

## **JCC Iran presentation alarming, yet hopeful**

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**By Lauren Garrison, Register Staff**

WOODBIDGE — A three-expert panel at the Jewish Community Center of Greater New Haven Monday night painted a picture of Iran that offered cause for alarm, as well as reasons for hope.

The talk, called “Yearning for Freedom in Iran,” was sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater New Haven. It centered around the recent election in Iran won by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a reported landslide.

Renee Redman, executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, a New Haven nonprofit that tracks and analyzes human rights abuses, described the plight of about 2,000 demonstrators who have been arrested and detained in Iran following the election.

To be arrested in Iran typically involves being hooded and taken to a prison, then interrogated and tortured. The captors’ goal is to convince prisoners to televise their confessions, which often doesn’t lead to exoneration or release, Redman said.

“People historically have languished in prison” without being given a trial or the right to contest their detention, she said.

In addition, recent actions by the current regime reflect events that occurred in 1988, when thousands of political prisoners were executed in Iran at the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

Now, like then, a special commission has been established to “decide the fate of the demonstrators.” The three-person commission includes two members of the 1988 “death commission,” said Redman.

Roya Hakakian, an Iranian poet, journalist, documentary filmmaker and author who came to the U.S. in 1985 on political asylum, saw rays of hope in Iran.

Western countries have a flawed and lopsided view of the country because all news coverage focuses on Ahmadinejad and his regime. But there are 70 million people living in Iran and many of them are ready for change. Hakakian said that all positive change in

the Middle East will begin in Iran, which she said has had a “30-year head start” compared with the rest of the region.

“They have had a love affair with a theocracy for the past 30 years. They have tried it, it didn’t work, they’re done with it. ... They have not ceased to be Muslims, but they don’t want an ayatollah sitting on top of their constitutions nor do they want the regime to be a clerical one,” she said.

Hakakian said this “tidal change” has already begun, and “it is in our best interest to try to support the movement in every possible way.”

She said Americans, and the Jewish community in particular, must change the way they talk about Iran. By focusing only on Iran’s development of a nuclear bomb and the threat it poses to Israel, it “turns us, as a community of Jews, into a cartoonish figure that parallels that of Ahmadinejad and those radicals,” she said.

Instead, Americans must show support for the 70 million people of Iran.

A member of the audience asked if President Barack Obama should be doing more than he is with regard to the situation in Iran.

Charles Asher Small, director of the Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism, pointed out that Jews have a “moral imperative” to act when they see injustice. He, and the other panelists, pointed to a range of sanctions available to the U.S. and other Western countries to put pressure on Iran, such as blocking the import of gas into the country or passing a United Nations resolution.