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Transcript

NEGOTIATING WITH IRAN: ISTANBUL AND ITS AFTERMATH

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Transcript by Federal News Service

Washington, D.C.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Thank you all so much for coming. It's a great pleasure to see you. I don't think I've ever seen such a large crowd here at Carnegie.

And the talk here today – the title is called “Istanbul and its Aftermath,” looking at what happened in the nuclear negotiations between the P-5 plus one and Iran and also looking forward. And before I came here, I – a journalist friend asked me for a readout about what happened in Istanbul, and I said it was kind of a preliminary consultation in order to schedule a very complicated hysterectomy – (laughter) – very complicated surgery down the road. And I think really the hard part hasn't yet begun.

And so I thought in our discussion today, what I'd like to talk about is the path forward and, in particular, try to probe two over-arching questions. And the first is whether constructive engagement with Iran is possible, and the second is if it is possible, what would a deal look like; what would a nuclear deal look like between the P-5 plus one and Iran?

[00:05:06]

And so to probe these questions, we have really an all-star panel, a fantastic panel. You have their bios in front of you, so I won't go into great detail. But let me just briefly introduce them one by one.

To my right is my good friend and colleague George Perkovich, who is one of the most widely respected nuclear policy experts in the United States. And George has been a great mentor to me, and he's very interesting in that he has written the seminal book on India's nuclear program, but he's also very familiar with not only the Iranian nuclear program, but Iranian politics. He has visited Iran three times over the last decade and has had extensive interaction with Iranian nuclear negotiators.

To my far left is Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations. And Ray is a brilliant writer and thinker, and he's been one of Washington's most prolific writer (sic) on Iranian affairs over the last decade. And unbeknownst to many people, Ray was actually born and raised in Iran until he was, what, 12, 13. And I think Ray is short for Ruhala (ph). Is that right? (Laughter.)

RAY TAKEYH: Ouch. (Laughter.)

[00:06:24]

Now, to my immediate left – that – don't take that politically. (Laughter.) To my immediate left is my good friend Vali Nasr, who is currently a professor at the Fletcher School at Tufts University. But he has just been named dean of my alma mater across the street, Johns Hopkins SAIS. And I really wanted to first congratulate Vali and hope you can all join me in congratulating Vali for this enormous achievement. (Applause.)

VALI NASR: Thank you very much.

MR. SADJADPOUR: And Vali is also an adviser to the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, which is our co-sponsor here today. And PAAIA was started a few years back by an exceptionally talented and successful group of Iranian-Americans from very diverse backgrounds. And I think they're unique in that they're a nonpartisan Iranian-American organization, and they really have a positive message.

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And there are several PAAIA board members today, and they've done some very interesting polling. They have some very interesting polling data of the Iranian-American community. I think they've collaborated with Zogby. And so I will go back later in our discussion to talk to Vali a little bit about the results of those polling.

But let me jump into the discussion. And one of the reasons why I wanted to bring Ray and Vali here today is the fact that before the Obama administration, in the latter years of the Bush administration, Vali and Ray collaborated on several important pieces in Foreign Affairs and the Washington Post, arguing that it's a futile policy to try to contain Iran, that we need to vigorously engage Iran. And both Vali and Ray served stints in the State Department during the Obama administration. Vali was a senior adviser to the late Richard Holbrooke, and Ray was a senior adviser to Dennis Ross.

And what I found interesting is that they came out of their experience in government on different ends of the debate in some ways and that Vali believes and has written that the Obama administration didn't really make a concerted effort to try to engage Iran and engagement is still possible with Iran. And I think Ray has a slightly different perspective in that he argues it was Iran who didn't necessarily reciprocate some of the overtures which the Obama administration made and that engaging Iran is going to be much more difficult than we think and constructive engagement may not – may not be possible.

So let me actually kind of open the debate by asking Vali this preliminary question, and that is that, you know, do you believe that Iran, and particularly the supreme leader, Ali Khomeini, is interested in reaching some type of an accommodation with the United States? Or would you argue that – or how would you respond to kind of the skeptics – and I would include myself as a skeptic – who say that in some ways, anti-Americanism has metastasized in Iran, that for Khomeini, hostility towards the United States has become central to the identity of the Islamic republic itself?

[00:09:49]

MR. NASR: Well, first of all, thank you very much for your introduction and for putting together this timely panel and inviting us to this session. It's very good being here at Carnegie and in this event, also co-sponsored by PAAIA.

Yeah, I would look at it differently. I actually do agree with you that there is inbuilt resistance to bridge-building and to resolving the obstacles that are – that exist to the relationship. There is ideological reasons for it. It makes sense in terms of politics. And historically, we know that any country that has dug its heels in a foreign policy for a very long time creates, if you will, a domestic constituency around that foreign policy that is

difficult to move. It's – there is an element of what we call “great man history” – there's a single person who is going to make a decision to go left or right – but in reality, all politicians are somewhat encumbered by the context in which they operate.

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I think all of those are true about Iran. There's no doubt that Iran, particularly after a period when it looked like it was opening between '97 and 2005, has been going in the direction of much more hard-line conservative politics, which is – which is also attached to the ideological issues that you raise.

But you know, the issue is, you know, what do we mean by a deal? What do we mean by something that would work? If the question is Iran coming out from the cold completely, sort of a moment like Anwar Sadat, you know, turned completely from pan-Arabism and alliance with the Soviet Union to becoming pro-American and then moving within a very short period of time into Camp David, or something like what we saw in China, sort of Iran coming out from the cold, I don't see that happening. That, I agree. There is – there is too many – too many difficulties there for it to – for that to be possible.

But if the notion of a deal is much more narrow – it's around a certain percentage of uranium enrichment; it's about certain agreement that would allow a – essentially, a status quo to continue – that's a different story. And I think really what's been on the table both from the Iranian and the American side is not a massive breakthrough but is a maintenance of status quo. And I think in some ways, Istanbul is really about that.

I actually don't think that it would – the president of the United States at this point in time would want a deal with Iran before November because it's going to be extremely difficult to sell it in this kind of a political environment. It would – it would put Iran on the front burner of presidential campaign debate. He would have to justify why this is a good deal for the United States, how he didn't give away the storehouse to the Iranians. It's actually much more beneficial to take things back to a status quo so you have some kind of a forward momentum without a deal.

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And I think that, on the Iranian side, is what they agree on. So if the issue is can they make a deal about not making a deal and keeping the two ends which is unconsiderable to them, either a – either the complete breakthrough or war – I mean, neither side wants this. Neither side really sees its way to a complete, you know, love-fest, and that's not going to be possible. On the other side, neither side wants war either.

And the key issue is really in the middle. I mean, my – I think this goes more broadly to a whole set of different conflicts that, you know, the United States is engaged in, including in Afghanistan, et cetera, about where do we see the role of diplomacy, as opposed to coercive means, in terms of getting to where we want to be.

I'll stop there and let –

MR. TAKEYH: I would agree with much of what Vali said, if, in fact, not all. I think whatever the status of U.S.-Iran relations is, whatever the status of this confrontation is – let me put it this way – I think Vali is right that diplomacy is an indispensable means of – an indispensable part of it, even inconclusive diplomacy, because it allows everybody to sort of calm the temperatures and test each other out. So I think Vali is right that a diplomatic process, whether it's conclusive, inconclusive, protracted or what, is useful. Even if the parties then change their opinions, then they have a venue of doing so. So I think that's right.

I – the goals of the 5 plus one's – most of members of the 5 plus one I think are consistent and not in tension with one another, the short-term and long-term goal. Short term, they want some means of curbing some aspects of Iranian nuclear program and in the long run to have some sort of an agreement on what kind of a nuclear program Iran will have.

The goals of the Iranian regime, as far as I can see, the short-term and long-term goals, are somewhat in tension with one another. The – one of the aspects of the Iranian regime, in particular this regime, is that it has – it requires to some extent enmity with the United States as a means of legitimatizing a certain domestic ideological character. What Tom Christian (sp) said in another – in Mao's Early Years is, United States is a useful adversary. So it requires some sort of an antagonism toward the United States as a means of not justifying internal repression – I'm not suggesting that – but as a means of affirming its ideological identity.

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It also seems to want – the second long-term goal – is put itself in a position at the very least where it has a nuclear infrastructure that allows it to have a weapons option. So that's a long-term goal.

Its short-term goals, however, are to ameliorate this economic distress and forestall a prospective military action. These three goals are in somewhat tension to one another, because the strategies you pursue for the first one and second one are not necessarily consistent with the strategies we pursue for the third one.

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So the first thing that the task of 5 plus one diplomacy or the Iranian diplomats is, how do you square this circle? One other way you could do it is have a diplomatic strategy that Vali talks about and potentially some measures that will, you know, prolong the Iranian nuclear timeline. Well, one other interesting thing about the Iran issue is, is that there are so many other stakeholders. This is not a bilateral issue. I mean, they're regional actors, the Gulf States, who have their own anxieties and apprehensions about Iran. There's Israelis who have apprehensions and anxieties about Iran that recently were quite vocally expressed. There is the Europeans – and there's some divisions between Europeans on how to approach this issue, and others as well. It affects certain global norms – nonproliferation, viability of the NPT, and NPT as a treaty since enactment has served the cause of international system quite well. So it – the Iran issue, how it's resolved, affects that global norm, and it has ramifications for the global economy.

Ultimately, I think a deal, whatever its technical complexion is – and George can talk about that better than Vali and I – a deal is not a document; it's a living organism. It has to be adhered to and administered every day. And ultimately, the viability of that deal is contingent on what is happening in the region, which is today undergoing a Saudi-Iranian cold war, where the Saudis and Iranians are working against one another in Iraq and Syria and Levant, elsewhere. We – in my opinion, we have not instigated that cold war, but we are buttressing it. And that's not serving the cause of proliferation well.

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It has to do with what happens in Iran internally, and it has to do something with U.S.-Iran relations. This issue intersects on so many different things. So many squares have to be circled, so many circles have to be squared, that it's hard to see how it comes out. It's analytically the most exacting challenge the United States has. It's not the most important challenge, but it's analytically the most exacting one.

And in terms of another thing – I'll end with that – I think in this country, the Republicans and Democrats have to figure out a different way of talking about Iran, because right now it's war versus appeasement. And I think if there is going to be an agreement with Iran – and I'm forging way ahead – then it's not sufficient for it to be an incumbent executive administration's deal. It has to have stakeholders in the legislative branch and in both parties. So I think here we have to figure out if we can have a common language about this particular problem at a time when it's not just politicized – because it's a(n) epicenter of a certain political conversation. And the interesting thing about it is, when you step back and you sort of transcend all the political gyrations, I'm not sure the two parties disagree that much when you think about it, the – in terms of approach, in terms of process, and ultimately in terms of the outcome.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Before I hand it over to George, I just wanted to ask one follow-up, maybe for both of you, and that is that I think there are two wonderful quotes from Henry Kissinger which nicely bookend the discussion about Iran. Kissinger said, quote, "There are few nations in the world with whom the United States has more common interests and less reason to quarrel than Iran." But he also said that Iran has to decide whether it's a nation or a cause.

[00:20:14]

And Vali, you worked with Richard Holbrooke on the Af-Pak file. And when – you know, with regards to Kissinger's first quote about the overlapping interests between U.S. national interests and Iranian national interests, Afghanistan is a prime example. Do you think that it's worthwhile to try to broaden the discussion beyond just the nuclear issue?

And before you answer that, I just want to raise something which I found was interesting between kind of the Iranian negotiating culture and American negotiating culture. Someone I know who is kind of – grew up in the bowels of the Iranian system – in the Iranian regime system – shortly before the first nuclear negotiations in October of 2009, he called me, and he said to me that it's important that the Americans not broaden the discussion beyond the nuclear issue.

And I thought that was kind of odd advice, so I said, why? He said, well, the Iranian mentality is going to be that the Americans are weak in Afghanistan and Iraq, and therefore we can be less compromising on – we can afford to be less compromising on the nuclear issue. So my – that’s basically the question, you know, is it – is it worthwhile to broaden the discussion beyond the nuclear issue, or could that potentially send the wrong signals?

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MR. NASR: Well, you know, in all of these diplomatic efforts, they’re always multidimensional. I mean, whether you’re talking to the Taliban or to China or – you know, or it’s the Arabs and Israelis talking to each other, you’re always guessing as to how the other side might read a particular move. And you – there were people in the administration who argued that we shouldn’t talk to – we should only talk to Iran about the nuclear issue – when and if they’re ready, when and if we’re ready, but there’s only going to be one conversation with Iran, and it’s about a single issue.

It also dependent on where they were coming from. These tended to be people who worked on Iran, so they really didn’t care about Afghanistan, or they didn’t care about Iraq. People who worked on Iraq and Afghanistan thought that, you know, we have this war; the president wants to finish it; how could you finish it if you don’t talk to the country that has a 1400-kilometer border and, as you say, maybe – actually has more in common with us than Pakistan, which then was our ally, but actually was literally fighting against us in – so in other words, they would look at our policy in Afghanistan, and they thought that it’s completely illogical and that we’re not going to get out of this unless we broaden this.

So partly it had to do with where you were sitting, whether you thought that your job is Afghanistan and you need Iran to solve Afghanistan, or you thought your job is Iran and you didn’t care what happened to Afghanistan. And I think that people whose job was Iran won the debate pretty much. It’s they who decided that the conversation wouldn’t happen.

And you know, there is also turf rivalry; they were afraid that Holbrooke would take over Iran. It had nothing to do with whether there’d be a solution or not. They just were, you know, adamant that he wouldn’t get his toe in the door for whatever reason, and it had to do with personalities. Not everything is always, you know, high-level thinking and things.

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The other issue is that, you know, this is – this is a fundamental problem that – for any kind of a progress. You know, these two countries who are – and plenty of times it’s Iran’s fault, but nevertheless it is a fact – don’t have any single thing that they’ve ever agreed on and delivered on. There is absolutely no – nothing that they have – they can show that there’s a single thing that there has ever been a conversation, an agreement, even a small deal, and then they can turn around and say, you know, there was one time we actually got something done, which, you know, takes us to the core of the issues that you raised at the beginning.

So there was some argument that Afghanistan could provide a way in which you could make some agreements. And largely, people who argued this went back to the example of the Bonn Conference of 2001 because that sort of was a high point of collaboration. You know, virtual agreements on the text of the Afghan constitution and on Karzai's cabinet, et cetera, was done at that time. It's a decade ago, but – and it's the only thing people could point to.

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I think that moment is past, largely – we don't have common interest with Iran and Afghanistan because we don't have any interests in Afghanistan. We're leaving. Our – you know, if you were going to use sort of leverage with Pakistan or Iran is when you have most number of troops, where they actually have to worry about, you know, what you're going to be doing. We've said we're leaving. Probably in May the president will announce an accelerated exit strategy. Everybody in the region already sort of has factored out the U.S., including the Iranians, Pakistanis, Indians, et cetera. So Afghanistan no longer really provides any kind of a situation for this conversation.

So, you know, I think now it's largely theoretical as to whether it would have been useful in 2009, 2010 or not. We are where we are, which means that that door is closed. It's not – it's not there. Iraq is closed; we have already left. So we are actually down to a single discussion, which is the nuclear issue. And you know, again, it goes down to theories you think, that whether that's too fragile a place to try to build anything because there's nothing else there; or that's exactly the way to do it.

I think we won't know the answer until, you know, a month or two, whether there's anything to show for this current round. And as you said, you know, there is – there's plenty of reasons to be skeptical. That's something – although I personally think both sides have – are very incentivized to, you know, get to November. And there is some kind of a – an unspoken symbiotic interest here that – to keep the process on a forward momentum until we get past the election season.

[00:26:42]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Ray, you made a reference to domestic politics in the conclusion of your comments. And there's a quote from David Frum, who was President Bush's former speechwriter, that I think really captured the conundrum of U.S. policy toward Iran. And he said that – he said, a country can enrich uranium and it can reject Israel's existence, but it can't do both at the same time. This is the reality of domestic American politics.

And you know, how do you reconcile that in our dealings with Iran? I remember the first meeting I had with Catherine Ashton. I said to her, I think that if you can somehow get Iran to curtail its support for groups like Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad and curtail its vitriol towards Israel, there would be a much better chance at a nuclear deal. I don't see that possible. How would you answer that?

MR. TAKEYH: Well, I don't see that possible either. And now Syria as a – as a sort of a battleground between these contending opinions – and I think there is increasing opinion in Iran and maybe elsewhere that the Assad regime is likely to survive in some form. And when it survives, it is – if it survives and when it survives, it is further tied to Iran because it has no other interlocutors. It's been ejected from all kinds of regional groupings and so forth.

In terms of the actual technical aspect of a nuclear deal, again, I don't want to – with George on the panel, I don't think I can be presumptuous to go into that area. But I would say there is, I think it's fair to say, George, a possibility where Iran can enrich uranium in a manner that doesn't necessarily threaten, you know, the Israeli concerns regarding weaponizations. I mean, I think people like George and others who have thought about nuclear science and nuclear physics can probably draw it up.

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Now the question then becomes a political question, not a technical question, whether Iran would accept those constraints given that it predicates its negotiating posture on the – on the NPT, which gives it certain prerogatives and privileges, and whether Israel, whose sensitivities are more acute than others, can accept it, or for that matter, whether Saudis and others will accept it.

That's the – one of the problems about this issue is the politics of it. By politics of it, I mean whether Iranians will accept it and whether Israelis will accept what – the Israelis will accept what Iranians accept, which they tend to view this issue, as everybody here knows, as more existential and view Iranian enrichment as a technological precursor to a bomb, irrespective of gradation and whatever modalities are imposed on it. And you know, at that – how do you square that circle? I think it remains extraordinarily difficult, which is why everybody tends to be skeptical about a deal.

I will say one thing about Ali Khamenei and his approach to nuclear negotiations. I always think of – in terms of negotiations on the nuclear issues, Ali Khamenei is driving on a highway headed to "Nuclearville." (Scattered laughter.) And he's driving at about 75 miles an hour. But he's not a rash driver the way Saddam and Gadhafi would. Occasionally, when there are a lot of cops on the road, he may slow down. He conforms to the speed limit. Occasionally, during inclement weather, he'll pull off the road and rest a while. So I think that inclination of him can be used to potentially prolong the timelines. And as you prolong the timelines, many things can happen.

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There are two approaches to Iran. One approach is a management approach: how to manage Ali Khamenei's day trip. The other one has to curtail it. Now there are two different strategies; they do have overlaps, obviously. But I think that's where the – most of the focus is, is on the latter – the former, I'm sorry.

MR. : Well –

MR. TAKEYH: Now the Israeli focus is on the latter. That's the – (inaudible).

MR. : (Off mic.)

[00:30:37]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me turn to George now and start with a very elementary question – and you were in Milwaukee for a wedding on Friday. And when you go to places like Milwaukee and you – people ask you what you do for a living at a wedding, you know, holding a Pabst Blue Ribbon, and you say you're a nuclear policy expert, and they say, well, you know, what is – what is Iran doing? Is Iran trying to build a bomb? How far are they away? How do you usually answer that question, kind of in lay terms?

MR. PERKOVICH: Well, when they ask that question, I start to give an answer, and they say, oh, that's very nice, and they leave. So I – (laughter) – and so they don't actually follow up, which is probably good advice.

But since you asked and we're in Washington and not in wonderful Milwaukee, which really was great – you know, I have been saying for a number of years, before the U.S. intelligence community then did an assessment that said that since 2003, I believe and I think the evidence suggests, that Iran has wanted to acquire as much capability as it could to give it the option and know-how to make nuclear weapons without violating its interpretation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in a way that would bring extensive international cost/potential warfare against it and that other things had been going on or might have been going on before 2003, which were perhaps more robust; still an option because there's history.

I mean, you know, India, other states have decided – their leadership has decided to authorize technicians and scientists to start developing a capability without deciding in advance to make nuclear weapons. It's kind of – yeah, get started, because it's going to take a long time and requires all sorts of pathways. And so we see Iran is building a production reactor. So that could give it a plutonium pathway. We've been focusing on enrichment. They have centrifuges, but they also got from Russia laser capability. So this is a typical behavior of a state that – where the leadership says, go out and figure out the capabilities we might need and could get; work on multiple pathways, because we might get stopped; and then, at some point, we'll figure out, you know, whether to give you more specific instructions or make a more fundamental decision.

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And so I think they've wanted that capability. I think they – the people who were out doing the acquisition didn't have much sensitivity at all to what the rules were. By the way, that's not very unusual either. Technicians and nuclear weapons establishment or nuclear establishments tend to not very well understand what the diplomatic-legal limits are. But then they got caught.

And after 2002 – late 2002 and then in 2003, when they had been caught violating the rules and then the inspectors started coming, I think they developed a more coherent theory of their case, which is what arguably they've been following and what different

intelligence communities – you know, they debate about it – but in general say they’re following, which is to get the option – as much of an option to be able to make nuclear weapons as you can get without violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And so I think that’s what they’ve been trying to do.

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If – and basically the – anybody interested in this can read the International Atomic Energy Agency reports, which actually are pretty well-written. I mean, in (a ?) sense, you can follow them; you can understand them, you know. And what they say in the important report of November of last year is basically – I just – I have it here – it says, you know – (reading) – prior to the end of 2003, there was a structured program that involved activities that are relevant to the development of nuclear explosives. And then they detail what some of those experiments were, some of the materials that were being imported, much of which makes no sense unless you’re trying to make nuclear weapons. In other words, there aren’t peaceful applications of these technologies. And then they say that there are some indications that some of those activities may have continued after 2003 while, you know, many were discontinued. And so that’s the state of ambiguity that we’re in with them.

I don’t know anybody with credibility who says, yes, they’ve absolutely – they made a decision; they want a nuclear weapon, and that’s what they’re going for. I mean, I think anybody’s who’s careful about it would say, no, they’re capabilities, and there’s some reassurance in that. But, on the other hand, the things that they have done – some of the things that they have done are violations of agreements, one, but secondly, do give reason to worry, to think that they may want to go further. And so that’s the purpose for the IAEA trying to get more answers from Iran, more access to facilities, access to key scientists that they have not been able to interview in 11 years, to find out, you know, what were you doing, what does it all mean?

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And then, I think, the space where the negotiation – and we’ll talk more about that – needs to happen is to work back from, OK, you say you don’t want nuclear weapons. There are fatwas against having nuclear weapons. You insist all along that it’s never been a nuclear weapon program. Fine, we accept that; let’s define what that means, and let’s define all the subsidiary commitments that you need to make in order to reassure us that in fact you don’t want nuclear weapons. And I think that’s the main kind of space and logic of the negotiation that we’re talking about.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let’s actually get into that. And because, you know, some have made the argument – and by “some,” I mean myself – (laughter) – made the argument that, you know, our conflict with Iran is political in nature. The nuclear issue is the symptom. It’s a symptom, not the underlying cause of our conflict with Iran. And therefore it’s going to be difficult to reach a technical resolution to this conflict absent kind of a broader political accommodation, which will be difficult for the reasons we’ve discussed.

So you know, A, tell me where I – tell me why I may be wrong there, and second, what would, in your view, a technical resolution to this conflict look like? What would the contours of it be?

MR. PERKOVICH: Well, I think – I mean, on the first point, we talked about it in various ways already – is that the – there is a fundamental political and it's even more than political competition between the U.S. and Iran and other parties. That's right. That's going to take a long time to be resolved. It's not even clear that it's in everyone's interest to resolve it. It's not clear that it's resolvable and so on.

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But what we're talking about is there are only – there may be only one issue now that leads to war, and a war that any sane person would say is a really bad idea. Who's – I mean, you have to say its consequences would be unpredictable; but you then, in that unpredictability, have to say they're going to be some bad consequences. And so everybody – I mean, including Israel – wants to avoid that. And this is the one issue, notwithstanding all the other things we disagree – this is the one issue that drives you to war in a fairly quick, you know, schedule.

And so that's why, I think, the focus on that, and it may be to buy time, as Vali was saying, you know, through November. I think it's beyond that because I think it's an existential issue for this – for this regime and Iran to keep some of these issues of tension – fine. But that's fine. I mean, I think of – you know, my – I have a brother who's 10 and ½ months younger than I am. We fought every day –

MR. SADJADPOUR: (Inaudible)

MR. PERKOVICH: – every day until we were 20.

But my dad always felt – he said, no guns. (Laughter.)

And he was a judge, and he knew that most people killed, you know, with guns – it's somebody they know. It's usually family or an extended group. And so he said, no guns in the house, and I know you guys are going to fight all the time. But you won't kill each other.

And sometimes we came close. (Laughter.) But it's – and I think that's the issue here – is we can keep fighting with Iran and arguing with Iran and denouncing, and they'll still say things. But you take away the thing that'll kill a lot of people really quickly. That's a huge development, and I think that's what states people do in given fundamental conflicts, and I think that's why the focus.

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Now, in terms of the deal – and I'll be brief – I mean, it seems to me there's two – there're two kind of parameters right now and, in a way, Iran has established them because they're the object of the negotiation. They have clearly made a taboo since 2003 of giving up their, quote, “right to enrichment.” It's become a nationalist taboo. There is no political

leader or group that can come in and say, all right, you know what, we're not going to do enrichment. That – and I think that's been established. But there's also another taboo which is very important that the leader has reaffirmed recently, which is the taboo that says we don't want nuclear weapons. They've never said they wanted a nuclear weapon.

[00:40:16]

And I've been arguing since 1993 it's a mistake for people here and elsewhere to keep saying Iran's seeking nuclear weapons or Iran has a nuclear weapons program, because the worst thing that would happen is one day an Iranian leader stands up and says, you know what? We have a nuclear weapon program, and we're going to withdraw from the NPT, and we have the right to do it, and we're going to build nuclear weapons. Then you're in a heap of trouble. As long as they keep insisting, we don't want nuclear weapons, there's a space there to say, right, you don't want nuclear weapons, and so all we're asking is for you to reassure us that you won't get what you say you don't want. So you don't have to give up anything, because you said you didn't want this in the first place.

And so between that space of what do you have to do to reassure the world you don't want nuclear weapons – and we can talk more about that – which they say is a taboo already, and the other taboo, which is they can't give up some level of enrichment. That's where the negotiating space needs to be. And I – and you know, we have ideas. There are ways that you can – that you can structure that. And I think that's the – and I think that's what came out of the talks on Istanbul, if you look at the – where they say, well, we're going to approach a solution within the context of the NPT. Well, what does the NPT say? You can't have nuclear weapons.

And then, you know, and Iran's – you know, I mean, one last point I would say – there was a report that the Iranians in the talks weren't insisting on the right to enrichment. And I think that's because they already recognize that they've won that. And so they're going to pocket it and not try to negotiate over it, because they don't want to have to pay for it. So it's been a 10-year struggle to be able to enrich, and now that there's more and more people acknowledging they're going to be able to do that, they say, well, no, of course we're going to enrich. It's our right. And so we don't pay you for that.

And so I think now the struggle's going to be for people like myself and others who work on this I the governments to say, yes, enrichment may be an outcome of this, but because of all of the violations and all of the Security Council resolutions, you're going to have to do some special things to give us confidence it's not a weapon, because they're going to now want to say we already won that; we're not giving you anything for it.

[00:42:27]

MR. SADJADPOUR: There's a lot of journalists in the audience, who, I'm sure, are going to ask more specific details about the technical contours of a potential deal, but I will soon hand it over to all of you because there's a wonderful group of people here, but let me conclude with a couple questions, which I'll pose maybe to all of you.

And Vali, you brought up some of the historic analogies, which may or not – may or may not be applicable to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2012. And the three ones I commonly cite are, you know, those who compare Iran to 1970s China and say that it's a fundamentally pragmatic regime and we simply need to take a very bold gesture, just how Nixon went to China, to bring about a grand bargain between the two sides – the other end of that is the Israeli mentality that this regime is in fact fundamentally messianic and it's not deterrable, it's akin to Nazi Germany and therefore we need to take military action.

[00:43:28]

And the third analogy, which I always set up with a line from Jon Stewart, who said that Dubai is what happens when Las Vegas and Saudi Arabia have a baby – (laughter) – and I say that kind of Iran – the Islamic Republic of Iran is kind of the love child of the Soviet Union and the Taliban, and that it's a diluted version of each. So it's kind of the Soviet analogy.

These three may be the – you know, may be way off. Is there another kind of historic analogy or template which we're missing? Or do you just say that Iran is sui generis, and we need to approach it very, very uniquely? I'd pose that to all of you.

MR. NASR: It's a very good question. You know, I think historical examples are very useful in terms of thinking about diplomatic situations. I know most policymakers do, and depending on how old they are, you get a very different perspective. I mean, people who were alive and were part of the China – I mean, I had a lot of, you know, conversations with Holbrooke about Iran, about China. He was involved in – he was a member of Henry Kissinger's team that went to Beijing. His perspective was very different when you talk about younger people, whose experience, say, had to do with conflicts in Bosnia or Arab-Israeli issue, and come at it in a very different way.

[00:44:52]

There is no doubt that – you know, there's no other regime right now like Iran. And every diplomatic scenario is a – is – had a different component. As I said at the beginning, it also depends on what you want out of a – out of a negotiation. Is this about bringing a country completely in from the cold, like what we're doing with Myanmar, or you really, as George said, are trying to, you know, just create a tenable space between, you know, the two extremes of the situation? And that I don't think we have figured out. I mean, we sort of vacillate between grand ideas around Iran and then very sort of modest ideas.

A few things I would say are important to keep in mind is that, you know, most of the people who talk about China are reading back into history. When China was happening, there were only two people in this city who believed it had a remote chance, and that was Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Nobody, including anybody else in the Republican Party, you know, would have put any stock on this.

Now, they has the luxury of being able to do, you know, secret negotiations before they went public with it, but they would have encountered the same kind of skepticism. And you know, Margaret MacMillan has written in her account of this that when Nixon went to

China, he wasn't even sure Mao was going to see him. So it was a complete leap of – leap of, you know, trust that he made into his hunch.

And that actually goes to the point that every negotiator you talk to, every one of these histories you look at, you also realize that the process itself is determinant. In other words, once you get into it, people don't know what might come out of it. They gauge one another; new – the context changes. Ultimately, as Ray mentioned, any deal has to be a living organism. It has to relate to the context. A priori, we don't know things.

[00:46:53]

I think there are two kinds of negotiations. You have people who say they absolutely want a deal, like the Arabs and Israelis after Oslo, and they absolutely didn't want a deal when it came down to – whether you look at it – Arafat or, on the other side, Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, or there are people who say they don't want a deal and end up making one, which is what former Senator Mitchell said about Northern Ireland. There was 400 days of pessimism until the 405th – or the 401st day there was an opening.

You know, the Israeli read on Iran, you know, is based on also their own particular historical context. I – my reading of, you know, sort of messianism as foreign policy in Iran is different from that. I don't think – I think the Iranian government has a very clear regional objective; it has a very clear domestic objective. But I think it wants to remain in power for a very long time. It doesn't want to commit suicide. I think its objectives are – nefarious as many people may think they are, are very sort of understandable. It's to hold on to power. I would see them do what Assad is doing in Syria much more readily than try to provoke a self-destructive larger war.

[00:48:23]

But I would like to sort of point to, you know, two things that we often – which are very – which are different, even in the Iranian context, to follow up on what George was saying. One is that the domestic situation in Iran, largely because of the scale of the sanctions, is very different from anything else we've encountered in the past 30 years. So you know, whether we've passed the tipping point, we're on a tipping point, we don't know. But you know, there are many indicators that now there are fundamental social-economic changes in Iran happening. How they will play out, when they would play out, particularly in the context of the timeline George mentioned, we really don't know. We're sort of entering a phase that we're not familiar with.

The second one is in the region. We often talk about the nuclear issue as if there's only two elements here, Iran and the United States. This region also has not been where it's been since 1979, a sort of degree of instability that this regime itself created. So you know, for 30 years we've contained Iran, dealt with Iran, thought about Iran in the context of a Middle East that we were – we knew what it was. We knew Israel was there. We knew all these Arab dictators, where they stood. We know who the bad guys were, who the good guys were.

We're sort in a phase we don't know what's going to happen in this region. We – you know, everybody was thinking about Egypt very, very differently only three months ago. Now, you know, Syria, how it's going to happen – so that's part of the context. In other words, you know, if we're thinking of a policy of containment or curtailment or negotiations with Iran that sort of extends some time into the future, you have to take into account that you – the domestic scene in Iran and the regional scene are changing. And that could put us in a completely new place, which would change all of this sort of reading of history as well.

MR. SADJAPOUR: Absolutely.

[00:50:22]

MR. TAKEYH: Historical analogies: The late Ernie May used to say that when you talk about historical analogy, get a piece of paper and put a line in between, and write your analogy and write your situation, and say how are they different and how are they the same. You realize that the ledger that says different, you move to the second page. The ledger that they're the same, you probably won't get past item number two.

The China analogy is used quite often. There was a recent piece I read that – on that issue, because I think to some extent, it's analogous – is why did it take the United States and China so long to normalize relationship when the process began in 1970? Why did it take until 1978? Why did it take so long if all these commonalities, all these coincidences of interests existed?

Well, because as a revolutionary at the top of that state, Mao understood the imperative of dealing with the United States, given the Soviet exigency; he just couldn't pull away himself from his revolution, so he will stop it. He always thought the global revolution was coming, and China had to lead it. So somebody was saying there is a protest in Zimbabwe, so cancel the Kissinger meeting. (Chuckles.) Ultimately, China-America normalization comes after Mao's death.

[00:51:44]

And you begin to see the analogy with Iran's revolutionary leader. It'd be very hard for – and I understand that – for Iranian leader to divest himself of 50 years of ideology. Actually, I understand that. I think we're asking him to abandon his value system. And how many people in this room can do that easily, effortlessly and pragmatically, as it would be called? It's not an easy thing to do, especially for a revolutionary who's now a counter-revolutionary.

The historical analogy – if you want to use one, I have one – is, dealing with Iranians, I will say, is like dealing with the North Vietnamese. It's like negotiating with North Vietnamese – intransigent, disciplined, determined, looking for every angle – you know, exacting – the other analogy is, as with North Vietnamese, we try to use coercive power to extract concessions at the negotiating table, which is a very difficult thing to do. So that's the analogy that seems makes most sense to me because these were two states that didn't have obvious coincidence of interest, but they wanted to end the conflict. And you begin to see how United States tried to use – both sides tried to use coercive leverage against each

other. The difference is, in this case, Iran doesn't have much of a coercive leverage against the United States, so that's the –

[00:53:04]

Final thing I will say because of Vali – is there are – the – a certain decision was made by the United States in 2005, 2006, and maybe a little bit before that, is to try to take the Iran issue and embed it in certain international legal structure, the U.N. Security Council process. And as a result of that, what we're arguing about is not necessarily compliance just with the NPT, because we have introduced other legal authorities into this issue, namely series of Security Council resolutions.

Now, I understand there is a(n) overlap between NPT and those resolutions, but those resolutions prescribe certain things – suspension. And I think all those things have to be real. Suspension has to be real and has to be protracted because Iranian nuclear program, to use a Catholic phrase, was born in sin and has continued as an illicit nuclear program; it operates in defiance of international Security Council obligations that have cause for— (Inaudible).

So a(n) illegal program operating illicitly, there has to be some punitive measures here for the credibility of the international legal process, for the credibility of the NPT, for the credibility of the Security Council resolution and for credibility of international nonproliferation norms. I mean, if we wanted, we can denigrate that process; we can do that. It's called the Lavrov plan. We can emasculate it. But I think we pay a certain price in terms of the credibility of this legal authority if you do so. Now, it is entirely possible that we made a mistake in betting that in that security architecture. But you know, you are where you are.

[00:54:51]

MR. PERKOVICH: I don't think it's that hard – I just jump in –

MR. SADJAPOUR: Yeah. Yeah, why don't you jump in.

MR. PERKOVICH: – I mean, as a lapsed Catholic or whatever. (Laughter.) You know, one of the reasons I never bought it was, you know, they'll say, well, if you go to confession, you know, and say what you did, and you say 10 hail Marys, you're – it's done, it's good. I – this is too easy. (Laughter.) This can't be right.

But the – but I think in this case, it actually could work. In other words, Iran's already been punished. So the issue would be, if you – if you can imagine an agreement where they satisfy the IAEA – so they answer the outstanding question, which is a form of confession, but as in the Catholic Church, you don't get punished for it. Now, you get indemnified for it, which is, by the way, what happened with Libya; it's what happened with other states that had programs that had broken the rules: They came clean to the IAEA, and then the IAEA sent reports to the Security Council, and the Security Council passed resolutions not condemning them or punishing them, but thanking them for, you know, resolving the issue and moving on.

So I think there are ways where that could be done, that if you had a sufficient arrangement with the Iranians that people had confidence in, that the IAEA was now satisfied and it can close the file, that there are ways to get the Security Council to do it. Now, you're right, other stuff got tacked on to there about human rights and so on. So you'd have to figure out how to finesse that. But the – but the punishment part's already been done, I would argue. I don't think that's necessarily – and by the way, I mean, all of the states or most of the states that care most about the NPT would be so happy to have this resolved. The idea that they would want to protract it and have, you know, the Security Council demand more and everything, I just don't see that happening at all. I think people want it, like, closed, resolved, put a bow on it and the system's been saved, it would be my sense. U.S. politics is different, but –

[00:57:01]

MR. SADJAPOUR: George, I brought political analogies. Are there historic nuclear analogies which I'm missing here that could be instructive in our dealings with Iran?

MR. PERKOVICH: No. I mean, I – there may be, but I don't – because I think every other program that had an outcome that is like what one would want here, namely, they had illicit nuclear activities that were at least in part to develop options to make nuclear weapons, those all ended in secret. So Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa disarmed in secret. They were decisions made outside of politics. No one saw them, so no one was giving up anything that their own public knew they had or that others knew they had. And I think the Iranian issue has now become so public and so nationalized that there is no analogy of a country that has relatively open politics, having a big nuclear capability into which they've invested a lot of time, prestige and all of that and then walking that back. There is – there is no example.

MR. TAKEYH: I would just say one thing in terms of history of proliferation – George knows better than I do that history. It is kind of – and here, where many stakeholders complicate negotiations, it is very hard for a country to give up its nuclear capabilities. Or usually, countries give up their nuclear capabilities when their strategic environment improves – South Africa, for instance, with the reduction of the – elimination of the Soviet threat. It is harder for a country to give up its nuclear capabilities aspirations, let's say – weapons aspirations – when its immediate security environment deteriorates.

[00:58:53]

And that's what happening today with a – because in essence, the conventional balance of power today in the Gulf is tilted decisively and permanently against Iran. So for Iranians to give up their nuclear aspirations, nuclear weapons aspirations and protect their nuclear weapons is to live in a strategic environment where it is to their disadvantage, given the adversarial relationships they have with their neighbors across the Gulf.

That's what makes this – and our Gulf policy at this point, as far as I can tell, is we go to the Saudis and others – and I understand that – is we say, we share your concerns about Iran; here is another bushel of weapons – because the currency and confidence

between the two powers has become weapons sales. That's how dysfunctional that relationship is. Just imagine if that's the case in your personal relationships. (Chuckles.)

So as the Gulf becomes militarized, on the other side of the Gulf, that – how do you adjust to that balance – imbalance of power becomes more complicated. This is why I think this issue is so complicated because there are so many actors involved. If you've – working on Gulf policy, selling arms to the Saudis and others make a lot of sense to you, make political sense, makes – make economic sense nowadays. And if you're looking on resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, you begin to see the disadvantages of that. And if those trains don't cross –

MR. : Right.

MR. TAKEYH: -- as they often do in a compartmentalized, slow bureaucratic system – and how do you approach the Gulf states by saying, but as part of our nuclear negotiations, we're not going to sell you weapons? What does that do to their own nuclear weapon aspirations? So there's so many – as I said, there's so many circles you have to square here.

MR. NASR: That –

MR. TAKEYH: Oh, go ahead.

[01:00:38]

MR. NASR: No, I was going to say but – I agree with Ray, but even more immediate than that is that – is that the main threat in the Gulf is from the United States to Iran. That's why in the Persian Gulf, you know, Iran's objective is to get the United States to leave the region. So any scenario in which, you know, you would give up the strategic values of a potential nuclear program – nuclear weapons program, but don't change the posture that the United States has or the United States capabilities would leave you absolutely vulnerable, which essentially means that, you know, short of regime change, short of a Libya scenario or even in the case of South Africa, you know – you know, the giving of the – of the weapons or in the case of Brazil, still involve some sort of a major regime change, that – you know, this is – this would be an incomplete, if you would, agreement for them.

[01:01:40]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me follow up, Vali, with this idea of – I don't like to use the word regime change, but let's say regime transformation and go to these polls which PAAIA has done. And they may be available for you outside. If not, I recommend checking out their website – very interesting public opinion polls of Iranian-Americans. And the one that was done recently in the last month polled Iranian-Americans about their views on a military strike on Iran, I think both an Israeli and U.S. military strike. And 70 percent were opposed to any type of Israeli military action against Iran, which I actually found the number surprisingly low. I would have thought it would have been slightly higher.

And there was another poll which was done last year which I also found interesting, which showed that a strong majority of Iranian-Americans – and this isn't surprising – would like to see a different regime, basically a secular democracy and – in Iran. And they believe that U.S. priority in its Iran policy should be promoting democracy and human rights and things like that. And I thought inherent in these two polls is the fact that Iranian-Americans believe that military action against Iran will actually not promote democracy and human rights in Iran. In fact, I think all of us have argued the same thing, that it would likely prolong the shelf life of the regime.

So, you know, my question is if you have any broad thoughts about Iranian-American popular views. And then second, we haven't talked about the issue of promotion of democracy and human rights, whether that's a good idea and, you know, what specifically? We all – we all would like to see –

MR. : Right.

MR. SADJADPOUR: – a more representative government in Iran, but what specifically could the U.S. government do to champion that cause?

[01:03:41]

MR. NASR: Well, first of all, the polls were done in association with Zogby, which is a well-known pollster. The aim was to gauge the opinion of the community because it's a – it's a fairly engaged community. It's also – it's fairly – and particularly states of the United States like California, et cetera, its political pull is fairly important. And I think the community itself wanted to know exactly beyond anecdotal stories and personal impressions where its thinking is on these important issues of promotion of democracy or war with Iran. I definitely encourage you to look at the entire poll on PAAIA's website because it also breaks down the information by varieties of other interesting criteria – age, you know; who has family in Iran; the degree to which the community identifies – there's a lot of useful information in there.

But I think, you know, the poll, you know, taps into sort a larger problem in U.S. foreign policy with Iran and that's the following, that – you know, the Iranians obviously care a lot about democracy and there was this sort of degree to which there existed support for the Green Movement and still does for – the extent to which it's active reflected that. But those sympathies don't necessarily translate into support on the nuclear issue. And that potentially is probably true within Iran, too. In other words, our assumption or our starting point is that Iranians hate their regime and –

MR. SADJADPOUR: Iranian-Americans?

[01:05:21]

MR. NASR: No, no, even within Iran, that they hate their regime. And because they hate their regime, they also don't want to have a nuclear program. In other words, they – their approach to Iran is identical to us. And that might not be the case. I mean, you can go to India or you can go to Pakistan. You can go to many countries and see that nuclear

programs can evoke all sorts of nationalistic pride, et cetera, and people may dislike the Iranian regime for every reason – management, repression, et cetera – but not be supportive of the United States’ position on the nuclear program.

[01:05:59]

Now the problem we have is that we really don’t have a policy of supporting human rights and democracy in Iran. We haven’t had it since the 2009 uprising. We have a policy of getting Iran to stop its nuclear program. Now we sort of, in a convoluted way, tried to marry these two things by claiming that somehow pressuring the Iranian public on the nuclear issue would also serve the cause of democracy. I personally don’t believe that largely because people are not stupid. They know that nothing in these sanctions says that they’re – they are being imposed for repression, for jailing journalists, for abuse of human rights. They are specifically imposed for, you know, violations of IAEA demands or violations of NPT, and that the international community is not interested in those issues, is interested in human – in the nuclear issue.

And secondly, I think that, you know, potentially the sanctions hurt the public in Iran, particularly the private sector, the very social-economic sectors that were the base of the Green Movement, the pro-democracy movement. I mean, we saw what sanctions did to Iraq after 10 years. The so-called middle class just disappeared, and what you were end – left within Iraq was Sadr City and thuggishness and militancy, et cetera.

So I think, you know, the poll doesn’t – you know, is not directed at that, but it raises this issue that there is this problem between a policy that is primarily focused on the nuclear issue, but then sort of pretends that it’s also concerned with those other issues in Iran. And then, you know, we really haven’t thought about what is the – as I said, because it does impact the domestic scene in Iran – what sort of an impact it will have? Who is it hurting if we end up in this band of – as George says – of, you know, happy medium for another four, five years, what will it do to the Iranian public?

[01:08:07]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Ray, you’ve been kind of more bullish than you were a few years ago about the prospects for some type of political change, political transformation in Iran. What do you think is – you know, what would you advise the administration to do if they want to try to expedite the cause of political reform in Iran?

MR. TAKEYH: I would say if you look at, let’s say, the – just take a postwar history of Iran – post second world war history of Iran, 20th century and 21st century. Vali has written a book about that, but let me give you my interpretation in a brief way. That’s a history of central authorities battling various social, political protest movements. 1953 is remembered differently in Iran as a time when the political space was to be expanded. And these protest movements just don’t come up to 1953. There are – there is sort of a marination process – 1963, 1979.

Post-Islamic Republic history has been particularly turbulent. The 1980 to 1982 civil war, then the war stops that. Then you have the reform movement of the 1990s, the Green

Movement. There'll be another movement coming. That's the history of that country. I don't know if the Green Movement is dead or not. I don't know if it's going to revive itself or not, but I can say with some degree of confidence that the contest between the central authorities seeking hegemony of power and a population seeking emancipation and expansion of political rights has not concluded. (Applause.)

[01:09:47]

Oh, one person! What are – what are – (laughter) – was this some meeting in Belarus? (Laughter.) Were the rest of you skeptics? (Chuckles.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We're on camera. That's why.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mic.)

MR. SADJADPOUR: The silent majority, I think.

MR. TAKEYH: Now the second question is, what can the United States do as a proactive policy? There are some indications and experiences we have had with Eastern Europe and so forth. They can serve as a – as a – to inform your choices. But ultimately I think this is an internal dimensions. And when it gets to a certain level, I think there is a role for the international community to play.

I think one of the inclinations we may have at this point as we come to acclaim the spirit of Istanbul is to not necessarily continue our moral indictment of the regime. And it is a regime that is susceptible to a moral indictment. And that's going to be expressed on the Capitol Hill, that's going to be expressed elsewhere, because there is the degree of moral affront that this regime represents. I mean, that's just the reality of the situation. I'm not suggesting we shouldn't negotiate with them or accept some sort of a deal, as George suggested, but there's a moral deficiency about a regime that treats its citizens in the manner that this one does. And I don't think we can restrain ourselves from expressing that, irrespective of whether, Dr. Jelli (ph), we think that's a good or bad idea.

[01:11:08]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Do you have any thoughts on that, George, or I'll open it up?

MR. PERKOVICH: Let's open it up, yeah.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Great. So I'll bunch together a few questions at once. And I know there's a lot of Iranians in the audience, but if you can be as concise as possible – (laughter) – and please introduce yourself in advance.

Let me take Nasi (ph) first, if you can introduce yourself.

Q: My name is Nasi (ph) –

MR. SADJADPOUR: And wait for the microphone.

Q: Sorry. My name is Nasi Iftagori (ph). I'm a businesswoman from Minnesota. And I don't shut off when you are talking about nuclear weapons.

[01:11:43]

Mr. Takeyh, I wanted to ask you: As a businesswoman, I know that no deal is better than the men or women who sign it. As a Shia Muslim, I know that we have a concept called tathiyeh (ph), where, in the furtherance of the faith, we can tell an untruth. As an American, can you tell me how we can sit down and negotiate with people who believe that in furtherance of the faith, we can tell untruths?

And Mr. Perkovich, I wanted to ask a clarifying question. When you were fighting with your brother, if your father knew that your brother was at the same time – God forbid – murdering or raping other people, would the honorable judge have still given the same advice, to simply not arm the two of you and let it go until you grew up; or would he have chosen to intervene? Because in Iran we – between Iran and the United States, we have a little bit more of a complex situation than a fight between two countries and hoping to sit it out.

Thank you.

[01:13:06]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Saroush (sp), please. There's a mike right there.

Q: Very briefly, thank you to all of you. It was a very interesting panel.

I'm going to make one clarification on the poll on behalf of Plaiya (ph). It can be misleading. When you say 70 percent would not oppose, you should look at how many would support. And in our 2011 poll, only 3 percent would support; this year, 13 percent would support.

MR. : Support military action.

Q: Military action, precisely. And it's – what I was heartened by is that we didn't come across as tribal as Iranian-Americans, because we said we would support under certain circumstances, and the largest one was if there was mass civilian deaths in Iran. So – but I encourage all of you to look at the poll, because there's a lot of very interesting detail underneath that that shows a very thoughtful community.

Questions, very quickly, for all of you, a lightning round. What are your thoughts on Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey's statement that Iran is a rational actor supported by Burgess (sp), Clapper and others in Israeli intelligence? Two, given your experience in both Democratic and Republican administrations, there seems to be a lot of effort on thinking of sticks and smarter sanctions, but has there been any effort in terms of creative continuous thought in terms of incentives that could help resolve these problems?

And finally, three, a nuclear deal is sort of envisioned right now. What impact would it have – or could it have for the democratic aspirations of the people of Iran?

Thank you.

[01:14:40]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thank you. Amal, please.

Q: Yes. I'm Amal Meudaletti (sp). I'm adviser for Mr. Halili (ph). I was in Tehran at the beginning of –

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mic) – louder.

Q: Sorry. I was in Tehran with my boss at the beginning of 2000, after the election of Mr. Bush, and I can tell you how much excitement there was in the official circles in Tehran because they believe that Republicans are more prone to have better deals and better relationship with Iran than the Democrats.

My question is, do you think a Republican or a Democratic administration is more – is more likely to have a deal with Iran? And would this be on the expense of its relationships with the other Arab states in the region, which is a concern – (off mic)?

MR. TAKEYH: Why don't we go one by one, then we'll come back to questions soon. The first question, on the – I seldom comment on Shi'i jurisprudence with a descendant of the Prophet here, so – (laughter) – I defer all those questions on complexity of Shiism to Dean Nasr. In any international negotiations, I will suspect both parties are trying to maximize their advantages, and, you know, any agreement would have to have some verification procedures that are inexacting. But I will say again, an agreement is – adherence to an agreement is contingent on the politics of the country and the politics of the region. If you look at history of arms control, the Soviets adhered better to their agreements when they felt the U.S.-Soviet relation was better and so on and so forth. So I think that I do take that in point.

[01:16:15]

On the three questions that were asked on Iran, rational actor, I think rationality is not a state of mind, and it's a process. You can go through a perfectly rational process and come at the end with a very irrational conclusion. Whether or not there have been enough consideration on incentives, I mean, there's been a lot of discussions, particularly you go back to 1990s, where there was all the discussion of road maps and so forth and how do you essentially create a situation where Iran – since everybody's quoting Henry Kissinger – put them in a position where they want to be contained; what series of international incentives and how you can embed them in an international system whereby they essentially view its disruption to their disadvantage. (Inaudible)—the book on Kissinger, so we're all being very presumptuous here.

[01:17:00]

Impact of a nuclear deal on the democratic aspirations of the Iranian public, I think, is an important question. I don't have a satisfactory answer to it, because I can see a scenario where it could lead to demoralization; I could see a scenario where the Iranian public that wants to have greater democratic rights views confrontation as disadvantage to its aspirations. I think use of military force at the end, I will say, is unwise and constitutes failure of policy. If your policy's working, you don't have to bomb things.

And I think that creative imagination has to be put in how to solve this issue, whether you want to do coercion or incentives or a combination of the two, as opposed to use of military force, as George said, whose consequences are impossible to prognosticate with any degree of proficiency. I'll use another quote, saying nobody knew war like Hitler did, and Hitler used to say war is like walking into a dark room; you can step on something toxic or nothing at all, but you never know until you walk into that room. And it's a room that I don't think we should be walking into.

The Republicans or Democrats? You know, I think United States policy toward Iran has been characterized by a considerable degree of continuity. And both political parties want to deny that. (Chuckles.) The two-track policy that is the United States policy today was actually originated in Condi Rice's State Department. There were two people that were critical of a two-track policy in 2005, 2006, 2007. That was Vali Nasr and me. And we were largely ignored. There were two people who were critical in terms of -- in the administration of it. That was Vali Nasr and me. And then we were really ignored. (Laughter.) There are two people who are critical of it today. That's Vali Nasr and me, except we have been joined by a third person, who cannot be ignored, Bibi Netanyahu. So suddenly the two-track policy and its deficiencies or advantages or whatever it has is much more subject to scrutiny.

[01:18:52]

But I think United States policy toward Iran has been susceptible to continuity. We have always felt that through employment of economic sanctions, we can secure an interlocutor. That's been the thesis of two administrations, and I suspect it will be the thesis of the successor administration. So I don't know if Democrats or Republicans are better or worse at this. I think we have a certain Iran policy. If you're satisfied with it, it's an American policy. If you're unsatisfied with it, it's still an American policy.

MR. NASR: Just quickly on the rational/irrational. You know, we sort of -- this, I think, is more of a political tool domestically. We think that Iran is an irrational actor until it's responding to American threats; then we expect it to act very rationally. For instance, the argument that was made in Foreign Affairs about it's time to bomb Iran, all of its assumptions was that if we bombed Iran, then all of the Iranian responses could be calculated, based on rationality, that they would not do X, they would not do Y, because they are rational. You know, I think, you know, most of the things about Iranian government that we criticize, we see they want to do, are perfectly understandable -- which is, you know, why do they want to suppress their people? Why do they want to acquire nuclear capability? Why do they want to bully their neighbors? All of these are sort of behaviors that are not irrational.

[01:20:20]

I think that, you know, there is a question as to whether or not it's rational for a state to try to defy the overall global trends towards economic prosperity, decides to sit outside of the international system – which is similar arguments that people made about Myanmar. You know, there is a – there is a – there is a level of irrationality in terms of choosing a historical course that you know is going to end up at an impasse, and not be willing to get off of it.

But in terms of, you know, where we are in management of this conflict, I think we can see that, you know, they are making a certain set of calculations. They have objectives. They – and the – and you know, they're not going – they are not going to come into the meetings, for instance, in a deliberate way to escalate tensions for the heck – for the – for the sake of it. So I think, you know, that is – that is not very useful in sort of a serious conversation. But it is a political tool in terms of creating certain support for policies.

You know, on the Republican-Democratic issue, I'm not sure actually the Iranian leadership understands American politics to that degree of granularity. I think, you know, at a – there's – they have some experiences that they may think it was easier dealing with Carter or it was easier dealing with Bill Clinton, or you know, they don't want to deal with another very conservative Republican administration.

And I think they understand that probably a President Obama in a second term will be easier to deal with. I think they also heard what was – the open microphone told Medvedev. And also I think they understand that even if you have a Republican president come in, a first-term Republican has much more – a first-term president, regardless of party, because he is looking at re-election will have much more constraints in terms of, you know, fidgeting with the Iran issue.

[01:22:21]

And you know, generally I agree with Ray. I mean, you know, our sanctions policy with Iran doesn't make sense, largely because it hasn't and it will not solve the problem on its own. And in fact we've come to a point of, you know, thinking that it's failed. And some people say, you know, it's failed; go to war. But you know, it's a policy that was put in place because it was domestically convenient for the – for the administrations, Republican and Democratic. It makes you look like you're doing something about Iran, but you really are not doing anything about Iran.

And – but – and it worked because, for a very long period of time, it was cost-free to the United States. You put the sanctions, it doesn't impact the oil prices, it didn't impact us at all; it only impacted the people of Iran. And why – you know, why toy with good enough? And in some ways, you know, Ray is right: It's essentially Israel that has pushed basically by saying this is not good enough. It's not productive, and the only reason we're seeing a lot of debate is because now there is a public acknowledgement that the policy has failed.

[01:23:29]

MR. PERKOVICH: Just I – let me just add this to – not to repeat. I think on the question about how would a nuclear deal affect the democratic aspirations in Iran, I would think it would be beneficial in two ways. One is, if you can imagine what is wished for in terms of a transition in Iran, a transformation in Iran, whoever would come in would not want to deal with this issue. This is a really hard issue. So I think the sooner you can get it resolved by somebody else, you know, that that would be positive, number one.

Number two, one of the effects of nuclear weapons is that if you actually build them and have them there physically, there's a very hard decision that has to be made then, is who controls it – who holds it, who controls it and so on. But if and when you make that decision, if you imagine a transition in that country, it's very hard to get rid of the people who hold the nuclear weapons – because the democrats in Iran, for example, will have no idea what capability really exists. If there are nuclear weapons, they don't know who has them, how many they are or where they are.

And the people who have them aren't going to tell them. They're going to bargain. They're going to say, well, you know, you're coming into power now, but you don't have power because you don't have the nuclear weapons, and you can't take them. So now you're in a very strong bargaining situation if you're those guys. So it seems to me, to have this resolved before they get nuclear weapons, diplomatically, then at least in principle makes that process much easier, which is another reason why it's very important that Iran not make nuclear weapons and say that it doesn't want nuclear weapons yet.

On – just briefly, I agree on the rational actor issue. I don't – I would just keep saying, the definition of a rational actor is someone who tries to preserve themselves. And I think the Iranian regime has clearly demonstrated that in the fundamentals.

And the last thing, on the – on this – on this provocative question about my brother, which – some of which I'm not going to address – (scattered laughter) – I think – in the issue of lying, I think you – everyone knows this is an issue. So whatever deal would be structured is going to be structured in such a way that there are going to be lots of indicators, lots of subsidiary requirements that would be trip wires, that would – that would be things that you could detect would be violated. So that one doesn't worry me so much.

[01:26:01]

But also you have to, in looking at this, understand that the Iranian government assumes we're bigger liars than they are and that we deserve trust less than they. They have more mistrust – so they're not going to commit to anything that doesn't give up their leverage. And we have to understand that. And in defining what would be a deal that we think's negotiable, it's going to have to allow them to keep leverage – because their view is the minute they gave up leverage, we'd do regime change.

So they're going to keep – it's one of the reasons why there's going to be some enrichment, because there's some leverage there. It's going to take some time. There's going to be incremental, because they got to keep the leverage there. They're going to keep know-how and remind us sometimes that they have know-how, so that's leverage.

[01:26:50]

So if anybody thinks that this is – you know, you can design a deal that somehow denudes them, takes away all their leverage, and we're all happy and Israel's happy, that's insane, because they won't agree to it. And you know they'll cheat. But if you design a deal where they get some leverage, then they have less of an incentive to cheat, because it – you know, they know that if we try to screw them, they can – they can do it back. And I think people understand this.

MR. SADJADPOUR: That's a good point.

Let me take another round of questions.

Please, in the front, Gary. Front row. Yeah, front row.

Q: Thanks. I'm Garrett Mitchell, and I write the Mitchell Report. And I want to – I want to pose the question this way, I think. I'm having one of those moments where I – where I imagine that when this session is over I'm going to go into a room with 50 people who couldn't get seats for this session and answer their question, which is what did they say – meaning what did the panel say? And I'm a little unclear, so I want to try a kind of a three-step process and get your take on it.

[01:28:07]

One is, is it the – do the members of this panel agree that the supreme leader is the only game in town, particularly when it comes to this issue, and that discussions with anyone else are interesting but not particularly relevant? Second, do the members of this panel know or believe that the supreme leader has actually issued a fatwa stating that – in essence that the existence of a nuclear weapon in a Islamic state is against Islamic law?

And third, if the answers to one and two are yes, might this not be a point where we take a page out of John Kennedy's decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, where he had two letters from Khrushchev? One said, I'm going to blow your head off. And the other said, as parents and grandparents we can't do this – in which case, if you believe that the supreme leader is the only game in town, and if you believe he's actually issued that fatwa, and if you believe he means it, then, coming to the question that Karim asked earlier about to broaden or not broaden, is this an opportunity for us to in effect say, we take the supreme leader at his word and believe that there is not a nuclear weapons program in process; we want some assurances to that effect; but as I think George suggested – and oh, by the way, there are a couple of other issues on which we'd like to make some progress at this point?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thank you, Garrett.

Let's go in the – in the way back. Yeah, please, yeah.

Q: Avis Bohlen, retired State Department. Could you say a word about the divisions within the Iranian leadership about this and other issues? I would just also note,

just very briefly, a comment. When you talked about analogies, nobody really mentioned the Soviet Union. But as somebody pretty antediluvian, it seems to me that there are quite a lot of analogies between this highly messianic regime and – with which we nonetheless managed to find the space that at least reassured us on nuclear weapons, even if it didn't really deal with the problem?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thank you.

Please, in the middle there, Beyhnam (ph).

[01:31:12]

Q: Thank you so much for a great panel. My name is Beyhnam (ph). I'm an Elliott School student. My question is curtailing (sic) off of Dr. Perkovich's ending comments there. Whatever you call this deal, if you think it's going to be one, whether it's a grand bargain or a nuclear tactical compromise, technical compromise, what lessons could Iran have drawn from Libya, if any, with the coming in from the cold and then the recent actions of the Arab Spring? Thank you.

MR. SADJADPOUR: We've got about six minutes left, seven minutes, so why don't you guys pick what you like.

MR. TAKEYH: I'll be quick. Garret's (sp) question, the supreme leader in charge – I think that the cast of character has dramatically narrowed, but I think before he would concede to any deal, he would talk to his Revolutionary Guard members. I mean, he would have to have a consensus among a very small category of people. But I think he still has the authority and stature to impose a decision.

The fatwa – I have heard about it, but as I said, I haven't seen it.

And Ogdi Faroghal (ph)'s questions of jurisprudence who've – (Inaudible) – to the descendent of the Prophet – so I didn't answer yes to both questions, therefore I'm disqualified from answering the third question which you posed. I answered yes and no. Divisions in Iranian leadership – and some of that is Garrett's (sp) question as well – I would say one of the interesting thing that I saw when Hashemi Rafsanjani's thing came out about a relationship with the U.S. – there's a line in there that most people didn't see or didn't pay as much attention to maybe as I did in which he said he wrote a letter to the imam in the late '80s saying, there's seven issues that you should resolve – one of them is how to deal with the United States – before you die because if you don't, it's unlikely we'll be able to.

And he's right. They haven't been able to square out their animosity at this complicated relationship with the United States. And he's been right for 20 years, and he's probably being right again.

[01:34:38]

Libya analogy for Iran – I think Iran’s nuclear decision-making is now resting on how it can maintain its program, mitigate international sanctions and all these contradictions within its own posture.

And obviously, the notion of coming to terms and being subject to regime change – this is a government that thinks it’s been subject to regime change anyways, so that’s a sort of a constant variable in Iranian decision-making. And maybe the Libya analogy – Libya situation reinforced it or reaffirmed it. But I think in any approach they have to the international community, certainly with Ali Khamenei, he has a well – history, as Kalim (ph) has documented, of thinking that United States is seeking to conspire against his regime, whether there’s evidence for that. And if you think that, you’re going to look for evidence. And Libya case is one of it, and some – whatever else. So I don’t think that has nudged them in any sort of a way one way or the other.

I don’t know – one of the frustrating aspect of the current policy toward Iran is nobody has a suitable alternative to it. And the use of military force, I think, as I mentioned, is unwise. Whether Iran will transfer a bomb or not, you know, I think – there’s a declared policy of the state to transfer nuclear material, centrifuges or whatever. I don’t know what they mean by nuclear material, but every time they have a visiting head of state – Algerian deputy foreign minister – they say, someday we’ll give you nuclear material. I don’t know what that means. I don’t know how that goes about. I don’t know if that’s a commerce that is acceptable. I don’t know if Iranians are saying that they’re going to transform themselves into a North Korea, which essentially uses nuclear resources for commercial purposes. But that is a persistent and declared posture of the state. I’m not talking about a weapon, but I’m talking about resources.

[01:36:19]

As I said, the intellectually frustrating aspect of this policy is that alternatives are proving quite elusive, and particularly if you take the use of force off the table, which, as I said, I don’t think is a constructive path forward on that front.

MR. NASR: You know, to start at that last question first, I mean, obviously, there’s always – there’s a lot of hyperbole about this issue of what Iran would do with nuclear capability. But if we really had to worry about any country’s nuclear proliferation into the United States elsewhere, we should really thinking about Pakistan right now, which actually has nuclear weapons and has in the past shown some a tendency to be willing to sell them to all aspirants.

But that doesn’t mean that in the, you know, future this is not an issue. But it’s the same kinds of things that George said. These things have to be put under safeguards, et cetera.

Let me just say, about the issue of the fatwa, there is no written fatwa yet. But that doesn’t – that – there is also tradition that – you know, of giving oral rulings – as it’s called, bayans (ph) – that, you know, it’s – doesn’t – it’s not – it’s not like a – it’s not like a Supreme Court ruling where there’s a judgment that’s put down with all the appropriate references. But it’s a – it is – it has a quality of a legal directive.

What matters here is that we're not dealing with a very specifically legal issue. This has been broadcast by Iranian newspapers as a fatwa. They've used the word "fatwa," not us. In fact, the outside press – they didn't use this word. They use the terminology of cardinal sin in defining the nuclear issue. And then, you know, when the prime minister and foreign minister of Turkey went and met with the supreme leader, you know, they got an earful about the fact that, you know, I have spoken, and this is – this is my position, et cetera.

[01:38:10]

Now, you can take it any which way you want. You know, you could think that they are practicing dissimulation, in other words, hiding their true intent, which, as Ray said, could be said about any political position. Or you could assume that, you know, the Iranians send – were sending a very clear signal that they were going to meet, the president says, red line. The president said at AIPAC that the United States would go to war if Iran built nuclear weapons, not short of that, not for enrichment, not for capability, not for potentiality, but if there is evidence that they were going to build a bomb.

So basically, you could see that this was a political decision that – to – that sort of the supreme leader would personally answer this in a language that has religious connotations, saying that, well, we're not going to cross that, so let's agree on the upper limit of this thing; now let's work below it. And it has to be verified. I mean, there is no doubt about it. And you know, fatwas are not – you know, I always like to say that we'll really believe fatwas when they're against Americans and Israelis. Then we'll really believe that they're ironclad; they can never be changed. You know, the – if there's a fatwa on killing Americans, we think it's, you know, word of God. But fatwas can change. I mean, if the supreme leader dies, the next supreme leader is not bound by this fatwa, like legal rulings of the Supreme Court are subject to change.

[01:39:33]

If there's a major change in context, he reserves the right to revisit this policy. I mean, look, the president said at AIPAC that containment is off the table, right? America would – do you – we believe hundred percent that it will never revisit that issue if the context changes, that he's not going to – he's not bound? No, I mean, he may very well change his mind, and they would find a way to sort of walk back that statement and say, we're going to do containment.

So you have to take it in a context. It's not hundred percent. It's not ironclad. But it's significant because it actually did help the negotiations. That's exactly what Erdogan and Davutoglu, the Turkish delegation, told the secretary in Istanbul, that, look, this is a political leverage; you know, don't dismiss it; they've established a line; actually hold their feet to fire; say, you know, we accept the fact that you established your upper limit; now we're going to focus on making sure you keep it.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Last word to George.

MR. PERKOVICH: Really briefly on the Libya issue – I don't have time to go into, you know, what would be a sound analysis of it. But all I would say back to everybody who uses that is, what about Syria, then? Syria doesn't have nuclear weapons. In fact, Israel bombed its capability in 2007. Syria has killed, I don't know, 10,000, 11,000 of its own people, and there's no intervention. So if the argument about Libya is if you give up nuclear capability, they come in and invade you, well, what about Syria? So that's on that.

[01:41:15]

And then on your question about, well, what do people want, whether it's some people in Congress and everything else, I don't know. But I – my sense of it is they want a world in which everyone else defers to our interests and shares our values. (Laughter.)

MR. SADIADPOUR: I can't top that ending. (Laughter.)

But I'd like to thank all of you for coming. I apologize if I didn't get to your question. And thank George, Vali and Ray very much. (Applause.)

(END)