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Salam Toronto One on One with Thornhill MP Susan Kadis

By Azim Ahmed

A 15-year Breast Cancer survivor who lost her father to Alzheimer's, Member of Parliament (MP) Susan Kadis places a special emphasis on healthcare. But she also takes very seriously her role to work with communities such as Iranian-Canadians and assist its members with various issues. Representing the riding of Thornhill for the Federal Liberal Party since June of 2004, Kadis has also previously worked as a School Board Trustee for York Region School Board as well as helping establish the local newspaper, The Thornhill Times. The mother-of-five has an impressive list of credentials while on Parliament as well: Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Committee of Health, chaired the Status of Women Committee, Official shadow critic for Science and Research, Vice-Chair of Public Safety and Security Committee. Also, as revealed in her interview with Salam Toronto, Kadis strongly supports a potential project for a currently absent Iranian-Canadian community centre. Last week, Susan Kadis spent some time talking to Salam Toronto in an exclusive interview about her thoughts on Iranian culture, current issues pertaining to her riding of Thornhill, and of course, whether she is supporting the Ottawa Senators or not.



Azim Ahmed



Salam Toronto (ST): You've been a Member of Parliament (MP) for almost three years now, what have you found to be the most challenging aspect of that position, and what has been the most rewarding?

Susan Kadis (SK): The most rewarding has really been working with the grassroots community, such as the Iranian community, which I've grown very close to, and very much appreciate what they stand for; their values, emphasis on education, their steadfast support for democracy, their perseverance, and I also greatly admire their tremendous pride in their enriched culture. So for me, the biggest reward is working closely with local communities, to meet their needs, meet them in my office, in the constituent's office, and different issues that arise. Also to help push for - from a political standpoint - for recognition of credentials. I know that in the Iranian community and in other communities, for many of the newer immigrants and some that have been here a long time; this has been a source of frustration. So I'm quite passionate about to make sure skills are recognized. We have needs here in Canada, and we have people who can fulfill those needs, who possess those skills, and we need to unleash those skills and

benefit from the talents and skills that people bring here. Which again, in the Iranian community, are multiple. Also when people come from other countries it's important – especially the young people – that they feel they can reach their aspirations, fulfill their hopes and dreams and I believe we have an obligation (to them). The Iranian community has a very strong work ethic, and many other communities are very similar; they're entrepreneurial and have established themselves in pivotal areas in a very short period of time. Business, research, science and law, and have really set a standard for others to follow. I think in my position as Member of Parliament of Thornhill, in my capacity I have that responsibility to help people, if they're willing to do their part, then I want to do from my end what I can do to press for those skills recognition, or whatever the issue happens to be. So that they can fulfill their goals and make a stronger Canada in the process.

ST: In Thornhill specifically, what are some of the more pressing issues constituents stress on and want you to address?

SK: Well, we hear from the Iranian community on issues such as the environment, skills recognition as I mentioned, early learning and child care, because of course there is such an emphasis and premium on importance of education, which is so apparent. So they have written to us and told us that they believe in early learning and childcare, a national program that our previous Liberal government had previously established, and was then unfortunately ripped up (by current Federal government). The agreements were completely cancelled. We understand the intrinsic value of education, lifelong learning and education and what that means to a society and to a country and the potential it has to transform a country. And the quality of life.

ST: Yes, and related to that quality of life, where do you see Thornhill in 5 to 10 years, are you very hopeful for instance as you mentioned bringing different groups of people together?

SK: Well I do believe that in Thornhill we have a quality of life that is a shining example for other people to learn from and aspire. And there is one particular case where we won the harmony award with a synagogue and a mosque working together very positively. It started out as a practical operation, a parking lot, and it grew from there. And I think it is particularly important to bring together young people from all the different cultural groups and bring together commonalities where we can build on that relationship. It's very very important. We do have something special here in Thornhill and in Canada – Thornhill is reflective of Canada – that is admired around the world. We shouldn't take it for granted. It doesn't just happen by chance, it hasn't happened by chance. We recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and that wasn't by accident. It was a deliberate philosophical and legal goal that was reached and established. Again, to continue, all of us have a responsibility. Leaders and everyone to build on a very positive admired foundation. Because you can't take it for granted, that's the bottom line, you can't take it for granted and I think the Canadian-Iranian community understands that very very well. With the issues

they focus on and devote serious concerns regarding the current government regime of Iran. I know people here are very connected to their country and its very uniquely rich culture, and it's something that I have tremendous respect for. The fact is that I do really deeply respect that the Iranian-Canadian community here never forget their culture, roots, heritage and their families, many of which are still in Iran. So they want very strongly to see changes take place in Iran, such as threats and discrimination of women, harassing of students, women and academics, such as with the recent case of Mr. Ramin Jahanbaglou. Of course I had spoken out when he was arrested. Thankfully he was subsequently let go, that was due to a lot of pressure from the international community. And we do have a lot of responsibility as an international community including Canada, to speak out. Along those lines, I wrote to the Prime Minister not long ago, during the time of the protest of the arrest, and I just said that – I spoke with members of the Iranian-Canadian community who were very distressed by this as I was – and talked about what measures could be taken and what could be done so that. Again this relationship between the Iranian community and Iran the country is so strong and it's so admirable; their sense of purpose and perseverance to better lives in Canada and to better lives back in Iran.

ST: You somewhat already answered this next question, but as you know Thornhill has a very large Iranian population that is growing. You mentioned you have spoken to members and leaders from the community, have they approached you in the past?

SK: I've spoken to many people; I've spoken to a wide range of people on a lot of different issues. Yes, human rights in Iran is one, absolutely, and also issues of – they're becoming more politically active and it's very interesting to watch unfold and I enjoy watching that because it's important when people come from any country that they become active in all aspects of Canadian life. And one of those is political. They're contributing economically, culturally, and politically. And that's how it should be. And again they have a great appreciation for not just sitting by and being bystanders, and a sense of responsibility that they should try and make a difference, and that they should make a difference here in Canada. And they are making a difference, they're making a significant difference, and I find that with a lot of Iranians, I find them very inspiring. Because of the people, because of the spirit of the Iranian Canadian community. It's very vibrant, very welcoming, very warm and they very much want to educate others as to what they're issues and concerns are... As you say, it's a growing part of my Thornhill riding and I'm very proud to represent them and continue a very positive relationship in working together. As I say, the Iranian community raises the bar, I like that (laughs), raise the bar for the social conscience, I see that and it's very important to me, and that's why I got involved in politics. I guess there's a meeting of the minds there, because I appreciate the fact that they care about other people, they care about people here and they care about people in Iran and they care about the future. They have a deep understanding about how the decisions and actions we take now have consequences for the future.

ST: And they should be politically engaged and involved. I'm not sure if you are aware, but the Ontario Liberal Party recently nominated Dr. Reza Moridi in Richmond Hill, he's Iranian Canadian.

SK: Yes, and I support him in his bid to be the next Member of Provincial Parliament for Richmond Hill.

ST: Excellent. One of the issues for Iranian Canadians of the Toronto area right now is a community centre, as there is none right now. And the last issue of our paper actually dealt with that, on the cover here (pointing to Issue 327). They're trying to talk and bring it together at the moment.

SK: Virtually every community has that and a community needs that. It's a centre, it's a hub, and it's a catalyst for helping youth, seniors and yes, developing policies that would contribute positively to the community and country. And I do support their quest for that. It's very important, and I've watched many communities grow in that direction toward having a home of their own and a place of their own. There's no substitute for that, you know you can rent space and we've helped many groups to facilitate that over the years, but you do find that what goes on in all these different communities centre's in different groups within the community, very very positive in terms of helping people connect to a service, maybe it's a senior, and tell them where they need to go to access something. For new immigrants, it's very very important for things such as language training which I highly support and which our government brought not long ago to enhance and strengthen integration because it's absolutely makes such a difference when people come in from whatever country it is and towards reaching that capacity to be successful and having resources and programs in place. The Iranian community centre for example, can play that role, I'm not sure if everything will be put under that umbrella, but I'm sure it will grow exponentially, as it always does in these cases and it will not be limited and be a source of strength and support and encouragement, and a celebration of heritage also in that type of environment. So how far along are they?

ST: Right now, they're still in talks, they still have to do fundraising and all that. Is it not quite alarming that the community does not yet have one?

SK: I think it's a natural progression of communities to go in that direction. As I say, it's a positive step forward and even though they don't have one yet, and I full support that, it's very important for the next stage of development and growth as a community within Canada, they have had great success, the Iranian-Canadian community has established themselves on virtually every front, as a I said in Science, Research, Business, Education, Law, etc in a major role in those areas and through that process contributing significantly and positively to the growth of Canada. And you see it, its developing quite well and quite rapidly. It's a good model in the sense that they raise the bar and place such importance on education. That's one of the key elements that I see at play in the Iranian community that to me is so important which

is why they're successful and will be more successful. And they're young people, their next generation, will be. Because their aspiration to reach beyond themselves, beyond their grasp, and also to help others. It's very important, this is what Canada is. So the values that I see reflected every day in the Iranian community as they live their lives here in Canada, they're values and Canadian values (brings hands together), they're the same values, they're in line with each other. Very closely aligned. Therefore, this is why I think they're such a welcome part of our country. And our community of Thornhill. Thornhill is an incredible riding and community that I have come to represent, it's multi-faceted, it's very diverse, something that I take great pride in. And it plays a very important role in that.

ST: Just to shift gears a little more the national context. One of your great accomplishments as MP is to introduce the bill that lead to the formation of the National Alzheimer's Strategy, could you talk a little about this and the importance you place on healthcare?

SK: ... It was actually Chronic Diseases Strategy; it wasn't Alzheimer's on it own, though I would like to see that personally. Because of the aging population, (such as) my father, had Alzheimer's for many years, died fairly young unfortunately. He was also a man of great intelligence and a very impressive individual... Obviously, it was extremely sad to watch a really intelligent mind deteriorate and I felt that with a clearly aging population, and because it's such a debilitating disease with incredible potential health costs alone. The human costs, and there's the health costs... Another thing about Alzheimer's disease is that we've made breakthroughs in a fairly short period of time; we've shown a lot of progress. Medications, therapies, etc, which indicate that they could come up with a cure over not too long a period of time... it's almost like a race against time. So I thought it was something that was important to bring forward... But again, I know that the Iranian-Canadian community is always front and centre of core issues and are never satisfied to sit on the sidelines. Whether here or there. Always initiating, and that's very important for Canada. It's going to continue to grow and thrive and I'm very pleased to watch its growth that is an important community in our society.

ST: You got your start in politics through being on the School Council of York Region?

SK: Yes, I was on the School Council of the York Region School Board, now it's called the York Region District School Board. Then in 1988 I was elected to School Trustee serving Thornhill and Vaughan. Then I was City Councilor for seven years for the part of Thornhill in Vaughan. So I bring a lot of that to my position as Member of Parliament for Thornhill. It's a privilege to work different groups of people and represent them.

I feel that it is very important that every young person must see themselves reflected in society. They must feel that they can reach those goals that everybody can reach. That they have capacity and that it's there for them, as long as they do the hard work, and do what they need to do.

ST: Well, thanks for giving us some of your time today. It was great talking to you.

SK: Thanks, all the best!