



Iran: Deal or No Deal? (4/12/18)

00:00:24 Jessica Chen: All right. Good evening, and welcome. My name is Jessica Chen, and I'm the director of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members who are tuning in to our live web broadcast. Tonight we are joined by Karim Sadjadpour for a conversation about the situation in Iran and its impact on American national security and foreign policy.

00:00:49 Karim is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and he's widely considered one of the leading authorities on Iran and the Middle East. He's a regular contributor to "The Atlantic" and a frequent guest on "PBS NewsHour," NPR, and CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS." At Carnegie, he advises senior U.S., European, and Asian officials, including foreign ministers, military leaders, and heads of state.

00:01:14 He's a sought-after voice on current events, and we are especially fortunate to have him here in this particularly turbulent and gripping time in geopolitics. We'd like to thank Karim for sharing his time and insights with us, and we are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for their support of the museum's 2017-2018 public program season.

So without further ado, please join me in welcoming Karim Sadjadpour in conversation with the museum's senior vice president for education and public programs, Noah Rauch.

(applause)

00:01:48 Noah Rauch: Thank you, Jess. Karim, it is a pleasure to have you here.

Karim Sadjadpour: Thank you.

Noah Rauch: So we have quite a bit to cover tonight, and I want to start with Syria, where President Trump is debating how to respond to Assad's use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians. Over 40 civilians were killed in a Damascus suburb. Uh, and so, just to recap the last week, President Trump said initially, they would have a big price to pay, calling out Russia and Iran specifically.

00:02:17 Today, this morning, he tweeted that an attack-- and this is a quote-- "could be very soon or not so soon at all." Israel, it's been reported, has already retaliated with missile strikes, reportedly killing four Iranians.

This comes a week after President Trump said that the military would be pulling out of Syria. And it also comes after failed attempts by both President Obama and President Trump, in very different ways, to stop the use of chemical weapons by Assad. So sort of given all of this background, given this recap, you know, what options are on the table for the United States, for President Trump, and how do you see this developing over the next days and weeks?

00:02:52 Karim Sadjadpour: Well, first, Noah, thank you for having me. Thank you all very much for coming-- it's an honor to be here. Syria is really the great tragedy of our modern times. When you look at the statistics of Syria, 500,000 people killed, over 12 million people displaced, and really no end in sight. I used to live in Beirut-- I was a Fulbright Scholar in Beirut-- and I would go as often as I could, a couple times a month, to Damascus. Because, really, Damascus was the best place in the world to study Arabic. And so... The Syrian people-- anyone who has been to Syria and has strolled through the bazaars and mosques of Damascus and Aleppo know the gravity of this tragedy.

- 00:03:34 The challenge for U.S. foreign policy is that when you look at civil wars, what we know from them empirically is that they are commonly concluded, and the violence ceases for long periods, not when there is a political settlement which is negotiated by the United Nations, but when there's actually a decisive military victory from one side.
- 00:04:01 And I think the challenge the United States has in Syria is that we don't want either side to win. We certainly don't want the government of Bashar al-Assad to prevail. He is closely allied with our adversaries, with the governments of Iran, with Russia, and he, in my opinion, has been guilty of genocide. You know, just recently, he has used chemical weapons again against women and children.
- 00:04:27 So we certainly... It's not in America's interests for Assad to prevail. But at the same time, I would argue that Assad, from the very beginning, his strategy and the strategy of Iran and the Shia militias were to crush any moderate opposition in Syria and really indulge the most radical opposition, the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda. And now the reality has become that you have Assad on one side, and you have these jihadists on the other side. And the United States, understandably, doesn't want either of those sides to prevail. And so I think that's why you saw, both with President Obama and with President Trump, such incredible ambivalence.
- 00:05:15 Um, last week President Trump didn't really care about Syria. He said that we're going to bring our troops back home. You know, it's time to move on, we need to do nation-building in the United States. After the chemical weapons attack happened, he was ostensibly moved by that and he said the U.S. is going to react. But the reality is that lobbing only a few missiles with no political strategy, with no broader military strategy, with no sustained strategy, is really going to not have a meaningful impact on the ground.
- 00:05:54 And I know we're here to talk about... a little bit about the Iran nuclear deal. One of the lessons that I learned, and I think many people learned, from the nuclear deal with Iran is that pressure-- including the threat of

military action-- pressure and dialogue, engagement, are actually not in competition with one another when it comes to diplomacy.

00:06:16 They're actually, oftentimes, complementary pieces of diplomacy. And I think it's absolutely true that as long as Assad doesn't feel that there's any pressure or any penalty against him for continuing to commit mass massacres against his people, then he will continue to act with impunity.

00:06:36 Noah Rauch: So what does pressure look like in this context?

Karim Sadjadpour: You know, I think that... I... you know, You know, whenever you're sitting in front of an audience and you have a microphone, you're tempted to pretend you're an expert on things, and I'm not a military expert. I wish, you know, General Petraeus were here to talk about his experience. I think the reality is that, um, you do...

00:07:00 And here I'm critical of President Obama, in 2013, was it, 2012, when Assad very clearly crossed Obama's red line. He used chemical weapons, and when there was no penalty for that, you know, he saw that, "Okay, I can continue to act with impunity." So I do think there needs to be military costs. I say this as a non-military expert.

00:07:25 To me, it seems that, um... You know, I would support something which doesn't necessarily provide the Syrian opposition a sword, but it provides the Syrian population a shield. And so one way of doing that, and this has been written about by others, is to take out some of their airplanes, their air force, crater some of their runways.

00:07:51 Obviously, there are now new risks associated with that. Russia is... has a heavy presence in Syria. Iran has a heavy presence in Syria. And so these acts are not cost-free. There's a risk of escalation, there's a risk of greater conflict. But I frankly think that in the past, when the Israelis—you mentioned the Israelis-- when the Israelis have taken military action against, whether it's Hezbollah outposts in Syria, Iranian outposts in Syria,

attacking chemical weapon outposts in Syria, the Syrians really haven't reacted, nor have the Russians. So that, as a nonmilitary expert, that would be something I would be supportive of.

00:08:35 Noah Rauch: Let's move on a little bit to sort of some of the people making these decisions. This week also had John Bolton, former ambassador to the U.N., begin as national security adviser. Mike Pompeo, Trump's nominee for secretary of state, had his confirmation hearing today in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Do you see these staffing changes as a shift in policy, as a natural extension of where Trump is going anyway? And how do you see sort of their presence affecting policy moving...

00:09:03 Karim Sadjadpour: Well, with National Security Adviser Bolton, given the proximity of the national security adviser to the president-- they sit just, you know, a few feet away-- I think the national security adviser oftentimes does have an even more profound impact on presidential decision-making than even the cabinet secretaries, whether that's secretary of state or secretary of defense.

00:09:27 And there are very few people, if anyone, I can think of off the top of my head, of, you know, experienced foreign policy professionals over the last two decades that have been more supportive of military action in a number of different contexts, whether that's Iran or North Korea, than John Bolton. So I really do think that the replacement of someone like McMaster, who served in war, and I think saw firsthand the horrors of war, with someone like John Bolton, who never served in war and, as I said, advocates it more frequently than perhaps any of his peers, that is very meaningful. Um, not-yet-Secretary of State Pompeo-- he hasn't yet been confirmed...

Noah Rauch: Correct, correct.

00:10:12 Karim Sadjadpour: I've been at Princeton all day, so I didn't see if he was confirmed, but, but, he, also, like Bolton, was a vigorous opponent of the Iran nuclear deal. And so, if you're trying to decipher what is the impact

of the replacement of Rex Tillerson with Mike Pompeo and General McMaster with John Bolton, well, you took two individuals who were supporters of the Iran nuclear deal-- Tillerson and McMaster-- and you replaced them with two extremely vociferous critics and opponents of the nuclear deal.

00:10:46 And so, I would... I would guess that the... That's tilted the balance against the nuclear deal, which was, in a way, kind of reinforcing the president's original instincts on this. And we can talk about where that may lead us in the coming weeks and months, because I think it does put us in a potentially perilous position.

00:11:10 Noah Rauch: Well, let's get to the deal. Uh, the joint comprehensive plan of action, the JCPOA, which was signed in July of 2015, which basically has Iran... Iran curbing their nuclear program for a period of time for immediate sanctions relief. This wasn't just the United States. This was Russia, China, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in this deal, as well.

00:11:34 And the negotiations took a couple of years, but a lot sort of happened before that, as well, and so I wanted-- let's just sort of go back to that moment, where negotiations start, and I'm sort of curious if you could walk us through what brought the different players to the table and how the negotiations unfolded in those couple of years before 2015.

00:11:52 Karim Sadjadpour: Sure. So some of you here in New York may have seen the play "Oslo," which is a wonderful play. I recommend if you haven't seen it. And the way I think of the Iran nuclear deal is also like a three-act play. And so act number one in the play was engagement. When President Obama came to office in 2009, he made more effort than any U.S. president since the 1979 revolution to try to engage the government of Iran.

00:12:20 And he made these unprecedented, but ultimately unreciprocated, overtures to Iran. And what that did was that it proved in the eyes of much of the world that the problem is actually not America, the problem

isn't Washington, D.C., the problem is Tehran. And at that time, Iran's president, if you remember, was a guy called Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who...

00:12:44 I used to joke that his memoir is going to be called, "How to Lose Friends and Alienate People." He had this uncanny ability to gratuitously offend people with Holocaust denial and just a lot of stupid things he would say. And so, act two of the play became coercion. It was Iran's isolation, and not just by the United States, as I mentioned, but the Chinese, the Russians, Europe.

00:13:09 Almost overnight, they were exporting about 20%-- they were importing about 20% of Iran's oil exports. Almost overnight, they shut that off, so there was a pretty robust global sanctions regime against Iran. Which really forced Iran to come to the nuclear negotiating table. And so act three of the play, then, became diplomacy. So, act one was engagement, act two, coercion, act three was diplomacy.

00:13:37 And the reason why it's so important to have a united diplomatic approach against Iran is that almost 100% of trade with Iran is with countries other than the United States, because the U.S. and Iran have been estranged for four decades now. We trade very little with Iran. So if we unilaterally sanction Iran, we don't really trade with them, so that doesn't really have much of an impact on them.

00:14:03 But if you wage a full-court press, and you say, "Okay, Europe is gonna stop importing your oil, the Chinese are gonna import Saudi oil instead of Iranian oil," you know, "No companies..." The way these sanctions were set up by the U.S. Congress, it essentially forced companies and countries around the world to make a pretty simple choice, and that was, do you want to do business with America, or do you want to do business with Iran?

00:14:25 And apart from, you know, third-tier Malaysian banks or Chinese banks, that was an obvious choice. It was an easy choice for, you know, the major corporations of the world who are heavily invested in the United

States. And so, as I mentioned earlier, it was that combination of rigorous diplomacy coupled with pretty significant pressure which helped produce the nuclear deal.

00:14:51 And I think the danger this time around, if this nuclear deal falls apart, is two-- three-fold. One is that we are not going to have that same international coalition that we did several years ago, because our European partners-- certainly our Chinese and Russian partners-- believe that Iran has actually been in compliance with the deal. So if we blow it up, and we say to those countries, "Okay, now we want you to sanction Iran, we want you to forsake your own commercial interests in Iran to please us," they will say, "It's you guys who... It's you, the United States, who have reneged on your end of the deal. The Iranians are actually in compliance, so why should we forsake our own interests to placate you?"

00:15:31 That's one. Two, as I mentioned, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president of Iran, was actually an asset to the United States because he helped unite the world against Iran. Iran's current leadership, or at least... I should say, their current accessible leadership-- President Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif-- are perceived in the eyes of a lot of the world to be pretty moderate, reasonable figures.

00:15:39 And at a time when so much of the Middle East is in a state of total carnage and disarray, I'll tell you, when I go to China, when I go even to visit our European partners, they'll say, listen, the last thing we Europeans want to do is destabilize yet another country in the Middle East. And Iran is one of the few stable countries in the region. It's a major power. It's a, you know, as Chinese will say, it's, like them, an ancient civilization, and we need to be working with them, to engage them.

00:16:31 So I fear that if this deal unravels, and we unravel it, we're going to have a pretty, uh, small team of allies-- you know, basically the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia-- which are eager to counter Iran. And again, absent that global coalition, it's going to be... It's going to be difficult to push them back.

Noah Rauch: I want to put off what exactly pulling out would look like, and some of the ramifications, and just sort of get into, you know, what critiques President Trump and others who are critical of the deal-- what are those critiques? And, sort of, how do you see the validity of those concerns?

00:17:06 Karim Sadjadpour: So I can share with you my own critiques of the deal, and then I can go into President Trump's critiques. I always thought, from the very beginning of the deal, that you had to look at the Iran nuclear deal in three different boxes. President Obama said you should, we should only be looking at this in a nonproliferation context, but I think we have to look broader than that.

00:17:27 So box number one is the nonproliferation context. And in the nonproliferation context, I think the nuclear deal with Iran has been successful because it's significantly curtailed Iran's nuclear program, and it's subjected Iran to much more invasive inspection. So by all accounts, the U.N. body that oversees Iran's nuclear activities, the I.A.E.A., they've said Iran is in compliance, and, as I mentioned, every party to the deal is happy with it other than the United States. So in the nonproliferation box, the deal has been successful.

00:17:59 Then you have to look at the Iran domestic box. And there was this hope that the Obama administration had that the nuclear deal may be transformational, may help transform Iran, strengthen moderate forces in Iran. But in reality, the deal has been really transactional, not transformational. The Iranians said, okay, we'll curtail our nuclear program, but we're not gonna change any of our other behavior. We're gonna continue to be repressive domestically and continue to do the same things we've been doing beyond our borders. So in the domestic Iranian context, I'd say the deal has been a letdown for many Iranians. Their quality of life really hasn't changed.

00:18:40 And then the third box is the regional box. And here, I think, for most countries in the region, the nuclear deal has been a huge disappointment, if not a failure. Because, as I mentioned, Iran, uh, their... the financial handcuffs that were on Iran before, the sanctions, which

really were painful for the Iranian economy, those handcuffs were unlocked. You know, it's not-- it didn't totally unleash Iran's economy, but it made it much more... much easier to do business with Iran, and, you know, their oil sales significantly increased. And I think it is fair to say that Iran hasn't used the proceeds of the nuclear deal to try to make their domestic economy more prosperous.

00:19:10 You know, we've seen that they've continued to double down on groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Assad regime in Syria, Houthis in Yemen, Shia militias in Iraq. And so I think you have to look at it in those three boxes, and it's been, it's been a mixed review. In my opinion, though, the deal has been positive.

00:19:53 Now, I'll say briefly what are President Trump's, or the Trump administration's critiques. They have three critiques specifically with the nuclear deal in the nonproliferation context. One, they say that there shouldn't be what's called a sunset clause, that in ten, 15 years, Iran will be free to resume a lot of its nuclear activities and have a pretty robust, advanced nuclear, a nuclear program which could be... which could have a weapons capability. So they are critical of the sunset clause and they want to extend these restrictions for many more years.

00:20:31 Number two, they say that they want to have much more invasive inspections against Iran. And number three has to do with missiles, Iran's... limiting Iran's ability to produce, manufacture, use long-range missiles. I think the challenge that the Trump administration has, and I'm not trying to be, um... I was telling Noah earlier, I work for a nonpartisan institution and testified many times before members of Congress, both on Republican and Democrat side, but I think, if we're being honest here, the challenge is that you have a president who has said this Iran nuclear deal is "the worst deal in history."

00:21:16 But it's very clear he hasn't read the agreement. It's 159 pages, it's very technical, and his critiques are always, they're never, they're never really specific. So it's clear he has not read the agreement, and it's clear he's not likely going to read any addendum to the agreement. So the challenge here is, how do you convince the president that you've

strengthened those three elements of the deal if he's not gonna read the very technical document which we're trying to negotiate now with the Europeans to strengthen the deal.

00:21:51 So even if we are able to reach some type of a consensus with our European partners about strengthening these three points, the Iranians could well react to that by saying, "Listen, we had a negotiated agreement, and you're now changing your terms of the deal. So therefore we're going to reconstitute our activities. If you're gonna change your end of the contract, we're going to change our end."

00:22:15 Noah Rauch: Do you see that as likely?

Karim Sadjadpour: I do see it as likely, yeah. Because, you know, there's a couple of ways to think about this. One is that Trump says, "Okay, we're just gonna unilaterally withdraw from this agreement." The United States is gonna unilaterally withdraw from it. Kind of like the Paris accords. But, you know, our partners in the P5+1, if they want to continue doing business with Iran, that's fine.

00:22:41 He may think he can do that, but in reality, what happens is that, if we pull out of the deal, and the economic sanctions against Iran aren't waived, and so they kind of kick back into effect, a lot of the European banks, European companies, their compliance departments will say, "Listen, it is now technically in violation of the law for us to be doing business in Iran."

00:23:08 And as I mentioned, even if their contracts in Iran are, say, \$100 million, their contracts in the U.S. are probably ten, 20, 30, 100 times that. And so, it becomes kind of a-- an easy way to get rid of the headache by saying, "Okay, we're not gonna, we're not gonna do that anymore. Forget about Iran."

And so, I think what's most likely to happen, if we try to change our terms of the deal, or if we pull out of the deal, the Iranians will say, "Okay, you've reneged on your end of the deal, we're gonna reconstitute our program."

00:23:37 But I would argue the Iranians are shrewd enough not to go from zero to a hundred. So they'll put their foot on the gas in a way, they'll go from zero to 20 in a way that kind of creates fissures within the P5+1, within the international community. Because they're not gonna react by saying, "Okay, you've violated your end of the deal, now we're gonna go for a bomb and we're gonna kick out all the inspectors." They want to continue to have plausible deniability. To say that, "Okay, we're, we're actually, we're only pursuing a civilian nuclear energy program."

00:24:08 But they will, while they will do that, they will, they will essentially pursue a nuclear weapons capability still under the guise of a civilian nuclear energy program. And the danger here is that, as I said, you know, even if they're going 20 miles an hour, they're gradually inching their car closer to Nuclearville. And I think-- or the Israeli government, in particular, their threshold for military action is much lower than ours.

00:24:38 And, you know, when you have a government in Iran which believes that Israel is a "cancerous tumor" and should be wiped off the map, they feel that this nuclear-capable Iran poses an existential threat. But this is, uh... this is not, um... You know, military strikes against Iran are not the same as lobbing a few missiles against Syria and then, you know, forgetting about it. Iran has much greater capability to react.

00:25:08 Noah Rauch: So, you know, you talked about negotiation, we could talk about what exactly that would entail, but what other, what other, um, you know, what else does the administration have at their disposal, um, to allay some of their concerns with the deal?

Karim Sadjadpour (stammering): What the administration has?

Noah Rauch: Yeah, and what else can you-- besides sanctions, what else could the administration do to allay some of their concerns if negotiation, you know, renegotiating the deal is implausible.

Karim Sadjadpour: Allay the U.S. concerns to penalize Iran?

Noah Rauch: Yeah, yeah.

00:25:38 Karim Sadjadpour: So... Again, the challenge here, as I mentioned, is that we have a few tools in our toolkit, right? We have sanctions, which we've used, you know, quite a lot. The power of the American economy to basically strong-arm our friends and frenemies around the world to say, you know, if you do business with Iran, you can't do business with America. We have the military threat. And, as I mentioned earlier, John Bolton, more than anyone over the last two decades, has advocated the military option.

00:26:20 The concern is that, in the 9/12 world-- that's a term I just learned today, the 9/12 world, the post-September 11 world-- it's... it's evident, certainly to the Iranians-- I would argue probably to the Russians, as well-- that the American public is not really interested in prosecuting more wars in the Middle East.

00:26:43 We're not really interested in putting more blood and treasure in the Middle East. And I think this is kind of the cognitive dissonance of both President Trump, it seems to me, Secretary of State Pompeo, in that Pompeo was elected, I believe, with the Tea Party, when he came to office as a member of Congress from Kansas. And, you know, the whole... The Tea Party very much... Part of their ethos was, forget about, you know, building bridges in Afghanistan and Iraq. We need to do that in America.

00:27:15 And so there is a dissonance there when you're... With President Trump, as well, saying, we need to pull our troops out of Syria, it's time to do

nation-building at home, and then simultaneously say, "But we're gonna counter Iran and we're going to... we're going to, you know, get out of the nuclear deal." And so... I think that our best tools...

00:27:40 The best way to think about this is to, as I mentioned earlier, if you can kind of launch a full-court press and you go to countries that are doing business with Iran and you convince them not to. But you can only do that if it's perceived that you've made a good-faith effort at diplomacy and you've exhausted diplomacy. And that hasn't been the case with this administration yet.

00:28:04 Noah Rauch: And pulling out has unintended consequences. You write about-- and this is sort of, as we transition to sort of the broader regional ambitions of Iran-- of the symbiotic relationship between, you know, Iranian ambition and Arab disorder. Uh, you know, they've been able to locate themselves in these countries that have slowly or quickly sort of fallen, fallen apart. So I wonder if you can sort of speak to that aspect.

00:28:26 Karim Sadjadpour: Sure, so the paradox of Iran right now is that it's probably more powerful outside its borders than it's ever been, since, certainly since the Persian Empire. But within its borders, it's perhaps more vulnerable than it's ever been. There's protests happening on a daily basis in Iran. And so, in my opinion, when you look at Iran's role in the Middle East, it's attributable-- Iran's outsize influence at the moment-- is attributable to a couple of factors.

00:29:00 One was the Iraq War. And the Iraq War, though people forget about this now 'cause it's-- it was... it... it was so long ago, but the... One of the goals of the Iraq War was to have kind of a two-in-one package. This was what was intended by the Bush administration, that you take Saddam Hussein's government and you replace it with a Shiite-led Iraqi democracy. And that Shiite democracy in Iraq will spread to Iran, to Iran's Shiite theocracy, and bring down the Iranian government.

00:29:40 But the exact opposite happened. Instead of spreading Iraq's Shiite democracy to Iran, we spread Iran's Shiite theocracy to Iraq. And Iran, at

the moment, has, is the most important outside player in Iraq, so the Iraq War was a significant factor in allowing Iran to spread its influence post-9/11.

00:30:03 The other factor has been the Arab uprisings. Used to be called-- we used to call it the Arab Spring. It certainly doesn't feel like spring anymore. But the Arab uprisings, so, um, the tumult in Syria, in Yemen, um, to some extent, in Lebanon and Bahrain, but basically the power vacuums that were created as a result of the Arab uprisings and the Iraq War has given Iraq, Iran enormous influence over four Arab capitals, right? Damascus, Beirut, Sana'a, and Baghdad.

00:30:34 And so what we're looking at is not necessarily the great power of Iran, but the great, uh, weaknesses and disorders of the Arab world. And historically, the United States would serve to try to counterbalance Iran in the region. But, you know, it's not something which... It's a tough sell domestically to send American troops into Syria, or keep them in Iraq or in these other places. And one thing I'll say, which is, um...

00:31:10 'Cause these days, the... Arguably the greatest source of tumult in the region, the greatest conflict in the region which is producing bloodshed, is no longer the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the Iran-Saudi conflict. The huge advantage Iran has over Saudi Arabia in its head-to-head conflict is that... There's a perception that, well, Iran is Shiite, and so supports Shiite radical groups like Hezbollah and Shia militias, and Saudi Arabia is Sunni, and therefore it supports Sunni radical groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. That's actually not true, in my opinion.

00:31:48 What is actually the huge advantage Iran has over Saudi Arabia is that almost all Shiite radicals-- whether you're Lebanese or Iraqi or Pakistani or Afghan-- almost all Shia radicals can find a place of employment with the Iranian government. They can fight for the Iranian government. The Iranian government will employ them. Sunni radicals, on the other hand-- ISIS and al-Qaeda-- they actually want to overthrow the Saudi government. They see the Saudi government as illegitimate.

- 00:32:15 So this is a huge asymmetrical disadvantage that the Saudis have because they actually can't fight fire with fire. They can't really support Sunni radicals to counter Iran's Shia radicals 'cause those Sunni radicals actually pose far greater existential threat to Saudi Arabia than to Iran. And so the current tumult and power vacuums really advantage Iran, certainly more than the United States or Saudi Arabia.
- 00:32:41 Noah Rauch: I want to get to, uh, their rivalry with Saudi Arabia in a minute, but I'm just sort of curious what, beyond expanding, what are, what are the goals of Iran in these countries, you know? And what does sort of the presence actually look like and how does that manifest itself on the ground?
- 00:32:56 Karim Sadjadpour: So I think the most incisive quote on Iran comes from Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. And he said, "Iran has to decide whether it's a nation or a cause." And I would argue that this current Iranian leadership, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, they really have seen Iran as more of a revolutionary cause than a nation-state.
- 00:33:19 A very simple test of that is that, if you see yourself as a nation-state and you want to pursue your country's economic interests, the economic welfare of your people, security of your people, the slogan "Death to America" doesn't really make sense as an organizing principle. You would want to have relations, commercial relations, with the most powerful economy in the world.
- 00:33:39 But that's been one of the official slogans of the Iranian regime since 1979, "Death to America." So this is a regime which really sees itself more as a revolutionary cause rather than a nation-state, and so what are their... What are they trying to achieve? What are their aims? I would say that they've had, kind of, three broad aims in the Middle East: One is to counter U.S. influence-- what they would call counter, you know, U.S. hegemony, U.S. imperialism.

00:34:05 Number two is the rejection of Israel's existence. And their strategy for rejecting Israel's existence isn't, you know, to seek the military annihilation of Israel. They know that they're significantly outmatched-- Israel has over 150 nuclear weapons, Iran doesn't have any. So they won't be able to achieve the military annihilation of Israel, but their plan is kind of this war of attrition. And what they would call kind of a... the medium- to long-term political dissolution of the State of Israel. So that's pillar number two: opposition to Israel's existence.

00:34:40 And, as I mentioned, pillar number three is, is the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which has kind of three components to it. There's a sectarian component: Shiite Iran versus Sunni Saudi Arabia. Ethnic component: Persian Iran versus Sunni... versus Arab Saudi Arabia. And an ideological component: U.S.-opposed Iran versus U.S.-aligned Saudi Arabia.

00:35:06 And, um, you know, in contrast to... The current crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, gave an interview to "The Atlantic" magazine a couple of weeks ago, and he called Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, even worse than Hitler. And, you know, what's different between the Iranian government and the government of Nazi Germany is a couple of things: one is that, let's say, Iran is homicidal but not suicidal. You know, they... they're willing to kill a lot of their own people to stay in power, but that's their ultimate aim-- to stay in power.

00:35:38 And two, they are not really acting in a way in which... You know, they're taking their own military, they're moving tens of thousands of their own men into countries and trying to conquer countries and occupy them and take them over. They really act more stealthily through non-state actors, and they've really mastered that well with Lebanese Hezbollah, which has been a four-decade project for them and which they've invested in. And they're essentially trying to kind of franchise Hezbollah like a McDonald's.

00:36:12 And they've taken it to Iraq, they've taken it to Yemen, and, you know, I think that their plan is to take it elsewhere.

Noah Rauch: Has there always been a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

Karim Sadjadpour: That's actually a very good question, because oftentimes the way these things are written about, in the media or even books, is to talk about these ancient hatreds, right? These ancient rivalries. And the reality is that in the 1970s-- not that long ago, actually-- Iran and Saudi Arabia had a pretty good modus vivendi. And the reason why was that they had a few overlapping interests.

00:36:50 One is that, you know, these are two-- they were two U.S.-aligned monarchies. You had the shah of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And they had two common, common enemies: one was the fear of Arab nationalism, the spread of Arab nationalism, and number two was Communism and the Soviet Union.

00:37:09 They both very much feared that. And what changed was the 1979 revolution, when, as I mentioned, Iran went from being kind of a country which saw itself as a nation and espoused Iranian, Persian nationalism, to a country which saw itself more as a cause and espoused Shiite nationalism. And one of the great sources of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia to this day is the fact that during the Iran-Iraq War between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran,

00:37:40 Saudi Arabia helped bankroll Saddam Hussein. And this is something that, to this day, when you talk to Iranian officials, they still feel very incensed by the fact that Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries bankrolled Saddam Hussein in a war that, you know, created half a million Iranian casualties.

00:38:00 Noah Rauch: I want to shift, uh, in the time that we have left, to internal politics. But before we do, I want to take a step out because this is something I think that... something that's sort of, it's hard to wrap your head around, which is the power structure within Iran. So you have the supreme leader, you have the president, you have the Revolutionary Guard... Uh, just... if you could talk about how they relate to each other, the power struggle there, because we sort of think of this as a monolith,

but in fact, there's internal power struggles like there is in most countries.

00:38:25 Karim Sadjadpour: Mm-hmm, so one way of thinking about it is that Iran's most powerful actors aren't accessible and Iran's most accessible officials aren't powerful. So the most powerful guy in Iran is the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He has not left Iran since 1989. He's a 78-year-old cleric. And he, um, he's... I would argue... He's the second-longest serving autocrat in the world, after the sultan of Oman.

00:38:52 And he is very clever. He's a clever Machiavellian operator in that he has kind of figured out how to wield both a sword and a shield. The sword that he wields is, are the Revolutionary Guards, who have become the most powerful institution within Iran economically, politically, and Iran's sword in the Middle East, you know?

Noah Rauch: They report to him?

00:39:13 Karim Sadjadpour: They report to him. He is their commander-in-chief. And so that, you know, has been a great source of his domestic power, and they're the tip of Iran's spear in the regional context. But at the same time, he also has a shield. And his shield is Iran's foreign minister, Foreign Minister Zarif, who is very accessible, right?

00:39:40 He's someone who, he studied at the University of Denver, he goes on "Fareed Zakaria," he speaks at the Council on Foreign Relations, he goes to the World Economic Forum, but he doesn't really have power to make decisions. He's someone who, when John Kerry was secretary of state, he probably spent time with... more time talking to Zarif than any of his other counterparts.

00:40:04 And he obviously can relay messages, but he's not a powerful figure that can make decisions. And so this is a perennial challenge that the United States, Saudi Arabia, has faced in our dealings with Iran, in that the

people who make decisions we don't have access to: Khamenei, Qasem Soleimani-- who's head of the Quds Force unit of the Revolutionary Guards. So the people we don't have access to, people we... The people we have access to really can't deliver, and the people who can deliver we don't really have access to.

00:40:35 The other thing I'd say about Khamenei that's been one of the keys to his longevity is that his model is to wield power without accountability. And in order to do that, he needs a president who has accountability without power. And he's... he's really kind of perfected this quite well, so you have a president of Iran, a guy, Hassan Rouhani, who at the moment, you know, he is being blamed for a lot of Iran's economic malaise. People saying, you know, "Rouhani didn't deliver," when, in reality, he doesn't really have that much power to deliver.

00:41:17 And so Khamenei has, has done kind of a clever job of insulating himself against public disaffection by, by having a president out there who, you know, has... You know, a public agenda and a... And a public platform. Um, and he, behind the scenes, wields far more authority, but he doesn't really have the corresponding accountability that comes with this power.

00:41:45 Noah Rauch: The protests that you're talking about, which started at the end of last year and have spread into this year-- 80 cities, 5,000 detained, 25 killed-- and it seems that the focus is economic, economic inequality, and so is that how you sort of think of them? Is that how they started, and have they morphed since then? Because, you know, they do... They are railing against not just Rouhani, but also, uh, the supreme leader, as well.

00:42:07 Karim Sadjadpour: Yeah. So I think what's somewhat unique about Tehran among authoritarian regimes, that... It's not only politically authoritarian and economically authoritarian, but it's also socially authoritarian, as well. And so, oftentimes, you'll have governments like, say, Cuba, which are obviously politically and economically authoritarian, but they allow people their social release, you know? You can go out with your girlfriend or boyfriend or you can go have a rum and Coke or beer or, you know, dance.

00:42:37 And in the Islamic Republic of Iran, even that is outlawed. The regime wants to have a role in your... in your private lives, as well. Women being forced to wear the headscarf, you know, people can't drink alcohol or, you know, you can be penalized for going out with your, your non-married, uh, couple.

00:43:00 And so I think that the overwhelming frustration people have in Iran is certainly economic, but at the same time, when you are accusing your political representatives of plunder, that's inherently political-- it's not merely economic. And, you know, what I tell people is that if you, in the United States, you find out that your clergyman, whether it's your rabbi or imam or priest, is cheating or stealing, that makes you even angrier than if someone else from your community is seen as stealing.

00:43:34 And in Iran, your politicians and your clergymen are oftentimes one and the same. And so, when you're ruling from a moral pedestal and you're telling people what to do in their private lives and, you know, how to live their lives, and you are, are being accused of graft and plunder and massive corruption, I think that angers people even more than if they were just, you know, run-of-the-mill corrupt politicians. And so it is economic, but it's much deeper than that.

00:44:06 And, um... You know, I think this is another paradox. I say about Iran that in most of the Arab world, or most of the Middle East, you have secular autocrats that are trying to repress Islamist opposition, right? Sisi in Egypt is a good example, a secular general who's trying to repress the Muslim Brotherhood. Assad in Syria. Gulf leadership, basically secular monarchs, and they're most worried about their Islamist opposition.

00:44:39 Iran has the opposite dynamic. You have an Islamist leadership who are trying to repress an opposition which is secular. They're trying to... The folks who are opposed to the Iranian government, they're trying to actually separate mosque and state, not join mosque and state. And I think the reason why that dynamic is important is that the people in Iran's society, people who want change, they don't believe in martyrdom.

They don't believe in going out and, you know, conducting suicide operations or getting killed for their cause or dying for their cause.

00:45:10 So you have a regime which believes in martyrdom against a society which doesn't believe in martyrdom and is not willing to get killed or kill for the cause. And so, for that reason, I think the pace of change in Iran is going to be slower than many people would like.

Noah Rauch: So in light of that, how unique is it that they're calling out leaders by name, and protesting in the streets?

00:45:33 Karim Sadjadpour: It's significant, because in 2009, when there was massive protests in Iran, a few million people took to the streets. They were not immediately calling for an end to the system. You know, they... The initial chant was in protest of the tainted re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

00:45:54 So people's chant was, "Where is my vote?" And this time around, what was so significant-- in December of 2017, January of 2018-- number one was that these protests were not... They didn't even begin among the urban sophisticates of Tehran. You know, these protests began in very traditional cities like Mashhad and Qom, which were thought to be kind of the heartland of the Islamic Republic.

00:46:20 The way I analogize this is to say to my American friends, "Imagine, you know, major anti-Trump protests break out in Kentucky." You know, it's Trump country, Republican country, red state. And that's what happened in Iran. These are very religious cities that were thought to be strongholds of the Islamic Republic. And then the slogans, as you alluded to. They immediately went from zero to 100, to say, you know, uh... "Let's get rid of the Islamic Republic." "Death to the supreme leader." People saying, "Forget about Syria, think about us," protesting Iran's regional adventurism.

00:46:58 And so they were quite intense. The other, I think, notable statistic about these... The latest protests, compared to 2009, 2009, only a million Iranians had smartphones. This time around, nine years later, 48 million Iranians have smartphones. And so it's much more difficult to keep your population in the dark when people have access to other sources of news and information, and they have video cameras in their pockets.

00:47:28 Um, but again, just to re-emphasize something I said earlier, you know, I believe that in 1979, Iranians experienced a revolution without democracy, and today they aspire for democracy without a revolution. People have revolutionary ends, but I would argue very few Iranians are interested in pursuing revolutionary means. And that makes sense, you know, if you're sitting in Tehran and you look at your television set and you see what's happening in Syria and Libya, Iraq and Yemen. That's not-- doesn't want to inspire you to take to the streets and revolt.

Noah Rauch: So is this slow boil sustainable?

00:48:06 Karim Sadjadpour: It's sustainable in the same way that, you know, the Soviet Union was sustainable, right? It was, it... That kind of malaise of the Soviet Union, you know, Russian writers were, you know, writing about that in the late '50s, starting, right? '60s, '70s, and so it was evident to people who were living in the Soviet Union that it was a rotten, unsustainable system. In fact, I should say even earlier than that. George Kennan, the great American diplomat and Cold Warrior who wrote the famous long telegraph, you know, that was 1949 he wrote that the Soviet Union was unsustainable.

00:48:46 Uh, but it sustained itself for almost four decades after he wrote that. And I think, likewise, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not, um... It's not a winning bet to have a theocracy ruled by someone who claims to be the Prophet's representative on Earth in the 21st century. That's not a winning business model. But using force and repression, I think it's oftentimes more sustainable than people know.

- 00:49:16 Just two quick points here. One is that, um... I remember in 2009 when the protests were happening, talking to the son of a very prominent Iranian political figure. And I asked him, I said, "You know, it seems to me..." When I was living in Iran, I saw that there were few supporters of the hard-line politicians in the Islamic Republic.
- 00:49:41 And I said, "You know, how is the regime... How many people really support the Revolutionary Guards and Ayatollah Khamenei?" And what he essentially said to me is that what matters in Iran-- and I think this applies to authoritarian regimes more broadly-- what matters for authoritarian governments is not the breadth of your support, it's the depth of your support.
- 00:50:01 So if you have only ten percent of the population, but it's the ten percent who are armed and organized and willing to kill for you, that's more important than having 60% who will say things about you on Facebook, right? But they're not, they're not organized, they're not armed, they're not willing to do anything about it. The Islamic Republic has that.
- 00:50:19 Number two, this is a theory from... from a North African philosopher called Ibn Khaldun. I believe 13th-- 14th-century North African philosopher, who is thought to be the father of modern sociology. And Ibn Khaldun had this theory called "asabiyyah." It's oftentimes called the "power cycle theory" in... um, political science literature now, and it essentially says that empires are built and destroyed over three generations.
- 00:50:49 The first generation, they're the... You know, they're hungry. They are vigilant. They come and they build it. The second generation are, were kind of observant, to see how the first generation built it, and so they are able to preserve it. And by the third generation, it's just these kind of palace-reared princelings, these softies, who end up losing it.
- 00:51:11 And you see-- you know, Soviet Union was essentially three generations. You see this oftentimes applied to the corporate world. You look at a company like Walmart. Sam Walton was, you know, born into poverty

and started this billion-dollar company. His grandchildren were born billionaires. They're not... they don't... Not born with the same grit that Sam Walton had.

00:51:29 And I think the Islamic Republic is entering its second generation of leadership. My guess is that this system still could have another... another perhaps even generation before things start to change. But, you know, uh, John Kenneth Galbraith famously said that economic forecasting exists to make astrology look respectable. And, uh, I think that applies even more so to Middle East forecasting.

00:51:54 Noah Rauch: So with that, I'll have one more question, then we'll open up for, for a Q and A. Now, I'm curious, thinking about the protests and thinking about, sort of, this moment-- and every president faces this-- is, what do you... What do you do? Because speaking up and offering a statement in support cuts both ways, and so, I'm curious, sort of, in this moment, does it do more damage than not? I mean, does it sort of help that other 60%, whatever it is, rise up and feel empowered enough to continue in face of the guns and the organization? Or is it the other way around?

00:52:25 Karim Sadjadpour: You know, under normal circumstances, I think it's... It is useful and can be powerful when the United States stands for values. You know, human rights, democracy, and the United States can serve as a powerful example for other countries.

I, frankly, don't think that really applies with the Trump administration, and I don't think that Iranians are looking to President Trump for leadership or moral support-- you know, I'm generalizing here. It's a country of 80 million people, so I'm gonna get hate tweets from Iranians who would want that, but I would say, on the whole, that there are...

00:53:11 Let me say, kind of, what are the practical things that the United States can do, because I think, even more important than calling out the Iranian government or tweeting solidarity with people in Iran, that I think there are some practical ways that the United States can be helpful to the

cause of political reform and transformation in Iran, and I think the most important way is to really inhibit the Iranian government's ability to control communications, to control information.

00:53:41 That's almost a role more for the U.S. private sector in Silicon Valley than it is Washington, but as I mentioned, when 48 million people have smartphones, it's much more difficult to keep them in the dark, so I think any efforts to limit the regime's ability to encroach on that is very effective. Number two, this is not a... It's a suggestion which, um, is... It may not sound that sexy, but it's actually very impactful in Iran, and that is that a lot of Iranians get their news from satellite television.

00:54:16 And because they... At the moment, their options are state television-- which is, you know, it's the state television of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it's not very entertaining-- or, you know, their satellite TV options, which is... BBC Persian has very... very effective programming, which has a wide audience in Iran-- their satellite television's based out of London-- and Voice of America, which is a U.S. government-funded enterprise, has a satellite channel which could, in theory, be incredibly impactful, could reach tens of millions of Iranians, 40, 50 million Iranians.

00:54:54 But instead of being run as a 21st-century media company, it's run as kind of a 1980s U.S. government bureaucracy, and so it's not employed with talented journalists as much as it is, kind of, government bureaucrats. And so, if I were asked-- which, this White House is not going to ask me-- but if they did ask me, you know, what would be the most powerful thing we could do to help the cause of change in Iran, more than any tweets or harsh language against Iran or statements of solidarity, I would say try to fix Voice of America, 'cause that is... You know, it can impact 40, 50 million Iranians on a daily basis.

00:55:36 Noah Rauch: I found that incredibly sexy. And, uh... So let's go to some questions. If you have a question, please raise your hand, and wait for the mic to get to you. Let's start right in the middle, right here in front.

Audience Member: Yeah.

Noah Rauch: Yeah. If you just wait for the mic, please.

Audience Member: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for coming.
Merci.

Karim Sadjadpour: Thank you.

00:56:08 Audience Member: We have this horror show of... The thing that frightens me the most in the Middle East these days, in Yemen... The, the war, that is perhaps under-reported, and I see awful things all around, but particularly for the Shia community generally. It almost seems like there are some leaders in the Middle East, above all, the crown prince in Saudi, who seek to delegitimize even being a Shia Muslim. Am I too worried? (chuckles)

00:56:44 Karim Sadjadpour: Well, I don't think there is any worry which would be excessive about Yemen. You know, Yemen is arguably, in some ways, even more than Syria-- the casualty figures in Yemen are not the scale of Syria, but if you look at cholera epidemics and malnutrition, starving of children, it's certainly competitive with Syria.

00:57:09 And so that is absolutely a human catastrophe which the United States is, in some ways, even more implicated in, because it's U.S. weapons which were provided to Saudi Arabia, which are being used in Yemen. You know, I would, I would... My interactions with the leadership in Saudi Arabia is a little different, in that, I think that what they obsess about is not Shiites writ large.

00:57:45 They're obsessed with the kind of Shiite revolutionary ideology of the Iranian government. And what they would say is, "Listen, we don't have a problem with Iran, we have a problem with the Islamic Republic." Right? And, in fact, what we were talking about earlier, they have this nostalgia

for the 1970s, when Iran was a monarchy, Saudi Arabia was a monarchy. Iranians were still Shiites, but there was this, you know, modus vivendi.

00:58:12

But in some ways-- I'm not an expert on Yemen-- but in some ways, I think most Yemen experts would say that it's a somewhat easier problem to resolve than Syria, because in Syria, you have this combination of great power rivalries-- you know, Russia and United States, Iran, Gulf countries-- you have tons of cash, and you have religion. In Yemen, you have, essentially, a small minority, Houthi minority, which, historically, have managed to be co-opted by the Saudis-- financially co-opted by the Saudis-- and so I think there is a valid critique of Saudi Arabia to say, "Listen, there's not a military solution for you in Yemen, you're not gonna be able to eradicate Iranian influence, you're not gonna be able to eradicate the Houthis. On the contrary, your war is in some ways counterproductive in that it's actually strengthened Iran's presence, and it's strengthened Houthis."

00:59:21

But, you know, to... As long as you have this disparity where you have two countries bordering one another, one is one of the poorest nations in the world, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, you have one of the richest nations in the world, you're gonna have to figure out to where... I think that the Saudis, ultimately, whether they want to do this six months from now or six years from now, it's going to end like all kind of Yemen conflicts in the past have ended, with some type of a diplomatic solution and financial co-optation.

Noah Rauch: Yeah. Right here. Right, yeah.

Woman: Oh, sorry.

01:00:07

Audience Member: Hi, thank you. So what do you think the real reason is for the U.S. to be so upset about the death of 25 people with chemical weapons, when, for seven years, we really didn't care that much about the death of 500,000, and we certainly didn't do anything to help refugees coming to the U.S.? So why, all of a sudden, is there this moral fiber that goes across the U.S. and Europe for the death-- and the use of

chemical weapons? What's the difference between killing people with chemical weapons or machine guns or cluster bombs or bombs-- however you kill 500,000 people?

01:00:45 Karim Sadjadpour: I think all Syrians would very much share that sentiment, that in fact... In fact, since the chemical weapons have-- chemical weapons attack happened, far more people have been killed with conventional weapons. And so... I think part of it is just the impact it has on people watching television, or watching on the Internet, that the images of children being attacked with chemical weapons, or, you know...

01:01:12 Emote people in a way which the barrel bombs maybe don't. It was a red line which was initially drawn by President Obama, to say once they've crossed that line of using chemical weapons, but, you know, what, what Assad has done in some ways, if you compare Syria and Libya, there's a lot of differences, but one big difference is that, you know, in Libya, we partially went in because there was a fear that Gaddafi was going to commit genocide, to kill ten, 20, 30,000 people in a very short period of time, like, a week, just to mow down entire cities and villages.

01:01:58 And what Assad has done has been basically, you know, hundreds of people per week, over seven years, which have now, as you mentioned, now tallied to 500,000 people. And I'm always remembered-- reminded of this quote, perhaps apocryphal, from Stalin. I think he said that, you know, "One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic."

01:02:23 I think for many people now in the U.S., it's, it's no longer front-page news apart from when Assad does use chemical weapons. If he kills 50 people in a barrel bomb, it doesn't make front-page news. And again, I think that... There is a widespread sentiment around the country that we tried bringing democracy or good governance or freedom to the Middle East. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we spent a trillion dollars, we didn't get much return on investment.

01:02:56 And here, we have two parties in a civil war, and we don't want, really, either side to win. One point I'll make about this is that... One thing I've

been surprised about is, when I do National Public Radio, and if I refer to Assad as a dictator, I get a lot of hate mail from people in Middle America who I'd never guess would even, you know, be thinking about Syria, and it's oftentimes people from evangelical communities, and they say, "You don't know that it's Assad that is the protector of the Christian community--" which is a very, now, small community in Syria-- "and is preventing them from being killed en masse, preventing them from genocide, and if we allow these jihadists to win, then the Christian community's gonna be totally wiped out."

01:03:51 And so, there's... Kissinger famously said that when you're in government, the big decisions are oftentimes 51-49. There are not-- we are choosing between less bad options in Syria, but I think I share your sentiment, if I get it correctly, that barrel bombs are no better than chemical weapons, and that should outrage us just as much.

Audience Member: Since I have the mic, I'm gonna sneak in one other quick question.

Karim Sadjadpour: Please.

01:04:21 Audience Member: What do you see, 20 years down the road, in this game of thrones with the U.S., Russia, Syria, and all of the other Middle Eastern countries and Israel, what do you see as an outcome in a way that the world could finally have peace in that region?

01:04:35 Karim Sadjadpour: One of the things that worries me about the Middle East is that when-- during the time of the Cold War, when you had the Soviet Union and you had the Eastern Bloc countries, you know, those authoritarian regimes didn't allow their, many of their citizens, to actually flee abroad and to emigrate, and they shut down their borders.

01:05:03 And so what ended up happening, oftentimes, is that, you know, the best minds in those countries actually couldn't leave and they stayed behind,

and they were dissidents, and they helped, in many ways, change those places, whether we're talking about, you know, Czech, or even, you know, Poland—Lech Walesa-- even, you know, Russia, you had a powerful intellectual community and dissident community.

01:05:28

One of my concerns with the Middle East is that these authoritarian regimes, whether it's Iran or it's Syria or others, say, "You don't like us? You don't like it here? Don't let the door hit you on the way out. You know, go ahead, you can go to Germany, Canada, America, if you're lucky, Australia." And so instead of staying behind and changing their countries, it's just a lot easier to go drive an Uber in Ottawa, Canada, rather than, you know, fight the Assad regime or fight your government in this era of globalization.

01:06:05

So I have to say that, you know, I worry that the same experience that Iran has had-- it's been a very bitter experience for Iranians-- but after four decades of joining mosque and state, I think Iranians have become the most secular population, arguably, in the region, 'cause they don't romanticize about living under a theocracy, 'cause they've experienced it firsthand.

01:06:33

And my sense is that probably a lot of countries in the Arab world are going to have to have a similar experience of going to-- living under extreme circumstances or experiencing, you know, the joining of mosque and state, to have a similar maturation and evolution, so I have to say I'm not terribly optimistic that in ten, 20 years' time, we're going to have turned the corner and seen a liberal transformation in the region.

01:07:16

Noah Rauch: We have time for one more question. Uh, along the side here.

Audience Member: Where do you see the man, woman on the street in Iran? Are they looking at it as a cause, or are they looking at it as a nation, and do they want to go with Hezbollah or do they want to go with being Persian/Iranian and doing business with the world?

- 01:07:40 Karim Sadjadpour: So I'm not sure if I mentioned this earlier, but what I say about, you know, Iran, the paradox of Iran, is that you have a regime whose most extreme elements want to be North Korea, and a society whose majority elements want to be South Korea. It's a society which really doesn't prioritize militarization, nuclearization.
- 01:08:00 They want to be integrated, they don't want to be isolated. They want to be economically prosperous, they want to be-- it's a very proud country. You know, Iranians are among the most nationalistic, patriotic people in the world, but they want to be... They want to be Iranians, but they want to be part of the outside world, integrated with the outside world.
- 01:08:17 There's a wonderful apocryphal story from a king of Cambodia in the 1950s, and he's deciding where to send his son, the prince, for university, and he tells his aides that the options are either Moscow State University or the Sorbonne in Paris. And after a couple days of deliberation, he tells his aides, "I've decided to send the prince to Moscow State University," and they say, you know, "Why would you do that, Your Majesty?" And he says, "Well, if I send him to the Sorbonne, he'll become a communist. "And so...
- (laughter)
- 01:08:53 Karim Sadjadpour: In today's Middle East, I joke with my Arab friends, "If you're worried about your children becoming Islamist, you should send them to study abroad programs in Iran," 'cause they will not leave that experience thinking that it's a wise idea to join mosque and state and be a theocratic government. And so, for that reason, I... Shimon Peres famously said that-- he was asked, decades ago, about prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal-- and he said, "The good news is that there's light at the end of the tunnel. The bad news is, there's no tunnel."
- 01:09:30 And so, I think, similarly, I, actually, am optimistic about Iran, I see light at the end of the tunnel. I don't see a tunnel yet to get from where people

are at the moment to where they want to go, and that pace of change, as I mentioned, is probably gonna be slower than people want. But I would place a bet on Iran, if it were a, let's say, a two-decade bet, that this is a society which had a bitter experience, but is going to be able to transform itself.

01:10:01

But as I mentioned, I fear that a lot of other countries in the region may have to have a similar experience for their societies to have a similar evolution and political maturation process.

Noah Rauch: Well, we could keep going for a while, but unfortunately we cannot. Karim, thank you so much for joining us this evening.

Karim Sadjadpour: Thank you, thank you all.

(applause)

01:10:22

Noah Rauch: And please, next Wednesday, join us with C. Christine Fair from Georgetown, who will be discussing our evolving relationship with Pakistan. Thank you.