

Last night at the Frontline:

18.5.17

Wendell Steavenson

Elections and Rising Tension: Iran and the US

The inimitable and elegant Azadeh Moaveni, lecturer, author, chaired the discussion. Iran goes to the polls on May 16th. Two candidates remain in the race. 'Its a choice between bad and worse,' said Kasra Naji, correspondent for BBC Persian TV and author of Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader.

His colleague at the Guardian, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, who grew up in Tehran during the relatively liberal-relaxed Khatami years, sketched the character of the establishment candidate, Ebrahim Raisi: A populist in the mold of Ahmadinejad who has promised cash hand-outs to the poorest third of Iranians if he is elected and sat on death committees during the 80s signing off on the executions of thousands of political prisoners, 'not a cuddly type of figure and proud of it.'

Rouhani, by contrast, Naji described, started his Presidency, four years ago, as a pragmatist who negotiated a nuclear deal with the West and has become progressively (relatively, a bit, not much; it's still the Islamic Republic after all) progressive. 'He has become the person defending reform.' Naji didn't think, ultimately, Raisi would win.

Iranian elections, despite the careful vetting of candidates, despite outbreaks of fraud and ballot stuffing, are competitive and important. We shouldn't forget, the panel agreed, that it's the dream of many in the region to be able to vote, and Iranians can and do experience democracy, and their voice has an effect on the political life of the country.

There are caveats: the judiciary, Jamie Rubin, an Assistant Secretary of State under Clinton, pointed out, are a parallel power structure to the Presidency, independent and hardline. Rouhani may want to release political prisoners, Naji said, 'but he cannot do it.' Similarly, a President is hamstrung by the hardliners, the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards, the agendas of various semi-autonomous intelligence entities, in the pursuit of foreign policy.

Rubin, as ever a sharp and acerbic analyst, pointed out that the problem with Iran should not be underplayed by those, 'probably many in this room' who wanted to see a rapprochement with the West. The nuclear deal, he emphasised, as far as Hillary Clinton was concerned, was an arms treaty, not the first step to open up a whole new kind of relationship, politically or economically. Iran's adventures in Syria, he said, meant 'they have blood on their hands.'

Some in the room, audience and panel too, pushed back against the idea of Iran being the only, or the focal, bad guy in the Middle East. What about Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism? Rubin said it wasn't state sponsored, in fact the opposite, the Saudis were trying to combat it, it threatened their government. What about the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Rubin said, yes well, America had clearly lost its appetite for new interventions as a

result. Still, he bemoaned Obama's 'flawed idea that Iran and Saudi Arabia could share the Middle East' as America beat a withdrawal.

Iran is a regional player, Rubin pointed out, has always been, since Darius the Great, and it 'there intention is to be a leader in the region.' He just lamented that their methods were military instead of political or economic. Dehghan, apologised for seeming like an Iranian apologist, and argued, 'For two hundred years Iran has not attacked another country,' and Rubin conceded this point.

All evening the discussion had threatened to tip into Syria and wider geopolitics, Moaveni deftly kept the panel's focus on the election. But just as the time was up, the word Israel was mentioned in a question and we all repaired to the bar with the feeling that this was a conversation that could have been twice as long...

Chaired by **Azadeh Moaveni** ([@AzadehMoaveni](#)), senior lecturer in journalism at Kingston University, former Middle East correspondent for Time magazine and the Los Angeles Times and author of *Lipstick Jihad* and *Honeymoon in Tehran*. Her research has long focused on how political instability impacts women, and she is writing a book about women and ISIS.

— **Iranian Spies Tried to Entrap Me in a Pret A Manger:** How the ayatollah's online trolls lure, discredit, and intimidate journalists halfway around the world. February 3 2016. In Foreign Policy <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/03/how-iranian-spies-tried-to-entrap-me-in-a-pret-a-manger/>

— **ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape** New York Times, Nov 21, 2015

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=2

Kasra Naji ([@BBCKasraNaji](#)) is special correspondent for BBC Persian TV and author of Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader.

—NPR Interview on his book Ahmadinejad's 'Secret History', 2008

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90397578>

Saeed Kamali Dehghan ([@SaeedKD](#)) is a staff journalist with the Guardian. He has previously written from the Iranian capital, Tehran. He is now based in London and was named 2010 Journalist of the Year at the Foreign Press Association awards.

— Iran presidential elections: everything you need to know

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/iran-presidential-elections-everything-you-need-to-know>

—Conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi enters Iran's presidential race

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/09/conservative-cleric-ebrahim-raisi-enters-irans-presidential-race>

Jamie Rubin is a writer, commentator and lecturer on world affairs and US foreign policy. He contributes a weekly column to The Sunday Times. He served under President Clinton as assistant secretary of state for public affairs and chief spokesman for secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright from 1997 to May 2000.

— Jamie Rubin on a dangerous world. In a This Week film, Clinton-era diplomat and commentator Jamie Rubin calls for a leader wise enough and inspirational enough to confront the threats of the modern world. Neither Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump, he says, fit the bill. 12 Feb 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03j8yq7>