and the extent to which they can work is limited. Even the most reformist clerics have a vested interest in the current system, which makes them less likely to be truly reformist in ideals and leads them to try to reform within the parameters of the current social structure. Indeed, most clerics are not socially reformist. In addition, security agents are often placed in classes.

True openings in the social system are found in many workers' organizations. Due to economic hardship, many regime-appointed union leaders now find themselves organizing protests for economic reform. While these kinds of demonstrations do not oppose the foundations of the system or the religion, they are significant in that the regime has less control. The discussion of the relationship between the religion and civil society identified six centers of civic action in Iran.

1. Law Centers
2. Teachers' Unions
3. Bus Drivers' Unions
4. Women's Organizations
5. Journalists
6. Students' Islamic Unions

Forms of passive resistance, which include music, clothing, and migration were also discussed. Three major non-governmental, but politically, important groups reportedly include:

1. The *Hojjatieh* group, which now maintains open ties with the Islamic Coalition Party of Iran
2. The *Mo'talefeh* association (Islamic Coalition Party), which sympathizes with *Fedayeen Islam* - a known terrorist group
3. *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, dubbed the Islamic Republic of Iran's 'storm troopers'

The discussion concluded by examining the prospects for secular openings in Iran versus political openings. While some clerics can be considered reformists, the variations between reformist ideologies are legion. Due to the integration of the Ayatollahs into politics, the prospects for political opening seem more likely than those for social change. One idea still on the table is to connect civil society groups and reformist clerics. However, due to the theocratic nature of the country, predicting the degree to which and when either will be open to this is difficult.

## Session VII IRANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Many Iranians, according to participants, do not trust the Russians nor do they see Russia as a dependable partner. The power struggle between the two countries makes it difficult for many Iranians to view Russia as a possible partner in civil society development in Iran. If popular opinions of Russia are negative on an international plane, the diplomatic gains between Russia and the West will not translate into influence over Iran.

There are similarities between the countries of the former Soviet Union and Iran in as much as the international community needs to play a continuing role in the "great game", while balancing the difficulties of operating inside Iran. In Iran's closed society, outsiders can act as microphone. However, the problem of finding a 'legitimate' outside voice still persists.

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Finally, the statements made regarding the nuclear issue in Iran and its ties to Russia were also insightful. Many oppositionists and civil society activists in Iran, although they distrust Russia, view the international attention that is paid to the nuclear issue as a microphone for other issues. They have a platform as long as the world concentrates on Iran's nuclear capacities. ■

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**Roundtable Conference  
Berlin, April 18-20, 2007**


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**Executive Summary**

This conference succeeded in laying the groundwork for Aspen's series of discussions on Iran. Almost every participant was also a 'session speaker', which encouraged both intense debate and full participation. The conference covered topics from civil society development to the role of the media, from opinions on nationality to religious power structures, and from the economy to student movements. Two basic strains existed throughout the conference. The first was that Iranians, even those who are very pro-democracy and pro western, are interested in finding solutions that fit their nation's history and interests. The second was a discussion surrounding modern versus traditional Iran and the overlaps or conflicts relating to this problem.

All of the participants gave positive feedback regarding the diversity of participants and the high level of participation. Some future topics suggested by participants were:

1. The religious power struggle and structure in Iran,
2. The internal dynamics of the Iranian political system,
3. The dynamic between Persian Gulf states and Iran,
4. The economic perspectives of women,
5. The role of new media.

**Session I**
**IRAN & THE WEST – NATIONAL INTERESTS  
OR “AXIS OF EVIL”?**

This discussion began with an introduction to the problems and perspectives of Iran. The U.S. approach is not perceived as successful at the moment. In regards to the nuclear issue, one speaker said that Iran would need to define its national interests and allow supervision of nuclear facilities. In order to ensure this, the West needs to pursue a diplomatic path. Within Iran, the nuclear topic is seen as a modernity and energy security issue. Iranian dependence on German trade and the need to keep human rights as a priority were also discussed.

Another key topic was the tension between state and population in Iran. Within the country, the strains between tradition and modernity, or moderation and force, make it difficult to find a common denominator. Many participants mentioned the differences between the government's interests (the elite themselves) versus those of modern civil society, which is seen as a threat to the elite. The expatriate participants urged that one listen more to the Iranians and ask which reforms they desire.

**Session II**
**IRAN'S CIVIL SOCIETY & POLITICAL OPPOSITION – MYTH OR POTENTIAL FOR REFORMS?**

The two presenters disagreed with one another on the use and purpose, or existence of civil society. One spoke of civil society and argued that it exists, is alive and well, and posed a number of questions about the role of religion in civil society. The other spoke at length about the role of modernism in civil society development. One argument against the existence of a civil society was that a fully functioning civil society must not just be cosmetic, but substantive. Civil society must have room for opposition and

cannot work under a state that is ruled by a person or group that claims to have a divine right to rule. When a divine right to rule exists, then there are no citizens just subjects. In contrast, some participants cited numerous civil society groups such as teachers' organizations, sports clubs, women's groups, and student groups. However, there is also a risk that some NGOs in Iran have been founded either to attract western money or to be used as intelligence service front organizations.

During the discussion, the participants argued about the usefulness and/or harm of the West using the space allowed within Iran to fund NGOs and the legitimacy of such involvement. Since the state monitors, regulates and infiltrates all NGOs, especially western ones, some said that the interests of the West have been harmed because of the government's suspicion and its doubt about the U.S. There were no agreed conclusions, but the existence of debate amongst experts and expatriates leads to the conclusion that the complications of working in Iran are great, however such involvement is still seen as helpful if done correctly and discreetly. On the other hand, if organizations are seen as being connected to the United States or motivated by 'regime change', then the reputation of such organizations suffers. The example provided to support this claim was the connection between Freedom House and the Dutch organization, 'Media Diversity in Iran.'

### **Session III HUMAN RIGHTS & THE WOMEN'S & STUDENTS' MOVEMENT**

Most of the discussion surrounded two basic ideas:

1. The benefits and drawbacks of approaching democracy in Iran from the minority rights standpoint, and
2. The role of women in society.

The issue of minority rights and human rights violations against minorities in Iran was also a cause of diverging opinions. All of the participants agreed that abuse of minorities in Iran needed to be addressed. Some participants thought these problems should be addressed along with a change to democracy while others urged pushing for a fully functioning Iranian democracy and dealing with human rights violations later. In other words, there is no point in arguing for the rights of minorities without arguing for the rights of the majority. The complex overlapping of various ethnicities in Iran and the country's history of diversity led some of the delegates to believe that a change to democracy would ensure the rights of minorities more than promoting violent or extreme movements amongst minorities themselves. All participants agreed that breaking apart the Iranian identity would do more damage than good.

The second part of the debate dealt with the role of women. Two of the female participants agreed that many misconceptions exist regarding the role of women's groups, and they both agreed that women's groups have always been at the heart of opposition, even if not on the frontlines of politics. On the other hand, some western media outlets and even western women misunderstand the cosmetic differences between these women's groups.

**Session IV  
FREE MEDIA & THE BLOGGER SCENE IN IRAN**

All participants agreed on the lack of a free media in Iran. However, the best method by which to effect reform brought different opinions from the participants. There are two types of censorship in Iran. One is the censorship imposed by the government. The second type of censorship is self-censorship. Journalists and writers as well as political activists act out of their own fear and refuse to say certain things, or in order to write an opposing opinion, they choose to use general or generic wording so as not directly to insult someone in power. There was much discussion regarding how ‘free’ journalists or writers are to disagree with various levels of government or the religious rulers. All of the participants agreed that there are many limitations imposed on publishing material in Iran, but some argued that the establishment, or religious leaders, could be criticized in coded form. Additionally, the participants debated the objectivity of information emanating from the West. Some felt that media outlets, such as Radio *Farda*, are not objective while others felt that they are.

The second topic, the blogger scene in Iran, produced an informative discussion, even though it was not particularly contentious. There are over 700,000 blogs in Persian, however the most popular blogs, and those that are critical of the ruling elite in Iran, are either censored or filtered, perhaps even blocked. Though there are only four companies that provide blogging services in Iran, the use of blogging as a medium of communication is accepted. The Iranian government does not view the blogs themselves as that much of a threat, as they are no longer seen as something imported from the West.

**Session V: 1979 (et seq.) –  
THE ROLE OF CLERICS AND RELIGION IN  
IRAN**

Religion plays two roles in Iran. One is to act as a stabilizing factor for the regime, and the second is to provide a mechanism for social outlets under the regime. The role of the religious elite as well as the evolution of politicized religion has led to a power structure in Iran that is particularly difficult for foreigners to understand. The radicalization of Islam became popular because of the media and due to social groups, such as charity organizations. The political-religious elites distribute material friendly to the regime through the religious groups and use phrases such as ‘Islam is the solution’ to gain political power from the masses. The marginalization of critical clerics by replacing them with ‘regime-friendly’ clerics has led to growing political-religious tension. Another consequence has been secularization of the youth, who see religion as a tool of the government. The conflicts that exist now are mostly between the truly religious and those who use religion for power and politics. The West needs to realize the distinction between the political and religious *mullahs*.

**Session VI:  
IRAN: AN ECONOMIC PROFILE BETWEEN OIL  
AND SANCTIONS**

Iran’s economy is mostly state-owned and controlled, therefore inefficient. Bad economic policies and state-owned banks have created a system that cannot control inflation or unemployment. This problem was described as ‘demographic suicide.’ After the fall of the Shah, Iran experienced a baby boom, and that generation is now entering the job market. Over 750,000 people are added to the job market every year, which serves only to aggravate economic tension. Iranians are upset by Ahmadinejad’s unfulfilled

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promises of economic reform. This discontent led to the introduction of energy subsidies in Iran. However, the overuse of energy subsidies to keep prices low has created a culture of waste, environmental problems, and a vicious cycle of inefficiency. In addition, dependence upon oil and gas in combination with the lack of investment in industry makes Iran weaker in the long run.

The participants debated the role of Germany, Italy, and France as Iran's leading trading partners. Another topic was the economic reform scenario by which Iran establishes an independent central bank and allows its currency to float. Many comparisons between the former Soviet economy and that of modern Iran were drawn in this conversation. Comparing China's ongoing economic transformation and Iran was suggested as a future theme.

**Session VII:  
IRAN AND ITS ARABIAN NEIGHBORS –  
RIVALRY AND COMPETITION**

The lack of consensus in this conversation reflected the current international debate. Many discussions from earlier in the conference recurred, namely the question of legitimacy and the use of force against Iran to prevent nuclear weapons development. A member of the German Bundestag advocated looking at the broader picture, citing the Gulf States' fear of Iran, and urging that the world make it unattractive for Iran to build nuclear weapons. The U.S. representative stated that the world would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The Iranian participants posed questions about the lack of current diplomatic engagement from the European Union or its members. In the meantime, all parties agreed that Egypt and Saudi Arabia are now feeling pressure to get involved. The debate included discussion of the current and hypothetical future roles of Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as the utility of sanctions against Iran. ■

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**APPENDIX:  
Acronyms Used**

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AIDS	Advanced Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DVD	Digital Video Disk
GDR	German Democratic Republic
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Gaurds Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency
ISP	Internet Service Provider
IT	Information Technology
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NPT	Non Proliferation Treaty
SMS	Short Message Service
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
VOA	Voice of America



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