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IRAN TODAY

Speaker
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The New York Times

Moderator
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Warren Hoge:

Good evening. I am Warren Hoge, the Vice President and Director of External Relations for the International Peace Institute, and on behalf of Terje Rød-Larsen, IPI's president, I am happy to welcome you for this talk on Iran Today with Roger Cohen, Op-Ed columnist of the *New York Times*.

Roger and I have been friends and colleagues for many years and in all kinds of arrangements. I am happy to say that I played a key role in getting him hired at the *New York Times* back in 1990, and he turned up some years later as my boss when he was the foreign editor – a job I once had – and I was the bureau chief in London, the city that he is from.

There are two key parts of the international agenda where Roger and I see emphatically eye to eye – a love of Brazil, where we both once lived and wrote and which produced the women we married, and a passion for international soccer, where we both root for the same club in England – Chelsea.

More recently though, I have been keeping up with Roger by following his stunning and courageous coverage of Iran and sending notes telling him of my admiration for him and his writing. Happily for all of us, in one of those notes, I invited him to come to talk to us tonight.

This recent experience of Roger's in Iran covering the elections and their turbulent aftermath is hardly the first time that he has taken risks and faced down danger to bring news out of harrowing circumstances. He filed memorable dispatches 15 years ago from Bosnia, during the Siege of Sarajevo, where, as in Tehran last month, citizens living under menace and defying those

who would silence them, found their voices communicated to the outside world through the stirring journalism of Roger Cohen. At a time when people are too often disparaging of the mainstream media and of descriptive writing that needs more than 140 characters to tell a story, read Roger Cohen and learn again the immense persuasive power of words.

In Iran, Roger stayed on for a week after his reporter's permit was revoked. He finally had to leave when his visa expired, but the extra time gave him days in which he mixed with protestors and even supporters of Ahmadinejad in the streets, got tear gassed, fell into alleyways and building lobbies, heard instructions whispered back and forth, moved with the crowds as they dodged the men on motorbikes. Those men we all saw thanks to those shocking cell phone videos, men with sticks and shields who beat demonstrators and bystanders indiscriminately. Among the marchers, he spotted bloodied women going back into the fray, middle-aged office workers, teenage students, an old man on crutches. He concluded that unlike the protest in Iran in 1999 and 2003, this movement is broad.

Roger had been in Iran in January and February and wrote a series of columns that tried to present the country as something other than the mad Mullah caricature sometimes portrayed in the West. His columns were bold and assertive and they drew angry comment from some critics who felt he was acting as an apologist for the Iranian regime.

Judging by what he wrote last month, Roger was particularly undone by seeing women beaten. He asked one woman about her fears and she replied that she had this nightmare where she dreamed she had run into the street in the midst of an earthquake only to realize that she had forgotten her hijab. "She stands in the ruins, hair loose and paralyzed, awaiting her punishment," Roger said, "and she looked at me wide-eyed as if to say, 'Do you understand? Does the world understand our desperation?'"

Roger is a journalist who has witnessed mayhem and tragedy in a lot of places, but he seemed to this reader, particularly deeply affected by what he saw in Iran. On his return to New York, he said "A chunk of me is back in Tehran."

In a recent piece he wrote "The Iran of yesterday is gone, the Iran of tomorrow not yet born." So Roger, take us if you will, to the Iran of today, what you saw and heard there and what you think this Iranian present holds for the future.

Roger Cohen:

Thank you very much, Warren.

Warren did, indeed, bring me to the *New York Times* and I am very grateful to him for that and throughout my association and friendship with him there, he was always the consummate pro. Warren is a true pro, great journalist, was a wonderful correspondent in London. And I'm sure he's brought his energy and work ethic to this institution.

I am still somewhat undone by Iran. This has turned out to be my year of Iran. I did not really plan it that way. I had requested a visa more than a year ago and never heard anything back and then after I met President Ahmadinejad last year when he came to the UN General Assembly. I was approached by an official at

the mission here who managed to get me a visa. I went there in January and February, as Warren mentioned, and I spent three weeks there. It was an extremely powerful experience.

We journalists are taught to move on, we are kind of serial voyeurs. We see some story, we report on it and on we go. But then every now and again, a place or story turns the tables on us and we are grabbed and consumed by it. That was the case for me during the Bosnian War, which I covered, and not since then have I felt so involved in a story.

I thought perhaps the best thing I could do, would be just to try to take you through my 15 days in Iran to give you a picture of what happened. It was one of the strangest, topsy-turvy, intense two weeks I've ever lived, and a chunk of me is, indeed, back there.

I arrived three days before the election on June 9. I arrived to a city that was engaged in a kind of fete. The partying was going on every night. One of the most striking aspects of it was that supporters of President Ahmadinejad and supporters of Mir Hussein Moussavi were holding rallies side by side. There was great respect from one side for the other, despite the great differences.

Vali Asr, which is the *Champs-Élysées*, if you like, of Tehran, this avenue that leads from north to south, was full of revelers until 3-4 am in the morning. The debate that was going on in the Iran was as vibrant and as vitriolic as anything you could imagine in the United States or Europe. Ahmadinejad was hurling accusations at Moussavi, and at Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the *éminence grise* and number two person in the regime, accusing Rafsanjani of corruption. Rafsanjani replied with a fulminating letter back to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, saying this was unacceptable, raising the possibility that Ahmadinejad – like the first president of the Islamic Republic, Bani-Sadr – could lose his job if he continued to show such disrespect for morality and religion.

These were extraordinary events. The freedom in the air was absolutely bracing, and it was one of those moments when – as I had argued in January and February – one really felt that both words in Iran's self description, Islamic Republic, were meaningful. Here was the republic holding what looked like it was to be the freest and most open ... certainly the freest, most open and most extraordinary debate that had ever accompanied an election in Iran. [And this], as you know, after more than 100 years, since the Revolution of 1905, which sought what? It sought something called a constitution – and hence, it came to be known as the Constitutional Revolution. For more than 100 years, two very strong currents in Iran have existed. One is a deep and profound Islamic faith and the other is the belief of a wide array of Iranians in some form of liberal democracy.

I think it's the great tragedy of Iran that it has never quite found the balance it seeks between this Islamic faith and this commitment to liberal democracy despite the fact that today, I think, the groundwork has been laid. And let's give tribute to the revolution – [when] the groundwork has been laid, in many ways, for democracy – [rises in] the level of education, the level of civic involvement, the level of sophistication among the population of Iran, 65% of whom are under

35. These are the children of the revolution that we saw in the streets in such large numbers in Iran in recent weeks.

So that was the atmosphere I arrived to. I cannot exaggerate how remarkable it was – the openness seemed unlimited and the Islamic Republic had invited – or granted visas to several hundred journalists to come and witness this event and there we all were. Let's fast forward to the night of June 12-13. First of all, we had sort of hastily convened [at a] Moussavi press conference declaring that all the signs were that he had won and then from about two hours after the closing of the polls, the Iranian National News Agency (IRNA) announcing an overwhelming first round victory. As you know, an election in the Islamic Republic can go to two rounds if neither candidate gets more than 50% of the vote in the first round.

The first bulletins spoke of Ahmadinejad having won something close to 65% [of the vote], and this number never really varied throughout the ensuing 12 hours as results came in from areas of the country, vastly disparate in their ethnic and social makeup. There was an almost perfect correlation and consistency in the vote scores across these fantastically diverse regions and the line of the Ahmadinejad vote essentially just did that. I mean there was no flicker in it, until right at the end when the Tehran vote was counted in and it did dip a tiny little bit. And he ended up, according to the official tally, with almost 63% of the vote. He got officially, again, 24.5 million votes.

Now in the first round in 2005, four years earlier, Ahmadinejad got 5.7 million votes. This was a staggering leap of 20 million votes after a campaign in which Moussavi's green wave, if you like, had spread very suddenly and very dramatically in the final two weeks. I spoke to a political analyst who had done some polling and whose views I respect, just on the eve of the election, and he said to me "Look, things have totally been turned on their heads in the last month. A month ago, I would have said 55% of the electorate will vote. Suddenly, the people of Iran have become engaged and the people of Iran have believed that even if they could not change the supreme leader, that the election in Iran was their opportunity to nudge things in a direction."

Mohammed Khatami from 1997 through 2005 represented a more moderate tendency. Then things hardened again with Ahmadinejad. So there was this belief. Anyway, the political analyst said to me, "Look, a month ago, 55%, now I expect an 80% turnout. And the one thing that has become clear to me is that this election will go to a second round. With many people voting, Ahmadinejad cannot possibly get 50% in the first round."

There were so many strange aspects – I am not going to bore you with all the details – but the numbers, the votes, came in vast clumps of 2 to 5 million votes that were added on at kind of hourly intervals. There was no breakdown whatsoever of these votes into geographical regions. We only got a geographical breakdown 10 days later, which to me suggests basically that reverse engineering takes some time.

Mr. Karroubi, a reformist cleric, who had built quite a large political machine over the last four years and who got over 5 million votes in 2005, his vote officially went down to a little over 300,000 votes or 0.84% of the votes. Poor

Mr. Karroubi, his newspaper the next day had a headline saying “The Interior Ministry Says that Karroubi Came in Fifth.” There were more spoiled ballots than there were votes for Karroubi. I would suggest that this simply defies belief. There were no observers, of course. Moussavi’s observers were pushed out of most precincts. Mr. Rezai, the conservative candidate, also got very, very few votes, only about 600,000, and subsequently said that 900,000 people had written to him with their ID numbers telling him that they had voted for him. So there are all the numbers, but it is not really just the numbers that are important.

Let me describe to you briefly the atmosphere on the Saturday morning. I was out on the street at about 9.30 am. As I said, there had been a great big party in Iran and it ended on Wednesday at midnight. Thursday, in respect of all the election rules, everything was quiet. I mean it was impeccable the way it seemed the whole lead up to the election. On that Saturday morning, I went down to the Interior Ministry. There were black-clad riot police who became very familiar to me over the ensuing ten days pouring out of the Interior Ministry in the backs of pickups or two seater motorbikes. They were carrying batons. They were wearing these kind of knee-length black leg outfits and looked a bit like robocops. They were widely deployed outside Moussavi’s campaign headquarters which already had been turned upside down. I went in there and the whole place was just kind of thrown upside down, some stuff had been burned, it was complete chaos. The riot police were going back and forth, up and down outside the Moussavi headquarters, beating men, women, whoever crossed their path. To linger even for a minute was to be targeted.

I tried to linger there. I tried to linger in various places. There were police going back and forth saying, “Don’t stop, move on... you over there in a white hat, move... you over there in a blue shirt, move...” An atmosphere of near terror, I would say a putsch-like atmosphere was already in place. Of course, the question is, if you have won a great victory, if you have won by two-thirds of the vote, if indeed 25 million people have voted for you, why from the early hours of the election do you need this extraordinary deployment of force to ram home the result? I haven’t found an adequate answer to that question, other than to believe that the numbers that came out of the Interior Ministry are simply not credible.

I ran away from that street as police surged forward, bumped into women who were crying and one woman said to me, “Throw away your notebook, come and help us, come and help us!” Another woman said to me, “I could have stayed in Europe. I came back for my country.” I believe Iranians are patriots, deep, deep patriots. They believe passionately in their country, and they have cause to. It’s a wonderful and extraordinary country with an amazing culture. But in any event, she asked, “What can we do?” Then a man stepped forward and just said, “Don’t cry, this is not a moment to cry. Be strong.” He then pushed me forward and brought out an ID. I know his name, I’ll call him Mohsen, he said “I work for the Interior Ministry.” He showed me his ID card. He said “I’ve worked there 30 years, come with me,” and we kind of fell into this little cafeteria.

There was military music playing on the television, soldiers and revolutionary guards marching up and down. There were some women in black chadors going back and forth and I just asked myself have we just witnessed an election or

have we just witnessed a military coup? Why do we need this military music as a celebration of this extraordinary victory? What is going on here? The man from the Interior Ministry said “I can’t get in there. I’ve been locked out. We have all been locked out. Several of the people at the ministry have been shuffled in recent weeks. There is nothing I can do. My brother fought in the 1980-88 war with Iraq. I fought in it too. My brother was martyred. Iran is being flouted in this moment. The pride of Iran is being flouted in this moment. I cannot stand this.” Then he said, “And I said to the police, ‘If President Ahmadinejad won in the way that these numbers suggest, why are you here? Why do we need this display of force?’”

So that was day one after the election and it really was hallucinogenic in a way. I think that is why it affected Iranians so deeply, me so deeply. It was if everything we had witnessed was just theater and that some strange and sadistic puppeteer had been there and putting on this show for everyone and had then decided okay the show is over now guys, we have moved onto something else. It was really breathtaking – completely breathtaking.

There were all these journalists there to witness it. All this suggests to me the clumsy way the numbers came out, all the confusion after the election with the supreme leader saying, “It’s a miracle. It’s an act of God.” And then saying, “By the way, I will refer this to the Guardian Council.” The supreme leader saying to Ahmadinejad, “Congratulations, this is wonderful. You are now the president of all Iranians. Please reach out to all Iranians.” Ahmadinejad turns around and gives a press conference in which he calls all the opposition, anyone who didn’t vote for him, hooligans. He goes out in to the streets of Tehran and says they are all hooligans, they are worthless as dust. It was the quintessence of the most polarizing, most divisive speech that could ever have been made after a great victory in election and the supreme leader had just told [Ahmadinejad] to do the opposite.

So, everything to me suggests that in the last 48 to 72 hours [is when things changed]. I was speaking to Hooshang Amirahmadi who is the head of the American-Iranian Council, who is quite close to Ahmadinejad, and he said he heard from a good source that at the last minute the supreme leader was told we cannot predict the outcome of the election and the decision came down. In any event there we were.

Let me go forward again another couple of days. There was this sort of incredulity everywhere and pressure began to mount. The foreign press that had been welcomed was suddenly unwelcome, and we started getting messages about not going out, that kind of thing. By the way, communication had also been cut off, texting was down, cell phones were down, internet access was intermittent at best, everything was down to make sure that people could not communicate with each other. And yet, and yet, in what I called the City of Whispers because everywhere you went you heard “Vali Asr 2 o’clock, Ferdowsi Square 4 o’clock, Inqilab 6 o’clock, Azadi 8 o’clock...” People were just talking to each other, as well as talking from the roofs crying out their protest into the night, of Allahu Akbar and death to the dictator... that kind of developed during the following week. Through word of mouth and I would say just through a kind of giant osmosis anybody who argues that the foreign press

was just taken in by these yuppies in north Tehran, they do not really understand what was going in the country.

By the way, Ahmadinejad did much better in cities than in the country in 2005 and conservative candidates since 1997 have done better in urban areas than in the countryside, and the argument that the rural vote somehow counts or the village votes somehow [amount]to this extraordinary number, I find very unpersuasive. Anyway through this word of mouth, on the Monday, the 15th of June, one of the most extraordinary events I have ever witnessed in my life took place. What was it? According to the Mayor of Tehran, Mr. Qalibaf who is a conservative figure and another supporter of the opposition, three million people [turned out on the streets], this based on maps of Tehran and looking at the number of people in the streets of Tehran. That's about 4% of the total population of Iran. Three million people assembled in the streets of Iran, I was among them, and they walked. We walked from Inqilab to Azadi, from revolution to freedom. Even now when I think about it, it was extraordinary.

People walked in silence, arms often raised in a "V" for victory sign. Tremendous dignity, I had never seen silence deployed with such force, such absolutely undeniable force and it is interesting there was a lot of fear there after the beatings and what had already started but when you are in the crowd of three million fear simply dissolves. You cannot have Tiananmen Square with three million people. You cannot, at least it seems impossible, that anyone could try to hold back three million people and indeed, the police presence on that day was not intrusive. I saw a lot of women saying to the police, "Raise your arms, raise your arms" and they were smiling back at them. This was the Tehran city police. A woman I remember beside me just saying, "After 30 years we just wanted a little choice."

These people who voted, they did not want to overthrow the Islamic Republic. They wanted a little choice. They believe in the possibility of reform. I do not think the young generation in Iran is a revolutionary generation. They saw what revolution was like. They saw the bloodshed. They have seen what is going on in Iraq. They have seen what is going on in Afghanistan. They do not want upheaval and bloodshed in the streets in Iran and they believed that in this election they could make some difference. And then they saw their vote just trampled on, jackbooted in my view. So this woman said, "Yes, we believed we have a little choice." A man next to me said, "We are dust, but we will blind him."

The march proceeded in this extraordinary silence and it was immensely powerful, immensely powerful and it seemed in that moment – really, that anything could happen. I mean, I thought Iran was on a razor's edge. I did not know what the outcome would be. There was a tremendous, spontaneous, outpouring of very dignified, very controlled popular anger. People felt they had been robbed. They felt they had been played around with. They felt they had been through a great big piece of theater. And Iranians are many things, but one of those things is they are extremely intelligent. Do not try to fool an Iranian. The Iranian people felt they had been fooled, and they still think they have been fooled, which is why I think the situation there remains volatile and unpredictable.

Never again, however did quite that many people assemble. There were big rallies all through that week, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, they happened again largely through word of mouth. At the same time President Ahmadinejad brought in his supporters. I saw dozen of buses. They were busing all over the place. There were substantial crowds, but they were vastly outnumbered and again it suggested this chaotic improvisation which convinces me that the decision to go in this direction was a last minute decision. Why do you bring 300 journalists to Iran to witness something like this? The Iranian government proceeds with calculation. It proceeds with prudence. This is one of the things I wrote in January and February when I said this image of the mad, crazy [regime], most of it is completely wrong and it brought a lot of ire upon me for writing that, but I still believed it.

I do not think that when the decision was taken to invite all these journalists a month ago or two months ago anybody was foreseeing throwing them all out and saying that they were all evil agents within three days of the election. I mean it just does not make sense and the government in Iran is not crazy. So I think there was a switch, there was a last minute fear that Moussavi was going to run away with this in a landslide or that it could go to a second round which would have meant another week of all that I was describing, and the supreme leader drew the line. Some other people that I have mentioned also drew the line.

I will go forward to Friday, the Friday a week from the election now and it has become very difficult to work. Press passes are being revoked. No visas were being extended. Most people are leaving. I perhaps because... I mean, I happened to arrive very close to election and I happened to have a longer visa than most, perhaps because of the columns I wrote, arguing very strongly for engagement with Iran that had been well received by Iranian government. I do not know, in any event I had a slightly longer visa so I was more or less the last American reporter to leave Iran.

So on Friday, again an extraordinary event. Here is Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, the arbiter, the man put in a position at the fulcrum of the Islamic republic, the keystone to the arch, in the position of the velayat-e-faqih, the guardianship of Islamic jurists, standing in for the occulted 12th Imam who disappeared in the ninth century and who it is believed will reappear and bring peace and justice to earth. A man who sits if you like at the flank of the prophet, an arbiter, who stands above the fray and yet what happens... Khamenei comes out. He throws away all that plausible deniability, all that opacity, all that standing above the fray, and again gives a ferocious, deeply partisan, and very detailed speech in which he brands the west – the UK as being interfering. I mean things started to get really weird.

I remember the British ambassador telling me when I was there in January that it was quite interesting being in Iran because it is one of the very few places left on earth that still believes Britain has some influence. I think Britain was chosen because it has an embassy there and so you could have protest outside it whereas the United States does not. Also, I think Iran remains interested in some level by President Obama's offer of engagement. So while there was criticism directed at the United States, it was not directed full blast at the US. There was very little of the death to America [chants]. The BBC was the target rather than the Voice of America and I thought that was quite interesting in terms of going forward.

I do not think Iran has by any means discarded the Obama offer, but anyway the speech was absolutely ferocious. Khamenei made clear that he sided with Ahmadinejad. He was on the president's side. He defended Rafsanjani against the accusations of corruption but made clear that in this internal fight between the Rafsanjani camp and the Ahmadinejad camp, he stood with Ahmadinejad. He warned Moussavi in explicit terms that if the street protests continued, there would be blood on the streets and that blood would be the responsibility of Moussavi.

So here was word from a man whose word has divine sanction. [In effect] anybody from that moment on, the Friday, going out on the street was in fact defying divine will and could [suffer] a corresponding punishment. Nevertheless, the next day, Saturday, tens of thousands of people came out on to the streets. Again, the whole area between Inqilab and Azadi, the whole downtown area was awash with people but this time it was not a dignified silent demonstration by three million people. It was a pitched battle and it was scary. I saw women bloodied, limping out of the fray, going back into it. Tehran is, so – I think the vast majority [in Tehran] support the protestors – [residents] were throwing open their doors.

I got very badly tear gassed at one point and fell with a group of twenty people inside somebody's home, they just opened the gate. I did not know this but smoke from a fire can offset the effects of tear gas. An older woman had a lit a fire in a bowl and we were all putting out our eyes over the fire to try and dispel those effects. There was a kid lying on the floor who had pulled his pants up and he had a huge welt across his leg where he had been beaten by one of these electric shock-impairing batons.

Apart from the riot police that I described earlier on, we now had the full array of the security forces, the most scary of whom were the plain clothes basij who, as far as I could tell, were given a helmet and a stick and a shield and sometimes a motor scooter and just told to go out and to do their worst. Many of them looked to me to be aged between fifteen and eighteen, although they were also many older, middle-aged men. The basij tend to wear their shirts outside their pants. They are recognizable after a while, wearing kind of shiny shirts, often with a belly, and they were beating women. People with state license beating women in front of your eyes, it is very hard to watch or accept, and there were interesting scenes.

I mean, if I was a policeman and I had been trained, wore a uniform, and was proud of my uniform, and I saw un-uniformed guys with sticks just out there beating people, I would be outraged on behalf of my profession. I saw a lot of that in the Tehrani police who were talking to people and saying, "Please go home, I have a wife and kids too. I don't want to beat you... please move away." The Tehrani uniformed police, green-clad police, throughout, I thought, behaved with some dignity. This was not the case of the basij riot police or the camouflage Revolutionary Guards. Some of them had automatic weapons and, as you know, there had been dozens of deaths in these demonstrations.

Anyway, this pitched battle went on for hours. At times the police reeled backwards, at times they surged forward. People were helping. There was

garbage on fire. There were alarms going off as windows got smashed. The whole of downtown Tehran had plumes of black smoke over it. It was an insurrectionary kind of scene and it was pretty scary. And as you know, that evening at about 6.30 pm, Neda Agha-Sultan, as she was driving away from the demonstration, was killed by a single shot. The image of her eyes blanking and life abating and blood spilling across her face went viral around the globe. That is a very powerful image, but it is an image that in its way, I think, is very emblematic of the moment because the brutality and the violence were uncontrollable.

The state had in effect given license to people to go out and do their worst. There was not an order as in Tiananmen Square, to open fire on the people. That order was not given and for that reason the casualties are in the dozens not the hundreds or the thousands but nevertheless, the violence was such that inevitably there were going to be incidents, such as the one involving Neda or the one on the Monday of the peaceful demonstration. There was also one shooting incident that occurred as I left.

Well, by now I was more or less alone in Iran among American reporters because most people got visas for ten days, mine was longer and I was hardly sleeping because I was doing a lot of TV. I had written to the Ministry of Information asking for the press pass to be extended, written to Mr. Mogadaszadeh whom I had gotten to know in January and February and who is the head of that department. I wrote so that I had proof that I had requested an extension of my press credentials. He did not say yes, he did not say no either, he just did not say anything.

I decided to stay because I thought it was so important to try to go on reporting and to bear witness, which is, after all, fundamentally beyond everything else what journalism, as I understand it, is about. If you are not going to be out there trying to bear witness to what you see, hear, feel, sense, and convey that as graphically and powerfully as you can to as wide an audience as possible, why are you bothering? I think that is still true in the age of Twitter and interconnectedness. And it was a weird thing. I mean, here I was on a story of these proportions, in an interconnected world, virtually alone. The circumstances that would be required to dream up a situation like that are farfetched and yet it happened.

Then on the Monday – and I will move forward quickly now, I went to – again [heard through] word of mouth – there was a memorial service for Neda. We went down to the, last minute, we rushed down to this square. I should mention [Nazila Fathi](#), our stringer in Tehran, who was simply amazing, wonderful, a very brave woman. Anyway, we went down there, and there were about eighty people. There was a mosque next door, the mosque had been closed, the family had not been allowed to hold a service in the mosque. There were about eighty people just sitting on the ground with candles and incense and photographs of Neda, and there was a prayer being said. It was interesting, again, the Tehran city police were just kind of standing around making sure that this event took place peacefully. In fact, when the prayers started, I noticed that they were reciting the prayer, along with everybody else which, after all, was just mourning the life of a young Iranian.

I really think Neda is very representative of young Iranians. She was not particularly political, she was very interested in the world. She was curious about the world, connected to the world. She wanted a bit more freedom. She was not a revolutionary. She died. And then the basij suddenly arrived on their bikes and moved in, clearing everybody away. As we were going, somebody handed a piece of paper to Nazila, and on it was the address of Neda's family. So we went there. It was very hard for me to work by this stage. I could not really bring out my notebook or give away any sign that I was who I am – a journalist. We got there and there were about twenty people milling around and there was the guy who you see in the video with the ponytail and the gray hair, he is a music teacher. We started speaking to him and he described Neda's love of music. I asked him if she said anything before she died. He said "She lived for a few seconds, and she did say one thing. She said, 'I burned. I burned.'"

We talked and by this time, we were in the parking garage underneath this apartment building where, in fact, her sister lived. Suddenly this guy arrived and was very rude and just said, "Get out, get out." We kind of ran out. In fact, all of the families of people who have died have been threatened and told by the state not to talk to journalists or to communicate with the press. And, in many cases, they have been denied burial in Tehran.

As you know, the Shia mourning cycle is quite long, [with gatherings] on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th days. During the revolution of course, in 1978-79, [this mourning cycle for the] martyrs proved a very strong rallying point. The martyrs, the hundreds of thousands of martyrs from the war with Iraq are powerful symbols in Iran and I think the authorities do not want graves in Tehran to become kind of rallying points. I wrote about that. By this time, my visa was close to expiring and I was close to expiring too. I was really totally exhausted and drained. I was kind of running on adrenaline.

I actually thought about not leaving. I spoke to my wife and I said, "I'm thinking about just staying because I feel I have to try to go on reporting what is happening here." She has quite a long experience with me and war zones and conflicts, and she said, "Just call me when you have made up your mind." Which was much more effective than trying to argue with me ... but anyway, sense prevailed over being completely foolhardy, and I left just minutes before my visa expired.

I had a terrible time at Khomeini Airport. I will spare you the details, but it was pretty awful. I did get out, unlike some journalists who have been arrested – Maziar [Bahari] from *Newsweek*, whom I met while I was there is, of course, still in jail. Most of the people I met when I first arrived are in jail. Mohammad Atrianfar is in jail, Saeed Leylaz is in jail. Saeed Hajjarian, who was at a rally I was at, is in jail. In essence, the entire kind of reformists brain trust, if you like, has been rounded up. That is where we are. I left on the morning of the 24th, I guess it was, of June.

Let me conclude. Where are we after all this? I think we are in... this is not over. The ricochets from June 12th are still ricocheting. They are ricocheting within the regime, within the political, religious and military establishment of the revolution, which is more divided than at any time since 1979-81 when the argument was fought out over what the revolution was actually about. Was it a

theocracy, was it a democracy, was it something in between? [This is when] scores were settled between Ayatollah Khomeini and others, especially after the bombings of 1981, which led to a bloodbath. It is ricocheting in society where I think there has been a pretty fundamental shift.

My sense in January-February, as I wrote, was that the vast majority of Iranians believed that the Islamic Republic was a republic over which they had some influence. It might not be all the influence they wanted, but it was some influence, and that they could push the republic every four years in a certain direction. They were in a mode of what I would call reluctant acquiescence. This vast group of the reluctantly acquiescent, many of them have moved into a position of contempt for what just happened, for what they see as the theft of their votes, for what they see as a giant piece of theater, and they simply do not believe in it any more. It does not necessarily mean that they want to overturn it. It just means that they really, really do not like what they see and they are still going out into the streets to protest over it.

A small coterie around President Ahmadinejad, I think, ran this thing through. It included obviously the Supreme Leader. It included, obviously, Major General Jafari, the head of the Revolutionary Guards. It included Hassan Taeb, the new commander of the basij . A name one hears a lot is that of Mojtaba Khamenei, the second born son of the Supreme Leader. They ran this thing through, I think.

What are the possible scenarios? One is the fear that the headliners will continue with the oppression that we are seeing right now in which journalists, intellectuals, you name it, they are being thrown in jail and where the massive basij, revolutionary guard, police presence is still out there on the streets, and that they manage to maintain and solidify their hold on things. We see a pretty radical second term Ahmadinejad government pursuing more or less the same agenda as the first Ahmadinejad government but perhaps even more so. That is what President Ahmadinejad said he intended to do at the press conference I went to. That was two days after the election before all the events that I just described.

Another possibility, which I think is a little less likely but not impossible, is that the government, the leaders, try to recoup some of their lost popularity by bringing or corrupting some members of the opposition and bringing them in to a second Ahmadinejad government. I do not know on what terms that could be done. I mean, we saw what happened in Zimbabwe, farfetched things can happen. Ahmadinejad is clearly the president at this point. He is clearly the most divisive figure in the 30- year history of the Islamic Republic. He has been criticized widely within the majlis. He has been criticized widely by the clerical establishment.

Qom has been quiet. Two of the clerical associations have denounced the election as a fraud. Ayatollah Montazeri has said no person in his right mind can believe in these elections and that the leaders are usurpers and transgressors. Other Ayatollahs have come out with similarly powerful statements. There is very significant opposition to the president within the religious establishment and within the political establishment where figures like Mr. Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran, and Ali Larijani, the president of the majlis or parliament, both of whom are close to Khamenei have come out and said we need to listen to the

opposition and that what has happened is unacceptable. Do not underestimate these rifts. The question is out there, could it be at some point that the President is viewed as such a polarizing and divisive figure, also on the world stage that some other option is considered. I do not know the answer to that question. I do know that the divisions within and the opposition without is much stronger than it has been for a very long time.

Rafsanjani is going to reappear Friday, at Friday prayers and will give the sermon it seems. This is an interesting development. It appears that Moussavi and Khatami and Karroubi will be present at the sermon. I do not know what Rafsanjani is going to say. Is he going to announce the grand reconciliation? If so, on what terms? Is he going to denounce the election as fraudulent? It appears unlikely that he would be given such a stage if that were his intention. His children were arrested after the election. His daughter played a prominent role in the Moussavi campaign and they have now been released, and so I think we will have to watch that carefully.

I will just conclude, what of Obama's outreach? It is a tragedy for the world and it is dangerous for the world, this 30 years of non-communication between the United States and Iran. It is dangerous. It is past its time. It serves no real purpose. Death to America, the nest of spies, all that vitriol – the Mad Mullahs – all these polarizing images, they really do not serve much purpose. I think the significance of the US-Iranian breakthrough would seriously, in the age we live in, be of the magnitude of the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972 that restored relations between the United States and China. And remember, that happened at the time of the Cultural Revolution, just as the restoration of relations with the Soviet Union occurred at the time of the Great Terror.

In my view, the strategic imperative for a US-Iranian normalization is still there. It has not disappeared because of what happened. It is there in Iraq. It is there in Afghanistan. It is there in Lebanon. It is there in Israel-Palestine. Iran is a major player. It is a big country, 75 million people, and it has significant influence across the region. However, I think that influence... while Iran has been ascendant for the last eight years, I think that ascendancy has abated for now. I think President Ahmadinejad is a reduced figure as a result of what happened in Iran. Those images, that video of Neda Sultan, is going to run in everybody's minds, I think, every time he speaks about ethics and justice. He had a radical White House against which he proved a very nimble, radical opponent standing for the disinherited of the earth, against the arrogant power. That plays much less well with a black president of part- Muslim descent, who is reaching out to the Muslim world.

So the strategic imperative is there, but, of course, there is a moral imperative. As long as people are being clubbed in the streets, as long as people are being denied their right, their democratic right to protest peacefully, I think it is very hard to have business as usual. So as I said, as these ricochets continue, I think we have to press the pause button. I think we need a period of cool where the Obama administration leaves that offer on the table and watches whatever plays out in Iran, sees that play out over the next couple of months.

Come September at the GA, let us see how Iran responds to the offer. Saeed Jalili, the chief nuclear negotiator was among the people mentioned to me as one

of the people involved centrally in what just occurred. All the people who have talked to Jalili feel that the prospects of making progress on the nuclear issue so long as he remains the interlocutor are extremely remote.

That said, I think Iran still has not discarded completely, by any means, the Obama offer and because the United States is so popular in Iran, Iranians like the United States, clearly any Iranian administration who is able to deliver a normalization would be a hero. I think a China option is doable for Iran. I think the *nizam*, the system, at this point can perfectly well survive an opening to the United States. But forces that are in favor of closing down, forces that are nervous about Iran joining the world, are forces that do not believe that the amazing youth of Iran are ready to preserve the Islamic Republic, albeit a different Islamic Republic in which the republic part counts for more. They did not have faith in that younger generation and at this point, alas, they trampled on them.

I wrote, and I will conclude with this, that Iran overwhelms people with its tragedy. It overwhelmed me. The people of Iran are ready for a more open system, but Iran has to find a balance. The Islamic faith in Iran is profound and the achievements of the revolution are hugely significant. Iran has gained its independence through the revolution. Nobody disputes that anymore. The extraordinary education of women has come through the revolution, but of course, those women who now have been educated, want a different kind of society. I do not see any reason why it is impossible that Iran's thirst for a more liberal form of democracy and its deep sheer Islamic faith and belief cannot be reconciled. That in the 21st century Iran cannot move forward in the world and normalize its relations with this country. That would be a huge advance toward world peace.

Thank you.

Warren Hoge:

Roger, that was brilliant. It was passionate. Normally I come up with four or five questions afterwards. The good journalist that you are, you answered absolutely every question I have, and I only have one and then I want to give a chance to the audience to ask you anything. Really, thank you for coming and talking to us that way and also with that kind of feeling and wisdom.

The only question I have, Roger, is the reaction people had to you – I assume they thought you are American, or at least they knew you were Western – and it's the other side of the Obama-Iran equation, did you get any impression that you can trust, from the people on the street, as to the fact do they know that there is a president called Obama now who has a different attitude about how to deal with Iran? Did you get any kind of sense of request from them as to what they would like the United States to do?

Roger Cohen:

They are certainly aware of President Obama. They are certainly aware of President Obama's outreach. I did in that middle week, I felt that the President – while rightfully taking note of the poisonous history and past US meddling in Iran including of course, the overthrow of Mosaddeq in 1953, the very painful memory of the Iran passenger jet brought down with the loss of 290 lives... all these deeply painful episodes – the hostage taking of course from the American side – aware of all that painful and often poisonous history. He was cautious in

his remarks. I felt he was a couple of days behind the curve and I did hear some “where is Obama, where is Obama?” He got to the right point at each stage sort of two days too late. I did think there should have been – not to take sides – but there should have been a firmer denunciation of the violence and a firmer defense of the right of people to protest peacefully early on. Also, when he suggested that from the US national security perspective there was no really difference between Moussavi and Ahmadinejad, I thought he misspoke because whatever their viewpoints on the nuclear program, Moussavi is a very different character. He is extremely measured. He’s moderate in his approach to questions, whereas President Ahmadinejad is much more volatile and more of a firebrand and more unpredictable, much harder to negotiate with. So I think clearly there is a difference.

So I did hear, “Where is Obama ?” I also heard, “Where is the United Nations or is the United Nations is going to intervene?” And I had to disabuse people and say I thought that was really a very remote possibility. I hate to disappoint you all. There is now very sophisticated awareness of the world outside. Of course, the whole video and Twitter and social networking archive that has been compiled at this point, Warren, and that is out there, I think is going to prove a pretty lasting and powerful indictment of the events of the last two weeks.

The notion from the Iranian government, that a few Western agents, even British agents, could somehow bring 3 million people out onto the streets in the space of three days – I mean it is, I’m sorry – with respect – it is utterly fantastical, farfetched, and incredible. It’s simply not believable. I think the insistence on this point and apparently the Intelligence Ministry is now trying to compile a movie of confessions from people like Maziar, my colleague at *Newsweek*, and others, confessions as to the dastardly deeds of the British embassy and others in fomenting this velvet revolution.

I had heard, by the way, a lot in January and February about the velvet revolution and the danger of it and this is clearly something that the Iranian government is very attuned to. And the fact that – I do think the fact that the Moussavi wave was colored green set alarm bells ringing in a lot of people’s heads and is one possible partial explanation of what I consider to be, as I said, this last minute decision.

Warren Hoge: And nobody in the street believes the idea of foreign manipulation, do they?

Roger Cohen: Yes, the Ahmadinejad supporters do. I spoke to quite a lot of them. One showed me his bullet wound from the Iran-Iraq War and said this was an American bullet and said rightly that the United States and Europe supported Saddam Hussein during that war. And all the facile, and I think – and I still think – the misguided analogies that were thrown at me when I wrote about the Jewish community in Iran and noted that this was the largest Jewish community outside Turkey and the Muslim Middle East – and all the facile analogies drawn, which are false in my view, between the Nazi regime and the Iranian government [it] is sometimes forgotten that the Iranian people are one of the last people to get gassed. They were gassed in the 1980s during the war with Saddam. This had a profound – never underestimate the effect of the war, a million dead. This is World War I and 20 years from World War I, memories of World War I were pretty vivid in Europe and they are very vivid in Iran today.

It's one reason I still believe that in terms of embarking on any kind of outside adventure, the chances of Iran doing that are close to zero, if not zero.

Warren Hoge: True to the last question, you've mentioned the fact that in this 6, 7 or 8 man leadership they have in Iran, that you have the Larijani's, the Rafsanjani's, the Moussavi's, who was once in the leadership, all going to different places now. Will there be a consequence out of the fact that the supreme leader appears to have lost his infallibility – at least I assume he has – with the people?

Roger Cohen: I think it's a weakened position. I think if – Ayatollah Khamenei will be 70 either this month or next month. If the question of his succession came up, I'm not sure how the Islamic Republic would handle it this point, and I think that's one of the things going on behind the scenes in this push for four more years of Ahmadinejad. I think Khamenei is trying to somehow secure his succession and, of course, four more years of the nuclear program. Against that, you have Rafsanjani, who is 74, and who some people believed wants some kind of council which is envisaged in the constitution is possible, some kind of council of leadership representing the velayat-e faqui, rather than one person, but yes, among the taboos that just fell away, Warren, during this time were the taboos surrounding Khamenei.

I mean I heard *Marg bar Khamenei* rising from the rooftops night after night – “Death to Khamenei” – and this, of course, would have been absolutely, absolutely unthinkable before June 12. Absolutely unthinkable. It was happening.

The mentions of Mojtaba Khamenei, his son, unthinkable before June 12 and again, it was happening. Iran has lurched into new territory and we don't know, I don't know, none of us know, exactly where it's headed, but I think it's a far more unpredictable place and somewhat more militaristic place in that the revolutionary guard has taken a very central role. It's a place that's confronting a society that has parted company in large numbers with those governing it.

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