

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

IRAN: A CONVERSATION

WELCOME:

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BERNARD SCHWARTZ: Good evening, everyone. I'm Bernard Schwartz, the director of the Unterberg Poetry Center. And it's my privilege to welcome you all to tonight's conversation. We're very proud to be collaborating once more with PEN and the New York Review of Books.

Before we begin, I wanted to say a brief word about the format of the program. Following me, PEN's Larry Siems will step to the podium to say a few words. And then following Larry, there will be a short introduction of the participants by Robert Silvers, the founding editing of the New York Review.

The conversation itself, moderated by Shaul Bakhash, will last about an hour and 15 minutes, after which the panelists have kindly agreed to answer questions. If you have a question, simply approach one of the microphones situated at the bottom of each aisle.

Lastly, I'd hope to draw your attention to the flier in your printed programs, which announces the lineup for the poetry center's 2009 to 2010 season. Opening night is Monday, September 21st, when poet Adrienne Rich will return to the poetry center to read from her work. For more information on the rest of the upcoming season, please visit our Web site at www.92y.org/poetry. And now I'd like to welcome the director of PEN's Freedom to Write program, Larry Siems. (Applause.)

LARRY SIEMS: Good evening. I am Larry Siems. I want to thank you all for coming to this extremely timely and important event. As you know, PEN exists to defend writers and freedom of expression and to promote the free international exchange of information and ideas. One of the ways we do this is through events like this one, where we try to draw back the curtain of distance and censorship that so often surround important issues and events, and to hear as directly as possible from witnesses and participants and deeply informed analysts of those events.

One such event was a program we did in December 2006 on the life and death of Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist and writer who was killed that October. One of those witnesses was Natalia Estemirova, an internationally recognized human rights activist, who was kidnapped and murdered in Chechnya this morning. Speaking at that event in New York, Natalia said, "It is extremely clear to me that those who killed Anna Politkovskaya thought they were silencing her."

The same can be said of Natalia Estemirova's murder this morning. She was reportedly investigating extremely sensitive cases, and was on her way to a full day of meetings at the time of her abduction. Initial reports indicate she was shot twice in the head and chest. She becomes another in a long line of brave, truth seeking writers and journalists and human rights defenders who have been assassinated in Russia. We honor her work, we mourn her death and we will, of course, be pressing for a full investigation and prosecution of her killers.

We are also, of course, deeply troubled by the treatment of journalists and the widespread suppression of freedom of expression in Iran. From the mass arrests of journalists and reform advocates to the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations to draconian restrictions on international and domestic media, it has been a truly harrowing month for many of our colleagues in

Iran – and an extremely discouraging month for all who support their right and the right of all Iran's citizens to speak and write freely.

Among those still in prison in Iran is Maziar Bahari, who reports regularly in Tehran for Newsweek magazine, and has won acclaim for his plays and documentary films. Maziar was detained on June 21st while covering the demonstrations in the aftermath of the presidential elections. He has not been granted access to a lawyer in the three-and-a-half weeks of his incarceration. And no charges against him have been made known.

Tomorrow, PEN will be releasing a petition signed by 100 leading international writers calling for his release. And we will, of course, be pressing for the release of all writers and journalists currently imprisoned in Iran – at least 41 – and work to bring the voices of all our Iranian colleagues before international audiences.

Again, thank you all for coming and for supporting PEN. And an enormous thank you to our co-sponsors for this program – the New York Review of Books, the 92nd Street Y's Unterberg Poetry Center and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – for coming together so quickly and generously to make tonight's event possible.

And now it is my pleasure to introduce Robert Silvers, founding editor of the New York Review of Books, who will introduce tonight's extraordinary speakers. Thank you. (Applause.)

ROBERT SILVERS: Good evening. I want to welcome you to our symposium. And I want to say that, of course, at the New York Review, we want to join very strongly with PEN in our concern about the victims he's just told us about.

Now, as the program notes make clear, everyone tonight has their own special knowledge of Iran. And first is Shaul Bakhash. He's a highly respected journalist. He was a highly respected journalist in Iran. He left at the time of the revolution. He's since written many major books on Iran; many articles in the New York Review and elsewhere. He's professor of Middle Eastern, and especially Iranian history, at George Mason University.

And then, Roger Cohen, former foreign editor of The New York Times, columnist for the International Herald Tribune and The New York Times. He's also written for the review on a variety of subjects. He was in Iran for the recent election. He wrote vividly observed reports from Tehran. And now in the coming issue of the New York Review, he's contributed a long article on the tragedy of the recent election and its meaning for the future of the country.

Now, Haleh Esfandiari also emigrated from Iran. She's taught at Princeton. She's now the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson for Scholars in Washington. You may remember that last year while visiting her mother in Tehran, she was arrested and held in solitary confinement in the notorious Evin Prison. And after much effort, she was released. She's married to Shaul Bakhash.

And, finally, we're fortunate to have with us another leading scholar, Karim Sadjadpour, an expert on recent Iranian and Middle Eastern history, who's written for The New York Times, the Washington Post, The Economist. He's a member of the staff of the Carnegie Endowment of

International Peace – one of our co-sponsors. We're particularly happy to be joining, in the company of PEN and the Carnegie Endowment and the 92nd Street Y.

We've asked Shaul to be the moderator for this evening. And with great thanks to all, I turn to him and our panel. (Applause.)

SHAUL BAKHASH: Well, welcome everyone. We have, this evening, the subject of our discussion, Iran, which has been very much in the news in the last month. Even though we have all followed this news, I think, with great interest, nevertheless, about these extraordinary elections and the huge protests which followed the announcement of the results. Protests which, I think, indicate at least a large portion of the Iranian population believed the election was stolen from them, that it was rigged. And then the crackdown, of course, quite brutal that followed.

I think many questions still remain about the events of these momentous few weeks. First of all, what sparked such massive protests, which have not been seen in Iran since the revolution nearly 30 years ago? Another question, which certainly I ask myself, is these crowds on the streets, these protestors, do they represent – as some allege – just a segment of the Iranian population? Is this – what we're witnessing in Iran today – the elites against the masses? Or did the protests represent a spectrum of Iranian right across social, economic, ethnic, age groups?

Also the question of leadership. We do know that Mousavi, the opposition leader, is a cautious man. He was – I think, by general agreement – thrust into this position of leadership. But this is a very important question, as to whether – for the future – as to whether he and those who have allied themselves with him are capable, have the ability to sustain this protest and reform movement, or not.

And finally of course, I think the big question for all our panelists is what next? A question we all ask ourselves – where is this going to go? Are we witnessing a slow ebbing of this protest movement or is there more to come?

And finally, I think for this audience and particularly people in the United States, the question, then, of what all this means for Iran's relations or non-relations with the United States and with the rest of the international community.

I will turn first to Roger Cohen. He was in Iran during these momentous events and has been writing about it, and I think he can give us a very good overview of what it was like and what he sees as its salient, significant points. Roger –

ROGER COHEN: Thank you, everybody. Well, we journalists are supposed to be pretty hardened folk; serial voyeurs who move on from one story to another. But every now and again, I think we get ambushed by a story or a country. And that happened to me in Bosnia about 15 years ago. And it certainly happened to me with Iran.

It's been my year of Iran, not that I planned it that way. But, out of the blue I got a visa and went there for three weeks in January and February and wrote a series of columns that proved quite controversial – arguing very strongly for engagement and trying to present what I thought was a more rounded picture of the reality of Iranian society and of its very vibrant and engaged youth.

And then I went back. While I was there, I decided I definitely wanted to go back for the election. And I arrived there three days before the vote. And the scenes in Tehran were quite extraordinary. There's always, as you know, been a tension between the two worlds in the self-description of the Islamic Republic – a clerical side Islamic and, every four years, this presidential vote – the republic – which gave many Iranians the sensation that even if they couldn't change the top leadership – the velayat e faqih, the guardianship of the jurist – now Ayatollah Khamenei – they could, through their vote, nudge the country in different directions. And we've seen that with the reformist, Mohammad Khatami, and more recently, the hardliner, President Ahmadinejad.

In any event, after a long period of apathy, even three or four weeks before the election, not much of anything was happening. And Mousavi was a very gray figure. By the time I arrived, the atmosphere in Tehran was absolutely electric. There were parties going on deep into the night; Vali Asr, which is this magnificent avenue that runs north to south across Tehran – it's a combination of the Via Veneto and the Champs Elysees.

And it was full until 3:00, 4:00 in the morning with revelers mainly from the so-called Green Wave of Mousavi with their green banners and green ribbons and green bandanas and green everything else. And there's no question that this set off alarms in the camp of President Ahmadinejad and in the office of the supreme leader because a velvet revolution – a colored revolution – has been the great preoccupation and fear in Iran for some time now.

In any event, what was going on was absolutely extraordinary. There was vibrant and vitriolic debate of a kind that, certainly in the United States or Europe you might expect, but in Iran, was absolutely extraordinary – Ahmadinejad accusing Mousavi of all kinds of things; accusing the number two in the regime, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, of corruption; Rafsanjani responding with a fulminating letter to the supreme leader saying that Ahmadinejad had discredited the entire Islamic Republic, offended religion, offended morality, and holding out the possibility that he might suffer the fate of the first president of the Islamic Republic, Bani Sadr, who, as you know, was ousted in 1981.

So an absolutely freewheeling atmosphere and a sense that the Iranian authorities had decided to let this election happen. And that the supreme leader, who had had an uneasy relationship with Mousavi in the 1980s, had, while favoring Ahmadinejad, made his peace with the idea that this election would run its course. And whoever won would win and he would work with that person.

And I should add that the respect between the supporters of Ahmadinejad and the supporters of Mousavi in the street was also very striking. I saw rallies side-by-side and utmost respect one to the other. And in the day of silence, the Thursday before the election when campaigning has to stop – silence. And most of the posters came down as they were supposed to. And Tehran had been absolutely bedecked in posters. And so an election, it seemed, that was about to happen in almost exemplary circumstances.

I went to bed on the Friday evening and then got a call from Nazila Fathi, the wonderful stringer for The New York Times in Tehran, a remarkable and brave woman. And IRNA, the Iranian national news agency two hours after the closing of the polling stations, put out a bulletin saying that President Ahmadinejad had won an overwhelming first round victory. As you know, if no candidate gets more than 50 percent, things go to a second round. But he had won with about

65 percent of the vote. Mousavi had held a press conference at about 11:00, saying that he thought he'd won. And that was really the last he was seen for quite some time.

In any event, this number of 65 percent across regions of vast ethnic and social diversity really never varied. The Ahmadinejad line went more or less like that through the counting that went on for the ensuing 12, 14 hours. The votes came out in great clumps of two to 5 million votes without any geographic attribution whatsoever. It took about 10 days to get a geographic breakdown – I think because reverse engineering of that kind takes some time. (Laughter.)

And I won't bore you with all the incredible aspects to the numbers. I will just mention that Mr. Karroubi, a reformist cleric who got more than 5 million votes in 2005 in the first round went down 0.84 percent of the vote – about 300,000 votes – and lost in his home state of Lorestan, which is – I believe, I've been told – sort of the Sicily of Iran; a place of intense local loyalties – and even lost in his hometown. In fact, the results that came out looked very much like a runoff. Rezaee, the conservative candidate, and Karroubi scarcely existed. It was really quite extraordinary.

But what was most troubling was that I went out early on the Saturday morning and this city of festivity, of freewheeling debate, a city in fate, had become a city in quite terrifying lockdown. I made my way at about 9:30 that morning toward the interior ministry. Black-clad riot police in thigh-length leg guards carrying baton sticks, truncheons, shields, were pouring out of the interior ministry in the back of pickups and on motor bikes.

Mousavi's headquarters – which I managed to get into – had been upended. There were just papers everywhere, there were things burning. Anybody who lingered even for a moment in that area was simply beaten away by this police biking up and down.

There was tear gas, there were police vans with megaphones saying, you over there in the blue shirt, move. You over there in the white hat, move! And if you didn't move you got beaten. I tried to linger as best I could to observe things then I ran because I was being advanced upon by the riot police.

I bumped into, first, one woman crying who said – throw away your notebook. Come and help us. And then I bumped into another woman in tears who told me she'd come back from Europe because she believed in her country and she's a patriot as Iranians are across the board and that what was happening was terrible.

And a man stepped forward and said to her – don't cry, be strong. And this man kind of grabbed my arm and sort of took me – we ducked into a cafeteria. I'll call this man Mosun (sp) – I know his real name – and he showed me his interior ministry ID card, said that he'd been working at the interior ministry for 30 years and that he'd been locked out of the ministry.

Many jobs at the ministry had been shuffled in the previous days and the numbers coming out – which were quite fantastical – had simply been plucked out of the air. And as he spoke, I noticed a little TV in this cafeteria and it was broadcasting images of soldiers marching up and down and women in black chadors – and I just asked myself, what have we just witnessed?

Have we witnessed an election? Or have we witnessed a military coup? What was being seen on TV very much suggested the latter. And I think if you want to understand the upsurge of

indignation and rage among the people of Iran – who may be many things, but they're not stupid – you have to imagine what they felt having gone through this extraordinary election campaign of the previous two weeks, they felt, I think that some strange and rather sadistic puppeteer had simply been playing with their lives.

Had put on, for a period of weeks, this extraordinary theater of an election and then it simply said, okay, that's over now, we hope you enjoyed it, but now, ladies and gentlemen, we have something else for you. And this something else looks very like a military putsch. And the people who argue that maybe Ahmadinejad really did win, that maybe he did get most of the votes – all I can tell you is that anybody who was in Iran on that morning knew that something was rotten in the state of Iran.

Something very bizarre was going on. And I think the question that we have to ask ourselves – because I believe the Iranian government proceeds, on the whole, methodically and with calculation – and I wrote this earlier in the year, I don't believe at all in the image of the mad, crazy mullahs with the fingers on the nuclear button.

Why do these people bring, at that time, hundreds of journalists to Iran to witness this election, this amazing demonstration of freedom, only to usher us all into the next day, a dark night of the soul? And then, immediately proceed to expelling, trying to expel everyone and I was one of the last if not the last American journalist in the end to leave Iran.

Why did this happen? Why do this? And my only explanation is that this was a relatively last-minute decision, that Mousavi was pretty much dead in the water until very shortly before the election. This green wave emerged quite suddenly and that people around the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad led, I think by Major General Jafari and the Revolutionary Guards and Hassan Taed, the leader of the Basiji simply decided that this was not going to go through and this number would be attached to President Ahmadinejad's name and that would be that.

I don't – I'd better hurry forward because we have limited time but let me just say, give you some very quick idea of the ensuing week. On Monday, on the Monday after the election I witnessed possibly the single most moving event – certainly demonstration of what is now a rather long journalistic career. And what happened was amazing in that as soon as in the night of Friday among the many things that happened was texting was cut off, cell phones were cut off – communication became very difficult.

Access to Internet was extremely spotty. Despite that, I called Tehran at that point the city of whispers because everywhere you went, people were saying "Valiasr, 4:00," "Ferdowsi Square, 6:00 p.m.," "Enghelab, 7:00," "Asad, 9:00 p.m."

And this march in fact took place between Enghelab, revolution, and Asad, freedom. And there were – according to the official calculation of the mayor of Tehran, Mr. Ghalibaf, who is not a supporter of the opposition, there were 3 million people, he subsequently said, gathered in the street. All I can tell you is that I got up on an overpass on Enghelab at one point, which was not easy to do – the whole thing was shaking and people were getting quite panicked.

And you couldn't see the beginning or the end of it. It was a vast crowd and in answer to Shaul's question, it was young and old, men on crutches, people who talked about the 1979 revolution to me. Students, shopkeepers, and this claim of the Iranian government that somehow Western agents or British agents had somehow engineered all this and brought 3 million people – that's about 4 percent of the population of Iran – 3 million people into the street.

Actually the British ambassador told me in January that it was interesting serving in Iran because it was one of the very few places left on earth where people still believe the British have some influence – (laughter) – and was quite amused by this. He apparently did not believe that.

All around me were people saying – I remember one young woman just saying, after 30 years since the revolution, we just wanted to have a little choice. I think most Iranians certainly didn't go into the voting booths wanting to overturn the Islamic Republic.

They wanted to have their say, they wanted to have their votes counted; they wanted a little choice. The ability to nudge things a bit this way or that. Ahmadinejad, by that point, had called anybody who hadn't voted for him hooligans and dust and one young man sat next to me said, we are dust, but we will blind him.

And incidentally another thing that was suggested to me of a last minute decision was the complete chaos of the authorities in the immediate aftermath. Ayatollah Khamenei saying this was a divine result, a miracle. And then the next minute saying, well, there might be some problems, I'm going to refer this to the Guardian Council – (laughter) – exhorting President Ahmadinejad, telling him you are now the president of all Iranians, please reach out to all Iranians.

What does President Ahmadinejad do? He turns around and makes possibly the most divisive victory speech in political history, dismissing all the opposition, as I said, as hooligans. Anyway, this crowd walked and it was a remarkable sight. I think I should, you know, stop soon – I'll just add that – I mean, I can go on later perhaps but I don't want to monopolize things.

You know, things got scarier and scarier once Ayatollah Khamenei, who as you know, has a position really at the flank of the prophet. And one of the things that's happened, I think, is that he's forsaken this role of arbiter that was designed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution.

He has become a partisan of Ahmadinejad; he's down in the trenches from his celestial position. But once he had spoken and said that any bloodshed will be on your hands, Mr. Mousavi, and that anybody going out in the street, in essence, is defying a divine will. The will of the man who stands in for the occulted Imam who disappeared in the 9th century and is expected to return and bring peace and justice on Earth.

He said, if you go out on the street tomorrow, Saturday, you are defying my will. And tens of thousands of people did, and I was in that demonstration and got very badly tear gassed. One of the signs of the overwhelming support in Tehran for what was going on was that doors everywhere got flung open and we all fell into this room of a woman's house and she lit a little fire in a bowl, and I didn't know this but fire smoke dispels the effects of tear gas.

I saw women beaten and bleeding going back into the fray, police surging back and forth. Black pulls of smoke – really it seemed Iran was on a razor's edge for a while. I left extremely reluctantly. That first wave that I've first tried to describe a bit has been beaten back, but the effects of June 12th are ricocheting through Iran.

And those ricochets won't, in my view, die down for a while. They are ricocheting within society where millions of people who were in a mode of what I would call reluctant acquiescence to the Islamic Republic because they believe both words had some meaning, "Islamic" and "republic."

They have moved into a position of much more outright opposition and contempt for what they see as the theft, the brazen theft, as well as theft of their votes. And within the revolutionary establishment, the ricochets have taken the form of dissent from many senior clerics, from associations of clerics in quorum.

From figures who are on the conservative side including Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Majlis, and Mr. Ghalibof and when Ahmadinejad held a victor party, only a minority of Majlis members turned up. We don't know yet what role Mousavi can play – he's announced the formation of a political party. Rafsanjani is going to speak at Friday prayers. I doubt that he will be given that platform unless he was going to try to make probably some kind of conciliatory message, but let's see what form it takes.

He's been very, very angry about what happened. And there's no question that President Ahmadinejad at this point is the most divisive political figure in the 30-year history of the Islamic Republic.

And he's a weaker figure on the world stage than he was. He was very nimble and effective against a radical White House, representing the disinherited of the Earth against the arrogant power. I think against a president like President Obama, a black president of partly Muslim descent who's reaching out to the Muslim world and of course the video of Neda Soltan's death is going to run in everybody's heads every time President Ahmadinejad comes out and tries to speak again about ethics and justice which are two of his big themes.

I think he is a weakened figure and an extremely divisive figure. So it remains to be seen how his authority can be shored up and how these ricochets that I've just described come to rest. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. BAKHASH: The regime obviously panicked. And what started out as at best a reform movement, as Roger says, a desire by the Iranian people, at least a large part of them, to bring about some moderate changes in the system of government was treated by the regime as if it were a threat to the whole structure.

Now you had the unwelcome experience of sitting down with the people who have cracked down, who have made arrests or put people into prison. You were subjected to weeks of interrogation. You must have gotten some sense of the mindset of the hardliners. What do you think they were so terrified of?

HALEH ESFANDIARI: It was an unwelcome setting for eight months with these people. I think there is a sense of paranoia among the intelligence people in Iran. To begin with, the intelligence ministry, which now has, I think, abdicated its responsibilities to the Revolutionary Guards because the recent arrests were made by the Revolutionary Guards rather than the intelligence ministry.

In my discussion with them, I noticed the following: There is a belief among the intelligence community, the intelligence minister, Mr. Ezhei and President Ahmadinejad and the people around him and they have convinced the leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, that the United States and the West have been trying for the last 30 years not only to undermine the Islamic Republic but to overthrow the regime.

And the intelligence ministry has convinced itself that the United States because it is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan – and I'm talking now about – (inaudible, 36:03) – would not attack militarily Iran and therefore it will try and overthrow the regime by means of a velvet revolution.

And the first time they brought up this idea of a velvet revolution with me and explaining to me that I was the mastermind of the velvet revolution – (laughter) – and I said, me? You know, I didn't know I was that important of a person. Anyway.

They went into a large explanation of why and how the American and the West were, but basically focusing on the United States. The American think tanks, universities, research centers are all instruments of the United States government and they work hand in hand with them to overthrow the regime.

And therefore the intelligence ministry is going to be very careful on how these institutions will function inside Iran. I said, what do you mean by that? They said, oh no. You invite scholars to your center and then you make sure that they get in touch with CIA representatives and with the Department of State.

And I said, do they? I mean – he said, oh yes, yes, yes. We have seen pictures of your meetings with men in uniform. And I said, okay. These are public meetings. People come and go and we don't know who they are. And they said no. They brought a lot of pressure on me to give them names.

And I said, look, you people have been interrogating me for four months and I don't even know who you are and what is your real name. How do I know who comes in and goes to my meetings?

But anyway they have this paranoia that the United States is going to – was going then, to overthrow the regime through the velvet revolution and they had followed very carefully the developments in the former east European countries. The example of Georgia and the Ukraine. And I kept on telling them, you're not a banana republic. I mean – and they said, oh no. We don't want any demonstrations and that takes me to what you said Roger because at that time they were very concerned about the women's movement.

The women were coming out, they were having a campaign, collecting signature for equal rights. And they were concerned that they would not be able to control a large crowd. And that's

why they went after small crowd. So I think when they saw these 3 million people coming out in the streets, they thought, that's it. You know, they are going to succeed this time, and therefore we have to go after them.

MR. BAKHASH: Karim, Roger referred to this that these events have shown some serious splits within the ruling group. I wonder whether you might say something about that, how serious you think these splits are and how you see the play of forces within the ruling elite in Iran?

MR. SADJADPOUR: First, it's a great honor to be here. I think there are many friendly faces in the audience, but I forgot my glasses so I can't see any of you. (Laughter.) But I'm not trying to dis you. And it's a wonderful pleasure and a privilege to be among such a distinguished panel. Haleh, in particular, don't take her petiteness for granted; she's the toughest and most dignified Iranian I know. (Applause.)

I thought Roger did a beautiful job. His writings were I thought worthy of a Pulitzer and I think he rendered the election experience and post-election experience beautifully. I just wanted to share a quick anecdote which I always like to recount – and Haleh has heard this before – which, for me, kind of exemplifies the relationship between rulers and ruled in Iran. And this was when I was based in Tehran several years ago.

I was traveling in a taxi. And I always tell people that if you base your analysis of Iran only on Tehran taxi drivers, you could predict a revolution next week because Tehran taxi drivers are constantly in traffic ingesting pollution and most of them are former – are disillusioned former revolutionaries themselves.

So we happen to be driving and I looked up at the street sign and we happened to be on Bucharest Street, the capital of – I'm sorry, on Khalid Islambuli Street. And some of you may know, Khalid Islambuli is the guy who killed Anwar Sadat. And the Iranian regime, post-revolution, named the street after him because the shah was a great friend of Anwar Sadat so therefore they named the street after the assassin of Anwar Sadat. (Laughter.)

And this to this day remains a major reason why there is no official relation between Egypt and Iran. So I was curious to get this driver's reaction. I said, do you know who Khalid Islambuli was? He said, no idea. I said, he's the guy who killed Anwar Sadat. And he was outraged. He said, you know, what kind of a government do we have that names streets after assassins? Egypt is a great nation. We need to have relations with Egypt. And, unintentionally, I got him very excited.

So I said, you know, take the next right; it doesn't matter which right, just take the next right. (Laughter.) And he looked up at the street sign and the street was Bucharest, the capital of Romania. And he said, who did this bastard Bucharest kill? (Laughter.) It's a true story. I could not have made that up.

Now, I just wanted to say a brief word about the fairness of the election because I think there's maybe some question marks still in people's minds. I remember I wrote a long article after these elections, a thousand words, listing all of the reasons why the elections were conducted under a cloud of improprieties. And I sent it to Tom Friedman to have a look over. And he wrote me back two sentences. He said, listen, if I win a 2-1 election genuinely, I'll agree to a recount against anyone any time. And that was basically it.

If you won a 2-1 election, there's no need for you to impose martial law and imprison thousands of people and kill hundreds. I thought, you know, for me that was really it.

A word about Ayatollah Khamenei: I think there's – my colleague brought some copies of a profile I did of Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader. And, you know, this book "Chicken Soup for the Soul," this profile of Khamenei is the antithesis of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" because his worldview is incredibly sinister, conspiratorial.

And this individual has really emerged the last 20 years as Iran's most powerful individual, if you look at the most important institutions in Iran: institution of the presidency, the parliament, the Guardian Council, the Revolutionary Guards. They are all currently led by individuals who are directly appointed by Khamenei or unfailingly loyal to him.

But it's remarkable the difference between June 11th and June 13th in the world of Ayatollah Khamenei. Whereas June 11th he looked like a modern-day shah wearing a turban instead of a crown, June 13th, suddenly, previously sacred red lines were being crossed. Before people were terrified of publicly admonishing Khamenei. Within the next two, three weeks afterwards, we saw people going to the streets saying – (in Farsi) – "death to the dictator."

And, you know, for the last two decades, I think Khamenei has had a great gig in the sense that he has this job – he wields power without accountability. This is how I describe him, in the sense that the last two decades, the president in Iran has always had the highest public profile. So Ahmadinejad comes to New York and speaks at Columbia University, the United Nations, denies the Holocaust. And if you do a Google search of "Ahmadinejad," you get 10, 15 million hits. And if you do a Google search of "Khamenei," you get about a million hits.

But, behind the scenes, this is the individual wielding power. And, as I said, up until now, he has liked to project this image of being a magnanimous godfather who stays above the fray. And, for the first time, I think he has really, truly revealed his hand and he has done it, he has tied himself to a very unpopular president.

Now, what is interesting for me about Khamenei's worldview is a couple of things. One thing I found in doing the study was that – one thing that's really a fundamental tenet of his worldview is that you never compromise when you're under pressure because when you compromise under pressure, this doesn't pacify, this doesn't allay the pressure – but it projects weakness and it will even increase the pressure.

So I wasn't surprised that after this public outrage he came out very defiantly in support of President Ahmadinejad. And there was once a quote I found from Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was also a pillar of the 1979 revolution and so on, previously quite close to Khamenei and now, as you said, Shaul, there is these great cleavages amongst the founding fathers of the revolution.

And Rafsanjani once said something which, for me, was very telling. He said – this was several years back – he said, you know, when the shah came out in late 1978 and he said on television, national television, that I've heard the voice of your revolution – this is when the protest started to really get big in Iran. And he came out and he apologized for past transgressions.

And, again, the shah said I have heard the voice of your revolution. Rafsanjani was saying this publicly. He said the shah thought by doing that he was going to appease us, he was going to pacify the crowds but, on the contrary, that's when we smelled blood and we pounced. And I think this is central to Khamenei's worldview.

And there is an important distinction I would make between today's revolutionary elite and – today's political elite in Iran and the political elite during the time of the shah. And one of them was that many of the political elites during the time of the shah, they spent their formative years being educated in universities in the United States and Europe and certainly they loved Iran. And I think it was very, very difficult to leave it behind. But when they did, they could sustain themselves elsewhere; they could make their lives elsewhere.

These guys, the current revolutionary elite in Iran, the current political elite in Iran, spent their formative years in the seminaries of Qom. And the Revolutionary Guardsmen, they spent their formative years on the battlefields with Iraq. And people have told me for years that, one day, when the going gets tough, these guys really don't have anywhere to go; they are not going to retire in the south of France or Los Angeles. So they're going to really fight till the end.

But that gets to the question about the cleavages we're seeing now. And what's truly been unprecedented about the last four weeks has been this incredible popular uprising and I think we shouldn't underestimate the magnitude of what's transpired the last few weeks. This wasn't small. This wasn't limited to Tehran.

There is an amazing image you should see of this beautiful square, Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Esfahan, UNESCO World Heritage site, an enormous square. And it's filled with so many people, you can't even see the ground – tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people.

So we're seeing this tremendous bravery and courage of the Iranian people. And the scale of the protest certainly has decreased because the regime does repression very well. So they're able to prevent large amounts of people from congregating on any one area. And they've used an incredibly heavy hand.

These official statistics you see on the amount of individuals imprisoned and killed is vastly underestimated, vastly deflated. European embassies who I am in contact with in Tehran say the numbers are much, much higher, to the tune of thousands imprisoned and several hundreds killed.

And the problem is that we only have these statistics in Tehran; we don't really see what takes place outside of Tehran. But, you know, in terms of the – so we have this popular sense of outrage and the sense of injustice. And now, at night, people are continuing to chant Allahu Akbar, God is great, as a small means of protesting. And I think they are waiting to see what is the next move.

They are waiting to see if the reformist leadership can re-congregate.

But, again, we have these incredible pillars amongst the revolutionary elites themselves. Roger mentioned some of the cleavages amongst the clergy. And what I would focus on now, for me, I think what will be most telling is the institution of the Revolutionary Guards because, truly,

what we've soon over the last decade is that the institution of the Revolutionary Guards has really eclipsed the institution of the clergy in terms of its political and economic clout.

And neither of these institutions is monolithic. I remember when I was based in Tehran, I used to meet with individuals who were in the Revolutionary Guards. And there is something you find out about men who have gone to war – whether they are Iranian or they are American or others. But they are much less ideological than individuals who haven't gone to war oftentimes because they have experienced the horrors of war first-hand.

So oftentimes, these individuals, you know, don't have a romantic idea about this death-to-America culture of 1979 and they are oftentimes more pragmatic. What you see right now is that the senior elite of the Revolutionary Guards have been handpicked by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. So in public they are very deferential to him.

But certainly amongst the rank and file, I've experienced this both anecdotally but also empirically; we've seen statistics in the past that show that there's 120,000 men in the Revolutionary Guards and the rank and file are more reflective of Iranian society at large than we may think.

Now, Shaul, should I speak now about U.S. policy or should we get back into it?

MR. BAKHASH: We'll get back to that.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Okay, okay. So I will leave it for –

MR. BAKHASH: Roger, you used the word “putsch.” Do you see Iran now as a country in which the Revolutionary Guards, the military, are going to play a much more commanding role? And would you like to say anything about – I mean, we are all struggling with this. Is the repression going to be sufficient to deal with this public resentment and anger or not?

MR. COHEN: Well, Shaul, I think the Revolutionary Guards have clearly, under Ahmadinejad, as Karim was saying, moved very much toward the center of things, the center of power in Iran. And Ahmadinejad, as you know, channeled a lot of no-bid contracts in construction and oil drilling and other areas to the Revolutionary Guard. So there was also a lot of money, of cash, at stake in maintaining the hold on power.

And I think one of the most significant statements, looking back at what happened, didn't get a lot of attention at the time, but came on the Monday before the election when the political director of the Revolutionary Guards put out a statement on the Fars news agency, which is close to the Revolutionary Guards, saying that if Mousavi thinks for a minute that he is going to lead a velvet revolution in Iran, he should know, quote, “it will be quashed before it is even born.” And that was on June 8.

And what we did see was a quashing; there's no question about that. You know, Ahmadinejad – it's perhaps worth just mentioning this detail – went from 5.7 million votes in the first round in 2005 to 24.5 million votes in the – that's a surge of 20 million votes – after a very intense debate: oil at 60 (dollars a barrel) instead of 140 (dollars a barrel), inept leadership, economy in a downturn, extremely hard to believe.

I think we will see the Revolutionary Guards in this central role, but I agree with Karim; it's very hard to know beneath the surface what divisions there may be. There were rumors while I was in Iran that one commander had been stripped of his post because he had refused to go out in the streets. And you saw in the streets, while I was there, I described the elite, black-clad riot police, but very quickly there was an astonishing array of forces in the street, including the Revolutionary Guards in camouflage and they sometimes had automatic rifles.

But the most scary day-to-day were the Basij, this militia, vast militia, who were plain-clothes, had helmets, sticks, shields and had no qualms whatsoever about beating men and women. And I have to say there's something about seeing a plain-clothes thug with the full license of the state beating young women to the point where they're bleeding heavily that is impossible to stomach, I think for anybody who sees it. And I saw quite a lot of that.

Yeah, I think the whole power structure, it is holding for now. And I think if we were betting on it, we'd have to say at this point they have pushed back the surge and they will hold the line, at least for now. But, in addition to – (in Farsi: “death to the dictator”) – I was hearing every night – (in Farsi: “death to”) – Khamenei, which is even more incredible and shows the degree to which taboos have simply been shattered.

Another taboo that was shattered was that there was open talk while I was in Tehran of the role played by Mojtaba Khamenei, a cleric who is the second-born son of the supreme leader and who is believed by many to have played a leading role in what happened and a leading role in directing the Basij. And, again, the fact that this was being talked about openly was extraordinary.

And I think the ruthlessness of what has happened is also quite – makes one's head spin. I mean, everybody that I saw when I arrived there – Saeed Leylaz, Mohammad Atrianfar, Mazir Bahari, many others, they are all in jail. The entire reformist brain trust, if you like, has simply been rounded up.

And, you know, I think Rafsanjani, Mousavi and many around them believe in a kind of China option for Iran, you know, that Iran has enough self-confidence; the revolution's core achievement, one of them, has been gaining independence for Iran. Iran is a genuinely independent country today. It has no reason any longer to be fearful about that. And that's where I think the word “paranoia” that Haleh used comes in.

Iran is independent. And there is no reason, in my view, that the Islamic Republic could not open much more to the world and normalize, ultimately, relations with the United States while continuing to be an Islamic Republic.

And I wrote somewhere that people are overwhelmed by the tragedy of Iran. And this is the story of Bazargan, the first post-revolutionary prime minister, on his death bed just overwhelmed by all he felt he had failed to do and all of the ways in which the revolution hadn't lived up to what he had hoped.

And, going back to 1905, Iran had a revolution for what, for something called a constitution. And that's why it was called the Constitutional Revolution. And the two currents in Iran are both strong. It is a deeply religious, profoundly religious, Shia Islamic state. But it is also a country where there is a broad – and I would say, broadening – and in a sense that, too, is an achievement of the

revolution. If women have been educated in Iran, it's because ayatollahs told traditional families to go out and educate their daughters.

And the attachment in Iran to some form of liberal democracy, some form of society where there is greater freedom, is equally great. And the tragedy of Iran is it has never managed through this turbulent 104 years since the Constitutional Revolution to get those two forces into a balance, which is not, in my view, impossible to conceive of, but which has certainly – that balance and the hope of achieving it, I think, was trampled on in the night of June 12 to June 13.

MR. BAKHASH: Roger, I think, I mean about this balance that you just mentioned, certainly this was what President Khatami believed when he was president – that the system could remain Islamic but become democratic. And he and his advisors really believed that if you worked through the system, within – through the legal system and elections, a freer press, political parties and the like, you could achieve that balance.

As we know, of course, he was, again, defeated by the hard-line and conservative forces. And I wonder, Haleh – you were about to comment – but also to ask you, you know, what role you see for the leaders of the, quote, “opposition,” who are all, in a way, insiders? After all, we know now, as Roger mentioned in passing, that Rafsanjani's going to deliver the Friday prayer sermon this week, and we will see what he says. As usual, he'll probably muddle everything – (laughter) – but nevertheless – and it's also rumored that Mousavi and Khatami, two of the opposition leaders, will attend the Friday prayers.

So are we seeing, you know, once again, the leadership – even the opposition – fearful of going to the brink and therefore coming together and believing again that if you only twiddle with the system on the edges, everything will be all right, or do you think that this group of opposition leaders have the means, have the mental frame to lead a movement that will then result in general reform?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Before answering your question, I would like to comment on a point that Roger made regarding the Revolutionary Guard. I think they have realized that they have gone much too far, and the Basij are also under the control of the Revolutionary Guard. So therefore, they have started to mend their image. But again, in a naïve way – I don't want to use the word stupid – (laughter) – in their naïve way, what have they done? They're trying to blame others – non-Iranians – for beating up the crowd, for arresting them.

I mean, there are these rumors they started circulating that they were not – you know, they were people from the crowd, you know, agents provocateur who were coming and beating up – these plainclothes men who were beating the women and arresting and so on were really part of the reformist movement to create chaos.

And so this accusation of velvet revolution by the Revolutionary Guard commander beforehand and then Khatami talking about a velvet coup, you know, which is something – so therefore, I think, suddenly – and this is my sense – that the Guard feels that it has gone much too far and they are concerned that they will lose the control over the Basij, because the Basij can turn against anyone they want, including the current leadership, you know.

So they are trying to control them, to mend their image, and this will take a lot of time. But there are also, among the Revolutionary Guards, those who feel an allegiance or sense an allegiance to Rafsanjani. There are those who also feel an allegiance to Mousavi. Mousavi was the prime minister of the war, and so he made sure that everything got to the front – you know, enough money, enough ammunition, enough weapons and so on. So I don't think that the guard is uniform in thinking that they have to support 100 percent Ahmadinejad and the leadership. So that cleavage, Shaul, I think exists between the guards, just like it exists among the clerics.

But as far as the future of the reformist movement, I personally think that Mr. Mousavi was an accidental leader. He was just thrown in when the Guardian Council approved his credentials, they thought that he has been out of politics for the last 20 years, so okay, he'll get a couple of millions, Mr. Karroubi would get a couple of millions and so will Rezaee and then they'll go to the second round and Ahmadinejad will win.

And this green movement also started accidentally. Mr. Mousavi himself said that he was in the provinces campaigning and a young man came and put a green scarf around his shoulders. And aesthetically, "because I'm an artist," quote, unquote, I thought it looks very nice. So this became the symbol and the color of the reformist movement. (Laughter.) And I give a lot of credit to his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who would warm up the crowd and then call on her dull husband – (laughter) – to address the crowd.

So I think, really for the first time, we had a couple running the movement. And I believe, Shaul, that at this stage, the reformist movement is in disarray because the bulk, the majority of its leadership is sitting in jail. So maybe, I think, maybe tomorrow, when Mr. Rafsanjani speaks –

MR. BAKHASH: Friday.

MS. ESFANDIARI: – this could lead to freeing the reformists to come out. And then, knowing this government, they'll have a trial and they'll do exactly what they did to the former mayor of Tehran, Karbaschi. They banned him – the whole leadership – from any kind of political activities for the next five years. But they will allow Mr. Mousavi and Mrs. Rahnavard to start a party, but they will limit the activities of the party.

I mean, I wish I was more optimistic, but I can't – but something broke on June 13 in Iran. Iran and the Iranian society is not going to be the same anymore. And that will then take us to the role of the United States.

MR. BAKHASH: (Chuckles.) Good, yes. And I do want to start to discuss this –

MR. COHEN: Can I just add one thing on Mousavi? It was really fascinating at the rally on the Monday after the election, and then on the Thursday – on the Thursday, there was another big rally, several hundred thousand. He wasn't, for whatever reason, up to seizing the moment, in my view. He was neither present enough nor audible enough to seize the energy that was there, and the energy was phenomenal. Now, exactly why this is – whether it was his character, whether – he was clearly working within some kind of constraint.

On the Thursday, he passed four feet from me with his wife, Zahra. They were waving. The crowd was going crazy. And he said nothing. He didn't make a speech. Now, why was this?

Was this because he'd been let out of virtual house arrest on condition that he not speak, or what was it? And also in that time, I think our president was perhaps a couple of days behind the curve in his statements on the situation.

I think he got to the right place. And I understand completely, given the poisonous history between the two countries and given the way what he said could be exploited, for his caution. But once people were being killed and once the right of people to demonstrate peacefully and protest was being flouted in that way, I think a far more emphatic denunciation of the violence earlier on was needed. It didn't come and Mousavi was somehow constrained and the moment passed.

MR. BAKHASH: Yeah. On Mousavi, if I may just add, it seems to me that precisely what you described – this very enthusiastic, large crowd on the streets – in a way, restrained him, because he, too, was afraid of unleashing the potential power of that movement and what the consequences might be. And I think we saw this earlier on with Khatami's reform –

MR. COHEN: One thing you realize – it was scary, of course, going out in the streets, but – and I think everybody who went down to that Monday demonstration was apprehensive – but one thing you realize in a crowd of 3 million people, or however many people it was, fear simply goes away because you can't shoot 3 million people – you can't! Or at least you tell yourself, you can't open fire on a crowd this large. Even something like Tiananmen becomes inconceivable when the crowd is that large.

And in fact, the potential of a crowd of that number is limitless. I've never seen silence deployed with such power as in that demonstration. Every time somebody – even a murmur – people said “sokut, sokut” – is that right – “silence, silence.” And it was just people walking in a vast crowd, arms raised, V-for-victory sign, women trying to encourage the Tehran city police, who were, by far the best police to deal with throughout this, to also raise their hands. But just millions of people in silence driven by their indignation at seeing their votes stolen from them.

MR. BAKHASH: Let's briefly, then, talk about Iran-U.S. relations, because I do want to leave some time for questions from the floor. Karim, it seemed to me the Obama administration – one of the reasons for President Obama's initial restraint, and for very good reasons – talk about events in Iran – but one additional reason is perhaps the belief that there still is an opening for negotiations with the Iranians. How do you feel, you know, the U.S. should handle the engagement with Iran at this moment? And I ask for brevity so that we can go to the floor.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Sure. What I would say is this, that I truly think that what we saw – these cleavages amongst political elites in Iran and also the rise of the population – had something to do with Barack Obama. I don't want to exaggerate it, but I don't know if this could have happened during the Bush/Cheney years. And the reason I say that is whereas the Bush/Cheney administration united Iran's disparate political elites against a common threat, I think the Obama administration's overtures accentuated the deep divides between Iran's political elites.

A couple months ago, I was in Jordan and there was a senior Iranian official there at a conference who was actually a conservative official. And this was shortly after Obama gave the Nowruz speech to Iran. And he said he confided in me privately that there's a great deal of pressure, now, on the hardliners in Tehran to justify this gratuitous enmity – he didn't use

gratuitous; that's my word – (laughter) – but this great deal of pressure to justify this anti-Americanism.

And he said to me, if we can't make nice with Barack Hussein Obama who is preaching mutual respect on a weekly basis and sending us Nowruz cards, it's pretty obvious the problem is in Tehran, not Washington. (Laughter.) That's what he said to me. Now, with regard to what the policy should be now, I'm someone who, in my short and undignified career, I've always advocated engagement. Always, unequivocally I've said the benefits of engagement far outweigh any costs. For the first time, I no longer advocate engagement, at least in the immediate term. I think, for the first time, the costs of engaging now and saying simply, you know, it's business as usual, the costs of engagement outweigh the benefits. (Applause.)

And the reason why I say that is that, again, we shouldn't dismiss the magnitude of this moment; we should really appreciate what has transpired, and I think what may continue to transpire, over the last four weeks. And I truly think it would be demoralizing for the millions of Iranians who took to the street and the opposition if suddenly, the United States says, well, you made a good run, a good try, but we're going to go back to engaging.

It sends the wrong message to the regime – that you can act with impunity – you can murder a 26-year-old woman and it's captured on video – Neda Soltan – can murder a 26-year-old woman and blame it on the CIA, but it's back to engagement. So I think that we may well have to reassess this policy weeks from now, months from now. But I think in the short term, engagement is not the right approach. Unfortunately, I think the Obama administration has already made a decision to go ahead with it.

MR. BAKHASH: Roger and Haleh, you've both argued for engagement in the past. Again, very briefly, what do you say to Karim's comments now?

MR. COHEN: Well, I think the strategic imperative for engagement remains. It's very hard to imagine progress between Israel and Palestine, in Lebanon, with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan – Iran's pivotal regional position makes it very hard to imagine how, without moving towards some kind of normalization, you can really make progress on this front. But there's also – and Karim's just outlined it – there's also a moral imperative now.

So long as people are being clubbed on the streets, so long as hundreds, perhaps thousands of people have been thrown into jail just for what they think, and until we get a real number on those killed – and I got a note today from a man who'd just spoken to a physician who'd been telling him about 22 corpses taken out from the hospital he worked at just the other day, so I do think we are quite a long way from the real number – so long as all that's happening, I agree with Karim. I don't think it can be business as usual – absolutely not.

But I suspect that – and also, I think, it's impossible anyway. I don't think Iran has a national security team at this moment. I think they are in complete disarray and focused only on trying to shore up the situation for now. So in any event, I think we're probably talking about the fall before things begin to settle a little bit. And at that point, you know, I think ultimately, one has to – I think the one way this regime, whose hold on things is more tenuous now, would be cemented, and for a long time, would be if bombs were to fall on Iran.

I think the reaction would be the same as in 1980, when Saddam Hussein invaded. And whatever people are feeling today – and people have very, very strong feelings today and they are patriots at the last, and if their country was attacked, they would rally around. And in the end, how do you avoid that outcome that I certainly don't want? The only way is one day to get to a table, and on that table, you have to put everything – not just the nuclear issue. You have to put everything – Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas, the situation in Iraq, frozen assets, I mean, these five diplomats who've been held in Iraq have actually just been released, Afghanistan, Iran's regional security role, security guarantees for the Islamic Republic – everything has to be.

This is such a messed-up relationship. (Laughter.) You know, we've had the "nest of spies" and Great Satanism for 30 years; there have been flurries of communication and then they always collapse somehow. And you know, our country was traumatized by the hostages. I mean, this was beamed for 444 days into the homes of every American across the country – wild-eyed, bearded Iranians mistreating American diplomats.

And these traumas – it's a very, very emotional relationship; it's not a rational relationship. And if we're going to get it to the rational plane, which is where it needs to be, we need to air everything. We need to get beyond the psychosis. And that looks very remote to me right now, but I don't see any alternative down the line to trying to get back to that point. And we don't know – you know, could it be that we will see some moderates? Ahmadinejad will form his government in August and be sworn in, assuming nothing unforeseen happens. What is that government going to look like? We don't know yet.

MR. BAKHASH: Haleh?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I think I agree with Karim. Look, we have not engaged – first of all, let me say that I came out of prison and returned to the United States 10 days later. And in my first press conference at the Wilson Center, I talked about engagement and I said something – what happened to me is not going to be even a footnote anywhere, so therefore, we need to engage. But at this stage, I would say for 30 years, we did not engage, so sitting back, waiting for a while is not going to do anything.

The nuclear clock is ticking; it will tick regardless of whether we are going to speak to them tomorrow or in six months' time. But I believe that the administration – the Obama administration has reached out enough to Iran, and now, it is Iran who has to reach out to the United States, provided we get an explanation for what happened. What happened in Tehran was not a Tiananmen Square. People went and voted and their votes were stolen, so it wasn't a Tiananmen Square. It was really a different story. And I think that is what the administration should keep in mind.

MR. BAKHASH: Good, thank you. I'm going to open the floor to a few quick questions – not statements, questions. (Laughter.) There are microphones in the aisles. Oh good, I can see better now. So if you would line up, and please try and be brief, and as I say, because we're near the 8:30 hour, we'll only take a very few. Yes, please?

Q: Can you hear me okay?

MR. BAKHASH: Yeah, we can hear you, yes.

Q: My name is Genevieve Long. I'm a reporter with a newspaper called the Epoch Times. And I have a question for Mr. Cohen. You mentioned that you were very reluctant to leave Iran – that you think you were one of the last to leave as a journalist. I wonder if you could comment briefly on the impact that it had on this story being told to the rest of the world that the journalists that were there – the media that are still there – how they've been muzzled and prevented from, you know, telling parts of this story, or basically how that has affected the story being told in a very descriptive and full way in which you've shared with us here. I wonder if you could comment on that.

MR. COHEN: I hadn't realized there were so many of you out there. (Laughter.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: We couldn't see anything from here.

MR. COHEN: The media has been very deliberately targeted from day two or three after the election, when our press passes were revoked. I chose to go on working despite that and the fact that there are no Western, European, U.S. or other non-Iranian national correspondents in Iran today is very bad for the quality of information emerging from the country at this critical moment. And it's absolutely unacceptable the way the press has been targeted.

It is – I salute all the Iranians I saw with their cell phones at great risk taking video footage of what was going on. And an extraordinary video archive – Twitter archive, new media archive – exists today for what has happened since June 12th. That archive exists, it is there, and it is a very powerful indictment of what happened.

I work for what's now called the poor, ailing MSM – the mainstream media – (laughter) – and I continue to believe that it's a journalists fundamental duty and obligation to bear witness, and that to bear witness, you have to be on the ground, you have to be able to see, you have to be able to smell, you have to be able to hear, you have to be able to feel, you have to be able to listen, you have to take the temperature of where you are.

And whatever the quality of all that video and other material pouring haphazardly out of Iran, we have lost the presence of people like myself, who have some training in doing that and maybe have learned over the years to try to distill information in ways so that we present an honest and fair picture – or try to – and enable people to prioritize and weigh the flood of information. Because a flood of images and 140-character tweets and other information going through social networks – it gives you a kaleidoscope of things, but the Iranian government knows very well in expelling us that it's made it much, much more difficult for people to get an accurate picture of what's really going on.

MR. SADJADPOUR: There's a great quote from the comedian Bill Maher who said that, "Twitter didn't save Iran; Iran saved Twitter." (Laughter.)

MR. BAKHASH: Please, yes, next question.

Q: I'll direct my question to Mr. Sadjadpour. I know there was a brief discussion regarding the figure of Mousavi, who was described, perhaps somewhat accurately, as accidental, but I'm looking for a more thorough explanation of why the powers that be in Iran – we can call them for

shorthand, perhaps, Khamenei's circle – chose Mousavi, essentially, in the days prior to the election, over Ahmadinejad.

There have been several theories posited about this, one of which, which was widely repeated, was the personal animosity between the figures of Rafsanjani, Khamenei and Mousavi, who have a long and complicated history, which I'm not sure if it's useful to get into now. And there was also sort of talked about the possibility of a paranoid and somewhat delusional intelligence community, which was pushing for the idea that there was an imminent velvet revolution and that this might have tipped the scales in favor of President Ahmadinejad.

So I'm wondering if there's a more thorough explanation of exactly why the cards were sort of thrown in Ahmadinejad's favor, especially given that now it seems to have done irreparable damage to the foundation of the Islamic Republic, especially considering that Mr. Mousavi himself was – you know –

MR. BAKHASH: Okay, yeah. I think we get the question.

Q: Yeah, and if anyone else has any light to shed on that, perhaps you could explain.

MR. BAKHASH: Karim?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Why Khamenei chose Ahmadinejad?

MR. BAKHASH: Yes, I think that's the question, yes. (Laughter.)

MR. SADJADPOUR: I would just say briefly that I think that they never anticipated that Mousavi's movement would build the momentum that it did. Roger has written about this – he was this 67-year-old, uncharismatic, soft-spoken guy and they never anticipated this green movement would build the momentum that it did. And you yourself mentioned the contentious relationship between Mousavi and Khamenei during the '80s. Mousavi was prime minister and he was closer to Ayatollah Khomeini than Khamenei was.

And in many ways, Khamenei was, at best, his equal, if not his subordinate. So he didn't want a president like Mousavi, who could potentially challenge him; he wants someone like Ahmadinejad, who will remain his subordinate. And I think that they never anticipated the reaction – they never anticipated this type of popular reaction. I can tell you I didn't anticipate it either. That's my take on it.

MR. BAKHASH: Right. Please, next question.

Q: Mr. Cohen, thank you very much for your wonderful and very brave columns you wrote from Tehran. I, and I suspect many others, were e-mailing them to my friends in Iran at the time. (Applause.) Could you give us a little more detail on specifically what happened to you and your exit from the country, given that you were one of the last, and you were writing about some very specific things that were happening? Were the authorities trying to find you in particular? Were they contacting The New York Times to tell them to stop doing this? Could you give us a little more detail on exactly what happened there and how you exited the country?

MR. COHEN: Well, I don't know what the security services were doing. I do know they gave me a very hard time at Khomenei Airport on the way out – humiliating and very unpleasant. But what they were doing or thinking prior to that, I don't know.

I arrived shortly before the election. And perhaps because I'd written these series of columns earlier in the year arguing very strongly for engagement, I don't know why, anyway I got a slightly longer visa than most correspondents got. And I took the position that, so long as my visa was valid, even if I was working with my press pass revoked – maybe I was wrong about this. I took the view – because I saw it was so important to go on writing – that the worst that would probably happen to me would be that I'd be detained and thrown out of the country. And that, I could live with.

It was very hard to work by the end. I didn't bring my notebook out when I went down nine, 10 days after the election to the service for Neda Soltan, which happened in a little square in Tehran outside a mosque where the family had been barred from going. And there were about 80 people sitting around, and there was a prayer. And actually the Tehran city police joined in the prayer before the Basij arrived and dispersed everyone with sticks.

But I didn't bring out my notebook and I was trying to memorize things and Nazila was helping me. And it was very much a game of cat-and-mouse by then. And I grew the semblance of a beard because I thought it might help me. And somebody did ask me the directions in Farsi – (laughter) – on one of the last days there. So I thought I was making some headway.

It became extremely difficult. And I – as you can probably tell even tonight – I got very little sleep in the last five or six days because I was almost alone. And I think I was on Larry King four nights running and Wolf Blitzer. And because of the time difference – the eight-hour time difference – and I was writing more or less, a column a day. And I was really sleeping an hour or two a night. And I was kind of going on adrenaline. And I'd invested a lot in Iran earlier in the year and I'd been through this whole brouhaha about what I'd written, including some pretty unpleasant attacks on me. And I just felt very invested in the story and that I had to go on bearing witness as long as I could.

So yeah, it was hard to leave. But my wife's pretty clever. I said this on NPR the other day. (Chuckles.) She's used to me in war zones. And I said – because I was thinking quite seriously about just staying beyond my visa's expiry. But then I thought of Nazila and my colleagues – I mean, it would have been foolhardy. But I told my wife that I was thinking of staying on. And she just said, well, call me when you've made up your mind. (Laughter.)

And anyway, ultimately, I did leave. But it was very hard to leave. It was one of those moments in journalism when something truly momentous is very clearly unfolding before your eyes. And you have the privilege of being there. And, in my view, with that privilege comes certain obligations. And the story was ongoing; it's still ongoing. And it's a pity that the Iranian authorities won't allow foreign correspondents and columnists to do their work.

MR. BAKHASH: I'm going to allow one more question because we're really running out of time. So please go ahead.

Q: Thank you. My question is for Mr. Sadjadpour and it comes from a comment by Ms. Esfandiari about how the role of the Revolutionary Guard has expanded since the election in controlling security and population.

It seems, in my own uninformed interpretation, that the Ahmadinejad enclave within the government, perhaps with the approval or maybe the direction of Ayatollah Khamenei, has expanded its power and sought to take control, regardless of what the rest of the populace thinks at all.

MR. BAKHASH: So let's have – I'm sorry – let's have the question. So go ahead.

Q: Sorry, let me – this will take just a second. (Laughter.) It seems to me that a government that has absolutely no concern over what its domestic population thinks wouldn't care much about reconciliation with the international community. And I'd like to know from Mr. Sadjadpour whether you think this will ultimately – if it doesn't implode on itself – end in a violent conflict.

MR. SADJADPOUR: What I would say is that right now – and I choose this word very carefully – I think right now the government which has taken over Iran is a cartel. It's representative of a very narrow swath of not only Iranian society but also the Iranian political elite. And a friend of mine, the most informed intellectual I know in Iran, I called him the day after this election. He said, listen, these guys made \$300 billion the last four years on oil revenue. They're not going to give it up that easily.

And I use the word “cartel” and “mafia” carefully because if you're a mafia and you're a Revolutionary Guardsman and, again, your formative years were spend at the battlefields, not getting an MBA from Harvard, you don't want Iran to open up necessarily to the international community, and to join the WTO, and have the great oil companies of the world invest in Iran, and for Iran to become more meritocratic.

On the contrary, I think, the less the merrier. So take this ideological enmity towards the United States with a grain of salt. It's a marriage between power and greed, essentially. And when these Iranian officials – they could be Revolutionary Guardsmen or clergy – say that enmity towards the United States was a fundamental pillar of the 1979 Revolution and it remains central to the identity of the Islamic Republic, I think that that's because their power and their economic clout is much better preserved in isolation or with retaining this adversarial relationship with the United States. And it has very little to do – despite the fact that these groups are called the Principlists – they have very little principle. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. BAKHASH: Well, thank you all for your patience. (Applause.)

MR. SIEMS: I'd like to thank you all, again, for coming. And please join me one more time in thanking Shaul and Haleh and Roger and Karim. And please, if I could just ask you on your way out, if you think a little bit about what you've been thinking about tonight, and what's going on in the world, if you might consider supporting PEN's effort. There's a table out there. You can become a member or an associate member. You can make a donation or you can visit our website and join any of our campaigns on behalf of writers and free expression in the U.S., in Iran and around the world. Thank you very much, everyone. Goodnight.

(END)