

The Iran Protests: Implications for the Islamic Republic and Beyond
A conversation with Reuel Marc Gerecht, Mariam Memarsadeghi, Ray Takeyh, and Behnam Ben Taleblu, moderated by Clifford D. May

DERSHOWITZ: Welcome to those here in our conference room and to those watching today's event on FDD's live stream. My name is Toby Dershowitz. I'm Senior Vice President here at FDD. We're so pleased to have everybody here with us today, including members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of the Think Tank Community, Congressional staffers, officials from the Executive Branch and the Defense Community and members of the press. A very warm welcome to all of you on this rather chilly Washington day.

As most of you know, FDD is a non-partisan research institute focusing on foreign policy and a wide range of national security issues. While the camera's eye today is focused on the protests in Iran, Iran policy is one of those issues that we look at through different lenses. Its regional aspirations, its nuclear proliferation, and its human rights concerns, among other issues. Although today, as we explore the issue, we'll see that perhaps many of these dots really do connect.

Our Iran team includes policy and language experts, people who have been privileged to serve in government and those who bring personal experience to their craft. Many have been called upon in recent months and certainly over the past week or so, to bring their insights and analysis with regard to the Iran protests. For example, Behnam has been quoted in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other publications and on many TV outlets. Reuel has written three op-eds in the last couple of days in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Weekly Standard*. And also, the protests with the subject of Cliff's weekly column in *The Washington Times*.

In addition to those on the panel, I also note that FDD's CEO has written two op-eds on the protests that we have made available to you today. One, he co-authored with our panelist, Ray Takeyh. I'm sure we will talk about that. And, one that he co-authored with Ambassador Dan Shapiro. Many of you know Dan served as the Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa in President Obama's National Security Council. Dan and Mark vehemently disagree on certain approaches to Iran policy, but wrote about where they in fact agree. A model for those who have different approaches, but who can agree on certain principles and perhaps agree on a way forward for US policy.

Before I turn it over to FDD's president, Cliff May, I ask everybody to silence their phones, pagers and anything else that goes beep or buzz. Cliff, over to you to kick off what I'm sure will be a very stimulating and timely conversation.

MAY: Thank you, Toby. Very brief introductions. I think most of you are familiar with our panelists.

Reuel Marc Gerecht is a Senior fellow here at FDD and he's a former Iran specialist with the CIA, whatever that means. Ray Takeyh is Hasib J. Sabbagh, Senior Fellow for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Behnam Ben Taleblu is Senior Iran Analyst here at

FDD, whatever that means. And, Mariam Memarsadeghi is the co-founder and co-director of Tavaana and is an outspoken advocate for democracy, civic learning, internet freedom and women's rights internationally.

MAY: Let's just start. Behnam, between Christmas and New Year's, most people are partying, but you I know are sitting there trying to figure out what's going on. On Thursday, probably you saw some things online, long before they were reported, that clued you in that something was going on. Go ahead and just talk a little bit about what you saw and what you thought.

TALEBLU: Yes, Cliff. Thank you very much for having me. It's great to be on this distinguished panel and thank you guys all for turning out, today. On Thursday, my Christmas vacation came to an abrupt end, as you know. Last week, protests began in the holy city of Mashhad in Iran's northeast, which is a short drive from the Turkmen border. These protests mushroomed across the country for the next week, hitting cities in the northeast and then Iran's periphery, eventually spiraling to over 60 cities. There are some similarities with the 2009 protests, but many differences as you know. There are a few myths that the protests shattered.

But ultimately, the protest slogans, which were initially economic and targeted at the Rouhani government, quickly targeted the supreme leader, Sayyid Ali Khamenei, quickly targeted the regime, chided it for its foreign adventures, and then broadened it to a targeting of other personalities in Iran, the IRGC. You saw photos of Iran's Quds force commander, Qasem Soleimani being torn up. You saw some vandalism going on. But, you saw Iranians using new social media platforms, such as Telegram and Instagram and moving away from traditional ones, like Twitter that they had used after the 2009 protests.

The protests are still continuing, despite the regime's best efforts to say that they've been crushed, that there's only been 15,000 people protesting. It took three days to reach the country's capitol. This is an outside-in protest. It's telling to know that these protests began among the urban poor and the religious poor, particularly. The base of the regime. There were economic grievances, but as some of the media are trying to frame it as such, these protests are not only economic. They are distinctly political and they follow a trajectory of social and political protests in the Islamic Republic's history.

MAY: Ray, let's talk a little bit about the media coverage because I noticed first of all, kind of what Behnam was saying, that if you looked at the English language, whether it's Thomas Erdbrink reporting from downtown Tokyo or Deutsche Welle reporting from Iran, this was about the price of eggs. That's what this was about. There seemed to be a determined thesis that this was not about politics, it's not about ideology, it's not about theology. This is about a sluggish economy, and I'm quoting on both those things. Do you want to elaborate on that?

TAKEYH: Yeah, there is no economic protests in the history of the Islamic Republic that doesn't turn political very quickly. What is surprising about this, as was mentioned is how quickly it became political. I mean, within a span of hours.

Now, there isn't that many reporters in Iran from outside, so the coverage in there is already embryonic and limited. I think it's a very difficult beat to have because you have to subscribe and submit to all kinds of regime restrictions and they kick you out, they kick you in. It's a difficult place to report from. If you look at what the BBC Persian has done, I think a pretty good job at it. In that particular sense, that's a reliable source to look at. Increasingly, in the first day or so, I don't know what your experience was, the Islamic Republic's papers weren't covering it. But then, it gradually came into some coverage, even in that. No notion of sedition and so forth.

What I think was surprising to me is even the pace of demand for removal of the regime was even quicker than 2009. In 2009, it took—It went from the economic grievances to, "Death to Khamenei," within minutes. It lets you to believe that these are essentially political grievances and economic discomfort obviously plays a role in that.

MAY: Mariam, I-

MEMARSADEGHI: You know-

MAY: Yeah, go ahead.

MEMARSADEGHI: One of the big differences with 2009 is that there was no election in which reformists were a candidate and people got behind the reformists. Then, the reformists didn't make it. The reformist leaders, Mousavi and Karroubi became the leaders of the movement. This time, there's no leadership, there's no connection to any kind of participation in an election. If anything, the protestors are resentful of the reformists as much, if not more, than the hard liners. So many slogans and other indications to show that the entire system is being rebelled against and the entire country is rebelling against the entire system.

MAY: Just to—This is not Green Movement. This is a different demography and geography than we saw in 2009, right?

MEMARSADEGHI: Absolutely. We've talked about Thomas Erdbrink and some other erroneous media coverage in the mainstream press. One of the things that is not so correct is that it's the rural, it's the countryside, it's the poor. Mashhad is the second biggest city in the country. That's where things started. Isfahan has been on board. Shiraz has been on board. It's really every place in the country that people gather. Whether it's big cities or small cities, small towns, there is protests going on.

GERECHT: Just to add one thing on the 2009 parallel. But before doing that, I should just clarify one thing about Behnam. He does know how to party. It's just that we don't let him party.

TALEBLU: I'm too busy defending democracy!

GERECHT: Yes. In 2009, the regime although we had these massive demonstrations in Tehran somewhere between two and three million people hitting the streets, which by

historically is roughly the same number of people who were probably out there '78 and '79. The 2009 demonstrations were actually, tactically probably easier to take down. Because they were so concentrated in Tehran, there was actually a greater structure of opposition that the regime could go after. It was more effective. You could concentrate your torture against a select number of individuals and you could expect it to ripple through Tehran much more effectively.

This is harder for them to do. It's also much harder for them to do to deploy sufficient force in enough cities and have them use members of the Basij and if they so choose, bring in the Guard Corps to ensure that you're putting forces that are unrelated to the people that you're thumping, which is critical because you can't really use forces that are near the areas where they're coming from because you're not going to have people beat their family members, their extended family members. So, this conceivably is a much more difficult, much more demanding existential crisis for the regime than 2009.

TAKEYH: Let me just add two things to what Reuel said. I think 2009 protests was not just the urban middle class. As it evolved, you began to see it's permeates. And had it gone longer, I think the coalition would have been much larger. I think it's remiss to suggest that in 2009 it was only the middle classes and the universities in Tehran. There were actually protests in about eight, nine, ten cities. They were becoming a cross of socioeconomic landscape.

On the repression of this, I think one of the reasons why the regime may be reluctant to deploy the Guard Corps, because at the end of the day, there's a conscript army the Guard Corps. It's easy to get a conscript to beat up on a middle class student. It's tougher to do when he is facing a protestor from his class, from his background, from his socioeconomic—This is to some extent, a rebellion from bottom, up. What's dangerous for the regime in this particular rebellion, it is coming from a social class that it has privileged and exulted since 1979. The sort of oppressed

MEMARSADEGH: Yeah, Mostazafin.

TAKEYH: Mostazafin, yeah. The revolution was for mostazafin and the uprising of the mostazafin. It was the last constituency that the regime thought it could rely on because it has lost the middle class, the intelligentsia and so on. The repression of mostazafin by people who come from the conscript army, I think is going to be difficult. That's just why they've lasted as long as they have and will probably last longer.

This has got to be very unsettling for the regime because at this particular point, it is questioning the reliability of security services.

GERECHT: Absolutely.

TAKEYH: If they deploy those security forces and they don't function, then the entire coercive power of the regime is demystified.

MAY: Before you add, just where do we think the rebellion there stands today? Is it still spreading? Is it contracting? I've heard that hundreds, maybe thousands have been arrested.

We've seen figures of a couple dozen killed, but I don't think we really know. Where do we stand on this?

TALEBLU: I think it's still ongoing. You know, you saw powerful protests in Zanjon yesterday.

TAKEYH: And Tehran.

TALEBLU: And Tehran. The need for the Guard Corps and Guard Corps affiliated websites that come out and ask the Iranian population to identify the protestors just shows you how much they fear what may be coming next. Ultimately, if this ends tomorrow or if this ends in fundamentally changing the Iranian landscape a year from now, the most important thing is that the Iranian people would not let 2009 be the death knell in their quest for a representative government. That is the larger takeaway, here.

But just on the conscript army part and on the IRGC in particular, there was a reason why the IRGC is picking the cities that they want to deploy to first. That goes to what Reuel was saying, that they can't deploy to all of Iran's provinces at once because they have to take rank and file from one town and ship them into another town. It would be too much to do.

So, if you're a US security planner, what you're looking at is, what can we learn about Iran's command and control networks, here? How does Iran engage in the art of repression? How has it changed since 2009? What has Iran learned from its experience in Syria? This is what you should be looking at. How is Iran putting down the rebellion? Is it still vigilantes? How much integration is there between the Basij and the Guard Corps? What is the media doing to facilitate the efforts of the Basij and the Guard Corps? These are the things US security planners should be asking themselves when looking at Iran's coercive apparatus.

MEMARSADEGHI: I think the regime had a blind spot that interestingly, I think the policy-making community, the Iran watchers had the same blind spot. They were focused on the people who were very active in the Green Movement, trying to get them away from those demands and on board with voting in another election, getting behind Rouhani. The messaging and public opinion shaping apparatus through social media became very strong. The regime created a new kind of legitimacy for itself, or it seemed that way.

We're all looking, I remember making the big mistake. I was in the kitchen one day recently, maybe less than a month ago. I said, "Look, nothing's going to happen any time soon. These guys are the most powerful that they've been in so long because you have people from Palo Alto to London, to anywhere in the country, inside the country, talking about how great Zarif is and how the—But then on the other hand, the same people were saying, "How do people make it economically? How are they putting two and two together? How are they putting bread on the table?" We didn't see that well the uprising, the resentment is really coming from below.

I agree that the Green Movement, the south of Tehran was resisting ultimately, also. Everyone was on board but it was much more I think, the people who had bought into, yes we need to vote. This guy's the lesser of two evils. Somehow, the idea of reform had been

resuscitated again. Then with Rouhani again in a new way, resuscitated with economic promises and let's open Iran back up to the outside world.

GERECHT: I'll just say, all of the leaders of the so-called dissident movements, protest movements, Green Movements are bad. I mean, Mousavi was a thug. He was a really nasty piece of work. Karroubi also was not a nice guy and Rouhani is one of the architects of the National Security State. He's got so much blood on his hands, he'll never be able to wash it off.

That's what's interesting this time and it also makes it much more difficult for the regime, is that because the movement is leaderless, it's very difficult for them to locate what to kill. The whole, I would even go to say the whole Shiite conception of the way that it's supposed to work is you're supposed to have a hierarchy and you're supposed to have a leader. So if they don't have a leader, then it makes it vastly more difficult for the intelligence apparatus to kill it.

TAKEYH: Well I suspect you have leaders emerging now.

GERECHT: Yeah, individually. I think local—

TAKEYH: At the individual and local level.

GERECHT: Yeah, absolutely. I'm sure you do.

MAY: If they emerge as a leader, they're going to get whacked or put into jail pretty quick, no? As soon as they're identified as that.

GERECHT: I would imagine.

TAKEYH: Yes.

MEMARSADEGHI: When you look at the women's resistance, the campaign against compulsory hijab, the fact that it is just atomized, widespread, leaderless and people are just taking individual actions, has made it so much stronger than it would be if it was just one or two or three people from Tehran saying, "Women want their rights. Women, say no to hijab."

MAY: You approached this in your story. Is there a sense where the Iranians have recognized that there's a ruling class and the ruling class is the religious class. For 40 years, unless you were a member of the religious class, hence the ruling class, you really have no power in the society and they're sick of the idea of a ruling religious class?

MEMARSADEGHI: Yeah. They've been sick for so long. They've been sick for so long. These jokes and these slogans and all this has always been with us, almost always. I was thinking about after the revolution, almost immediately after the revolution, a significant segment of the people that had revolted, that had participated in the revolution were already severely disillusioned with the revolution. It wasn't like it took the Iran Iraq war for a lot of people to realize that oh, this is totally the wrong way. This is not what we intended. It's just that this is a severely, deeply repressive state and they haven't been able to do it.

MAY: There were a number of slogans that were relevant to foreign policy, interestingly enough. For example, "Not for Gaza, not for Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran." Now, there's two things that I'd like you to well on a little bit, here. One is, we know you're spending the money that you're getting from the oil and from the JCPOA—

MEMARSADEGH: Yeah, in Syria.

MAY: —In Syria and in Lebanon and in Yemen! That's not what we want. It's kind of a come home Iran—The other thing is that, "Only for Iran. My life only for Iran." That's nationalistic, okay? The Khomeinist conception of the revolution was not nationalistic. His famous saying was, "Patriotism is paganism." If you worship the country, you're not worshiping Allah. We are not going to do that, here.

Talk about what both of these things mean. It seems to me, it's a protest against the very theology/ideology of the regime.

TAKEYH: Let me just start out, because we have been talking about this for a long time. In the past couple of years, you have seen the regime becoming much more flamboyant about its imperial adventures abroad and essentially, becoming much more sectarian in the way it sold its foreign policy. In the first two decades, the regime would say, "We're pan-Islamic, not Sectarian," but it was much more Shiite-edged. Also, it seems to have anticipated that this particular brand of Shia imperialism, pan-Shiism, would redound to its favor at home. That imperialism abroad would dovetail to the themes of Persian hegemony and Persian greatness and would essentially work to refurbish the regime's legitimacy battered as a result of the 2009 and economic distress. That obviously is not the case.

The second thing I would say. In aftermath of the Green Movement in 2009, the entire security structure of the system became readjusted and reformed. Many people within the intelligence community were put in high positions of power. I think the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is from intelligence. This was an intelligence failure.

I don't know where the security services go from here. There's going to be a restructuring and reorganization and revamping but this was essentially the equivalent of Stasi coming to power. The fact that this overlapping, highly intelligent multiplicity of intelligence organizations were taken by surprise, it tells you to believe that in some way, the people who lead the Islamic Republic have lost touch with what the people are. In many ways, they have, even from a repressive angle. They thought Shiite imperialism would work. It didn't. They have the security structure that they had created with a multiplicity of overlapping intelligence organizations that seem to have missed it.

So, where it goes from here, I'm not entirely sure because there's no way of essentially tracking everything that's going on. I think the regime today is in particular kind of trouble, irrespective of how this works out.

MAY: Do you think that the regime, besides wanting to put this down and get this over with, are they going to have a discussion of, "Well, maybe we have been spending too much time

and energy in Yemen and in Syria and in Lebanon and in Latin America and with Hezbollah?" Are they even going to have that discussion?

TAKEYH: I don't think so because this was always supposed to be revolution without borders, as you mentioned. It's part of the revolutionary identity of the regime. The revolutionaries and imperialists tend to be impractical people. In 1960, China used to give economic assistance to countries with higher GDP than China, East Germany and so on. There's an impracticality to the revolutionary vision but they still have those ties about that—

GERECHT: They really do believe that the front line of the revolution is actually abroad.

TAKEYH: Right.

MAY: Am I wrong to think that this is one of the reasons why it is a myth in the media and in a lot of analysis, that there are these moderates in Iran because if the moderates are also believed that the Iranian revolution was and must be a global revolution, how much can you moderate that?

GERECHT: Well, the whole discussion I think of moderation is a bit overdrawn, as I said before. If Rouhani is being labeled a moderate, then you need to have a new lexicon because it just historically makes no sense. The regime fundamentally can't moderate. It's had numerous opportunities to do so, particular in the 1990's where it had loyal members of the revolutionary left who wanted to soften the system. They could have done that. There was no real threat to the system except the Supreme Leader Khamenei definitely believes in the slippery slope. He thinks and probably correctly, that once you go down that path, it's over. So, you can't do that.

It might be fair to say that Rouhani, who isn't as ideologically attuned believes that you can do certain things and have the system survive. For example, you can allow a little bit more economic, I wouldn't go so far as to say laissez-faire since there's nothing in Iran that really qualifies for that, but that you can somehow import the Chinese model and not have the whole system come tumbling down.

TALEBLU: Cliff, you used a very important word, there. I want to make sure that the audience harps on this. Myths. There are a lot of myths about Iran post-2009 that have been sticking in Washington. They have this odd shelf life that I really hope the 2017, 2018 protests do away with.

The first myth is, if you were reading the Western Press in 2017, you saw all these stories, particularly in the Times about rising nationalism in Iran and how this would actually hinder any social protests and that the people were actually buying into all the funeral ceremonies of the people coming back from Syria and engaging in the martyrdom ceremonies. All this stuff was a bit ridiculous because it's premised on a false assumption. That assumption is that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a good guardian of the Iranian national interest.

That's fundamentally not true. No one has been more detrimental for the national interests of Iran than the Islamic Republic. No one has bucked the interests of the Iranian state more than

the leadership of the Islamic Republic, particularly because of this preference for the revolutionary ideology, which you mentioned. That nationalism may have bought them a few months but ultimately, I think it could be the death now. This leadership has failed them, that's why it's death to Rouhani, death to Khamenei. And another one of those quote-on-quote Iranian first lines would be, "Abandon Syria. Think about us."

TAKEYH: Well, that was to some extent discussed within Iran. I remember an interview by Behzad Nabavi, which I sent it to you, who was a minister in the first government and he was actually jailed for a number of years. He gave an interview, I forget in which paper, in which he compared Ali Khamenei to George Bush. He said these are two people that want to transform the Middle East and at a considerable cost domestically. That idea was actually discussed within Iran, the cost of these particular adventures.

It was missed obviously, by the western press and many others. There was a theme in there, that why are we doing this?

MEMARSADEGHI: Yeah, there's a similarity to Putin and Russia and the focus on the outside as the economy inside is getting worse and worse. It did buy in both cases, Russia and Iran, credibility and support for the regime from some sectors of society and alienated others and made them more resentful and more willing to protest.

The people who were willing to support for example, Qasem Soleimani, they were not fringe elements or hard line supporters of the regime only. You have on line people who are important people at BBC Persian service, for example. Or at VOA, even, or consider themselves activists, had to leave Iran after the Green Movement who were supportive of the policy in Syria, who were supportive of the annihilation of Syria by the Iranian government. That's why I say that this was hard for us to see coming because it seemed like Zarif and the propaganda and the regime survival mechanisms, techniques were on eight cylinders before this.

MAY: The initial US response, to start with that, what have we seen so far? What have you thought about it? Go ahead.

TAKEYH: I think the public statements that have been made by the president, the vice president's op-ed, Ambassador Haley they have been quite exemplary. I think the first part of it, namely making an unequivocal declaration of support and condemnation of regimes have been very good. But this is—You need an act two and three.

MAY: I'm going to get to that in a second. Let's talk before we do that, let's talk a bit about the European response. Mogherini and Macron, basically they've said—They've criticized not just the regime, but Saudi Arabia, American and Israel for this. Maybe I'm exaggerating, but not much.

TALEBLU: Yes. The European response has been lagging. That's a polite way to say it.

MEMARSADEGHI: Shameful.

TALEBLU: I'm glad Macron mentioned it at least in, I don't know, his phone call or his meeting with Rouhani. That probably was just a little check and then move onto the next conversation topic. The Canadians were actually much better than the Europeans, I have to say. But the Europeans, they've largely been mercantilist in their interactions with Iran since the 90's. They're not driven by security or they're not driven by values or ideology. They want to sign the most number of commercial contracts and this is the way they're going to do it.

GERECHT: I would say this. We don't know yet. But, I'll make a historical parallel with the Europeans to make them look just slightly better. I was in Europe during the 2009 demonstrations. European coverage of those demonstrations, the European coverages rule—and I hate using just Europe because there are stark differences obviously, between the Europeans on this—was generally better than what you had in the American press. The American press was pretty awful. It just is not deep, it's not thoughtful. Part of that has to do with the fact that you just don't have Americans there doing the reporting. You could find some really wonderful stuff in Germany and France on the Green Movement.

I suspect if this continues, that you'll have a discrepancy develop in Europe between the leadership, which is going to remain hopelessly tied to the JCPOA, tied to commerce. Then, you're going to have a greater dissonance amongst the intellectuals in the journalistic community, who I suspect will do better reporting because they still have access. If they lose that access, that might change but I suspect the human rights reporting in Europe is going to recover from its initial quiet.

MAY: There were those, I can't remember if you were among them, who predicted that the Iran deal, the JCPOA would turn Europe into a pro Iran lobby for commercial reasons. Has that happened?

GERECHT: Well, it's happened to the Democratic Party, so I see no reason why it wouldn't happen in Europe. Yeah, definitely. You don't want to overdo the potential profit for the Europeans from the Iranian market. It's there. It's serious. But, the Europeans are well aware of the difficulties of operating inside the Iranian marketplace. There is a desire to see Airbus go through. The Europeans are paralyzed about that issue that President Trump may down Airbus.

There are some big ticket items, Total is worried, et cetera, et cetera. I don't think the Europeans will be hopeless if the Americans adopt the right attitude about this to actually being less commercially aggressive in the Iranian marketplace.

MAY: Go ahead, Ray.

TAKEYH: I just want to say one thing about the European response that maybe it applies to others. There's a strategic assessment. Namely, that the presence of President Rouhani and others can still be an engine for moderation of the Iranian regime. Therefore, how do you strengthen that particular faction within Iran, which is probably a calculation of many with the European Chancelleries and elsewhere.

Since 1979, we have looked at Iran as a collection of factions and to some extent, we have thought about US policy or European policy, commerce or sanctions, as a means of manipulating those factions. What has not been clearly assessed is what happens when the Iranian policy moves to its post-factionalism period? Which, I think is where we are, today. That doesn't mean there are no disagreements within a state. You put four people together, they're going to have a disagreement. We had a disagreement. We didn't want Reuel here but we worked it out. It was a disagreement. It was a tactical disagreement.

The point is, as the Islamic Republic becomes more unitary and it moves beyond factionalism, much of the analysis that you see is still tied to that factional notion and how to manipulate those internal balances of power.

GERECHT: I would say this. If the regime starts shooting people and torturing people, raping people, Rouhani's going to have to obviously side with the Supreme Leader. That's where his heart is. It will become more difficult to depict Rouhani as a force of moderation and pragmatism if he is publicly sided with the folks who are killing people in the streets. There's a shelf life to this.

MAY: Right now at the White House and the State Department, discussions sort of like this are taking place. We know that. As you said, the initial statements have to be followed up by policy. There's going to be a debate over that. Let's talk a little bit about what their choices are and what they can do.

By the way, I was listening to NPR coming in this morning and they made it very binary that the president either reinstates sanctions relevant to the JCPOA and that terminates the JCPOA, or he does nothing. That's not quite the case. They can also do sanctions not directly related to the JCPOA, which puts pressure on the Iranian economy and particular parts of it. I don't know why they wouldn't know that or talk about that.

But talk about what—There's the Boeing deal. Let's talk about that. Should the Boeing deal be canceled, absolutely first thing out of the box? What else should be done? Go ahead, Mariam.

MEMARSADEGHI: I think there needs to be something strong, symbolic that you're not going to get this because you've done this. If it's with the Boeing deal, if it's something else, whatever it is. Something that the protestors will hear, the diaspora will hear, the people in the media who are straddling one way or the other, what's going to happen, what are they going to do. You're not going to get this because you've treated your people this way. I think that there would be strong support for that. For what it's worth, my opinion is that there would be strong support for that.

The way I read the Iranian civil society and the protests is that when they said in 2009, "Barack Hossein Obama, Ya Ba Oona Ya Ba Ma," You're either with us or you're with them, the regime. They never got their answer. The answer they got was the Iran deal, was appeasement. They really want a strong response from the international community at the very least about the abuses, about the violation of human rights, about the violence against protestors.

TALEBLU: You mentioned that the argument was presented as a binary on the radio this morning. That's an argument that's been on the shelf because it's been either the Iran deal or war, or diplomacy or war. It's never been a binary. In fact, looking at Iran should teach you one thing, that it's always option B. It's always in the middle. Iran thrives by living in the gray zone, the space short, not war but not peace. The US response should also be in that realm, not war but not peace.

With that in mind, if the people on the streets are saying, "Death to the dictator," it would behoove of the United States to target the financial empire of the dictator. You already have the authorities with which to do that. Use the Global Magnitsky authorities to go after ICO, execution of Iran and Khamenei's order, which is just as—

MAY: Which is worth about \$95 billion, all of which is controlled by the Supreme Leader, personally. Am I right?

TALEBLU: Exactly. It's his personal holding company. There was an excellent Reuters investigation on this. The Treasury briefing on this is excellent. You guys should read it. I think it's from 2013. But, this was a non-nuclear entity de-listed for the Europeans in the nuclear deal. While I would support putting back those sanctions on, I can understand the optics of that.

So, let's use the optics of Global Magnitsky, which is this is anti-corruption, this conglomerate got its money by confiscating the Iranian people's assets. The Iranian people are now saying, "Death to the dictator." Now, let's target the financial empire of that dictator and then, move beyond that and go after the Guard Corps.

TAKEYH: Yeah. I'll say a couple of things. What should you do depends on what your objectives are.

MAY: Well, let's start with that. What should the US objectives—

TAKEYH: Well—

MAY: —I would think it should be to encourage the protestors and hobble the regime in terms of its imperialism.

TAKEYH: Well, that would be one objective. There are people who will say that in the midst of this disorder, the objective would be to safeguard the JCPOA. That takes you in a difficult direction.

MAY: It takes you in a difficult direction.

TAKEYH: Let me just say one thing. There is no such thing as a nuclear sanction. The United States Congress never passed nuclear sanctions. The Central Bank of Iran was not sanctioned because of nuclear infractions. In the NDAA of 2010, the Central Bank was sanctioned because of terrorism, human rights abuses, ballistic missiles and so on. In 2015, John Kerry called all those sanctions nuclear sanctions and said they're going to be released as part of

the JCPOA. There is no such thing as a nuclear sanction. The United States Congress never passed nuclear sanctions. You can call them that as part of the JCPOA.

It is to me, there is a priority question here. I take your point about targeting the financial empire and I think that's useful. But at some point, you have to consider sectoral sanctions and the infringement of that with the JCPOA. I think it's easy to say we can do sanctions and maintain the JCPOA, but at some point those lines collide. That's the decision that you have to make. If the answer to your question is we want to maintain the JCPOA, then you're going to do designations, which are the junk food of sanctions. They fill you up but they're not nutritional for you.

GERECHT: That's very good. I'm going to steal that.

TAKEYH: Well at some point, the lines will have to cross and the priority has to remain—

MAY: The Obama Administration did say that what we're doing here with the JCPOA does not prevent us from imposing sanctions for terrorism, for the missile program, and for human rights violations.

TAKEYH: And further, in a congressional testimony, Secretary Kerry in response to Jeff Flake, I believe said. Jeff Flake asked him, "Can the Central Bank of Iran be sanctioned for terrorism and human rights?" And he said, "Yes, it can be." Those questions have to be revisited now. They would be in some, at least a textual transgression of the JCPOA and everybody has to make a decision about how they will proceed with that.

GERECHT: I just find it amusing that in Iran, Iranians can talk about regime change and democracy but it's very difficult to have that conversation in Washington DC. It is a stark contrast.

MEMARSADEGHI: Which takes more courage.

GERECHT: Yeah.

MAY: Would you agree with this premise that President Trump would like to get rid of the JCPOA but is being advised, "It would be so much better if you didn't rip it up. Let the Iranians rip it up, instead."

TAKEYH: Right. Whenever you're talking about this issue about the JCPOA, about the Iran issue, there are multiple audiences. There's a domestic audience, there's a European audience, there's an Iranian audience. Many people tend to privilege the external audiences. How do we manage this with the European allies? So essentially, you're privileging the European alliance. It's easy and a cop out to say, "We can balance between these audiences." Actually, you can't. You have to start prioritizing. It's a cop out to say, "Oh, we can do sanctions that Europeans buy into, protect the JCPOA." It's a question of priorities now and those priorities tend to conflict.

Which audience do you privilege? If you privilege the Iranian audience, you're going to piss off the European audience. There are trade-offs, here. That's what I'm trying to suggest.

MAY: All right, so you get a phone call from McMaster or Trump or Ivanka and she says, "The Central Bank of Iran, sanction them, Ray, or not?"

TAKEYH: Well, I would say the president has to relieve, issue four waivers. It's not just one. One is the NDAA with the central bank. The second one, called Iran Freedom Act. There's four. I would say you figure out off this menu, which one of them is the most germane and not waive it. The president potentially next week will have to waive something called the Iran Freedom Act.

MAY: Convenient.

TAKEYH: A bit inconvenient. I would say you figure out which of those are most applicable in the terms of putting real pressure on Iran and which are not, and you don't waive the ones that actually can make material pressure in the central bank as well.

MAY: Reuel, enough analyzing this in regard to medieval Persian Empire. What does the president do?

GERECHT: Well, I don't think you can have an intelligent Iran policy and coexist with the JCPOA. But, you have to have the intestinal fortitude to walk away from the JCPOA.

MAY: You don't think he should force, or not force, but tacitly encourage the Iranians to walk away so he's not doing it. You don't think there's a tactical or strategic benefit?

GERECHT: You have to be prepared to risk the JCPOA to do that.

MAY: Right. You don't think he is? You don't think he's being advised to?

GERECHT: I don't know. I have to confess that the administration, I find confusing.

MAY: You may not be alone.

GERECHT: Yeah. It does not seem to have a consistent direction, so I don't know. Sometimes the president certainly appears to be more determined than his aids to get rid of the JCPOA. Again, if you're going to get rid of the JCPOA, which I am in favor of, it means you have to be prepared to take the risk of that. It may mean that you have to be prepared to use military action or it may mean preparing that you're willing to surrender, that you're going to really not try to stop the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapons capacity. But, you have to be willing to go there.

It's by no means clear that the administration is. It's certainly clearer that the Republican Party in Congress is not. This is a debate that obviously, the administration and the Republicans in Congress have to have.

MEMARSADEGHI: I don't think the Iranian regime is going to walk away from the Iran deal. It especially, has more reason now not to because of these protests going on. All along, Khamenei said, "We don't want this. It's a waste of time. Rouhani's wasting his time. Zarif is wasting his time." Then as soon as the Iran deal happened and there were indications that the Trump Administration might walk away, he said, "Well, we're not going to rip it up. We'll let them rip it up." I don't see any indications why the Iranian regime will walk away from the nuclear deal.

MAY: I'm going to ask a couple more questions and then I'm going to go to the audience, so start thinking of yours. Yeah, do you want to add to that?

TALEBLU: No one should be looking for a self-inflicted wound or an owned goal, here. The way you want to finesse this issue is to make sure that whatever the president does with the waiver decision, there is a strong declaration of support for the Iranian people there, that there are continued non-nuclear sanctions. Even though, I know this doesn't exist in US law. The US for instance waived CISADA Sanctions, which are terrorism, chemical weapons, whatever. But we still waived them, pursuant to the deal.

Framing is everything, here. This is very low cost. Not to cop out of the high risk, high reward arguments of deal or no deal, but to keep up the rhetorical pressure, we all agreed that I think the president and the administration were on message, here but we shouldn't let that message die out. We shouldn't let that die out in the media, as well.

There was a joke in 2009 when Michael Jackson died that summer, that the Basij killed Michael Jackson because the news stories were all about Michael Jackson and no longer about the torture and repression and the protests that lingered on. We shouldn't let the Iranian people's story also wither away if the media decides to let it wither away.

TAKEYH: I agree with that, but there is an issue here. The rhetoric of the administration has been quite exemplary, but if there's a gap between rhetoric and conduct, you have something that in another context used to be a credibility gap. The rhetoric and policy have to at some point have some sort of a relationship to one another.

MAY: Am I wrong to think that one way you don't want this to come out is that the US ends the JCPOA but the Europeans and the Iranians say, "Well, we're still in it?"

TAKEYH: Well, I don't know what—

MAY: No?

GERECHT: I don't think it really matters. I think people get far too concerned about the appearance of who's walking out and who's not. Well, and the Europeans, I don't even know what that means. The Europeans are going to stay in the JCPOA. What's that really mean?

MAY: It means, they say that the Iranians are complying and they go on with the commercial deals.

GERECHT: Well, but if the Americans implement sanctions that affect the Europeans, the Europeans aren't going anywhere. The Europeans have relatively little money invested in Iran. The notion that the Europeans are going to go on a jihad against the United States over the Iranian marketplace is just absurd.

MEMARSADEGH: I agree.

GERECHT: It's just not going to happen.

MAY: All right, we're going to go to audience questions now. Wait for the microphone. Please introduce yourself when the microphone gets there. Ali, we'll go start with you.

ATRI: Hi. Thank you for wonderful panel. I'm Akbar Atri, former activist. Actually, I have a comment rather than a question. My comment is that the last uprising created two economic problems. Islamic Republic is not in the position to solve this problem. That is a fact. It means, protests anyway will go on. But, not if they're oppressed today. Maybe next month, a month later, it's going to start again.

How US can, or international community can benefit from this, can put more pressure on Islamic Republic. For example, doing something symbolic. Release their assets, official regime's offshore assets. It can be helpful. Or, ban the IR State, Islamic Republic State TV. It's symbolic for Iranians because this TV, the regime arrests people and force them to come to TV and confess something that's not true. They're using TV as a propaganda. It can be symbolic that gives actually hope to people.

Other thing is that putting sanctions on revolutionary guards or whatever they are doing in Syria. Another thing I want to add is slogans of people. Despite these people come from the lower class, religious class, but entire slogan was against the religious government. You cannot find anything religious related slogan. It means, even the lower class that was this regime base, they are against, at least we can say Islamist regime in the region. Thank you.

MAY: Thank you. Let's go right there. Yeah. I want to give the microphone to you. It's okay. It'll take a second. Again, please introduce yourself.

ENAYAT: Mahmood Enayat, Small Media. Just want to quickly about what Akbar just said. Actually, one of the waivers that is up for renewal is actually sanction IRIB. IRIB was sanctioned in 2013 and it has been the relief and waiver. IRIB has been renewed since then. The renewal for the IRIB is coming up whenever the Iran Freedom Act renewal is.

MAY: Next week.

ENAYAT: What the president can do, just simply not renew the waiver IRIB and is already a huge pressure and also support from Iranian citizens. He lost on the Twitter storm. There's a lot of Iranians Tweeting about IRIB and they're asking the president to ban the real fake news in Iran, basically. I think IRIB could be symbolic. It would have a real impact and I think that's an easy, main target.

MAY: Let's go onto Dave. The microphone is coming to you.

POLLOCK: Yeah, thanks. I'm Dave Pollock from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. I want to ask about regional reactions to this. I have a paper coming out later today about the Arab reaction to what's going on. At the government level, it's extraordinarily cautious, so far. Even though, popular sentiment in most Arab countries is measured by actually public opinion polls, it's very, very anti-Iranian government.

So, is there something that the United States in particular, or that those countries maybe acting on their own, covertly or overtly, could do to weaken the hold of Iran's regime? Support the protestors, push back harder against Iran's regional activity? I think the same kind of question might apply to Israel, as well.

MAY: Who wants to take that?

TAKEYH: You going to try?

GERECHT: I just operate on a general rule and that is, good Saudi policy is where the Saudis do nothing. I would prefer to see the Gulf Arab countries just sit back and watch.

TALEBLU: Interesting—

TAKEYH: No, go ahead.

TALEBLU: Interesting you mentioned Saudi real quick, because the Tehran Friday Prayers leader—

TAKEYH: Everybody in Tehran brings the Saudi, yeah.

TALEBLU: Castigated the Saudi. The Saudis are behind the protests in Tehran. Khamenei, himself just said foreign enemies but then Friday Prayers came out, "It's Saudi Arabia." Very interesting.

TAKEYH: Well, General Jafari had a twist to that, head of the revolutionary guards. He said, "Saudi Arabia, United States and Israel," who of course created ISIS, "These protests are ISIS people being imported into Iran." He went deep. He hit the bottom of the ocean on that one. You've got to admit, he put it all together. The Zionists, ISIS. He got it all together. That was good.

GERECHT: That's not why I would object to the Saudis doing anything. I object to the Saudis doing anything because they'll mess it up.

TAKEYH: They'll mess it up. That's why.

MEMARSADEGHI: Maybe the Saudis can exert some pressure on the European Union and for them to sort of wake up—

GERECHT: Yeah, that's a good spot for them. I would agree with that.

MAY: Right here. Feel free to show me your hands between questions so I know where to go.

GRAMER: My name's Robbie. I'm a reporter with Foreign Policy. You touched on this briefly, but I was wondering if you could elaborate on what impact if any, this will have on Iran's involvement in Syria and Yemen. Thanks.

MEMARSADEGHI: Well, can I answer that one?

MAY: Yeah.

MEMARSADEGHI: Try to. I was on a TV show on Alhurra a few days ago. They had brought on a regime guy from Tehran. I was talking about the slogans as in, "Na Ghazeh Na Lobnan, Joonam Fadaye Iran – Sooriya Ra Raha Kon, Fekri Beh Ma Bekon." All those slogans that are trying to get the Iranian regime to say to the outside world I think actually, as much if anything else, that we don't want this foreign policy. We're ashamed of it.

The regime guy's response on TV to me was, these are just one-off slogans. Just because a few people are saying these things, doesn't mean we're going to change our foreign policy. I'm not sure who it was.

I forget which one of you said that you don't see them backtracking or changing anything about the imperialism. I agree. I don't think they're going to do it. Again like Putin, I think that's where there is some backing for the regime, it's for those reasons, that very robust, we're strong, we're—I think that they're going to double down on that and they're going to get more brittle as a result. It's not necessarily a good strategy for them, but I think they're going to do it.

TAKEYH: By the way, that's not entirely unique. Imperialists tend to be enamored of imperialism, even when the costs are obvious.

MEMARSADEGHI: Yes.

TAKEYH: The Soviet Union in the 1970's, getting involved in Africa. Cuba had presence in three continents. The British Empire was not always profitable. The French in IndoChina and North Africa, impractical and costly. But, the mission to civilize and the Islamic Republic's mission of pan-Islamism has a hold on the mind of imperialists. Particularly in this case, imperialism engraved in an ideology and a mission and a religiosity. It's hard to ween your way off that because a balance sheet doesn't work out.

MEMARSADEGHI: But I think—

TALEBLU: And one—

MEMARSADEGHI: Go ahead.

TALEBLU: Just one of the challenges with using sanctions to combat that ideology, is it's premised on a flawed assumption. I'm saying this as someone who supports more coercive measures against Iran. It's premised on the fact that every man has his price. Ultimately, if you believe this with every fiber of your body, you may not have a price. That's one of the more dangerous things for US foreign policy.

GERECHT: There was an interview done with the late great General Hamedani of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, who died in Aleppo. He is responsible for creating the militia system in Syria. He was sincere when he said that the Iranian revolution lives or dies in Syria.

MEMARSADEGHI: Well, one thing I think that has maybe been strategically smart on behalf of the Iranian government is that with all this foreign meddling, you have the American press, the European press, pretty much everybody saying, "Iran is now the most powerful power in the region." Does that change after these protests? I'm not sure. If anything, I think it might give the regime more reason to maintain that external power.

MAY: Though, it does break the myth that again Thomas Erdbrink proposed a month or so ago, which is to say that thanks to Trump largely, Iranians are now all united behind this revolution and behind this regime. That was his—

MEMARSADEGHI: Yeah, I don't know why the PBS News Hour doesn't ask him about that.

GERECHT: That was just silly. It was just a truly dumb statement.

MAY: It was a thesis in the New York Times taken and it should be unraveled at this point. Way back there and then we'll go up there. Nina, yeah.

SHEA: Hi, thanks. Nina Shea, Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute. This week, there have been a number of developments regarding human rights policy in Iran. One Cliff, as you may know, is that the US named, the State Department yesterday named Iran among the CPC's, Countries of Particular Concern for their religious persecution.

At the same time, when these demonstrations are going on throughout Iran, which at their core are human rights demonstrations, demonstrations for freedom, freedom to criticize, economic policy and the Supreme Leader, the US decided to send back 100 minorities, Jews, Christians and Baha'is who have come under the Lautenberg Amendment to Vienna for asylum in the United States. It's one of the few places in the world where the US allows third country asylum applications. They've been there for a year. They've been vetted and approved and now this week, starting maybe today, they will be sent back to Iran.

This does not bode well from my perspective for bridging that gap between rhetoric and policy. I wanted to get your reactions and to also elicit your ideas about other human rights sanctions that could be applied.

MAY: Go ahead, Behnam. Do you want to?

TALEBLU: Definitely, on the human rights sanctions front, I'd re-up the Global Magnitsky because of the corruption. Targeting ICO would be a huge win for US strategically and also morally.

I'll let the rest of the panel speak on the refugee issue, but you hit at one point that I want to make sure the audience knows, which is that at its core, these are human rights demonstrations. These are people who are actually on the streets protesting for something more than just a dollar or their pocketbook or just to put food on the table, given the way the slogans have gone.

I see Dr. Clawson in the audience right now and he has always mentioned this line so I'm going to mention this line again. Khomeini said after the revolution that this revolution wasn't about the price of watermelons. I would put to you that the struggle of the Iranian people, 2009, 2017, 2018 isn't just about the price of watermelons.

TAKEYH: I would say there's enormous legislation passed on the hill on human rights. I think FDD had it tabulated, the documents. There's a lot of authority there for the president in terms of just enormous amount of human rights legislation that the hill has passed. That if they can be implemented and so on, you're going to see the results of it. I would recommend you to look at that FDD document. I don't know if it's publicized.

GERECHT: I do occasionally let—

TAKEYH: About all the human rights legislation that has been passed and this enormous amount of authority for an executive branch that congress has provided them.

MAY: Yeah.

MEMARSADEGH: Also, I don't know why the rhetoric is so lacking. From members of Congress for example, women senators on both sides of the aisle. I don't know why, for what good reason they can't get together and issue statements in support of Iranian women or people focused on the persecution of religious minorities in so many countries. Why aren't they speaking out more about the situation of the Baha'i, the Jews the Christians, Zoroastrians.

It seems to me that the basic stuff is not being done. One of the pieces that—I can't remember who the author was. I think it was Reuel. Can you imagine when Communism was collapsing in Poland, if the members of Congress or the US President said, "This is just their business. This has nothing to do with us." Can you imagine? This is a regime. This is an ideology that is an existential threat to liberalism, to the western way of life. We're sitting here talking about, "Well, it's not wise. It's not wise for women senators to take a stance in support of women in Iran." I just don't get it.

MAY: Or, if we were South Africa, would be another example.

MEMARSADEGH: Right. Was that your piece?

MAY: No, I don't think it was. Was it yours?

GERECHT: Yeah.

MAY: Okay, thank you.

SIMMS: Thanks, hi. Martha Simms, I work for House Committee on Homeland Security Committee. My boss, Chairman Michael McCaul is dropping a big bill today on Iran human rights sanctions and has also made some statements about the issue. I wanted to mention that.

My question is, back to the upcoming waiver decision. Just curious Ray, to get more of your thoughts on of these four potential things that the president is thinking about waiving, if he chooses not to waive the CBI sanctions. Could you talk a little bit more about how much risk this would, in terms of blowing up the JCPOA, what would be the implications of that?

TAKEYH: For the taxonomy of sanctions, Mark should have been here. There are two things that I don't like to talk about. Social media, because I'm not on it and sanctions because I can't balance my own checkbook to have the numbers add up. Maybe Patrick can talk about that a little bit. He'll know more than I do.

I think as I said—The question to which I don't have an answer to. Maybe Patrick does, Juan Zarate and others. Can you have a coercive, substantial sanctions policy that coexists with the JCPOA? I don't have an answer to that. My instinct is no.

MEMARSADEGHI: Why is that? Why can't you?

TAKEYH: Because I'm not sure. Patrick, maybe you want to say something about that. Okay, go ahead.

MAY: Right behind you.

TAKEYH: I don't know. My instinct is to suggest that you can't have that.

MEMARSADEGHI: Wasn't the whole point of the JCPOA that it's only on the nuclear? Keep those on the nuclear, add a lot of the human rights.

CLAWSON: One challenge—I'm Patrick Clawson, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A challenge you have is that many of the institutions and individuals that you'd want to sanction for human rights abuses are individuals and institutions who were sanctioned previously. Possibly, because of their nuclear role. But in any case, the sanctions on them were waived under the JCPOA.

So now what you're going to have to do, is to persuade particular the Europeans, but the world as a whole, that you are re-imposing sanctions on those same individuals and institutions where you previously waived sanctions and you're doing it because of their more recent actions that are unrelated to the nuclear matter, that are for instance about human rights. This requires

quite a bit of groundwork with the Europeans in particular and a whole public relations campaign by the administration to explain that the re-imposition of sanctions that you're proposing is because of the later actions that these individuals took. Not about the nuclear matter, but about human rights.

Now, that would happen to be true, but you would have to explain that because otherwise, the regime under any circumstances can be counted on to claim that what you're doing is breaking the JCPOA. But you're going to have to really make a big effort to explain to the world that no, that's not what you're doing here.

MAY: That's easier to accomplish this month than it would have been last month.

GERECHT: Oh absolutely. I might add something there. The way that you can identify easily the sanctions that will have no real bite, real meaning is if the Europeans support them. So, that's your litmus test for it. You use the Europeans to suss out wherever that line is because Europeans will suss out that line before us. They'll go for whatever is south of that line. You can use the Europeans to figure that out.

That's one reason I love going to France because in France, at least if you sit down privately, everyone is intellectually honest. They'll tell you right away, "Yes, we all believe in regime change. Of course we do. Everybody wants the regime to change." The question is, what you're prepared to do it and whether you're willing to risk the JCPOA because that gives them heartburn, because if it goes away then maybe we'll have another military confrontation and the Europeans really don't want to deal with that. They'll figure that question out for you.

Again, I think the major American question is, are you willing to support the democratic movement in Iran with serious sanctions if the cost of that is the JCPOA?

TALEBLU: Martha, to the question you asked, this is one of the ironies of the JCPOA, which was that you're supposed to put a bow on the nuclear issue, tie it up, put it aside and then get to the rest of Iran's lingering nonnuclear threats. The inability of even this panel to get around the JCPOA just shows you how flawed that deal was and how much the deal remains the 800 pound gorilla in the room. The sanctions—

GERECHT: Correction. I think it's fair to say in the eyes of President Obama, it wasn't flawed. The tentacles in fact, were designed.

TALEBLU: The last little bit, here. I fully agree with Patrick. Essentially, what you would have to do is replicate the target set for nuclear sanctions under nonnuclear authorities. That requires again as he said, a massive PR campaign. You want Europe to be on board with you.

Ray just called the Treasury Department designations junk food. We had five junk food designations yesterday but those five entities just to show you the potential flash points coming, even with junk food between the US and the EU, those five entities are owned or controlled by SBIG, which is owned or controlled by AIO, which is owned or controlled by MODAFL, which

is Iran's Ministry of Defense. AIO, SBIG and MODAFL will be de-listed by the EU by 2023 or earlier, pending the deal's implementation timeline. So, even on a tougher, more military issue like ballistic missiles where the French are making good moves and bringing it up at the UN raising it with Rouhani, we will have a flash point even among junk food sanctions, let alone the heavier sanctions that will target the financial sector under different authorities. This is why we need the groundwork to have begun on this yesterday.

TAKEYH: Let me just say, if I can Cliff?

MAY: Please, go ahead.

TAKEYH: During the time of 2015, the internal Iranian debate in the parliament about the JCPOA. General Zarif said some very interesting things in those particular parliamentary hearings.

Number one, he said that incremental violations of the agreement will not be prosecuted. We have seen some incremental violations that have not been prosecuted. Number two, he said that this is not just a nuclear deal that relieves sanctions. This is an agreement that will prevent the re-imposition of the sanctions' architecture under any circumstances.

He was right on the first one, that incremental violation only has documented them. They haven't been really prosecuted. If he's right about the fact, which I think he is by the way. I think what happened in the years 2010 to '13, we have an optimal sanctions' regime. We had never really had that in the case of Iran. During the hostage crisis, we couldn't get the Europeans. We couldn't get it pass at UN resolution because of the Soviets.

I think to go back to Zarif's comments, I'm not sure we will from here on, have an optimal sanctions' policy, but that doesn't mean there is different gradations of coercion that you cannot impose. I don't think we can replicate, I wish Mark was here, the 2015 sanctions under the banner of human rights.

MEMARSADEGHI: They were supposed to be snapped back, but they're not going to snap back.

TAKEYH: I don't think you can—but the question therefore is, what kind of a sanctions package can you have?

MAY: Right. In the back there's a question? Who else has a question? No? Okay, bring it—Come over here and go ahead. You wanted to say something?

TALEBLU: I have a question for us, actually. What do we all think the administration's thinking will be around the waiver? Is the nuclear deal waiver process sufficiently insulated from facts on the ground? Should it be insulated?

I'm not a betting man, but if I had to bet, I would say that the things driving the president and the National Security Council to waive or not waive the NDAA 2012 and the other sanctions

that are up for a waiver on January 12 are the process in the congress right now to amend INARA and the seriousness with which Europe is looking to target Iran's nonnuclear threats and enforce the deal. Those would be I think the driving conditions for the president to waive or not waive. If I had to bet, the president would be looking to deal with the protests in Iran with these new, weaker, nonnuclear measures and he would waive.

That's me, just putting my money on the table. What do we think going down?

MAY: Let me ask this part of it. You all agree that while the president may consider re-imposing sanctions, Congress on a bipartisan basis is not going to be able to manage that.

TAKEYH: This is executive authority. If the president doesn't issue the waiver, the sanctions snap back. It doesn't require-

GERECHT: Congress could come in on its own.

MAY: The president has tried to encourage that and through the—

GERECHT: I tend to operate always on the observation by the French philosopher, Raymond Aron, which is that when statesmen say that something is unacceptable, they've already accepted it. I think you can apply that to all forms of Iran policy.

MEMARSADEGHI: The red line on Syria.

MAY: Okay. Do you have a question, here?

BOLTS: Yeah. I was actually, I'm Shlomo Bolts with the Syrian American Council. I was actually going to talk about Syria. I agree very strongly with those who say Iran is not going to pull back, despite the objections we saw in the protests to what the IRTC is doing and despite some shows of solidarity mutually between the Syrian and Iranian opposition. It's a big deal among the Syrian opposition. One of the top activists, Hadi Abdullah has Tweeted about it multiple times. Iran can't go back because the Iranian backed ground forces are the main forces supporting the Assad regime. The Assad regime is not feasible for them to hold ground without him.

What I was interested in asking is about the opposite, which was raised actually by Karim Sadjadpour. What is the possibility and what would be the effects if the Iran backed militias that have been cultivated in Syria, Afghani Fatemiyoon, Iraqi Nujaba and other militias are redeployed back to Iran to crush the protests? I know that on the one hand, this would actually reduce the chances like you worried that there would be defections. We've already seen some within the Basij because these are people. They don't care. They're Iraqi, they're Afghani. It has nothing to do with them. So there's an advantage in that sense to crack down with them, but I assume there's also disadvantages in the domestic reaction. I'm interested to hear your thoughts on that.

Also, in terms of getting around the JCPOA, are these militias that are not directly tied to the IRGC but are essentially Iranian assets, potentially sanctioning them. Is that one possible route?

TAKEYH: Let me just say, sanctioning. There is authority for sanctioning them, but we have not done so as a deference to the Iraqi government. That's been the conversation between the United States and the Iraqi government about this. It gets into the tenuous situation in Iraq and how much you can have the instability of the Iraqi government. That's been a concern about dealing with that.

I do think that it would backfire for the regime to use those kind of militias inside Iran. Although, there were some instances in 2009 when they did so. But, I'm not quite sure if that's essentially where they want to go in terms of quelling these particular protests. It's an important question you're raising about all these militias that are proliferating and whether ... There is presidential authority to impose sanctions on them but they've always been sort of waived as well.

MAY: A related question. Does what's happening in Iran now change US-Iraqi relations? Do US diplomats now say to Iraqi officials, "You sure you want to put all your eggs in the Iranian basket because they're not as strong as they looked a month ago?"

TAKEYH: I suspect that will happen, at least in terms of US embassy making that sort of a demark to the Iraqi government.

MAY: Is it a persuasive argument if you're an Iraqi politician?

TAKEYH: No.

MAY: Okay.

TALEBLU: But one we should try, nonetheless.

MEMARSADEGHI: Actually, it's interesting. There's a Tweet from an Afghan activist that said, "Please, when you're talking about Syria and all of that and that you don't want the Iranian government to support the war in Syria, have some slogans about Kabul and Hirat and all of that, too because we're sick and tired of these people. We're sick and tired of the Iranians backing our corruption, especially."

MAY: All right. We're now at the final comments. Anything you want to repeat, emphasize, introduce that you haven't? Reuel, why don't you start?

GERECHT: Again, for me I think the most important issue is just the history of this. That is, all these things have been a long time coming. The regime has known about the internal fragility of its order since at least 1989, when the first major riots occurred in Tehran and you had the Basij mobile riot control forces.

People should have seen this coming. I'm regularly amazed by the people who say they are shocked or surprised when demonstrations break out inside of Iran. The demonstrations have defined domestic politics in Iran at least since the death of Khomeini. These fail, more will come. It's something that shouldn't surprise us. It's going to be a constant of Iranian politics.

I will say this because it's always a good idea to end something in recommending a book. I do recommend that everybody look at Misagh Parsa's, he's a professor at Dartmouth's book, *Democracy In Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*. It is despite his sociological approach, it's a fine read and will make you very depressed about the possibilities of internal revolution in Iran. That's not the way this is going to change. It's going to change because the regime falls.

TAKEYH: I would say that today, the landscape has completely changed. It's very inconvenient for Iranians to do that. As Reuel said about the Irish question, "As soon as you figure out the answer, the Irish changed the question." The Iranians have changed the question today. The question is about internal Iranian politics and how do you adjust that. I'm not quite sure if we have caught up to that. We're in a post December 30th universe now and I'm not sure if everybody understands that, within the city and within the bureaucracy.

TALEBLU: Two quick things. One more myth to bust and then one thing to look for in terms of US policy. For US policy first. The president in his October 13 decertification address linked the Iranian nuclear issue to the rest of the bad behavior of the regime at home and abroad. We should be looking now to see will the nuclear issue business really integrated into how we treat the protests in Iran? Will it really be integrated into how we treat the missile issue, the terrorism issue, or will it continue to stovepipe, as we saw in the Bush and Obama Administration? This threat has nothing to do with this threat when really, it's one ideology that's driving them all. That's the first thing I would say to look out for.

The second is this other myth that I wanted to bust, which is given where these protests have begun. The way we report about Iranian politics here is that we say there's this urban rural divide, there's the Tehrani elite and then there's everybody else. It's telling that the protests began in the second largest city, the holy city of Mashhad where there's a lot of urban poor and religious people. What these protests bust and as they spiral to Lorestan and Zanjan and Kermanshah and areas with a lot of ethnic minorities, is that there is less of an urban rural divide than we believe existed beforehand.

If you read more recent papers today, they would site the fact that it took so long. It took three and a half days for the protests to reach Tehran and that Tehranis don't share the same grievances as the people on the periphery. That's not true. Tehranis have long had the notion in their head and hearts that the regime must go, that the regime itself is the impediment to their daily lives. Now, you have the regime's social base, who live on the periphery, who are the urban poor, who are the rural poor, who are the dispossessed, who also buy into that. So now, you have an urban rural consensus on what is the problem facing their daily life.

MEMARSADEGHI: Yeah, I just want to offer some practical things that the United States can do and Europe can do that are not financial sanctions. One is that this world of social

media. I know that we're trying to get our heads around it in so many other ways, including related to American elections. It is just really a wonderful terrain for the Iranian regime to play with.

I'll give you an example. Tavaana, the project that we run that reaches millions of people through social media and has been particularly active through the protests. Our Instagram was shut down for over 10 hours yesterday because regime trolls reported us for posting videos of the violence against protestors, because they were violent. It took, even though we had the State Department on it and everything, it took 10 hours for our page to come back up.

Meanwhile, Tasnim and other Iranian State media are using Instagram freely and using Facebook and Twitter and everything else freely, including to post pictures of protestors and have users identify those protestors so that they can be arrested and tortured.

The United States can do a lot about that. They can do a lot about that very quickly and need to. The US government needs to echo the call for the IRIB, Islamic Republic International Broadcasting, to be sanctioned. The United States government, because of an action that George W. Bush took has been giving millions and millions of dollars every year to organizations like ours to try and promote democracy and human rights in Iran.

Unfortunately, under the Obama Administration, that funding lacked teeth. There was money for example going to organizations talking about cancer awareness or about basically economic development, startups, things like that. That is just a ridiculous use of US taxpayer money when you're talking about a country as important as Iran that is on the brink of democratic breakthrough, democratic transition. There are clearly better choices for that money hopefully under a Republican Administration now, that can start to shift.

Voice of America again, since the Obama Administration began, completely changed. Just before the Green Movement, Voice of America Persian service was popular, it had huge audience, wonderful programming and after the Iran deal and well before that actually, it completely lost its audience because of changes made to reform it, to make it better. Voice of America now is at the very best, anemic. At worst, it just echoes Iranian regime propaganda. Again US taxpayer money should not be going for that.

MAY: Well, thanks very much to the panel. Can we give them a round of applause? I found this edifying. Hopefully, you have. Thanks for coming. We'll see you again here soon.