

interview

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Interview with Marvin Zonis

The Iranian People Are Entitled to More Freedom

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Marvin Zonis is Professor Emeritus of International Political Economy at the University of Chicago. In the 1960's Mr. Zonis traveled extensively in Afghanistan and lived in Iran for a while. He has written on oil, business, digital technology, Russia and foreign policy. Dr. Zonis interviewed ayatollah Khomeini in Neauphle-le-Château before Mr. Khomeini went back to Iran. He is the founder of DSD, a software development company based in Chicago and Moscow. As an author of many books, he has *The Kimchi Matters: Global Business and Local Politics in a Crisis-Driven World* and *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah* to his credit. Here is the interview Rooz had with Dr. Zonis.

Rooz: What is your current professional position?

Marvin Zonis (Zonis) I am Professor, Booth School of Business, the University of Chicago

Rooz: You were in Iran several times before the 1979 Revolution, what were you doing there?

Zonis: I arrived in Tehran in May of 1963 to do PhD dissertation for my PhD in

Political Science for MIT. I left Tehran at the end of the summer of 1965, having completed my research. The thesis was published later by the Princeton University Press under the title, *The Political Elite of Iran*. I returned to Iran often until September 1979 when I saw the situation changing dramatically in favor of the radical Islamist wing.

Rooz: Did you or anyone in the US government predict the Iranian revolution?

Zonis: Everyone predicted the Iranian revolution. No one I know correctly predicted its timing and no one I know thought that 1978-1979 was remotely close to the year.

Rooz: February 11th will mark the 32nd anniversary of the revolution; what is your take on it after more than three decades? Do you believe Iran has become independent of foreign influence?

Zonis: I understand that was a major goal of the revolution and I understand why it was. I have to say that the effort to isolate Iran from foreign influences has largely succeeded. Unfortunately, it has also succeeded in keeping Iran from benefitting from foreign influences. Let's be frank. Khomeini was primarily interested in Islamizing Iranian society. That he did accomplish but at phenomenal cost to Iran in terms of economic development for which he had no interest. Think of the differences between Iran and China. China had been humiliated by centuries of foreign manipulation and by foreign control over crucial aspects of China. What was China's response - "we'll show you. We can play your game and beat you at it." That they have done. So China is phenomenally powerful and phenomenally richer. Where's Iran? It is a pariah state.

Rooz: Did you anticipate that this revolution was going to take an Islamic turn?

Zonis: You bet. For a long time, I interviewed Khomeini outside of Paris, in December 1978 and was convinced of it.

Rooz: Why do you say everyone predicted the revolution? On what basis?

Zonis: Everyone understood that the Shah was not a popular ruler and that, in fact, he was detested by not just what seemed the vast majority of Iranians but also the people who had benefitted most by his rule.

Rooz: What did Khomeini tell you and how did you assess him? Did you find him an uncompromising man and did he tell you what his vision was for Iran?

Zonis: He was not quite rational in my opinion and had no sense of what a modern state is about. He was out of touch with the needs and realities of a contemporary state.

Rooz: Is Obama making the right gestures to Iran? He even apologized for the CIA coup, what do you think?

Zonis: The current government is taking the hard line even with Obama. Obama could stop threatening Iran and start indicating a willingness to talk about all the issues in US-Iranian relations instead of just the nuclear one. The Iranian government probably cannot say yes right now to the US or to the international community. A tragedy has been unfolding.

Rooz: As a historian, having studied the Middle East so well and so long, what do you think is going to happen in this vital region of the world? Do you see a trend towards more radicalization and fundamentalism?

Zonis: Actually, I am optimistic about the Middle East. By and large, the radicalism, the “fundamentalism” have failed the peoples of the region. I believe they are all smart enough to figure that out and the result will be that the region will move in a more stable, more sensible direction in the future.

Rooz: About the people's desire for more freedom which is now echoed in the Green Movement, what do you think?

Zonis: I think the Iranian people are entitled to more freedom. This has been a rallying cry for the Iranian people for over 100 years. One of the greatest failings of the Iranian intelligentsia during the 1978-79 revolution was to think that freedom could be achieved by backing Khomeini or that once the Shah was gone, they could also get rid of Khomeini. That belief marked the total failure

of the educated classes of Iran at the time.

Rooz: Do you believe that Iranians will succeed in establishing a just rule? Do you think it will take a long time?

Zonis: The clerics think there is just rule in Iran. There's the problem. There is not a lot of consensus in Iran as to what constitutes just rule. Although, the thirst for "justice" is deeply seated in the Iranian people's psyche.

Rooz: What do you think of the Mossadegh's government? We had a democracy, why did the foreign powers intervene?

Zonis: In my opinion, Mossadegh was not a full- fledged democrat and Iran did not have democracy. Iran however was able under his premiership to stand up to foreign rule, even though the cost to Iran in forsaking revenue was phenomenal. Sound familiar?? The foreign powers intervened because the Brits convinced the Dulles brothers that the Communists would be the beneficiaries of Mossadegh's rule. It is really important to extract oneself from the influence of personal ties and emotions. Millions of Iranians worshipped Mossadegh. He touched the Iranian character deeply, more than the Shah ever did. But that's not what we are talking about here. You can talk about whether he was a democrat. We would need to get into a lengthy discussion of what is the meaning of democrat in the context of Iran in 1950 - 1953. Even if I concede to you that he was a democrat, his handling of the oil crisis was disastrous for Iran. That does not legitimate foreign intervention in 1953. But I believe his tenure contributed to his commitment to ending foreign influence which led directly to the very troubling Revolution of 1979.