

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**SCOTT PETERSON** is the Istanbul bureau chief for the *Christian Science Monitor* and a photographer for Getty Images, as well as the author of [\*Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran—A Journey Behind the Headlines\*](#) (2010). He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on Iran and the Arab Spring at the Boisi Center.

**OWENS:** Iran provides an important example of the move toward democracy and modernization in the Islamic world. It's unique in some ways and similar to the recent Arab movements in other ways. I wonder if you might start by commenting on the status of the Iranian mode of Islamic democracy today.

**PETERSON:** Iran set a precedent in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution, which was meant to be both Islamic and democratic at the same time (hence the title, the Islamic Republic, which is still used to describe revolutionary Iran). The principles for which that revolution was waged are the kind of things that many of us would fight for: straightforward justice and the kind of changes in society that really are enlightened and good.

These days, no more than 30 years later, we've had real changes that have gone on inside the Islamic Republic. Iran has not been the best example of the principles that it purported to follow from the days of the revolution. The most extraordinary example of that is what took place in 2009, because we had this election in which President Ahmadinejad was anointed to a second term. I'm very convinced that he didn't win a second term, but he was declared the winner in a "landslide" victory. The Iranians who were voting took issue with that. We had as many as three million people in

the streets of Tehran protesting. But the regime, despite all its talk about being interested in people power—being a revolution that was conducted for the people—really felt that this was a threat to it and, therefore, stamped it out, repressed it, by killing, raping, and imprisoning



people. Thousands of people were arrested, and the regime managed to succeed in repressing, for the moment, the Green Movement.

So where does that leave the example of Iran? Well, the fact that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 itself has been undermined by the actions of 2009 should not detract from the fact that the election of 2009 and the people-power protests in

the aftermath served as a template for the current Arab revolutions that we're watching. Iranians in 2009, for the first time in decades, demonstrated that you can come out and really can demand something if people want it. Now, their protest failed, but they set the bar for the use of Twitter and other social media as mobilizing tools.

**OWENS:** In the Arab world, there have been so many divergent pathways of the revolutions this year. Are Arabs prone to look at the Persians for inspiration, or have they looked at fellow Arabs in Tunisia as igniting the other revolutions?

**PETERSON:** I think it's a combination of all of them. Every revolution that we're watching in the Arab world today is different. There are different motivations, there are different factors, there are different regimes that are endangered, and there are different mindsets and histories that each of these people have. Libya is not the same as Egypt, is not the same as Tunisia. None of those are the same as Iran. So we're really talking in more general terms about what feeds into the consciousness of people in these countries. Iran took place in 2009, and the imagery was of millions of people on the street protesting a government in pro-democracy protests. Then you have in Tunisia this extraordinary galvanizing scene—which was never filmed—of a

young man immolating himself. This has been an extraordinary idea, as a concept, of an internal protest against helplessness, hopelessness and the inability to change things.

So that has really taken root in the Arab world in a way that I think has surprised Arabs, too. For many, many years, the Iranians were able to arrogantly say: “We Persians were strong enough, courageous enough, bold enough to have a revolution that overthrew 2,500 years of monarchy; but you Arab Sunnis really are just sitting there under your little dictatorships doing nothing about it, just sitting on your hands.” And now, the Iranians have really—and I know this is true, because there is a Persian-Arab issue here—many, many Iranians are looking over at their Arab fellows and saying, “wow,” you know, and being very impressed with what’s going on, and disconcerted that they, themselves, as Persians, weren’t able to pull this off.

**OWENS:** How has the Syrian situation—and the crackdown and the international response in particular—affected the view from within Iran?

**PETERSON:** The Islamic Republic (including Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) has embraced these pro-democracy revolutions as an “Islamic Awakening”—except in Syria, where it’s said to be conducted by secessionists who are basically in the pay of the Americans or the British or the Zionists or whoever, even though, of course, in reality, it’s the same type of pro-democracy movement. The Iranians are in a quandary, in a lot of respects. Syria is the most important cog in Iran’s regional strategy to influence things through its soft power, and being able to influence things through both soft and hard power, in terms of the kind of support it gives to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Also, ideologically speaking, Iran has always portrayed its revolution and its message as one that is pan-Islamic, so the fact that you have a Sunni Arab nation in Syria that’s a close ally of Iran, allows

the Iranians to say: “See? This isn’t just a Persian thing; this isn’t just a Shiite thing. It’s for all Muslims.”

**OWENS:** You are based in Istanbul, and Turkey is making a move to present itself as a new, modern leader by balancing religion, secularism, and democracy. How do you see Turkey fitting into this in light of its recent hard line on Syria?

**PETERSON:** Turkey is trying to portray itself as a model in which you have an

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Islamic nation, but one that also is deeply rooted in its secular rule. Now, Turkey has a different history from all of the others. Obviously it came into being from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, and it was forged by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 70 years ago as a very secular regime. There was no room for Islam in governance.

Modern Turkey is changing quite a bit, but Atatürk’s secularist rules still apply. But you’ve also seen Turkey being described by Arab revolutionaries these days as a model that they might want to follow; Tunisian opposition leaders,

for example, who say Turkey may be the way to go. Of course they won’t be able to import the Turkish model wholesale, but they can try to take on a framework of a government that can be both Islamic (because we’re Muslims) and secular (because this is the way modern rule should be). I think that that’s what appeals. Turkey, itself, has pushed very hard to impress everyone in the region with its stated policy to have “zero problems” with its neighbors. That’s one of its foreign policies, and there are a lot of different aspects to how Turkey has, very successfully, expanded its own soft power.

**OWENS:** Turning to your new book, you write that Iranians and Americans have some notable similarities in their national mythologies of Manifest Destiny, national exceptionalism, and their political habits of demonization. Could you say a little bit more about that, and in particular, I wonder whether that says anything special about Iran and America or whether these mythologies reflect a common pattern around the world.

**PETERSON:** I think that this says a lot about the Iran-America relationship, because there are few nations that proclaim the same things as Americans and Iranians proclaim. This degree of exceptionalism in both nations is seen everywhere, in every comment and in every idea; leaders on both sides are constantly talking about this. The upshot of these similarities is that the two countries will either be very, very close, because they are cut from the same cloth, or they are absolutely die-hard enemies of each other, because that degree of arrogance and everything else means you can never cave in, you can never give up. Even a small, rhetorical defeat might be taken by the other as a great victory, and you’d never concede even that. So it means that, even sitting down and talking, both sides are looking down their long, arrogant noses at each other saying, “Until they change, we’re not going to do anything.”

I think this really helps us to understand why this hostility persists after 32 years. Neither side can help but stick its fingers in the eye of the other. It's so self-defeating. Both sides know that, both sides recognize that, but actually digging your way out is a completely different story. That message is a real surprise, I think, to a lot of Americans, although it's not such a surprise to Iranians, who often have couched those things in this way. It was Iranians who told me of the Iranian sense of Manifest Destiny, and you can certainly see that in terms of how the nation conducts its business regarding the nuclear program and everything else. It's like they are saying: we will not be dictated to. That's a lot of what this revolution in 1979 was about, and they act that out every single day.

**OWENS:** And yet you say in your book that this could also be a way to bring us together, and that we have natural alliances of some sort, though it seems so far away.

**PETERSON:** It does seem extremely far away, right now. Now is about as far away as it's been, frankly, in the last 15 or 20 years. There were hopes that things might improve, back in the late 1990s, when Mohammad Khatami was president in Iran, and President Clinton was leading the United States. There was a lot of effort, from both sides, to try and make something happen. But never discount the sheer noise and ruthlessness of those who don't want this relationship to work, on both sides. Both President Clinton and President Khatami had to deal with much more hard-line, conservative elements in their own governments that cannot fathom a relationship. Iran and the United States are too useful to each other AS ENEMIES; they are too busy demonizing the other.

What we're looking forward to, now, is this next presidential election in the United States. Already the demonization of Iran is underway and will only get hotter. This is the one issue that Democrats



and Republican candidates can agree on: that Iran is bad, the leadership is bad, and therefore they should be rhetorically beaten over the head at every opportunity. It's a no-lose proposition for politicians. In Iran, for those hard-liners, it's precisely the same thing. Who's going to stand up and say, let's talk to the Americans?

**OWENS:** What happened to the dire conversation in our country about the Iranian nuclear program? Is it merely a rhetorical shift by the Obama administration? Is it that this Stuxnet bug has thoroughly destroyed the capability that we anticipated, and so we're not talking about it? Or is there something else at play here?

**PETERSON:** Well, Iran is definitely moving toward a nuclear capability. I'm convinced that they only want to go so far as a threshold capability, that they haven't made a decision to actually go for a nuclear weapon; I believe that that is also the conclusion of the most recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate. That kind of fundamental conclusion is important to trying to understand Iran, but that conclusion is news to many, many people who are convinced that Iran is going for a nuclear weapon.

The Iranians have continued enriching uranium; they haven't slowed down their program at all. Their higher-level

enriching, which goes to 20%, is right on the verge of being what we consider highly-enriched uranium. They are moving that type of enrichment to a facility called Fordo, very near Qom and south of Tehran; it's much more deeply buried underneath the mountains and, therefore, much more difficult to target.

There are so many layers of meaning, legalistic talk, and rhetorical brandishing that accompanies this nuclear program that there's an awful lot of confusion about what Iran's intentions are. These are the kind of things that get lost in the hot air from both sides. It is shocking when you start to cut through that stuff and actually look at what motivations are: it suits both sides to have this hot air floating around, being seen as tough to the other.

Stuxnet didn't stop nuclear development ultimately, but it did slow things down, which proved a remarkable principle. I really believe that it will be the United States and Israel that determine whether Iran will make a decision to have a nuclear weapon, because it will be the threats coming from Washington and especially Tel Aviv that make the Iranian regime sit there and say: "If we don't have a nuclear weapon as a deterrent, then this regime will not survive, because the Americans are going to attack us, or the Israelis are

going to attack us, or they're both going to attack us." So our own noise about this issue is what's going to convince the Iranians, one way or the other, to go for a nuclear weapon.

**OWENS:** One last question. Speaking of bloviation, Ahmadinejad is frequently lampooned here in the U.S. as much as he's demonized for his semi-coherent exhortations on the lack of homosexuals in Iran or his Holocaust denial. Is he crazy like a fox? What is your sense of his coherence and political sensibility?

**PETERSON:** He's very smart. He also, even after all these years being President, lives in a specific and quite isolated world. I think he believes that no independent investigation was ever done on 9/11 and on the causes behind it; he has no idea that scores and scores of endless reports have been written about this

issue. It's the same thing with the Holocaust: he doesn't have the slightest idea that this has been the most examined event in the history of the world.


He's also an extraordinary politician, especially as a populist. I've watched him in action many, many times outside Tehran during some of these provincial visits. It's extraordinary to watch him in action and see how—from everything from body language to word choice—he's a politician like Iran has not seen in more than 30 years. In fact, during the monarchy, you could never see the Shah doing this out there. There's no other politician in Iran that can do this.

However, he also is the most divisive president that the Islamic Republic has seen in these 32 years, and that has come back to haunt him in a very big way. He seems to have a talent for angering

people and creating political enemies, so that even people who ideologically are with him are now accusing him of being part of this "deviant" current. Of course, he, himself, has made some stupid decisions in terms of the people he's chosen to be close to him and how he's handled them relative to the Supreme Leader. He has also actually bucked the dictates of the Supreme Leader from time to time, which is unheard of—absolutely unheard of—in Iran.

So these are the kind of things that make the ruling establishment in Iran, separate from Ahmadinejad, very nervous about what may or may not happen. He's an extraordinary individual, but he may not actually survive his term as president.



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