



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Wrong Way on Iran: Representative Mark Kirk Outlines a New Strategy for Human Rights and Democracy Promotion in Iran”

United States Institute of Peace
1200 17th Street, Washington DC; 2nd Floor
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The U.S. Institute of Peace hosted **Rep. Mark Kirk** (R-IL) to offer his views on how the U.S. should approach Iran on the issues of human rights and democracy. Kirk is a member of the House Appropriations Committee and serves on its Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, which is responsible for determining annual U.S. foreign assistance funding. Serving his fifth term in the House of Representatives, Kirk is the co-chair of the bipartisan Iran Working Group, sponsor of bipartisan legislation condemning Iran's human rights violations and chief architect of the plan to restrict gasoline to Iran in response to its violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions. The meeting was opened with an introduction from **Richard Solomon**, President of USIP.

Kirk opened with a speech explaining his perspective on the current situation in Iran. First, to the protestors in Tehran he pledged American support for their fight for democracy. Since 1979 Iran has rotted from the inside out and the country now looks like other dictatorships of the 20th century. The regime severely limits expression, especially press freedom. Journalists are subject to arbitrary detention, the government limits internet connections, religious freedom is limited by the Special Court of the Clergy, academics are detained for their political views, and the 1979 constitution prohibits public demonstrations that violate the principles of Islam.

Before the elections in June, Western news organizations hailed the coming democratic change in Tehran and regime sympathizers like the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) came to Congress to cut funding for democracy programs, which they incorrectly claimed “tainted” Iranian dissidents. Kirk then detailed the extent of the Iranian election fraud with figures put out by the Iranian Ministry of Interior. He highlighted that **President Ahmadinejad** had received 13 million more votes in 2009 than all the conservatives received in 2005. He also won by exorbitant margins in the home territories of all of his opponents, including the home of **Mehdi Karubi** who seemingly received less than 5% of the votes he received in 2005. The vote count in 70 municipalities exceeded the total population of voters and in those cases Ahmadinejad won by 80 to 90%

Kirk then said that **human rights have deteriorated in the wake of the elections** and he went on to list the names of political prisoners, people imprisoned for their work to improve Iranian society, and leaders of the Baha'i community imprisoned for their religion. He made a point of reading each person's name as a means to help spread their names so that freedom-loving people around the world will plead their case.

In the wake of the election crackdowns, most Americans expected outrage from world leaders, but they did not receive it from Washington DC. **Secretary Clinton** argued that we should let the Iranian people decide their fate and **President Obama** said that the Iranian electoral process is something

“ultimately for the Iranian people to decide.” In terms of funding, **Obama has cut funding for Iranian democracy programs** from a requested \$65 million in 2008 to omnibus appropriations bill that had no line item for Iran democracy and instead asked for \$25 million for the Near East Regional Democracy Fund. The State Department claims that it will use the NERD fund to support democracy, but to date nothing has been obligated. In addition, funding has been cut for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, which was preparing to investigate election violence, and Freedom House Iran. He asked how Americans can justify such an apparent retreat from human rights. He also agreed with the president that we should never be afraid to negotiate, but if talking requires a sacrifice of our most sacred principles, then talking has given our enemies a major victory.

He believed that Iran parallels the threat posed by the Soviet Union and that history teaches us how to win this conflict. He then discussed **President Reagan’s** insistence on making human rights the basis for all negotiations with the Soviets. Reagan met with dissidents at the U.S. embassy in Russia and despite Soviets claims that this was unprecedented interference in their affairs, he knew better. The Soviets claimed that the West was attempting to foment revolution and violence in their country and they asked what right America had to judge them. Kirk sees these claims being echoed by the Iranians, members of Congress, and the White House. **He prayed that we don’t believe the propaganda of the dictators and that we don’t lose our moral compass.**

He argued that this is a time for a new American strategy to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. The administration should make these issues central to all negotiations, the president should speak directly about these dissidents, he should also invite members of the Green Movement to the White House, and U.S. officials should not visit Iran unless they are allowed to meet with dissidents. Congress should restore funding for groups like the IHRDC and Freedom House and the funds should be controlled by the National Endowment for Democracy. The U.S. should facilitate Green Movement conferences outside of Iran and we should establish a new public/private broadcasting initiative to fund independent Iranian filmmakers and producers.

For diplomacy to succeed, **the U.S. must act as the “Shining City upon a Hill” and it must speak directly to the hearts of the Iranian people.** We must have the conviction of our convictions.

There was one question following the speech in which a former State Department official explained that not all Iranian Americans share NIAC’s opinion on the situation and that she had formed a group of political officials and businesspeople that were unable to gain an audience with the administration. She asked how Congress could help them obtain an audience. In response, Kirk reemphasized the need for Obama to speak out on behalf of specific dissidents and to meet with groups like the one described. Kirk warned that Iran has built the administrative capacity to conduct genocide against the Baha’i and that the U.S. is at its finest when it is attempting to stop such atrocities.