‘This Regime Is Naked’

A conversation with Iranian dissident

MEHDI YAHYANEJAD

FOR SAPIR’S Activism issue, Editor-in-Chief Bret Stephens sat down for an interview with Iranian-American entrepreneur and activist Mehdi Yahyanejad. Born in Iran in 1975, Yahyanejad moved to the United States to earn a Ph.D. in physics from MIT. Since then, he has created a series of technological platforms that support activism against Iran’s hardline regime. The most well-known is Balatarin, a Persian-language online forum and news-sharing platform that serves as an outlet for free expression and the exchange of ideas in Iran.

Bret Stephens: You were a child when the Islamic Revolution happened in 1979. At what point did you or your family begin to be unhappy with the regime?

Mehdi Yahyanejad: My dad was in the Iranian army during the shah. He was an army officer at the time of the revolution. He was hopeful and to some extent sympathetic with the revolutionaries. Basically, he was hoping, like the majority of the population, that it would bring freedom and prosperity and fight corruption in Iran. But very soon he found out that this was not true.

I asked him, "When did you learn that this revolution was not going to work?" He said, "Actually, it was the first day after the victory of the revolution, when I went to the army base. On the way there, I saw one of the officers who was known to be particularly abusive of revolutionaries or others who were arrested. He was riding on the back of a motorcycle, which was a no-no for an army officer, and he was holding Khomeini's picture in his hand. When I saw this, I realized that the worst people are going to come out on top again, and this movement is going to be taken over by such individuals." And that's exactly what happened.

Stephens: You attended the Alborz High School, the Eton or Andover of Iran. And then you studied physics at Sharif University. Give us a sense of the attitude among the intellectual elite of Iran toward the revolution when you were coming of age.

Yahyanejad: At that point, suppression in Iran was so significant that no voices other than revolutionaries of different stripes were allowed to talk. The only discussion was among different types of supporters of the revolution, and at that point, a group of people who were previously supportive of the revolution had started to deviate as a result of frictions in the government. That movement consisted of Islamic religious intellectuals; it later became a foundation for reformists.

Even watching that was eye-opening, because to some extent, the government was intolerant of even those kinds of discussions. The

suppression was to the extent that we actually didn't see that much dissent openly. There was no internet, there was no satellite TV. My only exposure was once when I went to watch a student protest, with Basij members and plainclothesmen and government members trying to suppress it. I went to watch it. I wasn't part of either side, and I saw the level of hostility that Iran's government shows to any type of dissent.

The larger protest movement started later, in 1999 and 2000. Before that, you didn't see much protest activity inside Iran, because there was just not much room to do that.

Stephens: By then, you had already left Iran to pursue your Ph.D. at MIT in Massachusetts. Who were your early role models as activists? Did you encounter them in the United States? Or were they people you were following who remained inside of Iran itself?

Yahyanejad: MIT was an amazing place. There were so many different groups, different opinions. Exposure to NPR was amazing. I think NPR gave me the fastest education ever, when I came to America. The debates that I could listen to every day were amazing.

Inside Iran, there was a very short time of maybe a year or two after Mohammad Khatami's election when newspapers were able to write more freely. That created an explosion of new ideas, new personalities, new individuals. Suddenly, because of the free press, all these intellectuals came from out of nowhere. Even for a very short time, the free press is magic. That observation had an impact on a lot of my activism later on — the fact that information access is really significant.

Stephens: You came to the United States and also encountered an Iranian exile community, most of which was horrified by the rev-

olution, and parts of which were beginning to engage in genuine activism.

The Iranian activist community, as I have found it, is a very fractious community. Help us understand the landscape of Iranian activism, in broad strokes, outside of Iran itself.

Yahyanejad: For 20 years, there was a gap in immigration to the United States. There were people who came in the early '80s, a lot of them basically running away from the Islamic Revolution. A large portion of them were supporters of the shah.

Then, the new generation came. They were hopeful of reform inside Iran, and a lot of them remained engaged with that movement. Later, of course, this changed.

Today, the majority wants the regime to be replaced by a secular democracy that coexists in peace with its neighbors and the West. There are also others who are nostalgic about the era of social freedom and economic prosperity under the Pahlavi kings (1921–1979); they are interested in the return of a secular monarchy.

But the majority of Iranians are without representation. They haven't been able to organize well. There are a number of what I call "celebrity dissidents" who are well-known in the media. But they don't represent any political party or organized group of people. Most of the activism against the Iranian government comes about through individual initiatives or small NGOs scattered throughout Europe and North America.

The main reason it's fractured has been a successful campaign of character assassinations by the Iranian government. This has kept mistrust very high among Iranian activists outside Iran and prevented them from forming larger political movements.

Stephens: Since the Green Movement in 2009, and then protests in 2018–2019, and of course the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in

2022, much of the world has become aware of the activist community inside Iran. To what extent is that activist community in tune with the activist community outside?

Yahyanejad: There's a fair amount of connection on an individual basis. For a long time, I was part of a weekly meeting with key activists inside and outside Iran to coordinate efforts. It's very difficult to organize inside the country. The cost is high, and people end up in prison. Even messages from our meetings were captured by the Iranian government, and activists inside Iran paid a price.

It's a difficult thing to do, but it's still happening, in large part because of secure chat messaging systems that have made it feasible. What we haven't been able to crack yet is how to scale those relationships and mobilize people. We need to build connections between cities outside Iran and cities inside Iran, between activists who are in different locations. Let's connect them, so people who are outside Iran can facilitate and deliver all sorts of support — from VPNs and Starlink, to small cash transfers to help take action or to pay their bills if they are unemployed because of their activities, and so on.

We need to leverage technology to facilitate this. The Bernie Sanders campaign did this successfully in 2016. Nobody expected him to be a viable presidential candidate. He was a fringe politician, even in the Democratic Party. But with a very small team, he succeeded in organizing and mobilizing close to 100,000 volunteers back in 2016, and he put up a good fight during the primaries. There is a book on this titled *Rules for Revolutionaries*, on how big organizing can change everything. It covers how they used online workflows to get these 100,000 volunteers to call millions of people across America and set up meetups all across the country. I believe a similar approach — possibly made even stronger with the use of AI — would be successful in Iran.

Stephens: Give us a sense of the penetration of outside networks that allow activists to bring news into Iran and get messages across. Is this happening on a large scale? When you talk about the Bernie campaign, he was operating in a land with 330 million or more internet connections. There was absolute freedom of access. Just how large of an audience is there in Iran that is hungry for outside information, for samizdat?

Yahyanejad: The Iranian government has completely lost control over the flow of information. This is a big distinguishing factor between Iran and China, North Korea, and Russia. In those countries, the government has successfully kept control over the media, over content generation inside the country. In Iran, people from outside can reach the masses through satellite TVs, Instagram, Facebook, and so on.

This actually caught Iran by surprise back in 2009 with the Green Movement, because social media was the key factor that fostered this mass mistrust of the government. Afterward, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps said, *This time, we were caught by surprise, by Facebook, Twitter and Balatarin, but we are not going to be caught by surprise next time.*

They took actions to remedy their deficiency. But in terms of mass communications, I think the dissidents and opposition still have the advantage. Where we don't have the advantage is on the individual level: connections, network building, coordination, and taking action inside Iran. What's happening is very sporadic and unorganized. And you see the result anytime anybody from outside Iran puts up a statement asking people to protest inside Iran. Nobody listens. In Iran, none of the opposition parties has been successful in organizing a protest that even 10 people will show up to.

Stephens: Let me ask about your own activism. First, explain to me

what exactly you're doing. And second, how do you measure its effect?

Yahyanejad: Back in 2006, I started a social-media website called Balatarin. It's similar to Reddit, but focused mainly on politics and social issues. It became popular in Iran very quickly, in part because of a mistake made by the Iranian government. They accused the website of being funded by Israel, which was totally false. Six months before the Green Movement, in December 2008 and January 2009, during a war in Gaza, the government wasn't happy about anti-Hamas content that was posted on Balatarin. They organized a hacking campaign against us, and took the website down for a couple of days. That increased our popularity among Iranians once we came back, and Balatarin became a hub for activism during the Green Movement later that year.

Balatarin helped all these individuals who were dissatisfied with the Iranian government. Many of them didn't actually realize that they were not alone, that there were many others who believed in the same thing. They found one another on Balatarin, and their voices became stronger and were amplified. The website was effective in helping people move from believing in a reformist movement to a more revolutionary mindset.

The fact that you see much dissatisfaction today with the regime inside Iran is because the people's mindset has changed. Iranians during the '80s, during the Iran–Iraq War, suffered much more economic hardship than today, but a great portion of them believed in government ideology, government propaganda, and so on. That has totally changed. And that's where you see the impact of Balatarin and other social-media platforms.

This dissatisfaction affects Iranian foreign policy. The Iranian government didn't take aggressive action in Syria during the fall of Assad, for example. To justify their inaction to their own supporters, they

said they didn't have the full support of Iranian people. If the Iranian people's mindset had been where it was 30 years ago, where it was 20 years ago, the government would have made a different decision, even if it meant sacrificing 100,000 Iranians. So all these things, even though they haven't resulted in regime change, they have an impact. They've limited the government's aggressive actions outside Iran.

Stephens: Imagine a philanthropist. For humanitarian reasons, he's distressed by the plight of the Iranian people, and for strategic reasons, he's fearful of what Iran does. He wants to help activists in or outside of Iran do more of what they have been doing and do it more effectively.

What would you say to that philanthropist? What would you urge him to support and, at the same time, what would you tell him not to do?

Yahyanejad: First look back to history: Iran's situation is similar to Soviet Eastern Europe. A dissatisfied population, a revolutionary regime that belongs to history, and so on. What do we need to do? We need to increase people's solidarity inside Iran.

One idea is to go back to the existing networks inside Iran. There are a lot of guilds and unions and professional networks. Let's empower them. We could create corresponding guilds outside Iran, in the exile community, tasked with supporting those networks inside Iran. This is how Polish solidarity worked. This is how Charter 77, to some extent, in Czechoslovakia worked.

We need to bring together these networks that already exist in Iran and support their work by connecting them to corresponding international organizations, giving them Starlink terminals, buying them VPNs, and helping them to set up their websites securely outside Iran. The cost of political activity is lower for these networks, because they already exist.

Empowering these networks can change the dynamic and introduce new activist leaders inside Iran, bringing them to the mainstream media and social media. Once we reach 1,000 figures who are well-known inside and outside Iran, the Iranian government is not going to be able to arrest or crack down on all of them.

I also believe that we need to use AI to automate social organizing and mobilization inside Iran. We should be able to suggest to every single person inside Iran what action to take. The action needs to be low-cost. We can build something that will catch the government totally by surprise. This would be the first AI-assisted revolution, utilizing all these new communication tools. We need a small group of coordinators outside the country to use the technology, use workflows, and mobilize a large number of people inside Iran by telling them exactly what to do. This can unleash a massive civil disobedience action in Iran.

Stephens: The *Washington Post* has reported in the past few months about the ways in which Iran is sending criminal intermediaries to threaten or assault or even attempt to kill some of their critics, usually people of Iranian descent living in the West. It has happened, of course, with Masih Alinejad. That case has been widely reported. The Iranians also seem to have developed a network of soft fellow travelers who aren't exactly pro-regime, but are active in making excuses for the regime or trying to shape Western policy in a manner that is more hostile to the activist community and more sympathetic to the regime itself. How effective are those efforts in silencing activists or marginalizing activists, and how do you contend with them?

Yahyanejad: The Iranian regime's influence network has to a large extent been neutralized on social media in recent years. Their messaging to advance the Iranian regime's agenda failed.

In response, the government has launched a new generation of offensive methods. It consists of individuals who pretend to be dissidents, but who launch character attacks against other dissidents and attacks against NGOs. We still don't have a good response to these new types of attacks. I think part of the answer should come from the dissident community. We need to have basic ethical guidelines. We need to reject those who are pretending to be dissidents or pretending to be in opposition, but whose only job is attacking other opposition groups.

Stephens: About 20 years ago, I heard Bernard Lewis, the well-known, late historian of the Middle East, argue against military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. The line he used is that such an attack would give the ayatollahs or the mullahs the benefit of Iranian patriotism. That is to say, he feared that an attack by Israel or the United States or both would actually do more to help the regime than to hurt it in the long term, by uniting Iranians in a nationalistic way around their government. Is that true? Would that be true today in your estimation?

Yahyanejad: There are a lot of ifs. From what I read on social media, people are worried that other infrastructure will be damaged by a strike. The Iranians don't care about the nuclear issue. But they already deal with electricity and water shortages.

They don't want to end up in the Iraq of the '90s, where infrastructure was destroyed while the regime was left in place. Iranians want this regime to end. If somebody puts forward a solution that leads to the end of the regime, even if it's aggressive, I think a lot of people would support it. But if the solution doesn't have a clear end, and might put them in a position like that of Iraq in the '90s where Iraq was bombed and sanctioned but Saddam was still left in place? They're not going to be in favor of it.

Stephens: Another thing Bernard Lewis gave me was a prediction: In a few years, Iran would be once again like Turkey was in the 1990s or Iran was in the 1960s and '70s, an ally of the West with diplomatic relations with Israel, and Turkey would be where Iran is today, an Islamist regime, albeit a Sunni one, very hostile to the interests of the West.

Now, let's put Turkey to one side. If you were to make a bet, do you see Iran's regime in power in five or 10 years? Or do you think that we are like Romania in the 1980s — very close to the end of the line?

Yahyanejad: I think we are close to the end of the revolutionary regime. How it's going to crumble, it's hard to say. Will it happen suddenly? How violent will the ending be? Will a new secular republic emerge from it?

In terms of what we know: Opposition to the regime is high. Their ideology has failed, their control of the media is gone, and the only thing they have left is a small number of supporters and their security forces. That's a bad place to be in. This wasn't the case 20 years ago, 10 years ago, when they had a fair amount of soft power and a lot of people were still hopeful about reform inside the regime. That has all changed. This regime is naked. The only thing that's left are their tanks and their weapons, and those things don't protect a regime for too long. ✳

MEHDI YAHYANEJAD is a tech entrepreneur and the founder of Balatarin, a key online platform during Iran's Green Movement. He also developed Toosheh, a satellite-based tool to bypass censorship in Iran.