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Transcript

The Situation in Iran: Human Rights, Youth and the Media

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Stuart Horseman:

Good evening and welcome to Chatham House. My name is Stuart Horseman. I am a research analyst on Iran at the Foreign Office. It is a real pleasure to be here tonight to discuss a keen interest of mine.

Our guest is Maziar Bahari. He is going to talk about *Human Rights, Youth and the Media* in Iran. He is also going to read from his book. His book is actually available today as well. Maziar is an Iranian-Canadian journalist who was unfortunately detained in 2009 by the Revolutionary Guard and spent 118 days in Evin prison, one of the most notorious prisons in Iran. Thankfully he is now back in the UK carrying on with his film, writing about his human rights activities and raising a young family.

Maziar will talk for about 20 minutes, and then we will take questions and answers.

Maziar Bahari:

Thank you Stuart for a nice introduction. I thought that it would be interesting to talk about the Green Movement right now. One of the questions that people usually ask me is whether the Green Movement is really dead, why the Iranians are not doing the same thing that they used to do three years ago and why people in other parts of the Middle East have had 'successful' revolutions, evolutions, devolutions or whatever you want to call it, but in Iran nothing is happening?

I think we have to really talk about the definition of the Green Movement and what the Green Movement was. The Green Movement is of course open to interpretation but I think it can be summarised as a widening gap between the society and the government, the people and the regime. If we have such a definition for the Green Movement I don't think we can say that it's dead. Actually it is growing. We may not see the manifestations of the Green Movement in Iran right now but the gap is widening between the regime and the people for a variety of reasons that I am going to talk about.

This situation is not tenable and something will happen. There are two main differences between Iran and other countries in the region. The first is that Iranians experienced a sudden change 33 years ago and they are reminded of the negative consequences of that sudden change on a daily basis. They don't want to repeat that.

Also unlike other dictatorships in the region the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, is learning from others. He has learnt especially from the demise of the Shah. He has created an aura around himself that he is this island of cleanliness and piety in a land of corruption. Of course it is not right to consider him as such because you cannot be an island of cleanliness in a land of corruption. But he has created this image and, as a result, he has created a group of people around him who are willing to die for him and at the same time they are willing to kill for him.

But why is this gap between the regime and the people widening? I think we have to understand the core causes of what happened before June 2009 in order to find out what is happening right now. Understand that the Green Movement is not dead and that this gap is widening.

I can think of four main reasons for this widening gap. One of the main reasons, I think, is the status of women after the revolution. Of course for many of you the Hijab is a symbol of oppression and it is a symbol of oppression for many people, but for many Iranian women in Iran the Hijab is a symbol of liberation. In the period before the revolution many women from traditional religious families, many women who lived in poorer, more traditional neighbourhoods were not allowed by their fathers, husbands, brothers or sometimes even their sons to take part in social activities or to be educated. But after the revolution, things changed. It's important to remember that one of things that started Ayatollah's Khomeini's movement in 1963 was his objection to the Shah giving women the right to vote. But after the 1979 revolution because so many women came to the streets, because so many women supported Khomeini's revolution, he could not speak against women and against women's rights.

Women became more active in society and at the present time we have a situation where almost 65% – it varies from year to year – of Iranian university students are female. Of course it doesn't mean they are going to get jobs, they are going to become ministers or high-ranking officials, but the fact is that women have taken a more active part in society after the revolution. They have become more educated and as a result they are demanding more rights. Women have become at the forefront of all social activities. What is happening to the status of women in Iran is a good indication of what is happening in the society in general.

The other factor that I would like to mention is the politicisation of the clergy. Of course when we talk about the Iranian clergy, we can divide it into two parts: the traditional clergy who are against the present government and the

political clergy who are supporting the government. The traditional clergy may sound more progressive because of the reactionary positions that are taken by the political clergy. However, it is important to remember that the Shi'a clerics in Iran and also in Iraq and in Lebanon and other places were apolitical until Khomeini started his movement in 1963. Of course there were other clerics but no one was as prominent or influential as Khomeini.

Again, like the situation of women, clerics became involved in social activities, they became more educated, they took official positions and as a result they started to learn about the outside world. Because when a cleric is in his room or the seminary he has a very limited understanding about the outside world but when the cleric is given power, he becomes a minister or a bureaucrat in the government. Then they start to understand more about the society. And also they learn more about their own rights and the rights of their families in society. So the politicisation of the clerics was another factor for this widening gap between the regime and the people.

The third factor is the Free Universities and education in general. Whatever we want to say about former presidents and the current head of the Expediency Council Hashemi Rafsanjani – what most people say about him is either true or half-true – but one thing that he has done is he started Free Universities as a way to indoctrinate a larger group of people in society. I'm not sure if it happened by accident or by design but if you go to the smallest villages in Iran you will see a branch of the Free University. And like the way that clerics became more politicised and like the way women became more active in society, Free Universities gave education to the people. They gave more information to people and that means that people have realised about their rights. What happened in the Free Universities is that because of the lack of Islamic literature taught in Free Universities they have used either the texts that were available to them from the Shah's time or they translated the new text from the Western sources. When, after June 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei complained that we were suffering from Westernised humanities courses and basically put people like Max Weber on trial in June 2009, I think that he was somehow right because people were learning Western concepts and the young Iranians who were supposed to be indoctrinated in Free Universities were learning Western concepts. They were learning about something that was forbidden to the previous generation; people who were contained in a very claustrophobic, traditional and religious part of society.

But the most important factor that contributed to this widening gap between people and the regime are the media, especially the new media of digital television and the internet. When you see the pace of changes in Iran

between 1979 when the revolution happened and let's say 1997 and 1998 with the advent of digital television and the internet in Iran, it was a much slower pace. The gap between the elite of society and the masses was really wide. I'm not talking about the power elite; I'm talking about the more cultivated, westernised, human rights activists' members of Iranian society. When the regime's mouthpieces were saying that the elite have no contact with society and the masses, they were telling the truth. That's why the regime tolerated certain people to be active in the society, for example people like Shirin Ebadi and [inaudible], many of the expats that you see outside of Iran who cannot go back to Iran could act somehow freely without a degree of impunity in Iran because the regime was not worried about their effect on the masses. But what digital television and the internet did was somehow connected the masses to the elite of the society. Again, I'm not talking about the power elite; I'm talking about the cultural elite.

The pace of changes then from 1997 to 2009 was unprecedented and that somehow surprised the regime in June 2009. What happened in June 2009 was surprising to everyone because the change was happening in cyberspace, in houses but it was not manifesting itself. I and people of my generation were really disappointed in young Iranians because we were political, we were politically aware. We were always complaining that these young people only think about fashion, Ricky Martin, Googoosh, Beyoncé or whatever exported B-rated pop material you can think of. Why are they not more political?

And then, when I went to the streets of Tehran on 3 June 15, 2009, days after the election, people had come out against the re-election of Ahmadinejad. It was mind-boggling to see millions of people. I was on the same street in 1979 as a young child and now I was seeing millions of people – 3 million people by some estimates – come out on the streets. Everyone was silent, everyone was politically aware and everyone knew exactly what they wanted. They were screaming their needs in silence because they knew that they could not confront this regime violently.

That was really surprising to the regime so they had to tolerate it for a few days in order to realise what was going on. They managed to create some violence on the 15th and on other days but in general people managed to keep the demonstrations peaceful. And then the regime of course resorted to well-known methods of violent suppression on June 20 after Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, gave his blessing to these thugs during Friday prayers.

And then, I was arrested on June 21 and I did not see many things that were happening on the street after that because I was in solitary confinement. But I could feel the fear and paranoia of the regime first hand. I don't think my imprisonment was an education in terms of its content because I was in solitary confinement. I did not have access to any books, my interrogator was a moron so it was not a real education in terms of the content but in terms of its depth and in terms of understanding the fear and paranoia of the regime it was quite educational.

So I'm going to read a chapter of my book that deals with this paranoia and deals with the fact that the regime's misconceptions of reality permeates throughout the whole system and how they can misinterpret every shred of information against their critics and the opposition.

[Extract from *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*]

In the interrogation room that night Rosewater was not alone. Rosewater was my interrogator. I could not see him because I had a blindfold on. I could just smell him and he smelt of rosewater perfume so I called him Mr Rosewater. The man he was with, a man whose voice I had not heard before complained about the answers that I had written about my friends and acquaintances. When he came closer I saw through the crease in the blindfold that he wore shiny, polished black shoes. His trousers were neatly ironed and creased. 'Mr Bahari, your answers are very general. We hope that you can give us more details,' he said. He sounded more mild-mannered than Rosewater.

'I just write what I know, sir. And if I give you more details, that means I'm lying.'

'Well', said Rosewater, who had been fairly quiet up to this point, 'we have some interesting video footage of you. We think it may persuade you to be more cooperative.' I could not imagine what he meant. They had confiscated many videos from my house as well as external hard drives from the unused footage of two of my films: one about AIDS in Iran and another about a serial killer who had murdered 13 prostitutes. Although both films were banned in Iran there was nothing in them that would incriminate me in any way.

I saw the flicker of a laptop screen under my blindfold. Then I heard someone speaking. It was a recording of another prisoner's confession. 'It's not that one,' said the second interrogator. 'It's the one marked *spy in coffee shop*.'

Before the elections Iran had a vibrant café society. Young men and women got together with their green bands fastened around their wrists talking about the campaign and what they would do after Mousavi was elected president. I spent a lot of time in coffee shops in Tehran conducting interviews in order to get a sense of what young people were thinking. Perhaps they had filmed me at the time speaking to friends. This worried me. I was coming to understand just how ruthless these people were and how willing they were to believe their own lies and construct their own version of the truth. I worried who else might be imprisoned somewhere in this building, behind these impenetrable walls because of my reporting.

I was immersed in these thought when I heard the voice of John Stuart from Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and then that of Jason Jones the *Daily Show's* correspondent. 'What is it that makes these people evil?' Jones was saying. 'I hadn't signed up for Twitter so the only way I had to know was to go and see these people myself.'

'No, no, no they can't be that stupid,' I thought. Among the hundreds of journalists from news organisations around the world that had come to Iran to report on the elections there was a team from Jon Stuart's satirical news show. I had met Jason, his producer Tim Greenburg and their translator Mahmoud about three weeks before the election. Over a few cups of Turkish coffee we discussed the situation in Iran and Jason asked if he could interview me on camera in a coffee shop. Jason was going to pretend to be a thick-sculled American and their goal was to present an image of Iran different from the one typically shown on American television. I agreed.

For the interview Jason wore a chequered Palestinian kaffiyeh around his neck and dark sunglasses. He pretended to be completely ignorant about the country and intended to find out how evil Iran was. Introducing himself he joked that he goes by the codename Pistachio.

'Why is this American dressed like a spy, Mr Bahari?' asked the new interrogator.

'He's pretending to be a spy, it's part of a comedy show,' I answered.

'Tell the truth!' Rosewater shouted. I couldn't believe it. He honestly seemed to believe what he was saying. A spy had come to Iran and filmed me for a segment that had appeared on television. From the way he was speaking to me I drew the conclusion that he was acting tough to impress the other man, whom I assumed was his boss.

'What is so funny about sitting in a coffee shop in a kaffiyeh with sunglasses?'

'It's just a joke. Nothing serious. It's stupid.' I was getting worried. 'I hope you are not suggesting he is a real spy?'

'Can you tell me why an American journalist pretending to be a spy chose to interview you?' asked the other man. 'We know that you told them who to interview for the program.' I had given Jason and Tim a number of names of people I thought they would be interested in. Others Jason had interviewed were a former Vice-President Abtahi and former Foreign Minister Yazdi had been arrested a week before me as part of the Revolutionary Guards sweeping crackdown.

'It's just comedy,' I said, feeling very weak. I asked them to listen to the content of the interview. In it I said Iran and America had many things in common like fighting drug trafficking and Al-Qaeda. At the end of interview I concluded that George Bush's infamous statement about Iraq, North Korea and Iran being the 'axis of evil' was as idiotic as Iranians going around burning the American flag. Rosewater pulled the chair over and sat in front of me. 'Keep your head down', he said. 'Do you think it's also funny that you say that Iran and America have a lot in common?'

I had to give a careful answer. 'Sir, all I'm saying is that Iran needs America for its security as much as America needs Iran for the security of its troops and its interests in the region. We're living in a world where nations cannot live in isolation and prosper. Aren't we all interested in the prosperity of our country?'

'Why do you care about US interests?' asked the new man.

'Don't you know,' added Rosewater, 'that Imam Khomeini called America the Great Satan?' They didn't let me answer. 'The Imam also asked, why do we need to have a relationship with America?' Rosewater's boss said.

'America cannot do a damn thing!' repeating one of Ruhollah Khomeini's favourite phrases.

It was if the two of them had been rehearsing this anti-American *a cappella* for months. They seemed to be enjoying it.

'Do you know why you told that spy about common interests between Iran and America?' asked Rosewater's superior.

He seemed to have an answer ready but I had to defend myself. I thought of my father who could communicate with anyone. 'They are weak, Maziar,' I heard my father say. 'Appeal to their emotions, gain their sympathy.'

'Sir', I began, 'many people die in plane crashes in Iran because the Americans do not sell spare parts from old Boeings to Iran and Iran has to buy worthless, defunct Russian planes. It saddens me to see so many of our compatriots die every year. We are an independent nation. Having relations with America does not mean that we have to be American slaves. Venezuela, Syria, Russia and China do not agree with the US yet they maintain political relations. And sometimes they even cooperate with America. I advocate an equal relationship between Iran and the United States. A relationship based on mutual respect.'

'You want us to believe you?' the boss said.

'Mutual respect!' Rosewater mocked me. 'Mr Bahari the only reason you're searching for common ground between Iran and America is that you want to find a way for them to infiltrate our country,' the boss concluded.

'We have kicked them out through the door and you want to bring them back through the window,' Rosewater added, finishing his thoughts.

'Bravo, well said,' Rosewater's boss declared.

'Bravo for what,' I thought, 'for being a brainwashed moron?'

Rosewater said, 'Tell America to be angry with us and die of that anger. Do you know who said that?'

'Yes, martyr Beheshti', I said. Mohammed Beheshti was the first head of Iran's judiciary after the revolution. Anti-regime terrorists killed him and several other officials in a bombing in 1981. I knew Beheshti's family quite well. His son Ali Reza Beheshti had been a Mousavi advisor for years and I had met with him a few times during the campaign. He had been arrested a few days before I had.

'I find it ironic,' I added, 'that you quote a statement from the head of the revolution while you have arrested the son of the man who said it'. The ridiculousness of using *The Daily Show* against me gave me enough courage to argue with my interrogators, 'With all due respect, revolutions, like people, have to grow up, gentlemen', I said.

Rosewater was taken by surprise. He grasped my left ear in his hand and started to squeeze it as if he were ringing out a lemon. As the cartilage tore I could feel the pain like a slow fever inside my brain. Rosewater let go of my ear then whispered into it, 'Breathe in heavily. Didn't you hear what the judge said?' They had taken me to the court the day before. It felt like my ear was

broken. 'I am your owner. This kind of behaviour will not help you. Many people have rotted in this prison. You can be one of them.'

'Mr Bahari is wise, 'the other man said. 'He will soon realise it's in his own interests to cooperate with us.' The man with the creased pants said something else to me as he left the room but I didn't hear him. My ear was ringing with pain.

[End of extract]

So that was the level of paranoia, and of course it went from ridiculous to even more ridiculous. They started by asking me about espionage, then it went through my personal life and all that.

I think I went over time so I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about things that I do not know.

Also, in the book if any of you want to ask me about the future of Iran, I say in the book that anyone who says that they can tell you the future of Iran is either a charlatan or a clairvoyant. So you can test me.