THE BATTLE FOR POWER IN IRAN

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:
Karim Sadjadpour
Associate
Middle East Program

SPEAKERS:
Mehrzad Boroujerdi
Professor
Syracuse University

Mehdi Khalaji
Senior Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Ali Alfoneh
Resident Fellow
American Enterprise Institute

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KARIM SADJADPOUR: Great. I think it’s a good time to get started. Thank you all so much for coming. I’m Karim Sadjadpour from the Carnegie Endowment. And we’re here to discuss today the battle for power in Iran and Iran’s evolving political architecture. And we’re very fortunate to have three top-notch panelists, each of whom has a very distinguished background, and each of whom has a different perspective about where power lies in Iran, and each of them, you know, has a different implication for U.S. foreign policy as well.

So I thought what I’ll do is – you know, we’re just going to have a conversation between the of us three first. And then I look forward to opening it up to all of you. And what I’ll do is I’ll introduce them one by one. But I’d also like to kind of forgo the suspense, forgo the foreplay, if you will – (laughter) – and kind of out each of their positions to, kind of, establish where we sit. And then I’ll ask them kind of to probe and defend their positions; and then, again, look forward to handing it over to all of you.

[00:01:41]

To my – the far left – to my far left is Mehrzad Boroujerdi from Syracuse University, who has written one of my favorite books on Iran called, “Iranian Intellectuals and the West.” And Mehrzad is doing a very interesting project now, which is looking at the background of Iran’s political leadership in the parliament and elsewhere, kind of charting the path from which they’re coming. And you know, I joke with Mehrzad that as an academic – he’s the one academic on our panel – it’s difficult for me to summarize his view in less than 15 minutes. (Laughter.) But as a very crude summary, Mehrzad is the – is the one panelist here who assesses that Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, is firmly in charge. He controls Iran’s most important political institutions. And the U.S. has no other option but to engage with him directly.

To my left is Mehdi Khalaji from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who has done some really fascinating work on Khamenei himself. He’s actually writing a political biography now of Khamenei and also the prospect for succession in Iran. And if I had to summarize Mehdi’s position, I would – I would say that he’s in agreement with Mehrzad that Khamenei remains the man in charge in Iran. But as opposed to Mehrzad, he would argue that Khamenei is essentially unengageable. It’s an exercise in futility to try to engage Khamenei, and therefore we need to try to go over his head to Revolutionary Guardsmen whose power is growing at the expense of Khamenei.

[00:03:27]

To my right, in more ways than one, is Ali Alfoneh – (laughter) – my good friend from the American Enterprise Institute. And in my opinion, Ali has done the most fascinating work on the Revolutionary Guards. He’s an extremely careful and meticulous researcher. And I have both Mehdi and Ali on speed dial. Whenever I have a question about either the clergy or the Revolutionary Guards, I frequently bother them. And Ali has an interesting position in that he argues that Ayatollah Khamenei is essentially a figurehead. The real power in Iran are the Revolutionary Guards and unfortunately they only – they respond much more to coercion than they do incentives.
So those are kind of the positions that I wanted to lay out here. And I wanted to start by posing a question to Mehrzad, because as I mentioned, you’re doing some very interesting research about the backgrounds of these folks. And I wanted to ask you – I think the question I lay out here is whether Iran is still a theocracy ruled by clergy or is it now a military dictatorship ruled by Revolutionary Guards? I think Hillary Clinton said last year that Iran has become a military dictatorship. I wanted to ask you, is our anecdotal assessment that there are less turbans in the Majlis – there are less clerics in the Majlis, and the Revolutionary Guards are now increasingly a political and economic force – is that borne out in your research?

And just to provide some context for the audience, in the late ‘80s, a few things happened in Iran, which I think planted the seeds in some ways for the Revolutionary Guards’ rise. After Ayatollah Khomeini died, Ayatollah Khamenei took his place. And because he lacked – Khamenei lacked the religious legitimacy of Khomeini, I think in many ways he had to seek legitimacy in the barracks, rather than the mosque. And I think that’s one explanation for the rise of the Revolutionary Guards. The other is that you – we – there was an eight-year war with Iraq, which several hundred thousand Iranians and even Iranian men were employed – and once this war ended, I think there was a question of, you know, how these – how these folks were going to be employed. And for that reason, it opened up some space for them in the Iranian economy and Iranian politics.

So that’s my question to Mehrzad. Does this kind of anecdotal assessment we have that the Revolutionary Guards are on the rise at the expense of the clergy – is that borne out in your research?

MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI: OK. As you pointed out, there seems to be two dominant perspectives nowadays as to who is in charge. One is what I, you know, refer to as the theory of sultanism, arguing that Ayatollah Khamenei has become a new sultan – you know, utilizing Max Weber’s argument about, you know, sultanism – and that the buck stops with him and he is not, you know, responsive to anyone. And my argument is going to be that even though the Iranian regime has elements of sultanism, it is not proper to call it a sultanistic state just right now, because some of the defining characteristics of sultanistic states are not present in Iran.

On the other hand, we have another theory, the theory of praetorianism that argues that the Revolutionary Guards have taken over. And with all due respect to my friend Ali and to Hillary Clinton, I disagree. I disagree because I think, you know, especially in this town, we seem to be working on anecdotal evidence. And as an academic, that’s not my style of operation.

So as you pointed out, with the work – with the help of a colleague here, we have put together a database of 1,900 – over 1,900 numbers of the Iranian political elite from day one of the revolution to the present, gathering over 100,000 fields of information. Based on that data, what I can tell you right now is the following: that it is true that the share of
IRGC, the Revolutionary Guards, has been going up in every institution of power in Iran across the board. So in other words, in the Expediency Council, Experts Assembly, parliament, Cabinet, et cetera, the number has been going up so that today some 20 percent of the Expediency Council members, 6 percent of Experts Assembly, 19 percent of the Majlis, and 27 percent of the Cabinet are former IRGC members.

However, it is inaccurate to claim that the Revolutionary Guards far outnumber the clerics. The numbers, indeed, indicate something quite different in the sense that according to our data clerics constitute 43 percent of Expediency Council, 100 percent of Experts Assembly, 58 percent of Guardian Council, 16 percent of Majlis, and 4 percent of Cabinet ministers. In other words, the only arena where the IRGC members outnumber the clerics is in the Cabinet. Everywhere else it’s the clerics that have the upper hand.

And not only that, right, we also need to keep reminding ourselves that Iran is a theocratic state. And as such, there are a constellation of positions – almost all of the judiciary, for example – that are reserved for the clerical class, right. So I mean, I can go on and on with numbers from, you know, what goes on with Friday prayers, et cetera, but the message is quite clear. The Revolutionary Guards are the new kids on the block, right. They are trying to make sure that everyone recognizes that they’re a – you know, a player in the political game in Iran. But I think it’s a bit of an exaggeration to say that they have taken over.

Look, Iran’s political culture is not one that is necessarily infatuated with strong men ruling, right. The IRGC does not have the political capital. Their message does not resonate with the reference points, right, the class or the groups that are – and constitute a cultural reference in Iran. And therefore all these deficiencies of the Revolutionary Guards has caught up with them, right. And now, in addition, one should also keep reminding himself or herself that the IRGC, just like any other institution of power in Iran, is not a homogenous entity and that it is has gone through a serious metamorphoses over the last 30 years, right. So this is not an organization that speaks with a single voice, despite the fact that in this town in particular, we like to portray them to be, you know, as such.

MR. SADJADPOUR: That’s a very good point and a segue way for Ali, because that’s exactly right, that the Revolutionary Guards are not a monolithic institution. Just like the clergy, you have moderate clerics like Khatami, you have more hardline clerics like Mesbah-Yazdi.

And so how do you see the internal divisions in the Revolutionary Guards? And what are the debates happening? What is it that motivates them? And you know, who are the key players you think we should watch? And how do you sustain the argument that Khamenei has basically become an – (in Persian) – as we say in Persian – just, you know, the tea boy of the Revolutionary Guards. You know, how do you – what is your kind of evidence for the argument that the Revolutionary Guards are firmly in charge?
ALI ALFONEH: Well, first of all, thank you very much for your kind invitation. And thank you for providing me with this opportunity to have this discussion with colleagues and your distinguished audience.

To begin with, I have to challenge some of the data that Professor Boroujerdi has presented to us. First of all, we have, for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, a president whose credentials is because of the fact that he was a war veteran. He was a member of the Basij, and he is a former member of the Revolutionary Guards. In the United States and Israel, it’s perfectly normal to have great soldiers, great generals becoming presidents. Mr. Ahmadinejad is the first individual in the 33 years history of the Islamic Republic of Iran who is a war veteran. So there is a difference.

Then we take a look at the Cabinet of which Mr. Ahmadinejad presides, there are 18 Cabinet ministers. Out of 18 Cabinet ministers, there are 12 individuals – 12 Cabinet ministers who are former members of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij. All of them are war veterans. Even more interestingly, there is only one individual left in the Cabinet who is a cleric, and that is the intelligence minister. And the reason for this, ladies and gentlemen, is the fact that we do have a legal requirement in Iran that the intelligence minister must be a cleric.

That is also true. My criticism of Professor Boroujerdi’s data on the parliament – it has become more difficult to analyze the social backgrounds of members of the parliament. Until mid-1990s, you could get hold of very, very nice booklets published by the parliament called – (in Persian) – you know, acquaintance with members of the parliament, in which you could have access to information such as the profession of the father of the member of the parliament, which could give you a very, very nice access of – into information about social background analysis, but also very accurate information about their careers until they got elected. Sometimes by mid-1990s, especially after the election victory of Mr. Khatami, after which we see a radical increase in number of former officers of the Revolutionary Guards becoming parliamentarians, you see distortion of the data in the books published by the parliament. So the parliament is not particularly interested in sharing information about the military background of many of its members.

And another point of criticism in this regard is the fact that many members of the parliament are so-called amphibious individuals. What does it mean? (In Persian) – we say in Persian. (In Persian) – or amphibious means that these individuals are both clerics and Revolutionary Guards members. They are educated at the theological seminary of the Revolutionary Guards at the political-ideological indoctrination center of the guards in Qom. It is a school called Martyr Mahallati University. So they are clerics, but they’re also wearing the uniform. They are members of the Revolutionary Guards as well. Therefore, when we take a look at the composition of the political elites of Iran, we should take more care and we should analyze those social backgrounds of the individuals more carefully.
And then to your question – do excuse me, I speak a lot; you know, you should think that I’m the cleric in this panel. (Laughter.) Yes, it is true. Of course, there are – there are different groups and factions within the Revolutionary Guards. Ever since the revolution of 1979, there has been factions within the IRGC.

However, Iran is not the only military dictatorship in the world. There are also political factions in the Pakistani military. But the Pakistani state continues to survive as a weakened state, you could argue, or some would even say a failed state. But the Pakistani military is firmly in control. There is a civilian government, but they are not in real power. Real power in the country is with the Pakistani military, despite all the differences and factionalism that is present in that institution. And why does it survive? Well, because of the very simple fact that it is the only functioning institution in Pakistan. They know that if they begin fighting amongst themselves, the entire Pakistani state would collapse.

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Let me give you some indications – a few; and I'll make it very brief – about some of the differences that are within the Revolutionary Guards. Yes, there are ideological differences. And after the 2009 presidential election, even the chief commander of the Revolutionary Guards admitted that there were members of the Revolutionary Guards who sympathized with Mr. Mir-Hossein Mousavi – this, you know, from their own sources.

But that is not the most important cleavage within the guards. There are functional differences within the IRGC. For example, those officers who are running the national security business and apparatus of the Revolutionary Guards, they have a particular mindset. They have a particular lens through which they understand world events, and they pursued those interests. But within that organization, within the Revolutionary Guards, there are also individuals who are professionally tasked with the job of making money, producing profit for the economic empire of the Revolutionary Guards. And the first priority of those individuals within the organization, of course, is to make money. And there are, every once in a while, clashes of interest. There are conflicts within the organization because of the functional differences within the force.

And I shall not elaborate on social differences, you know, difference between the Basij and the – and the Revolutionary Guards and that kind of things – we can – we can get back to that. But the most important thing is that the IRGC is increasingly behaving like the Pakistani military. Despite of its differences within the organization, it’s managing to survive.

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MR. SADJADPOUR: Before I hand it over to Mehdi, I want to pin you down on this one question of what is your evidence for the argument that the Revolutionary Guards are firmly in charge and Khamenei is now merely the figurehead.

MR. ALFONEH: Now, my research background was that of comparative studies – comparative studies into civil-military relations in the world. What I studied was a number of military coup d’états, you know, ranging from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and
tried to understand what are the common characteristics of those regimes which produce an outcome which is called a military coup d’état.

One of them was the fact that the regime uses its own armed forces against the domestic opposition so that the army gets a dual role, both the role of protecting the territorial integrity of the state, but also the role of protecting the ideological nature of the regime. In other words, a – an ideological policing job, which paves the path of the army to intervene in politics.

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And the second characteristic is weakness of civilian institutions. This is – this is exactly what we see now – weak civilian institutions and a civilian leadership which is actively using the Revolutionary Guards to intervene in politics to secure the survival of the state. And this organization, the Revolutionary Guards, is pursuing its own interests, disregarding the national interests of Iran, for example, in the nuclear negotiations; for example, when it comes to the issue of the sanctions regime, which unfortunately to begin with, at the very least, have benefitted the Revolutionary Guards.

So the IRGC is in reality interested in an outcome which is not in the interest of the state, but it is in the interest – corporate interest – of the Revolutionary Guards. I can give you some more detailed information afterwards.

MR. SADJADPOUR: OK. Great.

Mehdi. Some of you may know that Mehdi actually was reared in Qom. He – in his – in a previous life was being trained to become an ayatollah. His father is an ayatollah. So Mehdi has a truly unique background to talk about the world of Qom.

And I wanted to ask you if you agree with this assessment that the role of the clergy in Iran has been increasingly diminished. If that’s true, how have they been handling it? And second, have the clergy become essentially a spent force in Iran? Do they – are they still relevant? If you look historically in 20th century Iran, at key moments it was the clergy who oftentimes were able to animate public opinion and have a major impact on the country’s politics. Do they still have that ability to animate public opinion in Iran?

MR. KHALAJI: Thanks very much for organizing this event, and thanks to all of you for coming. I would add to what Karim said about my background that I am a recovering ayatollah. (Laughter.) So, the clerical class in Iran is a very complicated class. It's very difficult for analysts and for scholars to define what clerical class is in Iran.

A cleric is someone who gets paid by a clerical establishment, or is he someone who wear turban and robe and clerical uniform? Is he someone who studied in the seminaries in Qom, Mashhad, Isfahan, outside Iran? Who is a cleric?
Actually, there is no definition for a cleric, because we have many people who have studied in the seminaries of Iran for a long time, but they don’t get paid by the clerical establishment and they don’t wear the clerical uniform. We have many others who – like, for example, Mr. Khatami. Is he a cleric? Because he wears a uniform, he studied in the seminaries, but he also studied in universities, but he’s – not get paid by clerical establishment. He never got paid by clerical establishment, before and after the revolution.

So it’s always difficult to understand who can be under this umbrella of the title cleric. So that makes it very difficult when it comes to the definition of the nature of Islamic republic. First of all, I don’t agree with the term theocracy to be applied in the case of Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini, who was the founder of the Islamic Republic – theologically and from a juridical point of view, Shia juridical point of view, he was a heretic.

The theory of vilayat-e faqih, and his interpretation of this theory, was against the tradition of Islamic Shia theology. On the other hand, most of people who worked in the government as clerics – they were not traditional clerics. They mostly were young, revolutionary clerics. Many of them were trained or educated, university-educated.

Let’s talk about Khamenei. Khamenei, because I’m working on his life – everything about him is unclerical. If you go to his, you know, before, you know, pre-Islamic, prerevolutionary life, you see that he was not a conventional, typical cleric, you know. He was a fan of Persian literature, Persian music. He was reading Western novels. He’s a fan of Russian 19th-century literature. He loves Tolstoy, he hates Dostoevsky. So, well – and he smoked pipes, and even the way he wear this clerical uniform is not a traditional way of wearing it.

After revolution, you don’t see him in a clerical position. For a while, he is a deputy of Revolutionary Guard. He is the representative of Ayatollah Khomeini in the ministry of defense. He’s the president, which is not a clerical job. And when he becomes supreme leader, one of the most interesting things about him is that he picks up, usually, clerics, ayatollahs – a well-respected cleric runs his office.

Look at Ayatollah Khomeini himself. Ayatollah Khomeini, the people who were running his office – Ayatollah Tavassoli, Ayatollah Razmara Suli (sp) – they were people who were known within the, you know, clerical circles as people who studied well in the seminaries for a long time. Or you go, for example, Ayatollah Sistani: You know, the people who run their offices are clerics, I mean, the key people.

But in case of Ayatollah Khamenei, when he became supreme leader, he picked up two clerics to run his office. One is Muhammad Muhammadi Golpayegani. Another one is Asghar – Asghar Mir Hejazi. Both of them are former deputy of the intelligence ministry. Before – after revolution, they have – they have not spent a minute in the seminaries. So and if you go back, in the beginning of the revolution, well, Golpayegani was in the army and
Hejazi was in the Committee of Islamic Revolution, which then was integrated into the police.

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So his office actually is run by nonclerics – or clerics who have more background in intelligence or IRGC or Basij or, you know, this sort of security apparatus, than seminary itself. We know that Khamenei – his religious credential was not recognized within clerical establishment.

OK, let’s go back to your question. If you are talking about clergy in Iran, we have to distinguish between two things – one, individuals; second, the establishment itself. Clerical establishment has no systematic relationship with the government. While the official religion of the country is Shiism and none of legislations can go against Islamic law, religious establishment, clerical establishment, is not the source of legislation.

The only source of legislation in the country is a lay, secular organization called parliament. So clerics – clerical establishment as an institution has no systematic relationship with the parliament. All parliamentarians can be nonclerics. You know, there is no condition for an MP – there is no requirement that force him to be a cleric. No, they can be all laypeople.

On the other hand, we have some specific positions, like members of Assembly of Experts, the supreme leader, the minister of intelligence, the chief of judiciary, that requires them to be an ayatollah. But that said, for the rest of the government, none of them should be an ayatollah. And something else – this is not the clerical establishment who introduce its candidates for supreme leader, for Assembly of Experts, for chief of judiciary, for the ministry of intelligence.

This is the government who decides who’s going to be in these positions. And what’s interesting is that, yes, the judiciary – the head of judiciary is a cleric, but they don’t pick up the staff from seminary. They have their own universities to train cleric-judge for the judiciary, ministry of intelligence, and others.

What’s interesting is that recently, Mr. Saeedi, who is the representative of Ayatollah Khamenei in the Revolutionary Guard – he said that we are going to create IRGC seminary to train IRGC’s clerics. That’s very interesting. It means that the clerical establishment itself does not train cadre for any section of the government. If they want to use clerics, they have to train their own clerics. So that’s why I wouldn’t call Islamic republic a theocracy. It’s very difficult to call it a theocracy.

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There is another reason for that. A theocracy means that a government which is based on religious teachings and religious theology. What is in Iran, what gives authority to a ruling jurist, what makes him different from other jurists, is not his juridical knowledge. There are many ayatollahs out there. Many of them are more knowledgeable than Ayatollah Khamenei.
Ayatollah Sistani is known to be more knowledgeable ayatollah in the Shiite world. He has the broadest range of, you know, followers throughout Shiite world. What makes a ruling jurist different than other ayatollahs is not theology, but his ability to recognize the interests of Islamic Republic.

So in case of any conflict between Islamic law and the expediency of the regime he – by his order, expediency of the regime trumps Islamic law. So in other words, the ruling jurist is not the one who implement Islamic law. He is the one who has religious authority to dismiss Islamic law, to ignore Islamic law. So that makes it difficult for Islamic Republic to be called a theocracy.

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MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me press you on this question of whether the clergy still have the ability to animate popular opinion in Iran. Are they still relevant in that respect?

MR. KHALAJI: None of the – none of the movements we had in the past were explicitly seeking secular, liberal, democratic values, even when in the period of constitutional revolution 100 years ago – when some clerics, a few clerics, supported this revolution, it was not because they were, you know, in love with secular, democratic values, the – because they were against decisions made by shahs of Qajar and they wanted to change the situation; they were looking for more stable government to protect their law. Don’t forget that Mirza Shirazi, one of the greatest marja in Iraq, he issued a fatwa against the use of tobacco – tobacco –

MR. SADJADPOUR: Tobacco.

MR. KHALAJI: – which was very troublemaking for Nassereddin Shah.

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So in the course of Iranian Revolution, clerics were not supporting secular, democratic ideals. So they were supporting the idea of anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism, you know, social justice and these sorts of things.

The thing is that clerical establishment cannot support democracy genuinely. Democracy, we don’t have a theory for religious democracy yet in Shiism. You know, we have religious intellectuals, but they have nothing to do with clergy. I’m talking about clergy. The theology is incompatible with the liberal political theories. So I don’t see any democratic movement in future that can open a space for the leadership of clergy.

So I think the clergy in a secular government would continue to become secular – or sorry, traditional, but marginalized. They would lose their leading role.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Mehrzad, Ali made the point that many members of Iran’s political elite are so-called amphibious, which is to say not that they’re reptiles, but that they’re both – have a background in both the Revolutionary Guards and the clergy.
So in many ways, this kind of debate that I’ve created today is a false one. It’s a false
dichotomy between the clerics versus the Revolutionary Guards, because you have some
clerics that are closely aligned with the Revolutionary Guards against other clerics and vice
versa. So my question to you is, what is a better way of framing the internal fault lines with
Iran? If you’re saying it’s not the clerics versus the Revolutionary Guards, what are the
important battles which are taking place in Iran?

And if you have any – also – (cross talk, inaudible) –

MR. BOROUJERDI: Yeah, yeah, sure. No, I’m not sure that we need to do away
with that dichotomy. I think it’s still quite relevant. And so let me elaborate on that by
responding to some of the comments Ali made.

[0:33:48]

The first point about Ahmadinejad being a war veteran – I don’t know how that was
considered a criticism of what I said. OK, so what? There is no conspiracy. Not only
Ahmadinejad; we have seen a generation, right, of people who went and served in the war,
the new generation who has arrived. These are the newcomers.

In every institution of power, my data shows that the number of Revolutionary
Guards as well as the war veterans are going up, right? So this is – there is no conspiracy
about that. I didn’t quite get the significance of – why is it that Ahmadinejad. Nor is it really
accurate to say there has been a qualitative difference between Ahmadinejad and others.
Nineteen percent of Khatami’s second administration were people with the Revolutionary
Guards. Ahmadinejad’s present Cabinet is 27. So how significant is that 8 percent extra one
if you want to really dwell on the numbers? I’m not sure about that.

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Your criticism as to not being able to rely on some sources – yes, mindful of that, we
are being scrupulous in terms of checking out the background of these people. So I cannot
bother you with, you know, how we do double-checking of information, not just based on
one source and another, looking at personal – the person’s personal bios, looking at
interviews, double-checking information with regime insiders who have left Iran, et cetera, et
ce etera, to verify the data.

And again, as far as these amphibious types – again, the numbers are not really that
significant to be able to do away with the dichotomy. And regarding Mehdi’s argument, let
me just say: As a political scientist who teaches comparative politics, right, we have certain
categories of regimes. You know, you have a liberal state; you have an authoritarian state, a
totalitarian state, et cetera.

When I encounter a regime such as the one in Iran, where by looking at the nature of
the constitution, by looking at the ideology of the state, by looking at the leadership cadres
and on and on and on, you will see this open expression, right, of religious sentiments and
ideological preferences for Islam, that satisfies my requirements for calling a state a theocratic state, right?

You know, look, in a way – for those of you who have seen the Harry Potter movies, right, you remember that famous scene where you go to the train station and there is a magical door that opens up, and you go into the wall, et cetera. Looking at Iran as if it is that train station, right, using that as a theocratic state is quite misleading. It is when you go through that hidden door and into this fantastical, you know, world of the Islamic Republic where you will see how things go.

So we cannot – we cannot argue by anecdotes, nor can we argue by ideal types, right, to say a true theocracy should be like this. We have a theocratic state – bastardized, no less – right in front of our eyes. And it is operating in the manner that it is, but that’s the fact of life about, you know, the Iranian state right now.

My argument is that the clerics are still quite relevant because these guys have been consolidating their base. It is true – I mean, again, we need to look at the logic, folks, right? Look at it this way: Because in Iran you do not have political parties, therefore Revolutionary Guards can perform the function of the political parties in many ways, right? They can – they can come and do that. Because the clerics are losing the electoral game, they are, you know, increasingly gravitating toward nonelected offices in Iran and therefore opening up a space for these former Rev Guards, former war veterans, et cetera, to be able to come and populate the spaces left by the departure of the clerics.

But to look at the data on the Majles, for example, and say, OK, therefore the Revolutionary Guards are winning; the clerics are becoming irrelevant, is quite misleading. Because you will see when you track the clerics that they are migrating to more important positions, right, in the bureaucratic state, whether it’s the Guardian Council, whether it’s the Assembly of Experts, and on and on and on.

So we cannot take a snapshot view of Iran’s politics or the person – or the career of any one individual and say, at this point in time this is what is happening. We need to have a camcorder image of Iran and look at, you know, the career of these guys, where they ended up, et cetera.

So my argument is this: My argument is that, again – another metaphor: Ayatollah Khamenei – Mehdi is quite correct – when he came, he was a nobody; he had a crisis of legitimacy. He was a mediocre Hojatoleslam, et cetera. When he came to power, he was like a Mini Minor. Today, he’s a monster truck, right?

The evolution from being a Mini Minor to a monster truck has come about because the guy is quite a deft, skilled political player. He has been able to outmaneuver every one of his important clerics, right – from the likes of Rafsanjani, Karroubi, Mousavi and everyone else, right, to the reform – to the entire reformist camp.
Frankly, over the last two years – again, judging, putting aside – my political preferences aside for a moment – over the last two years, tumultuous years post-2009, Ayatollah Khamenei has worked brilliantly. He has gotten rid of the reformists. He has, you know, marginalized, intimidated Ahmadinejad and his gang, right?

There is no one in Qom. Name one single ayatollah in Qom who has the ability, the name recognition, the ability to mass mobilize. There are 160,000 clerics in Qom and throughout Iran that depend on their monthly stipend – 160,000 that depend on monthly stipends from the office of the coordinator of the seminaries, right? Or their number says 220, but, you know, we have figured, in terms of human bodies, we have 160,000 people. So, in other words, he has created a machinery where no one in Qom has the stature to – I mean, he is Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, right? Sobhani and others, are these household names, people able to challenge Khamenei?

I mean, look, if we adopt an institutional approach – and that’s really my bottom line for the presentation today – that reasoning by anecdotes is simplistic, right? I cannot look at, you know, this person and that – we need to have an institutional approach. The institutional approach tells us this guy has been – has – you know, assuming more and more power; able to marginalize his, you know, opponents throughout the last 23 years, right; demonstrating very deft political skills.

So I can give you evidence after evidence how – of how he has overruled everyone else. But I’d like Ali or somebody else to tell me – give me one single instance in which he has been vetoed by somebody else. We do not have an example. In – (inaudible) – in everything else he was able to outnumber others, right? But again, not based on hearsay; constitutionally, the office of the supreme leader is the safest, the most powerful office in the country. It’s hard to intimidate the guy, right, constitutionally speaking, right? Again, just like the rest of us, I don’t have any sense of what goes on behind closed doors. You know, I’m not privy to that information.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I think just – I’ll hand it over to both of you. I just want to follow with one very simple question. That is, that if you were looking for important signs of dissent in Iran, and if you – if you were asked, you know, what are the important indicators you would look at to say that there’s growing discontent with Khamenei, where would you look? Meaning, what is his most important institutional power base?

MR. BOROUJERDI: OK, so historically, let us remind ourself – and I don’t want to make this into a causal argument, but historically, we have had two instances over the last 30 years where a mass movement has occurred in Iran, right, on two occasions: one in 1997 with Khatami’s elections, and the other one with the 2009 events. On those two occasions, we have had elite ruptures – elite cleavages, right? Again, I’m not making the causal relationship, but to – for the regime to experience any type of serious opposition, right, we have to have instances where this mass mobilization coincides – overlaps, right – is
juxtaposed on top of that elite ruptures, before something serious happens. Otherwise you have, you know, a small fire here and there that the regime is able to, you know, control.

[00:42:52]

Economically, right – as a result of the sanctions and so forth – the regime has been hurt, absolutely. So people will held the ayatollah responsible for that. People have not forgotten and forgiven about the election rigging of two years ago, right? That too is attributed to the supreme leader. So he’s – you know, he has had to spend a great deal of his political capital recovering from the fiasco of 2009. But again, looking at it as a – as a political scientist who looks at the balance of power, I ask myself, is this guy really weaker now than he was five years ago? Three years ago?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Where is this power coming from, what’s the power base?

MR. BOROUJERDI: The power comes basically from the fact that he has made a long series – and I have a name if you want – name of organization. There are a long list of constituencies in Iran, right, that are beholden to him. Let me just give you one instance, right? There is such a thing with the innocuous name of the Imam Khomeini Imdab Committee, right – help committee. This is an organization that, according to the government’s own official, right, is providing subsidies to 4 million – 4 million Iranian families, right? And multiply it by, you know, a factor of four or five, about the average number of people in a family – and you get to see what it is about the outreach of organizations like this, right?

Why is it that the clerics in Qom do not have the mobilization capacity anymore, right? Because after Montazeri, not only you do not have a, you know, high-caliber cleric who is able to stand to the regime and therefore carry a lot of it – notice, for example, Ayatollah Sanei has been as critical as Montazeri. But who cares about, you know, what Ayatollah Sanei says as far as a mass movement is concerned?

[00:44:40]

So my argument is that Ayatollah Khamenei’s power – and this is really the message that Washington needs to hear – that instead of just reducing it to that one individual and this simplistic notion of a one-man show – Iran is not a one-bullet state, right? The man has managed to create an institutional base of power; create a lot of stakeholders from Friday prayer leaders to the whole bureaucracy of elections, and so forth and so on. And then we analyze him. Or then we analyze anyone who is able to challenge him; we need to be looking at his lieutenants. But otherwise we are missing the boat as to why this guy is able to do the type of things he has been doing.

MR. ALFONEH: Thank you. I’m terribly sorry if I left the impression on you that I believe that one should do away with the dichotomy between the clerics and the Revolutionary Guards. No, I believe that that is the real dynamics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And this is what is pushing politics forward in Iran.
When it comes to the – you know, the difference between the two, and the conflict – I'll try to explain this in very simple ways. Clerics used to rule Iran in the past. And the Revolutionary Guards was and is constitutionally mandated with the job of protecting the regime, safeguarding the regime against internal and external enemies. So there was a clear division of labor between the two institutions. Now there is no longer that’s – that division of labor. The Revolutionary Guards is both ruling the Islamic Republic of Iran and protecting it against foreign threats and internal – domestic threats to the survival of the regime.

Is this a conspiracy after all? Yes, you are right. All countries, including the United States of America – experiencing long wars, you see the rise of individuals who go into politics. Very, very soon – you know, a couple of years from now – you are likely to see a new class of politicians in the United States who were former soldiers: men and women, war heroes, who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Just to cut you off very quickly –

MR. ALFONEH: But the difference in Iran – (laughter) – the difference in Iran, of course – the difference in Iran, of course, is the fact that there is not a single individual representing the regular army in the Cabinet. There has not been a single individual whose military past was served in the regular military, since 1989 until today – since the abolishment of the ministry of the Revolutionary Guards. If you look at the Iranian parliament from 1979 until today – and I am really sorry, whenever I hear Professor Boroujerdi praising his own work as academic and our work as nonacademic – anecdotal – (laughter) –

MR. BOROUJERDI: I have a response .

[00:47:30]

MR. ALFONEH: My study of the parliaments in Iran from 1980 until today shows that there has not been a single individual whose past was served in the regular military – not a single individual. Don’t you think it’s statistically significant? Don’t you think it’s academically correct to say so? (Laughter.) So there is –

MR. KHALAJI: Where are you going with that? So what? There are other classes too that were not represented. So what?

MR. ALFONEH: So there is a conspiracy. The regular military, which is far bigger than the Revolutionary Guards – it has 300,000 individuals serving in the regular military. You do not have a single individual representing them politically. But the Revolutionary Guards, which is only 120,000 individuals, is represented. So that is of course also very important for us to know.

And then the sign, the evidence of the Revolutionary Guards vetoing political decision making. Let me give you an example which is – does not refer to Mr. Khamenei. It refers to the master of Mr. Khamenei, to Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. According to primary
source material – academics, please listen to me – (laughter) – primary source material, the
late Grand Ayatollah Khomeini was ready to end the war with Iraq after liberation of
Khorramshahr in 1982.

[00:48:47]

The Revolutionary Guards vetoed that decision, and the war continued for six more
years. My sources are: Mr. Rafsanjani’s (?) memoirs; the last speech of the late Ahmad
Khomeini, son of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini; and the memoirs of Grand Ayatollah
Montazeri. If the Revolutionary Guards even managed to veto Grand Ayatollah Khomeini,
the founder of the Islamic Republic, why not Mr. Khamenei, who according to all of you is
nobody? This is why, ladies and gentlemen – (laughter) – that Iran has transformed into a
military dictatorship.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Mehdi, you wanted to respond? (Laughter.)

MR. KHALAJI: I think – in terms of defining what theocracy is, yeah, we can
discuss about it, you know, forever. I don’t care about what theocracy is. What I care is
what Islamic Republic is. But it’s important to agree on the different characteristics of this
regime. If you want to call that at the end theocracy, I’m fine with it. What I am saying is
that the very fact that Ayatollah Khamenei, as you said, was nobody – he was Hojatoleslam
in the morning; in the afternoon he was called Ayatollah – proves that he’s afraid he does
not come from clerical establishment. This was not clerical establishment who made him
the supreme leader of Iran. This is not even clerical establishment who gives the title of
ayatollah to people anymore.

[00:50:39]

Let me give you a very important example. Who is an ayatollah? Who is ayatollah?
Ayatollah means somebody who studied long enough to become able to have his own
interpretation of the legal, primary texts of Islam. So for him, he’s not allowed – since he
has this intellectual faculty, he’s not religiously allowed to follow other ayatollahs. And he
has to follow himself, because he has this intellectual ability to deduct the orders of God
from religious texts. OK?

Traditionally, people were called ayatollah by a certificate given to them by their
teachers. In the seminary, you study for 10, 15, 20 years. At the end, at the highest level,
your teacher gives you a certificate; says that, yes, this person has studied with me. I
discussed with him for many years different legal issues, and I can attest – I can confirm that
he has this faculty, so he’s an ayatollah. He’s mujtahid, OK?

What happened in Islamic Republic is that, if you have hundreds of such certificates
from your hundreds of teachers, that does not make you an ayatollah who will – would be
qualified to become a member of Assembly of Experts or ministry of intelligence. An
ayatollah who wants to become to – who wants to hold a political position has – his
intellectual status should be certified by Guardian Council.
So, for example, assembly of – Assembly of Experts, when they want to do election, all candidates should go through the qualification process by Guardian Council. They have to prove to – affirm their – they have to prove to Guardian Council that they are ayatollah. So in other words, these titles, even these titles – yes, they have gained political function. But these titles are given to them by government, not clerical establishment.

You have mentioned that Ayatollah Khamenei – I have always praised Ayatollah Khamenei for being a very mediocre, ordinary person – (laughter) – unlike his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini was a genius, charismatic leader, you know. He work, he run the country without any organization, you know. He was really a revolutionary leader.

But Ayatollah Khamenei was a very ordinary person. He became the supreme leader – he became the successor of Ayatollah Khomeini just by accident. He was not the natural successor of Khomeini. There were many other people more important and more powerful than him that could – people expected to become the successor. But if he is, as you say, the monster truck, he is – he’s here by planning. He is here by calculation. He is a very good planner.

But in naming these institutions that he has created – developed to, you know, establish his power, you underestimate the importance of Revolutionary Guard. And in your study, I think one of the criticisms I have is that you emphasize on quantity more than anything else. When we say that Revolutionary Guard has got lots of power, we don’t mean that the members of Revolutionary Guard are physically everywhere. For example, we don’t mean that 90 percent of Revolutionary Guard members actually are members of parliament, so the parliament is under influence of Revolutionary Guard. No. The way they exert their authority is much more complicated.

Revolutionary Guard is involved in, for – I give you an example. The Revolutionary Guard over sport business in Iran, over football clubs, over cinema industry in Iran. It doesn’t mean that they hire members of Revolutionary Guard to make movies. No. They control the money, they control the network, they put them in a direction they desire. And they influence – their influence goes beyond the physical presence in each area. And I think that too much emphasis on the quantity would, you know, undermine this fact that even – you can be a cleric, but you can be extremely under influence of Revolutionary Guard, as clerical establishment is.

You know, you said 220,000 clerics are in Iran. My number says more, because statistics in Iran always are problematic. But let’s say 200,000 clerics. There is a special unit, a military unit in Iran called the Imam Sadeq 83 Brigade. They are something like 2,000 people. And they wear this Basiji uniform with turban. They are very bizarre animals. (Laughter.) So these people – 2,000 people in Qom – they control 200,000 people. If you think that Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi or other clerics, they don’t dare to challenge
Khamenei, it’s because of those 2,000 military men in Qom. So that’s the influence of Revolutionary Guard. So it’s not only about numbers.

Second, with regard to Ali – because we shouldn’t leave him without criticism, you know – (laughter) –

MR. ALFONEH: I was about to praise you for – (laughter) – good, I didn’t praise you – (laughter) –

MR. KHALAJI: Some think that, you know, Ali is making money by working on Revolutionary Guard. (Laughter.) I’m making money by working on supreme leader. (Laughter.) So we have personal conflict of interests, so don’t take it seriously. So it’s not personal. Look, when Ali speaks about the Revolutionary Guard, he forgets that the commander in chief of Revolutionary Guard is Khamenei. Yes, Revolutionary Guard runs the country, but who is the leader of Revolutionary Guard? It’s Khamenei. We forget that. Revolutionary Guard could not get where it is now without Khamenei, as Khamenei could not have been powerful without Revolutionary Guard. They rely on each other; they depend on each other.

[00:58:02]

So yes, Revolutionary Guard is very important. I think – and that’s the most important organization in the country, but because of Ayatollah Khamenei. And my concern about post-Khamenei is not who’s going to be next supreme leader. It’s who’s going to be the next commander in chief of Revolutionary Guard. That’s the main question, because Khamenei now managed – as you say, the Revolutionary Guard is very factionalized. Different factions are there. Sometimes they fight over economic or political interests. They have different ideologies. But so far, the consistency and integrity of this Revolutionary Guard was sustained by Ayatollah Khamenei. If he goes away, who’s going to keep this organization from disintegration? That’s a crucial issue.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I know Mehrzad wants to respond, but I want to actually move away from the weeds and kind of more esoteric points, and jump into very concrete points. And I want you to imagine that my friend Gary there is Hillary Clinton. She is here in the audience. And, you know, she has on her mind a couple very important questions. This is the reality. And I’ll pose this to all of you before, you know, handing it over to the audience.

[00:59:24]

And that is, how will the acquisition of either nuclear weapon or nuclear weapons capability change the power dynamics in Iran? Would your assessment – what you’re saying today – change if Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon, or would you see it as a consolidation of power for the Revolutionary Guards? Ali already thinks they’ve consolidated power, but I ask you, how will the power dynamics change if Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon or nuclear weapons capability? That’s the first question.
Second, what would happen – and this is, of course, extremely speculative – but what would happen in the event of a military strike on Iran – on Iran’s nuclear facilities? Would that prolong the longevity of the regime? Would it decrease the longevity of the regime? Or would nothing really change? And I’ll go one by one. Please, Merhzad.

[01:00:18]

MR. BOROUJERDI: OK, so let me start with the – with the second question, as to whether it will help the longevity or not. Look, I think it’s important to keep in mind the nature, right, of the attack and the timing of it, what happens. So, in other words, there – the attack can happen right now and it can be within the threshold of pain for the regime. However, a year from now, right, the economic embargo have taken effect, there’s a massive amount of discontent with the regime on its – in terms of its economic performance. There might be a different, you know, reaction there. So intensity is there.

Frankly, I think we need to be a bit prudent in how we answer your question. I think the only, perhaps, thing that one can say with some degree of certainty is that a devastating attack on Iran can set in motion the wheels of ethnic strife, OK? Beyond that, I am not sure that this is going to either, you know, give a lease of life to the regime or not, right? But I think, if anything, it is going to intensify ethnic strife.

As far as the first question of who would benefit from it: Look, the Revolutionary Guards, the supreme leader and the clergy, in a way, can all benefit from this thing. Imagine, you know, for the – Khamenei and for the clerics, the acquiring of nuclear weapons can be a life insurance policy, right, that no one is going to dare attack him, particularly the United States. And I don’t know whether we get to that, you know, discussion of U.S. policy, which I think is –

MR. SADJADPOUR: We will – we will.

MR. BOROUJERDI: -- wrongheaded.

But, you know, if it gets to that point, right, they will take it as a life insurance policy. Certainly it’s going to enhance the power of the Revolutionary Guards because, you know, again, these are the people who are going to be, you know, operating the day-to-day affairs, right, related to this nuclear project.

[01:02:23]

But I’m not sure that, you know – I mean, look, let’s keep the following fact in mind. The Revolutionary Guards can benefit, they can have power over the clergies, not just by acquiring the nuclear bomb, right? The Revolutionary Guards can have the power just like the media has, right, by agenda setting. They can tell the supreme leader what to worry about, right? These are the ones who are providing him with the daily reports about the security conditions in the country, right?
So you don’t necessarily need to have the nuclear part – the clerics – I mean, the IRGC can cook up all sorts of arguments for the –

MR. SADJADPOUR: They can manipulate him.

MR. BOROUJERDI: Absolutely.

MR. SADJADPOUR: That’s his point, though, that they’re basically manipulating him.

MR. BOROUJERDI: But, you know, this is the agenda-setting power, right, that they can certainly have. Sure, there is no question about that.

MR. SADJADPOUR: OK. Mehdi.

MR. KHALAJI: I think it would be – there are two things. What Ayatollah Khamenei think? Ayatollah Khamenei think, as you said, that acquiring a nuclear bomb is a life insurance policy. He think that – look at Pakistan, which is much worse than Iran, how United States is friendly and nice with them and they are not able to pull – push too much for their demands.

[01:03:47]

And look at Libya. When Muammar Gadhafi gave up his nuclear policy – nuclear program, NATO invaded Libya and overthrown him. So he think that it would protect the regime. And I’ve heard from former officials of Islamic Republic that had we had nuclear bomb in first decade of Islamic Republic, Iraq would not have been able to attack us. So this is what they think.

But I believe that it would be extremely harmful for the image of Ayatollah Khamenei in the country, within Muslim world and on the international level because for decades he emphasizes that producing, stockpiling and using nuclear weapon is against Islamic law, and it is religiously a major sin. So imagine that, you know, one morning everybody gets up and see that Ayatollah Khamenei says, yeah, we have bomb. So what? (Laughter.)

[01:05:00]

So who would trust him in the world? So it’s not an easy lie. They can, you know, lie on many things, including election 2009. But while you are legally engaged and committed not to make bomb, and you just ignore all this international commitment and just test a nuclear bomb, it would be extremely harmful for the image of Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khamenei.

MR. ALFONEH: I agree that, you know, historically all states which managed to develop nuclear bombs – the institutions which benefited most from the bomb were institutions involved in building the bomb. That was the case in Pakistan, you know, that was the case in China with the People’s Liberation Army, that was the case in the Soviet
Union. So the regimes, you know, they manage to benefit from the enhanced prestige of having done the project.

And I think one of the big tests, if Iran gets the bomb and we would like then to find out if it is the IRGC which is controlling the bomb or it is the civilian leadership, is to see if there will be – if the civilian leadership would try to create a nuclear command outside of the Revolutionary Guards. That is, after all, what you did here in the United States in order to have greater civilian control, political control with how the bomb was used. So if there is going to be a nuclear command within the IRGC, or preferably outside of the IRGC, that would actually – you know, so history would prove me wrong and prove those two gentlemen right.

[01:06:40]

When it comes to the regime survival and longevity, to be quite honest with you, having a nuclear bomb did not secure survival of the Soviet Union. Why? Because the Soviet Union had political problems and had economic problems. Iran’s population has been getting better and better educated. Better educated people living in big cities demand political right for participation. And no bomb is going to change that fact. This is, after all, what the Arab Spring is all about. This is what 2009 revolt in Iran was about. So I would not say that the bomb could secure the survival of the regime in all eternity, no.

MR. SADJADPOUR: So I want to hand it over to all of you now. And I’ve lost my glasses so I can’t see beyond the fourth floor – or fourth row, but I will bunch a few questions together.

MR. KHALAJI: I thought you said beyond the fourth floor. I said, that’s good without glasses. (Chuckles.)

MR. SADJADPOUR: So let me start here in the front with – (inaudible). Please introduce yourself and try to be concise.

Q: Sure. (Inaudible). I have a question. If we compare the Islamic Republic with “Animal Farm,” are there – (laughter) – I mean, he talked about the animals, actually. So who are the other pigs and are they going to use the dogs against Napoleon or not? One. I’ll go with this one first.

MR. SADJADPOUR: And why don’t I go in the back there. I see a hand. Whoever has the mic can just hand it off to someone they look – who looks like they’re going to ask an interesting question. (Laughter.)

[01:08:14]

Q: Hi. My name is Farzin Farzad. I’m with the newly formed Network of Azerbaijani-Americans from Iran. And I want you guys – whoever can answer this – to elaborate on the issue of ethnic strife in Iran. I think it’s very hard to have a two-hour long discussion about Iran without mentioning the role of ethnic minorities and the power sharing that could or could not happen within the next few years, particularly in the context
of the diminishing relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, particularly Azerbaijan deciding within parliament to try and change the name of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of North Azerbaijan to gain some sort of favorable stance with the Azerbaijanis.

There is a growing sense of ethno-nationalism within the Azerbaijanis that constitute about a third of the population of Iran. And they constitute a very large majority of the IRGC. And there is a lot of historical precedent into ethnic divisions within the country, particularly in –

MR. KHALAJI: And Ayatollah Khamenei is Azeri himself.

Q: Yes. That’s –

MR. KHALAJI: (Inaudible.)

Q: He was born in Mashhad. He is half Azeri. He doesn’t speak Azeri very well.

MR. KHALAJI: Oh, he speaks it very well.

Q: No.

Q: I’m from Buenos Aires, national defense expert – and NDU former student here. I’m – my focus is counterterrorism. So whenever I attend these kind of meetings concerning these kind of closed societies, I try to understand this societies and in which way we, from here, from wherever, we can help the United States to accomplish the huge task to stop terrorism.

So my question is, if you suppose today were asked to lay out kind of strategy to stop terrorism, to stop the (career ?) of weapon of mass destruction, especially in Iran, to which are you going to focus the strategy – to the Revolutionary Corps, to the cleric, to the government? Because after today, the United States is fighting a kind of asymmetric war. They are fighting against societies with huge religious and deep religious feelings. And that is a kind of – deep religious feelings are not easy to defeat.
MR. SADJADPOUR: OK, thank you. So we have the role of ethnic minorities in the power structure, in the Revolutionary Guards. We have a counterterrorism strategy for Iran. And then the first question was an Orwell reference about “Animal Farm,” which feel free to answer whatever you like. But let’s – we’ll try to be brief so we can get more questions. So, Mehrzad, please.

MR. BOROUJERDI: Let me address ethnic strife, and you can – perhaps can deal with the “Animal Farm” question. And he is an expert on all things military history to answer the terrorism question.

Look, I think there is – there is no point denying, right, that there are a lot of ethnic grievances in Iran. It has been that way. It is not necessarily popular in the dominant style of Iranian historiography or nationalism to agree, to concede that there have been, you know, wrongdoings done to these minorities, but I think that's basically denying the facts on the ground, right? Surely this is an argument that can be exploited by all sorts of vested interests here and there, you know, for their own particular reasons.

But I think, if we are putting our hats on as political sociologists, right, not necessarily partisans of this – (inaudible) – and the other, you know, I have to look at, you know, let’s say, Baluchistan. I have to look at what is going on in Khuzestan, et cetera, and ask myself, you know, some troubling questions. Are these people being represented in the, you know, upper echelons of power. Are they – do they – the resources that are being given to these provinces, are they commensurable with their numerical strength and so forth?

And, you know, the fact of the matter is that both before the revolution and after the revolution, there is a lot to be desired, right? There is a lot left to be desired in terms of wealth distribution. You know, in Persian, even the government has two categories for the various 30 province in the country. We say the deprived provinces and the more well-to-do provinces. And again, ironically enough, the deprived provinces happen to be the provinces that are predominantly on the borders of the country, in the four corners of the country. This is not a – you know, again, a coincidence.

But I also want to – want to warn, you know, that we should not jump from this to the argument that the Azeris, the Baluchis, the Arabs, that – you know, whoever, are willing to, you know, secede from Iran. Again, there is no need for a speculation. I think we have a very great example. There is a concrete example of an eight-year war, right, where the Iranian public at large, regardless of what provinces they were coming from, they demonstrated their loyalty to maintaining the territorial integrity of Iran.

And it didn’t matter. You’re absolutely right. Many of the Revolutionary Guard leadership, et cetera, were coming from, you know, Azerbaijan region. I come from the Khuzestan region. You know, my house was destroyed in aerial bombing, you know, by Iraqi forces, et cetera. But that didn’t mean that, you know, the people who I went to high
school with, many of them of Arab descent, were not willing to pick up, you know, guns and fight the Iraqis because the Iraqis had invaded Iran.

So, you know, we have to understand. I think it’s fair to say that the problem of ethnicities or ethnic groups, the same way with the problem of, you know, women, et cetera, et cetera, or religious minorities, are issues that should be on the table in a democratic Iran that has to come to terms with these realities, not denying them but also recognizing where the popular mood in the country is.

MR. : (Inaudible.)

[01:14:35]

MR. KHALAJI: Yes. I think this “Animal Farm” turning point has happened 32 years ago. You know, they overthrow this arrogant – (inaudible) – and replace them by oppressed people. And now we have – we see these oppressed people, they are behaving much worse than – you know, than those arrogant. I think in the future, hopefully we wouldn’t have that things. We – that in the future we wouldn’t have a socialist revolution but rather a democratic revolution.

Q: Sorry, is Mashaei a new pig or not? (Laughter.)

MR. KHALAJI: I don’t know what you mean by that, but – (laughter) –

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me ask you – let me frame it a somewhat different way. And that is to ask you, when you look at Iran’s outlook in the next decade, which models or which countries do you think it’s mostly likely to follow? I think, you know, many people say best case scenario Iran becomes like Turkey; worst case scenario it becomes like North Korea.

MR. KHALAJI: OK.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I mean, Pakistani is a probably outcome. What is the model that you see it evolving?

[01:15:47]

MR. KHALAJI: The model I think we could expect more is the model of Soviet Union. It means that the Revolutionary Guard would – who has lots of power now and have control over economy and politics of the country – would continue to have this control, even after the collapse of Islamic Republic. So we should expect Iranian Putins to come to power if we think that Islamic Republic would collapse soon. So I think those people who have power now, it’s very difficult to convince them to give up by any democratic movement in near future.

MR. ALFONEH: Well, I’m a big fan of George Orwell. And I think it’s a very relevant question. And I fundamentally believe that the pigs have already become hostages in the hands of the dogs. In other words, you know, the pigs have become hostages – you
know, the leadership in Iran has become hostage in the hands of their own praetorian guard. That is what has happened in Iran.

[01:16:56]

And I’m not so sure that the Soviet model is the right way of describing it, because the Soviet Union had very, very firm civilian control over the armed forces. That was also true in China. And the explanation, of course, is that both in the Soviet Union and in China, we had very, very strong Communist Parties. What is the equivalent of the Communist Party in Iran? We do not have any. If there is any – if it is – it is the Revolutionary Guards itself. So that, I think, is an important point to make.

Concerning the issue of terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons, I really must say that most unfortunately, the – I do not see the Obama administration pursuing the right policy when it comes to these issues. I believe that President Obama is a very, very civilized man. He is extremely sophisticated. He has very large vocabulary, and that is the problem. That is the problem. (Laughter.) During the Bush presidency – seriously, I’m very serious with you.

During the Bush presidency, you know, somebody asked President Bush: Mr. President, why did you invade Iraq? And he said that, well, that man – meaning Saddam Hussein – tried to kill my dad. All of you, in Washington, you laughed at Mr. Bush. But in the Middle East, you know, well the least thing you can do when somebody tries to kill your dad is to invade their country. (Laughter.)

On another occasion, President Bush was asked, Mr. President, why did you invade Iraq, you know? And he said: I did so because God told me to do it. You laughed, but in Tehran, they thought, oh, this man is just as crazy as we are. (Laughter.) And this is why they sent a letter to the United States offering to stop their nuclear program and stop arming terrorist organizations.

[01:18:43]

But when President Bush shifted his policies, pursued a softer line towards Iran, then they began saying – the Islamic Republic of Iran pursing some of its more nefarious activities. And that is the very, very unfortunate situation we are in. The Islamic Republic of Iran, under the Revolutionary Guards, unfortunately only understands the language of force.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I’m not going to respond, because I’m sure people in the audience may respond to that. Please, in the front here.

Q: Judd Harriet, documentary filmmaker. With respect to economic sanctions, they are starting to bite, we understand. If they continue to bite, how will the Revolutionary Guards contain the damage? Will it damage them or will they turn this to their advantage?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Very good question. Is there any questions in the back? In the way back, yeah, please.
Q: Andrea Mattie (sp) from National Iranian-American Council. I –

MR. SADJADPOUR: Could you speak up a little bit, please?

Q: I have a question from Dr. Khalaji or Dr. Boroujerdi. It is about the Ayatollah Khamenei’s fatwa on nuclear weapons. And he said almost 100 times about that Iran doesn’t want nuclear weapons, and again, yesterday he mentioned that very clearly, that Iran doesn’t need nuclear weapons because it seeks other types of power, like soft power, in the region.

How come this is really ignored in the West and the nuclear discourse in the West is totally – basically, they have this – they think that, well, Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons –

MR. SADJADPOUR: OK, why don’t people take this fatwa seriously? That’s a good question. (Inaudible) – about that.

Q: Yeah, why Khamenei’s speech, in fact, was totally ignored.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Yeah, yeah, we got it. Garry, please, in the front.

[1:20:49]

Q: Thanks. I’m Gary Mitchell and I write the Mitchell Report. And I’ll start with the obvious, which is this has really been extraordinary valuable. And the great value of this discussion is to have heard intelligent competing perspectives on the country and the governance, et cetera.

I want to – so Karim began by saying we have – for the sake of discussion and argument, we have three competing perspectives here; here they are. And the discussion followed. I wondered if, as we end up, it is possible for us to find three substantive, salient points, issues, questions on which there is agreement about the republic and where it is today.

I’ll start by saying that it appears that the notion of the – of the fracture line between the clerics and the IRGC, I gather – despite some batting around at the margins, you know, I gather there’s general agreement that that is a reasonable way to describe the condition of the Republic of Iran today. Maybe I missed it, but let’s just say that might be one example. I’m wondering if there are two or three other examples where this group might say, I think we agree on X and Y, and possibly Z.

[1:22:30]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Great, thank you, Garry. So I’ll hopefully have time for one more round. I want you to take the question of the nuclear fatwa and then, you know, feel free, Ali and Mehrzad, to comment on the other questions.
MR. KHALAJI: The fatwa is a very interesting phenomenon. Actually, in Shia jurisprudence, you can change your fatwa, so that fatwa is not something permanent. It’s based on your interpretation, and as any other scholar who, you know, might change his views, a jurist can change his views. And usually religious texts are like this. You know, you can deduct almost everything you want from them.

It’s like, you know, the principle for Groucho Marx. Groucho Marx once said that these are my principles; if you don’t like them, I have others. (Laughter.) So a fatwa is like this. You know, Ayatollah Khomeini has changed his fatwas many times and it’s interesting to, you know, see this. Because the main problem is, first of all, what is very definitive in the process of decision-making and shaping the decisions of the Islamic republic is not fatwa. It’s the expediency of the regime. So any time, expediency of the regime can trump any fatwa.

And the government is working based on the expediency of the regime, not fatwa. The other thing is, other example which shows why the world has every right to remain suspicious about the Iranian government, is that for a long time Iran was denying that it was funding or, you know, supporting Hezbollah. Always they were saying that our support is just spiritual and political.

But it was very interesting to see these recent statements by both Ayatollah Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah that, yeah, we are proud of getting money from the very beginning of the Hezbollah – yeah, Iran has helped Hezbollah. All of these things that before that was accusation suddenly became a matter of fact.

So we shouldn’t be surprised if, you know, one day Iranian government tests a bomb and says expediency of the regime, you know, required us to make a bomb. And just fatwas can change. In this paper I published a while ago, “Nuclear Fatwa,” I mentioned several examples of fatwa change by Ayatollah Khomeini.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Ali, can you talk a little bit about the effect of sanctions on the Revolutionary Guards?

MR. ALFONEH: Absolutely. Thank you for your very, very good question. Most unfortunately, the Revolutionary Guards have managed to turn the sanctions regime into an advantage, at least in the short term. For example, the international sanctions regime is preventing foreign oil and gas companies to engage in development of Iran’s oil and gas fields in the Persian Gulf region – notably in the South Pars gas field, which is not being exploited by Qatar.

So Iran’s response has been to give those orders, development orders, to the Revolutionary Guards’ contracting firm, the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Base. The military budget of the Revolutionary Guards on an annual basis is $5.7 billion, but during the
past three years, the Revolutionary Guards have signed $32 billion worth of contracts with the oil ministry.

[1:26:31]

In other words, most unfortunately, it has benefited the Revolutionary Guards that there are foreign sanctions barring foreign companies to develop – in development of Iran’s oil and gas sector. And I can mention a number of other fields in which the IRGC has also benefited. You know, in the field of smuggling – thanks to the Revolutionary Guards, you know, because they do some good things, nobody is dying of thirst in Iran.

You have access to alcoholic beverages all over this Muslim country – (laughter) – because the Revolutionary Guards are smuggling alcoholic beverages into mainland Iran from Kurdistan, you know, from the Persian Gulf region. They do these kinds of things. So they have managed to turn it into a benefit, but in the longer term it’s going to be catastrophic for the entire economy of the country.

And that is what I mean that the IRGC is not pursuing the national interests of Iran. The Revolutionary Guards is pursuing its corporate interests. What I fundamentally hope and genuinely hope is that the new round of sanctions, trying to hit not the general economy of Iran but the Revolutionary Guards’ own companies, would have some impact and effect in the near future.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thanks, Ali. Mehrzad, Garry asked a very –

MR. BOROUJERDI: Sure.

MR. SADJADPOUR: – thoughtful question about U.S. policy, and we’ve flown you all the way here from Syracuse. You mentioned you disagreed with the Obama administration policy, so before I hand it out to the last round of questions I wanted to give you a platform to offer your critiques about current U.S. foreign policy and offer your alternative approach.

MR. BOROUJERDI: OK, let me first have – answer Mr. Mitchell’s argument about the common denominators between us. I think, just off the top of my head, these are the things that came to mind. A, appearances in Iran are misleading, right? We should always be, you know, careful about this other stuff.

[1:28:16]

B, we all agree about the rise of the Revolutionary Guards. And this is – the handwriting is on the wall. This is the new Young Turks in the country. Third factor, that there is a legitimacy crisis, right? The government, particularly after 2009, is facing a legitimation crisis that has not gone away, even though we are not seeing these, you know, daily demonstrations like in the example of the Arab Spring.

The next point I want to say is that let’s also remind ourselves that the Revolutionary Guards and the supreme leader both share a security outlook on things. Right, in other
words, their line of thinking – call it, you know, this garrison-state mentality, whatever – is the same. And for good reason: If you go back to Ayatollah Khamenei’s background, right, we recognize, this is a guy who was there at the inception of the Revolutionary Guards.

[1:29:13]

He was serving as deputy defense minister. He served for seven years as a war president, right? He was – there was an assassination attempt on his life. He receives those daily security reports that I told you, right? So as such, I don’t think it is just the Revolutionary Guards that feed him this paranoia and the guy says, oh, you know, I don’t want to agree. No, to a great extent it is a meeting of the minds on those types of issues.

But let me get back to the question, second part of the question. Yes, I think – I don’t know what the folks in the White House are smoking, OK? (Laughter.) But I think that the policy is, presently, really quite wrongheaded. It is not going to amount to much. You know, for the last 30 years we have had these schemes, really, cooked up in this town, about how to deal with Iran.

You know, many of us are old enough to remember that there was a time where they were saying, you know, we will negotiate only with one faction of the Iranian regime as a way of putting pressure on the other. Well, see what that policy got you – nowhere, right? Nowadays, you know – I mean, the Iranians are not fools.

You cannot be going there and tell them – you know, the IAEA will be saying we want to interview your nuclear scientists, and the next day you want to assassinate those same scientists? If I was in Khamenei’s position, why would I provide these nuclear scientists to you? Why would I give you, you know, access to all these secretive sites? Right, so that, you know, you have the – pass along the info to the Israelis so that they can carry on with their activities and so forth and so on?

So the question, I think, we need to get serious in this town is to ask ourselves, what have we offered – concretely, seriously – to somebody that is very smart, like Khamenei, who understands. I mean, please keep in mind, if Khatami – if Khomeini was in power for 10 years, this guy has already been in power for 23 years, right?

[1:31:08]

He has a mindset – as I said, he has – he’s a micromanager. He knows the inside and out of the regime. In my view, he has, already, perhaps, very decent plans in place for dealing with the succession problem and so forth. Right, he is not a guy who is going to let his legacy go down the drain because of some folks demonstrating in the street.

So let’s give credit, understand that we are dealing with somebody who is smart. Iran has genuine security grievances that need to be addressed. As long as we are pretending in Washington that we do all the talking and they do all the listening, right, and they cannot talk back to us – you know, we are basically ending up cornering ourselves; that is where we are.
Look, I know this is the thesis of my good friend Mehdi here, but again, I respectfully disagree. I do not believe you can go around the head of Khatami – Khamenei – and negotiate with the Revolutionary Guards. The leadership of Revolutionary Guards are political midgets, right? They are all there as a result of Ayatollah Khamenei. He plays the game of musical chairs with them, removes them whenever he likes.

I mean, I can give you name after name of big-shot Revolutionary Guards who are nobodies right now. Last case in point, somebody named Mr. Zohraj (sp), right – a name that invoked fears in the reformist camp, you know, in the 1970s, under Khatami. The man has been marginalized to the third tier of the Iranian judiciary. No one knows what the hell he’s doing right now.

So let us understand that the Iranian regime has genuine concerns. Any type of real agreement has to be – has to take into account their concerns. Let us understand you cannot have this wishful scenario that we choose who we negotiate with. It’s not going to get you anywhere. It didn’t get us anywhere, you know, 30 years ago; it’s not going to get us anywhere. Let’s wake up, smell the roses, understand who is in charge.

What do you think?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Hillary Clinton is sitting there. Who do you advise her to try to negotiate with?

MR. BOROUJERDI: With the supreme leader himself.

MR. SADJADPOUR: But when Obama writes a letter to Khamenei making it very clear that he’s interested in building confidence with Iran in Afghanistan and Iraq, and turning the page, Khamenei responds with a hostile letter one month later. Obama follows up with another letter and says to Khamenei, these are the individuals who are authorized to speak and negotiate on behalf of the United States – he names them by name –

MR. BOROUJERDI: Right.

MR. SADJADPOUR: And Khamenei – and he says, let’s commence a dialogue. And Khamenei doesn’t respond. This was the scenario we’re into. I hand it over to you – what do you do then?

MR. BOROUJERDI: No, but you see, Karim, it’s because you have this sea of mistrust between the two sides, right, that has accumulated over the last 30 years.

MR. SADJADPOUR: How do you bridge that mistrust?

MR. BOROUJERDI: OK, but if I’m Khamenei – again, put yourself – just play this mental exercise, right? I am putting myself in his shoes. I say, OK, how would I think? All
right, I’m dealing with successive U.S. administrations that keep moving the posts, the goalposts. They keep asking these demands. They are not offering anything by way of what he wants, i.e. regime assurances about, you know, the continuation of regime.

[1:34:18]

You have to promise him no regime change, right, and then we negotiate. Otherwise, otherwise he is going to look at the nuclear case as merely an excuse for what might be in store. And, you know, his thinking is I have my foot on the most solid position right now, the nuclear issue. That can resonate with the Iranian public, right?

If I make a compromise on this, the next day the U.S. is going to come and say, make a compromise on the human rights record, right? Make a compromise on supporting Hezbollah. So Khamenei is drawing a line in the sand and says, over my dead body. No apologies, no regrets, no compromises – not only with the U.S., but also with the reformist camp in Iran. This is the mindset we are dealing with.

[1:35:01]

The reformist camps were checkmated, right? They lost the chess game. Again, I’m sorry to say that, as somebody whose sympathy is with the reformist camp. But again, my analytical side tells me, well, you know, you lost the power game.

So now the question is, you know, confronting the U.S. OK, you can continue harping on the same message of the last 30 years. See how far that gets you.

The time is working to Iran’s advantage – again, I’m sorry to say – you know, on the nuclear and everything. So the policy becomes a bit shortsighted on our side. There has to – there is no military solution to this conflict, the same way the Arab-Israeli conflict is not being solved through military means. There has to be diplomacy, and diplomacy means compromises, period.

MR. SADJADPOUR: It’s 2:00, and I would love to hand it over to all of you, but I don’t want to keep those of you who have to go. I just wanted to thank you all for coming. Thank you all very much to the panelists. (Applause.)

(END)