

TAKING TEHRAN'S TEMPERATURE: ONE YEAR ON

TUESDAY, JUNE 8, 2010

12:15 P.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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NPR

SPEAKERS:

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Transcript by Federal News Service

Washington, D.C.

STEVE INSKEEP: Well, good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for coming. Thank you for your patience. My name is Steve Inskeep. I'm co-host of "Morning Edition" from National Public Radio and I'm extremely honored and privileged to be up here with these three guests.

I have a feeling that they are familiar to you all but I'll say briefly that Abbas Milani has a distinguished academic career, stretching back to the University of Tehran and continuing through today at Stanford University, and is author of a book called "Eminent Persians."

[0:00:44]

Gary Sick was in the National Security Council in the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations and has therefore had the opportunity to be frustrated by the problem of Iran as long as anyone in this room, perhaps.

GARY SICK: Not quite, but – (inaudible, off mike).

MR. INSKEEP: Oh, almost. Of course, he knows who might be further on in that category.

Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where we are now, of course – and also previously, the International Crisis Group, and someone whose advice I've relied on quite a bit over the years.

The occasion for this, of course, is the anniversary upcoming of the 2009 election, although it is of course also a newsworthy week when it comes to Iran. Our friends at The New York Times tell us that American officials have been giving briefings to other members of the Security Council about Iran's nuclear program.

We are going to have a somewhat wider-ranging briefing today and talk a little bit about the political situation in Iran, as we understand it. And perhaps, we'll begin with Mr. Milani.

[0:01:47]

I'd like to ask this question, Mr. Milani. It seems like a simple one. So much has happened over the past year and yet we could argue that nothing has changed in Iran despite all of the activity of the past year. What, if anything, has changed, in your opinion?

ABBAS MILANI: Well, first of all, thank you for the invitation. I'm very honored to be here. Karim Sadjadpour, especially, I owe him a word of gratitude. I think something has changed. I think something fundamental has changed in Iran. I think last June 12th, a new Iran was born. The old Iran, the status quo ante is dead, in my view. But it has a lot of poison in it; it has a lot of ability to do harm.

It has continued to do that and it continues not because it is a thriving option or because it has answers to Iran's serious fundamental economic, social, demographic problems. But it's arised (sic) because there is no alternative and it's arised because it becomes inadvertent recipient of good fortune in the region.

MR. INSKEEP: If you'll forgive me, if there is no alternative, then what is the new Iran that you refer to?

[0:03:10]

MR. MILANI: There is no alternative in the sense that no alternative has yet been powerful enough to take this rather morbid phenomenon and replace it. There is a democratic alternative. I think we are in a stage of what,

for lack of better term, we can call the political purgatory, where there is a viable democratic alternative but that democratic alternative is not strong enough, is not willing to challenge the regime and the regime is not willing to give up. It is armed; it has access to lots of finances.

I don't think – I certainly know of no time in Iranian history where the democratic discourse and the social bases of democracy have been as strong. And I also know no time in the last 500 years of Iranian history where as much as it is the reality today, a military junta like the IRGC has become a veritable economic-political juggernaut.

These complexes, these conflicting points of views – or realities, in my view – make for the complexity that is modern Iran today.

MR. INSKEEP: I want to bring Karim Sadjadpour into the conversation. Karim, I think we have spoken in the past about the Green movement, the opposition movement in Iran, and what it stands for and whether they all know and agree on what they stand for. Is there a new Iran? And if so, what is it?

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Well, first, thank you all for coming very much; thank you to the panelists.

[0:04:46]

I agree with Abbas. If there were one sentence I have to choose from to describe the events of last summer, it was from the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, who said that the Islamic Republic of Iran is no longer Islamic nor is it a republic.

And I think that there was a day for me last summer – June 15th, three days after the elections – when it was the largest protest day. And that was a day in which the way I view Iran fundamentally changed. According to some estimates, there were 3 million people. This is according to the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.

Three million people showed up into the streets that day in what is, in my mind, one of the largest spontaneous protests not only in contemporary Middle Eastern history but contemporary global history. And to carry out a protest of 3 million people to do it nonviolently, silently, is in my opinion a signal of the tremendous maturity of the Iranian people.

So for me, the way I view kind of the Iranian public – and if I had any lingering doubts about the Iranian public's readiness for democracy, they were eliminated that day. But certainly, when you're faced against a government which has an abundance of oil revenue and a tremendous will to remain in power and a monopoly of coercion, it's going to be a very difficult process.

And I think there was another fundamental lesson, which I learned in the aftermath of the elections, in the subsequent months, which is that when your only strategy is street protests – when street protests are the only play in your playbook, what matters then is not what percentage of the population supports you but what percentage of your supporters are willing to go out and sacrifice their lives for that cause.

And I think by virtue of the fact that the Green movement espouses democratic ideals, tolerance, nonviolence, a far smaller percentage of Green movement supporters are willing to go out and die and kill for this cause, as opposed to government supporters who do have a monopoly of coercion and have shown themselves very willing to kill to stay in power.

MR. INSKEEP: Do you mean that if it was a harder-edged opposition movement with a harder agenda, in effect, that it might actually have been more successful?

[0:07:36]

MR. SADJADPOUR: Well, I don't want to talk about it in the past tense because I think we're continuing to move forward but certainly I think there are several outstanding challenges which the leadership of the Green movement faces.

And there are a lot of reasons to be critical of opposition candidates and opposition leaders Mir Hosein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi but I think they also deserve credit for not relenting. We oftentimes forget that up until June 12th, 2009, they were regime insiders. For 30 years, they were regime insiders. And suddenly overnight, they're thrust into these roles of opposition leaders.

And they're operating under incredibly difficult circumstances right now – under virtual house arrest. All of their communication is being monitored. Mousavi's nephew was brutally murdered; Karroubi's son was savagely beaten. And I think under those circumstances, it's going to be very difficult for them to organize a strategy moving forward.

So in my mind, I think one of the first steps that has to be taken is they're going to have to send trusted advisors outside the country to operate. They're certainly not willing to leave the country themselves, which is understandable. But I think if you really want to begin to organize something serious and coherent and strategic, it's going to be very difficult to do that from within Iran.

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MR. INSKEEP: I want to bring Gary Sick into the conversation and I wonder if we can try to look at this from the regime's perspective because Abbas Milani has talked to – you've used the phrase "military junta," you've talked about the increasing strength of the Revolutionary Guard. You, Karim, have talked about oil revenues which are strengthening once again. You've talked about coercion, some of the tools the government has been able to use. What, if anything, has the government lost over the last year?

MR. SICK: Well, first of all, it's a real pleasure for me to be here today and I can't tell you how many old friends are in this room, some of whom I haven't seen for a very long time; others, I've seen more recently. I hope some of you will get up to New York once in awhile. It would be nice to maintain eye contact a little bit.

In answer to your question, Steve, and I appreciate also your getting out of bed at whatever it is, 2 o'clock in the morning so that you could be here on time. (Laughter.) Anyway, the things that I think have changed and that I think are really fundamental is that the very nature of the revolution itself has changed.

And in the old days – the old days being in Khomeini's day and shorter after the revolution – the regime trusted the street. They're the ones that put on demonstrations. They're the ones who got people out. They're the ones that had millions of people marching in the street. Today, they don't dare.

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When you had – well, most recently, Khomeini's commemoration, they had to keep it very tightly organized in one place. Nobody else could get in. There were no other demonstrations anyplace else. Anybody who showed

the slightest signs of disagreeing with the way it was done, like the grandson of the ayatollah himself, was heckled to the point that he couldn't even speak.

When we have the – when the commemoration of the revolution – of the election last year comes up, you can bet they won't allow anybody on the streets at all. These events are now passing either with highly choreographed events or they are actually preventing anybody from doing it at all.

They don't trust elections anymore. Who gets elected is no longer a factor. They want to determine who runs. And I think the number of people who will be allowed to run in any – is going to be extraordinarily limited at the time we get to the next election.

They used to respect the ulama, the high-level clerical people, and that was very much part of Khomeini's beliefs, that you should pay attention to the clerics. Today, you have a tiny little group of clerics at the very center who are pretty radical and who don't really represent the clerics of Iran but they are the ones that are dominating the issues. And anybody who doesn't agree with them is silenced – again. So you had even – Ayatollah Montazeri is the classic case but there are many, many others who are simply not permitted to speak out at all.

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And then, in the old days, Khomeini said that the military shouldn't participate in politics. They have just turned that on its head. The military today “is” politics. And that's where it's coming from. So all of these things which defined the revolution in its origins are no longer true.

MR. INSKEEP: Let's go back to Abbas Milani on that last point because you used the phrase “military junta.” What did you mean by that?

MR. MILANI: I meant precisely that the IRGC is now controlling minimally about 60 percent of the economy. Over the last three months alone, they have gotten their hands on close to \$20 billion of no-bid contracts. They are now –

MR. INSKEEP: Bids for what, if I may ask?

MR. MILANI: Contracts for the construction of everything from oil and gas fields to the billions of dollars of construction that the regime is undertaking in everywhere from Latin America – right here in Venezuela, they just finished building 20,000 houses in Venezuela. In Africa, they're spending millions of dollars to fight Israel vote-for-vote in the international community. All of this is being given in no-bid contracts to IRGC.

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The IRGC runs virtually the economy. And they are, in my view – in that triumvirate that became the dominant force in Iran – the triumvirate of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and the IRGC commanders. They are the ascending force.

I just want to add one point to what my friend was saying, and that is that I don't think the nature of the revolution has changed. I think the nature of the revolution is being revealed and I think the coalition that brought the revolution to power has now frayed and has collapsed.

Ahmadinejad represents the element – the hoodlum element, the street-hoodlum element – that was part of the coalition that Ayatollah Khomeini formed, just as much as Mousavi was part of that coalition, as much as Rafsanjani was, as much as I was, as much as the bazaar was. Now, that radical fringe of that coalition is trying to get rid of everybody else and is trying to dominate. They have the IRGC in their hand.

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Even the point of going after the clergy – let's not forget, it was Khomeini who put Ayatollah Shariat Madari under house arrest, brought him on television and had one of the most shameful moments of Iranian history where they had an ayatollah of Shariat Madari's stature come and repent in the most odious, Stalinist manner. Let's not forget that Madari was derobed (sic) under the direct order of Ayatollah Khomeini.

So attacking unfavorable ayatollahs has been the name of the game in this town. They are just now doing it more brazenly. And the person that is doing it, Khamenei doesn't have the stature. That's why he brought the IRGC in. I think that is the big difference.

MR. INSKEEP: That raises in my mind a crucial question and it may be hypothetical: If Khamenei wanted to change his country's policies, liberalize in the country or cut a deal with the United States, would the Revolutionary Guard let him?

MR. MILANI: I think that the Friday prayer after the election, Khamenei had a choice. He could align with the remainder of that coalition, which does want normalized relations with the United States, or he could align himself with the lunatic fringe – the radical, lunatic fringe. He decided to go with the radical lunatic fringe. And they obviously are not interested in dealing with the United States. Part of the money they make is off the embargo. Normalizing relations with the United States is cutting into their billions-of-dollars illicit trade. I think he could have and I think if the rest of that coalition was together under one leadership, the IRGC doesn't stand a chance in my view.

MR. INSKEEP: I want to mention to all of you that you're welcome to jump in as – go ahead, Gary Sick.

[0:16:59]

MR. SICK: Actually, I would like to just pick up on the point that Abbas makes. I don't disagree that there were elements of the, what I call the new Iran, that existed very early on and have been there from the beginning. I think it has been more systematic, more obvious – and if you can take the position, yes, they have been revealed to a degree that wasn't true before.

But actually, part of the old Iran, the pre-election Iran, was that they wanted to remain concealed. They didn't want their hand to show. And now, they make no bones about it at all. It is out there, they do it quite openly, they turn off the Internet, they send forces out there to arrest anybody who shows up who's carrying a banner.

Basically, the thing is, the IRGC now is dominant not only in the economy, it obviously is the military, it has taken over the security services, it now runs the judiciary almost entirely and it is actually the arbiter of the ideology. They are the ones who decide what is revolutionary and what isn't.

And what is revolutionary today is actually coming down to be simply divine right of kings, that concept – which was around in the early days but which was not certainly formalized. You couldn't have an Islamic Republic that had the divine right of kings.

Basically, they've shed themselves of the republic idea completely, and that is, in fact, where they're at presently. And that, it seems to me, is a substantive change, even if you can find traces of it there before.

MR. INSKEEP: Karim Sadjadpour?

[0:18:45]

MR. SADJADPOUR: I obviously would agree with Abbas and Gary that I think one thing that happened last June was that any remaining moderates or pragmatists were essentially purged from the Iranian government's decision-making structure.

So I joke that the color spectrum of this regime now ranges from pitch black to dark gray. I think a good litmus test of that is Ali Larijani, who is the speaker of the parliament. If you go back and read the Western media 10 years ago, Ali Larijani was referred to as an arch-hardliner. Today, vis-à-vis Ahmadinejad, he is a moderate or a pragmatist.

And certainly, it's true that the Revolutionary Guards have really eclipsed the clergy in terms of their economic clout, their political influence. They're running Iranian foreign policy in all the hotpots: Iraq, Lebanon, the Levant. The Iranian foreign ministry is essentially irrelevant.

And I think actually the seeds of this were planted two decades ago when Ayatollah Khamenei replaced Ayatollah Khomeini as supreme leader. We all know that he didn't have the clerical clout of Ayatollah Khomeini. He always kind of governed from this position of insecurity. And because he didn't have the legitimacy of the mosques, the legitimacy of the seminaries, he had to seek legitimacy in the barracks.

So that's why I thought that the most extinct quote which now sums up the Islamic Republic is what Montazeri said: It's no longer Islamic nor is it a republic.

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MR. INSKEEP: If I'm not mistaken, the Revolutionary Guards were created to guard, in effect, Khomeini and his revolution because he didn't trust the army. You're saying it is now reversed.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Yeah, I was reading the famous Cold Warrior scholar, George Kennan's old "X" paper in Foreign Affairs in 1947. And he actually said the same about the Soviet Union; that the security forces that were established to protect the state have subsumed the state. And I think that's exactly what's happened in the case of the Revolutionary Guards.

Now, I'm one of those who will continue to make the argument that if you look at power in Iran in the shape of a pyramid that Ayatollah Khamenei remains at the apex of that pyramid. He remains at the top. He is commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards. He handpicks their top few tiers of commanders. He shuffles them frequently so they can't establish their own power base.

So certainly, I think that if there is a patron-client relationship, he's the patron. But at the same time, given the fact that Iranian is increasingly this security state that the Revolutionary Guards, not the clerics, are the ones in charge, of course he's cede enormous power and influence to the Revolutionary Guards.

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Especially if you think in the aftermath of the elections, the Revolutionary Guards can't come to him and say, there are 3 million people out on the streets of Tehran; we need to do X, Y, Z, et cetera. Of course, he's going to say, do whatever you can; do whatever you need to, to make sure this edifice doesn't crumble. And I think so many decisions which have been made the last year, it's him having to concede to the Revolutionary Guards for his own personal security.

MR. INSKEEP: I want to mention that in a moment, I'm going to begin throwing this open to your questions. There's so much expertise in this room that I want to take advantage of it. And we'll be inviting that, so have your questions in mind if you have them for our panelists.

I want to ask all three of you, though, about one specific figure because you spoke about the narrowing of the ideological spectrum and the disappearance of pragmatists. Where is Ayatollah Rafsanjani in all of that?

MR. MILANI: I have a piece forthcoming about the relationship between Rafsanjani and Khamenei, which I've tentatively entitled "Shiite Shakespeare" because I think the relationship between these two men is quite Shakespearean in the sense that if you go back 25, 30 years ago, Rafsanjani was Khomeini's confidante. He was Khamenei's kingmaker. Had it not been for Rafsanjani, Khamenei would have never become supreme leader.

And I think if you look at the Iranian revolution in three states, the first decade of the revolution was the decade of Khomeini. After Khomeini died in 1989, the custodianship of the Islamic Republic was left to two men: Rafsanjani and Khamenei.

Khamenei was the ideologue, the individual who was going to remain loyal to Khomeini's vision for Iran, remain loyal to the ideals of the 1979 revolution. And Rafsanjani was more of the wheeler and dealer, the guy who could help thaw relations with neighboring Arab countries, with the United States, help rebuild the economy. And there was a balance of power between them in the second decade of the revolutions.

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I think what happened in the third decade of the revolution was that the rivalry between these two men began to grow more pronounced. Their world views began to dovetail more. And I think that Khamenei almost used Ahmadinejad as a bludgeon, as a tool to essentially get Rafsanjani out of the picture. And if there is a litmus test as to what Rafsanjani's power is at the moment, it's the fact that his son is a Flying Dutchman in Europe and the Gulf and he can't go back to Iran because there's a warrant out for his arrest.

So despite the fact that Rafsanjani still holds important positions within Iran, and I think there are two or three generations of technocrats in the system who much prefer him to Khamenei, he's ceded enormous authority. And at age 75, I'm not sure if it's coming back.

MR. INSKEEP: Let me throw that same question to our other panelists if you have views about Rafsanjani, whose role was somewhat mysterious to many of us over the past year and whose position now is perhaps a little mysterious.

MR. MILANI: My guess is that we have not yet heard Rafsanjani's last. If it is a Shakespearean play, the fifth scene is yet to come. Rafsanjani has, I think, enormous power within the IRGC command structure. Many of the people who are now commanders first made ranks when he was a commander in chief during the war.

I think he has enormous power within the clergy. Clearly, they have tried to remove him from his two key positions; they have been unable to. I think it is absolutely right that Rafsanjani was sacrificed by Khamenei. In fact, in the election, I think the Ahmadinejad pick was essentially a non-Rafsanjani pick.

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But my guess is that the fact that Rafsanjani, with his history of pragmatism or opportunism, whichever you want to call it, walks a very, very thin line between these two. The fact that he has referred the offer made repeatedly in the last year to rejoin Khamenei, to me, indicates that he does not think that this combination that we talked about – this triumvirate – is a tenable combination. I think he is biding his time. He might not be able to play his last hand. He might lose, in fact. But I don't think he has played his last hand yet.

MR. INSKEEP: Does that mean that he still supports the opposition movement or simply that he's preserving his options for as long as he can?

MR. MILANI: I think, clearly, he has decided that he must keep his line of communication to the opposition open. The fact that his son is flying around is partly because he can't go back but it's also partly because his son wants to keep lines of communication into the outside opposition open; the fact that his daughter openly talked about last week that, my father is part of the Green movement, wants to be part of the Green movement and is unshakable in his conviction.

All of these, I don't think are random acts. I think, clearly, he wants to keep that option open. And the fact that he does so, to me, doesn't – because some people say he's doing it because he has no other options. I don't think that that is the case. I think he could have compromised with Khamenei had he thrown in the towel. I don't think he has thrown in the towel.

MR. INSKEEP: Gary Sick?

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MR. SICK: I don't think he's thrown in the towel either but I do think that the Revolutionary Guard and Khamenei have basically stolen a lot of the assets that he had going for him. That basically, his great strength was after Khomeini died, he became the president and he set up the nizan (ph) – the system – and basically peopled it with all of his own appointments. And they were everywhere. So he was not just the president but he had lines that ran into every piece of the bureaucracy, every level, all the way down – in many cases, reporting to him individually, not even through the system. That is pretty much gone.

One of the big roles that Ahmadinejad has played, which I think has gotten less attention than some of his more spectacular, outrageous aspects, is that he has completely replaced the personnel at all levels – everything from the governors general of the provinces right down to the lower levels – the mid- to lower levels – of the different bureaucracies. That has eliminated one huge element of Rafsanjani's strength that was there before.

Also, if it's Shakespearean – you sometimes have to be a psychologist to really think about Iran – or almost, I guess, other countries are exactly the same way. But, who is this guy? Well, to me, the one great characteristic about Rafsanjani is that he has never been a bold leader. He would take a position but he would do it reluctantly.

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The way he got everything done was maneuvering behind the scenes. He would pull strings, he would put all the pieces in place and then he would let things happen and he didn't have to step out in front and lead the troops. He's never been willing to do that. I don't think he's willing to do it now.

And I think his day is over, that basically, he is not in a position now to pull those strings from behind the scenes to really make things happen, and that he may make a move at some point – and he's still a formidable power in the system because just the jobs that he holds makes him a power. But I think increasingly, the people on those committees that he belongs to are less and less willing to cooperate with him and that his ability to pull strings behind the scenes are dramatically eliminated.

And what's happened in the course of the Iranian revolution – again, and I take Abbas's point that it's not all at once. But basically, there have been two factors: One, the legitimacy of the revolution started very, very high, and has been declining ever since. It really has been coming down. And as the legitimacy came down, it was replaced with repression.

And I would say that those lines really crossed that year at the time of the election. That is when they took off the gloves and said, okay, forget about legitimacy, forget about those arguments of the Islamic Republic and all of that; those are just slogans now; this is the regime as it is. And suddenly, it became repression and the legitimacy was actually almost irrelevant at that point. That is a place where Rafsanjani has a very difficult job to try to step in.

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MR. INSKEEP: Words that we've heard used for him include pragmatic and opportunist. It sounds like you would almost tend toward words that are other sides of the same coin, such as cautious or noncommittal or indecisive, even, perhaps.

MR. SICK: I think it's just his style; the way he likes to get things done. And I think the tools that he had available to him in the past – first, as a leader of the revolution, as somebody who was dealing with it on the ground organizing it for Khomeini originally, then later as the president pulling the strings, getting Khamenei in the position of supreme leader., but he as president was in the position to manipulate events – those were his strong points.

Increasingly, if those things are taken away from him, those abilities to – the strings that he pulls. The strings have been cut and I think it is increasingly difficult. But my point is that he is a sort of Hamlet character. Okay, let's be Shakespearean, okay. That he can't make up his mind.

MR. INSKEEP: Karim?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Rafsanjani's role at the moment reminds me a little bit about U.S. orientation during the Iran-Iraq War in the sense that they didn't really want to see either side come out victorious. Obviously, Rafsanjani despises Ahmadinejad and I think deep down, he despises Khamenei as well.

So he wants to see an end to the status quo. That doesn't mean that Rafsanjani wants to see the emergence of a democratic, secular Iran because he would have a huge stake to lose in the status quo. I think ultimately, he would like to be supreme leader himself – maybe be “supreme leader-lite.”

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So in a way, he is going to continue to have a foot in each world. He is going to have his sons and his other family members' vow of support for the Green movement and want to weaken the government, but he is also going to have his weekly meeting with Khamenei and to tell him, listen, if we want to retain the Islamic Republic, you're going to have – I'm your only crisis manager.

I'll just end by saying that I know that – Abbas knows this better than any of us because he was, I think, in the same prison cell with Rafsanjani before the revolution – and Rafsanjani wrote a book about an eminent Iranian political called Amir Kabir, and he's very cognizant and he's very concerned about his own legacy, his historical legacy.

And Abbas may well be right that at age 75, he doesn't want to be remembered for simply having died when he was down. So I think he still has some tricks up his sleeve and maybe he's waiting for the right moment to act. But the more he's waiting, it seems that the opportunities are fewer to him because he wields less influence than he certainly did last year.

MR. INSKEEP: I can't let that pass without following up since it was just said that you shared a prison cell with Rafsanjani. What kind of a prisoner is he? (Laughter.)

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MR. MILANI: I can tell you he was a very bad volleyball player. (Laughter.) I shared a cell not just with him; it was a cell block. I was in Evin Prison for six months under the shah. And Ayatollah Montazeri was there, Rafsanjani was there, Mahdavi Kani was there, Hapbani (ph) was there, Taleghani was there; virtually, the “who's who” of Iran's revolution 16 months before the revolution.

And if you had told him at that time when we were playing volleyball in cell block number 1 that within 16 months, they will turn over the country to you, they would have thought there is something fundamentally wrong in your head; the prison air has corrupted your mind.

MR. INSKEEP: If the ball was flying toward Rafsanjani, would he get someone else to return it rather than do it himself? (Laughter.)

MR. MILANI: He virtually would. And I really, I don't want to take – this has nothing to do with our discussion, but during those days, there was a big rift within the clerical establishment in prison, which was very small. Something like 90 percent of political prisoners were leftists. And these guys were a very, very small part.

And there was a big fight amongst them on what to do in terms of daily conviviality with the rest of us, who they thought were unclean. I mean, they literally would not touch us because we were not clean. And Rafsanjani and Taleghani and Montazeri were the only ones of this group that would touch hands with us, play volleyball with us, eat off the same pot of tea with us. And they were – you could see even then that their mettle was different than the rest of these guys.

[0:36:11]

MR. INSKEEP: One other question before I go to your questions from the audience because we've just heard this example of Rafsanjani, who was described as being yes, definitely, part of the Green movement and also someone who'd really like to be supreme leader himself. I'd like to broaden it out to the Green movement more generally because a question that has been on a lot of people's minds for the last year is, do they know and do they agree on what they want?

MR. MILANI: I think there is consensus and that consensus was in the main slogan that they used on that 3-million man-and-woman march. It was: Where is my vote? And if you deconstruct that, you really can see the entire demand for a democratic revolution that has been in power, in play in Iran for 100 years.

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The 1979 revolution – that's why I've said what I said about the revolution revealing its sense. If you look at Iran's history, the same coalition of forces have been together for a hundred years. They have brought the constitutional revolution together, they brought Mossadegh to power, they brought Khomeini to power, they brought Khatami to power. They have had one simple demand: We want popular, democratic sovereignty. We want to be a modern nation like everyone else. And that has been thwarted.

Go back and read what Khomeini said in Paris days. Khomeini knew that this was a democratic movement. He put on a democratic show that was Shakespearean. He was the Iago to the Iranian people, telling them what they wanted to hear, knowing exactly what people's vulnerabilities were. He said not a word about this velayat-e faqih, not one word. He gave over a hundred interviews. One of my students just wrote a paper on it; not one word about velayat-e faqih.

So that coalition, that 100-year-old coalition, is stronger today than it has ever been. It's more numerous. Its democratic discourse is more polished. It has a bigger outside force that can help it in the Iranian diaspora. That's why I think what it wants is very simple: Where is my vote? I want to vote. Not I, I want to vote.

[0:38:46]

I don't believe in divine justice. For 150 years, there was reference to the divine power of kings. The monarchy died in Iran long before the shah died. For 150 years before the end of the monarchy, not a single monarch died peacefully enthroned in Iran, except one, Mozaffar ad-Din Shah, who gave up the powers of the monarch and signed the constitutional decree.

That tells you that the divine rights of kings as a concept is dead in Iran. And Khamenei and Khomeini tried to revive it and tried to revive even more than the divine rights of kings. And they're whistling in the wind. That is a long-lost cause. They might keep it for a while. They have their IRGC to do it. The people have said no. And that's what the democratic movement wants, a simple where is my vote?

MR. INSKEEP: Let me open this up now to your questions. I'll invite you to raise your hands. And you can go first, actually, ma'am, if you want to just stand up there. Yeah, you in the blue suit. Yes, you. You seem surprised. And if you'll just wait for the microphone to come your way and once the microphone does arrive, if you will give your name and your position for those who don't know who you are. Please.

Q: Robin Wright, U.S. Institute of Peace. I'd be grateful if the three of you would look ahead for the next year. What are we going to be discussing a year from now? What are the flashpoints that might spark new movement – probably not on the streets, given the security forces. But is it the coming-together of this removal of subsidies and sanctions and the economic mismanagement? Is it the nuclear issue? What is it that is going to be the flashpoint that triggers the next round of movement in Iran?

MR. INSKEEP: Forecasts, gentlemen.

[0:40:41]

MR. SICK: Obviously, none of us know. And I think we have missed major turning points in the past. The fact is, the next flashpoint is the next flashpoint. And it takes people by surprise.

I don't think anybody expected this election to set off the furor that, in fact, it did. And the reason for that is not because the election was falsified, but basically that they did it so blatantly and acted with such disrespect towards the people. Let's face it, the people that were running – Mousavi, Karroubi – are not wild-eyed people who were going to go out and throw the system out. They were good, loyal people who wanted to reform the system from within.

If the regime had been willing – or the IRGC, I think – had been willing to accept that, then probably not very much would have happened. They would have had a little bit of a problem the way they did with Khatami; that Mousavi or Karroubi would have tried to do something, but they would have thwarted him; and that in the end, the hardliners would have maintained their control.

They were not willing to accept even that. They were not willing to. And so having made that decision – where they actually come out the next time, this is a movement without a leader. Mousavi and Karroubi are not leading this movement. They say so quite openly in their own statements. Mousavi says, and Karroubi too, says, I'm a follower.

[0:42:36]

And basically, this is one of the – this is a strange movement that has been very grassroots. And I think it goes back to what Abbas is talking about, that you have people who have been believing in the idea of some kind of a democratic government or democratic operation in Iran for many, many years. And they're there.

A friend of mine said the other day, who lives in Tehran – he said, all of this talk about the Green movement being dead is just nonsense. He said, if they allowed people to come out on the streets freely to say what they wanted to say, there would be 3 million people back out on the streets of Tehran. They're there. They're waiting.

But if the repression – let's face it, this could be a very long process. Stalin suppressed a movement in Russia that was very powerful, and sat on it for, what, almost 50 years? So power does work; repression does work. Whether Iran is going to be the exception to that rule or whether it's going to be another case of long-delayed explosions coming much later, I certainly can't predict. And I don't think we can at this point.

MR. INSKEEP: Karim Sadjadpour?

MR. SADJADPOUR: I think, Robin, that the flashpoints are not going to be street protests, in my opinion. I actually think that the thing that will be very interesting to see play out is this subsidy – the removal of the subsidy legislation.

[0:44:12]

You probably know that every year, the Iranian government spends about \$90 billion in subsidies for basic foodstuffs and petroleum and things like that. I think it still is cheaper to buy a liter of gasoline in Tehran than a liter of bottled water. And there's, for years, been deliberations and debates about removing these subsidies. And it looks like it's finally going to happen, or at least, \$20- to \$40-billion worth of these subsidies are going to be removed, which, I think, is certainly going to cause a sudden rise in prices.

And what they've intended to do is simply dole out cash to people. And I think Ahmadinejad's logic was, why should we be subsidizing all Iranians? I could care less about the middle-class and upper-class Iranians who don't support me anyway. I just want to support my base, political base.

And I think they did surveys. Iranians were asked to fill out surveys about their income. And voila, they found that 90 percent of Iranians actually need the subsidies. Obviously, people don't necessarily answer openly about their income, so it's going to be very difficult for them to target these cash handouts. And I think it's going to cause rampant inflation. So for my money, that's going to be one of the flashpoints.

[0:45:43]

And in terms of the Green movement, to use a cliché reminiscent of the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, I think that Mousavi and Karroubi need to do a better job of reaching out to "Ali the Plumber" in Tehran – (laughter) – and to make it clear to working-class Iranians why they would be better off in a Green Iran. I think that argument still hasn't been clearly and powerfully made, the way that Khomeini made it in 1979 and Ahmadinejad made it in 2005.

This is also a credit to their decency, that they haven't simply kind of pursued the politics of cheap economic populism. But I think a very strong case should be made to people why the economy is doing so poorly, to point out the corruption and cronyism and, again, point out to labor unions and others why they would be better off in a Green Iran.

And I think it's a tall order to organize these labor strikes because labor movements in Iran are just as amorphous as the Green movement itself. But they're certainly discontented. And I think that it's difficult, but it's certainly not impossible to do.

MR. INSKEEP: Abbas Milani, any forecasts from you?

MR. MILANI: My guess would be, if anything – if one has to bet on anything becoming a trigger point, it would be the economy. I think many of the wiser heads in the regime know that this is playing with fire to suddenly take out \$90 billion out of people's standard of living. That's basically what they're doing. And giving back 20 or 40, in terms of cash, to their own cronies. And creating a smaller and smaller, militarized, but well-greased minority is, I think, as Larijani knows, very much playing with fire.

I think people forget that this bill for ending subsidies was passed during the Khatami presidency. Khatami refused to implement it because he said, without Khomeini behind my back, people will tar and feather me if I have to take this much out of the economy.

You need a big political base if you're going to reduce the standard of living for people. Remember, 30 years past the revolution, the real buying power of average Iranian income is still not up to 1975 level. The failure of this regime, in economic terms, is astounding.

[0:48:46]

In almost every economic indicator, Iran in 1975 was a competitor of Turkey, was on par with South Korea. There are studies; there are statistics. Look at where the Turkish economy is. Look at where the Iranian economy is. And they had a \$220-billion windfall and nobody knows what has happened to this money. So my guess is that if anything can be predicted as a trigger point, it is the economy.

MR. SICK: Just one additional point. That is, if anybody has tried to buy the lower classes, or buy a constituency, it's Ahmadinejad. He traveled all over the country. He passed out money when he went for these visits. And in the old days – not the old days so long ago, actually – whenever he arrived in a provincial town, the stadium was packed with people and it was a noisy place.

I don't know if you've seen the videos of his latest appearances out in the provinces. Empty. I mean, there's nobody in the stadium. There're people wandering around, talking, while he's speaking. It's amazing. There is no enthusiasm, no support. And if these are the people who he has bought, he didn't get a very good bargain for his money.

MR. INSKEEP: I want to ask one follow-up question about that because you have talked about the increasing power of the Revolutionary Guard. And if you talk about removing other sources of income in the country, is it possible that will simply make people more and more dependent on the guys who can still write checks?

[0:50:21]

MR. MILANI: Well, I think that's part of the calculus. I think the calculus that they seem to have is that they're going to tend to the machinery of suppression, which is not just the IRGC. They are about 140,000. There is at least a million Basijis who are now into the act. They are getting billions and billions of dollars of contracts and they are driving the Iranian private sector out.

The Iranian private sector has been virtually destroyed during the Ahmadinejad presidency. I think by the end of it, it will be nonexistent. And the way they are structuring it, Iran's equivalent of Chamber of Commerce has said that we won't be able to produce a damn thing with this new economic setup.

What they're counting on, in my understanding – the only thing that makes logic is, as he suggested, they're going to say, to hell with the rest of the people. We've got this group that can beat on the people and hold us in power. We'll keep them happy. To hell with the rest.

MR. INSKEEP: Let me move on to some more of your questions. You in front, ma'am; go right ahead, please. We'll get it to as many as we can. I know there are a lot of questions. Please stand up and introduce yourself, also, if you would.

Q: Sure. Barbara Slavin, author. Nice to see all of you. Abbas, nice to see you again. I wanted to pick up on something that both Karim and Abbas mentioned and that is the role of the diaspora. Both of you said that the diaspora was pivotal in this movement. Now, it has been in the past. Obviously, it was tremendously important in '78-'79.

[0:52:00]

How would you describe the role of the diaspora now, compared to '78-'79? It would seem that with so many people being forced to flee, that this is a very clever tactic on the part of the regime to marginalize the Green movement. Can there be organization done from the outside that will benefit those in? Thanks.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Abbas, why don't you take that first? And in fact, I just will ask my own question to Abbas, on top of what Barbara said because there was a quote I saw from you in one of the newspapers which said that before the revolution, there was several thousand Iranians in the United States who really made life hell for the shah, and how is it that Ahmadinejad can come to the United Nations and give a speech and get out alive when there are a million Iranians in the United States who despise him?

MR. MILANI: And 2 million, at least – 3 million Jews who have as much a complaint against him as they have against any president that has ever visited. And we haven't been able to mobilize and I think that has been a failure.

I think the Iranian diaspora has a very important potential role. It hasn't realized that potential yet but I think it is fast moving in that direction. And if it does, in fact – if this potential does, in fact, become reality, I think it will be a major problem for the regime because many of the regime's key tools of suppression are going to be thwarted by – can be thwarted – if there is an organized diaspora.

[0:53:36]

Iranian diaspora, as you know, in America alone, is estimated to control \$700 billion in assets. These are companies that they either own or manage. Iranian diaspora is arguably the most successful diaspora in the last 30 years to have come to the United States. They are disproportionately well-educated, they've been incredibly successful, and now, in the last five years, they have begun to pay attention to politics and they're beginning to organize. And if they can, you can basically become – the Iranian diaspora can become a virtual part of the Iranian civil society.

MR. INSKEEP: What did the few thousand do in 1979 that apparently is not being done now?

MR. MILANI: The few thousand students – and I was one of them – organized, mobilized. They were dedicated. I just finished a book on the shah and I was looking at the archives – American archives. The shah's movement in the United States was partially dictated by where there were concentrations of Iranian students. His movement in Europe – I've looked at the British archive and the American archive. They wouldn't take him to certain places because they said there are too many Iranian students. We can't secure him there. He, I think, knows. (Chuckles.)

MR. INSKEEP: Make sure not to go anywhere where there are any Iranians. Yes, go ahead.

MR. SADJADPOUR: You know, Barbara, before these elections, the nomenclature – and even now, the nomenclature which the Iranian government uses is this notion of khodi and gheir-e khodi – insiders and outsiders.

And there's actually a cleric who resides in Washington, D.C., who's an old friend of Khatami and a lot of the reformist clerics. And I saw him at a function last fall and I said, well, we're all outsiders now. You're now an outsider as well. He said, no, the ruling junta are the outsiders and we're all insiders now.

[0:55:35]

The point I'm trying to make is that, that gap between political activists in Iran and those in the diaspora – I've never seen it as narrow as it is right now. And the links which have taken place over the last year are quite remarkable. Abbas and myself personally have been in touch with people on a frequent basis who, a year ago, we wouldn't have been in touch with.

I actually think that one of the potentially divisive themes which could come about in the ensuing months between the leadership of the Green movement and the younger generation of the Green movement and certainly the diaspora Iranians is the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini because for the leadership of the Green movement – or the nominal leadership, as Gary says – Mousavi and Karroubi – well, they still continue to revere Khomeini as this infallible icon; had it not been for Khomeini, they would have never been in the positions they are. For the younger generation of Iranians, and certainly the Iranian diaspora, Khomeini is the problem, not the solution. Or Khomeini's ideals are the problem, not the solution.

And I noticed over last summer that the regime picked upon this as a divisive issue. During some of the protests, effigies of Khomeini were burned. And it could have well been regime supporters themselves because then Mousavi and Karroubi and others are forced to denounce it and praise Khomeini, which makes the diaspora Iranians very unsettled that these guys still are revering Khomeini, 30 years later. So I think this is going to be a potentially divisive issue.

[0:57:23]

I would just end on saying that I think there's a lot of caricatures of the Iranian diaspora; to say, oh, they're all monarchists or members of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq when, in reality, of the 4 million Iranians or so that are in the diaspora, I would argue that those groups probably encompass a very small percentage. And even a friend of mine who's in the audience today who is sympathetic to the monarchists said, not even the monarchists are monarchists anymore. Not even people who are sympathetic to monarchy believe in an absolute monarchy. At best, it's a constitutional monarchy.

MR. INSKEEP: Let me move to the gentleman in blue here and then we're going to go to the back, so if we can have a microphone ready in the back as we continue our discussion here.

Q: Michael Cowen with Democracy International. Assuming China and Russia follow through on what they've sort of promised, how do you think substantive sanctions would affect the dynamic between the Green movement and the current regime in the country?

MR. INSKEEP: Gentlemen?

[0:58:25]

MR. MILANI: First of all, that's a big assumption, and I think a new factor that has been added to the regime's benefit is the new, surprising turn in Turkey's foreign policy. I think the regime has been given a very big

bonanza. I think the European decision not to accept Turkey will go down in history as one of the most strategically – in my view, flawed – decisions with consequences that we will see in years to come. And so we now have to worry not just about China and Russia, but also about a Turkey that is becoming increasingly belligerent towards the West and more inclined to see if it can make a pact with the Iranian regime.

My sense is that if the sanctions are smart sanctions and target the regime, target the IRGC, target the regime's ability to exercise oppression, punishes those who have been oppressing people – disallows their ability to travel, for example. These will send a very important message to the Green movement that the international community is on its side and is willing to bring the kind of pressure that decreases the regime's brutality but does not hurt the Iranian people.

MR. INSKEEP: When you said, earlier, that the IRGC profits from sanctions, it made me wonder if sanctions are utterly counterproductive.

MR. MILANI: They have, so far, profited from it because first of all, they had this incredible windfall, and they set up something like 10,000 companies in Dubai, where they would buy American products and bring it into Iran and sell it, and virtually the entire thing was in their hands. With money being less, they're going to have less of this kind of cash to throw around. And I think if it is targeted to them and their companies and their leaders, it will send the right kind of a message. And I don't think Russia and China can long become the sole defenders of an absolutely brutal regime.

[1:00:47]

MR. SICK: The full text of the new sanctions resolution at the U.N. is now available online. I read it on the way down on the train. It does a couple of things. First of all, it makes a nice, little gesture – a sort of pro forma gesture – toward the Brazilians and the Turks and says, good for you for doing this. And then the next sentence says, but we've really got to focus on the big issues – with the implication being that, that didn't do it. So I'm not sure Turkey and Brazil are going to feel terribly good about that. Presumably, that was added, for their benefit, to the resolution.

The real test of the resolution itself is the annexes, which are not public. That is, who is named? Who, in the IRGC, is – you're not permitted to deal with? Who can't travel? Which companies can't do business? Et cetera, et cetera. Those are all in annexes that have apparently been circulated to the members of the Security Council but not to us. So at this point, we don't really know what it would do.

[1:02:00]

But I do agree very much that – to me, sanctions are useful for one thing. They are useful to lever Iran in a direction. Iran does not like sanctions. They would much prefer not to have sanctions. If you, in fact, go ahead and impose sanctions, they'll live with them.

But if you threaten sanctions with a clear way out for Iran – and I think the Turkey-Brazil issue was exactly that. They saw the sanctions coming. They said, okay, let's do a deal; let's go back to where we were before, back in October, and we'll cut a deal that basically will satisfy everybody; we didn't like to do it then, but now, we're prepared to actually do it. And what was the difference? There were sanctions coming down the road.

And there, the U.S., I think, made a really, really terrible decision, that instead of saying, oh, okay, let's talk to you about that, and not only what that deal is, but how you can go on from there – it provided an opening – but

instead, we were all caught up in our sanctions-passing business as if the sanctions were going to somehow resolve the problem. They're not.

When we started sanctions against Iran back in the mid-1990s, Iran didn't have a single centrifuge. Since that time, we have sanctioned them and, increasingly, new sanctions have been added through the Security Council, multilateral, et cetera. This is the fourth resolution by the Security Council coming up. Iran has 9,000 centrifuges and is producing low-enriched uranium.

[1:03:43]

If you want a measure of what works, that should tell you something. I mean, it hasn't worked. What we've never tried to do, however, is use the sanctions as levers or trading points; that you could, in fact, get something else that you're looking for. And to me, that's the real tragedy of where we are today. We could have done that, we still could do it, but it gets harder and harder and the price goes up, constantly.

MR. INSKEEP: Briefly, Karim Sadjadpour?

MR. SADJADPOUR: I know the conventional wisdom is that U.N. sanctions are negligible but I think your question was, how will the sanctions affect the Green movement? And I think U.N. sanctions are much more politically consequential than they are economically consequential.

To get China and Russia to endorse them, obviously, they water them down. But I think they can be a useful tool to the leadership of the Green movement to make clear to the Iranian public that it's not only the United States and Europe which are sanctioning and isolating Iran. Ahmadinejad and Khamenei's foreign policy is isolating us from the entire world – China and Russia and Turkey and Brazil.

So I think that my experience over the last years is that sanctions have been, arguably, the most contentious topic among Green movement activists. Plenty of people think that they would be counterproductive or hurt the people more than the regime; plenty of people are forced to say that because they're based in Iran. But more than ever before, I've also had many people privately tell me that they now believe that sanctions are a necessary evil; that this regime has become a cancer and that sanctions can be chemotherapy.

MR. INSKEEP: Let's go to the back of the room. Over here on my right. Sir, go ahead, please.

Q: My name is Shariar Etrinyani (ph). This question is for Dr. Milani and Karim. With a true, free, secular democracy being the goal of most of the Iranian people, which by definition means an absolute end to the Islamic Republic, what do you think are the key ingredients necessary for the Iranian people to achieve that goal?

[1:05:53]

MR. MILANI: Well, let me take, first, an issue with the way you put the question. I think over the last 150 years, one of the biggest lies that the clergy have told the Iranian people – and it's been very effective – is that secularism means an end to piety and religion; that the separation of church and state means lax moral or religious foundations. That's a big lie. The United States is the biggest example. They're a secular society and they're a deeply pious society – probably the most pious of any modern nation.

I think we can have a republic where people are as pious as they want to be. The difference is not whether there is piety or not; the difference is not whether people are Islamic or not. The only difference is whether the

foundation for sovereignty is the people's will. That's the only difference. And if you have that, I think you can call it anything you want.

You can have a republic that is democratic and Islamic but you cannot have a democratic, Islamic republic, as you cannot have a democratic Christian republic. Religion, if it becomes the foundational idea of politics – it cannot be democratic because democracy is based on pluralism; democracy is based on the right of the other; democracy is based on ambiguity, and religion doesn't allow that.

So my hope is that we can have an Iran where people can be as pious as they want or as faithless as they want. People can practice Baha'ism if they like or Shamanism if they like. Just don't get in my business, don't tell me how to run my life and don't try to base our country's laws based on Shamanism.

[1:07:50]

MR. SADJADPOUR: I just want to share a very brief anecdote from the days when I was based in Iran. About five years ago, I was going to interview a guy called Mostafa Tajzadeh who was, then, a very close advisor to President Khatami. And he subsequently spent eight months in prison in the aftermath of the elections.

I was driving to see Tajzadeh and for the first 40 minutes of my cab ride, the taxi driver was cursing the corruption of the clergy, which is – anyone who's been to Tehran knows that that's the modus operandi of Tehran taxi drivers. (Laughter.)

And a few minutes before he was about to drop me off, he asked me a question kind of apropos nothing, I thought. He said, Mr. Karim, do you like khar boo zeh, which is a kind of melon. I said, sure, I like melon. He said, how about honey? Do you like honey, as well? I said, yeah, I like honey, as well. He said, well, never eat the two of these together because it will create a rock in your stomach. So I assured him I would not eat the two of these together. And then there was kind of a dramatic pause on his end and he said, Mr. Karim, politics is melon and religion is honey. Separately, both of these things are good, but when you mix them together, it taints the name of both politics and religion.

[1:09:07]

And this wasn't from a Tehran University Ph.D. This was from a cab driver with a high school education. And you would be very hard-pressed to find a cab driver in Istanbul or Riyadh or Amman or, increasingly, New York City who would be able to make that distinction for you.

So I think that Abbas makes a very good point, and this is something which needs to be impressed upon people, that secularism isn't anti-religion. This gentlemen himself was very pious but I think he learned the evolution and grassroots experience that when you mix piety and politics, you taint the name of both.

MR. INSKEEP: What kind of tip did you give him? (Laughter.)

MR. SADJADPOUR: I actually gave him a hug afterwards, I was so happy to hear that. (Laughter.) And what was interesting was when I went to go see Tajzadeh, who was really one of the architects of the reform movement, I recounted this anecdote for him. And I said – this was before the 2005 presidential elections – and I said, why don't you guys talk about not eating melon and honey together? And his response to me is that it's too soon to do that. People are going to think we're trying to take religion away from them. So this is a delicate argument that needs to be made to people.

MR. INSKEEP: And after you hugged him, did he wait around a moment waiting for his tip?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Oh, of course, I gave him his tip, yeah. I'm a good tipper.

MR. INSKEEP: Just curious, just curious. Okay, we'll go right on. Continue in the back – on the aisle there, sir, please go right ahead.

[1:10:43]

Q: Steve Riskin, U.S. Institute of Peace. I had a follow-up question – it's good to see you all, by the way. I had a follow-up question on the IRGC. We've heard about how it has grown in stature in the military and the economy, in politics, and has become a dominant player in Iran. And I guess my question is, it seems to me it couldn't be monolithic.

And my question is, what do we know about the leadership, potential cleavages, differences of opinion in policy or ideology, and what kinds of things might be useful for foreigners like the United States in forming policy toward the country?

MR. SICK: Well, Steve, it's the question I think all of us would love to be able to answer. I certainly don't pretend to know the answer to that. I do want to remind you that the IRGC still remains in the background. They are not standing up and carrying out policy from day to day. They act through – I take exception, I think, to my two colleagues in that I think that Khamenei and especially Ahmadinejad cannot countermand the IRGC; that they may go their own way, they may look independent, but in reality, I think the IRGC is setting the rules and they really have to follow those. And they may follow them because they want to or because they find it comfortable, but they follow them nevertheless.

[1:12:19]

But if you recall, at some point, the IRGC – let's say, you know, Khamenei is not getting any younger and he's had his health problems, so what if, in the next decade, or even the next year, he dies? I'm certainly not predicting this but it does happen. And what happens then? There's a possibility, for instance, that you would actually have the Revolutionary Guards emerging as a – openly – to sort of provide a leader whether they had a pro forma senior leader, or what have you.

I'd just remind you of what happened in Egypt with the Free Officers. When they came to power in the '50s, nobody had heard the name of Nasser until after they got there. And suddenly, there he was. And he became the name of those people.

I think the Revolutionary Guard is in very much the same status right now, not that they are maneuvering to overthrow the regime, necessarily. But it seems to me they are providing – they are setting the base for what will happen later on. And there may be leaders emerging who actually are calling the shots inside, but we're not permitted to see that. And I think we probably won't know until the lid comes off and somebody stands up, and maybe they don't know the answer to it, themselves, until, actually, the moment arrives.

[1:13:58]

MR. INSKEEP: Let's stick with Mr. Riskin's question for a moment. Are there signs of divisions in the Revolutionary Guard?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Anecdotally, there are a lot of signs. When I was based in Tehran, I used to interact with Revolutionary Guardsmen who served in the Iran-Iraq War. And an adage which I would hear a lot is that men who have served in more war value peace more. So they're oftentimes far less ideological than their civilian counterparts, as we saw in the United States in the run-up to the Iraq War, as well. And we saw, I think in 2001, there was a lot of anecdotal stories that three-quarters of one particular Revolutionary Guard barrack voted for Mohammad Khatami, not his hard-line opponent.

And again, the Revolutionary Guards are kind of a black box in the sense that, of course, the senior few tiers of commanders are handpicked by Khamenei. He shuffles them frequently, so they're loyal to him. But the rank-and-file is much more reflective of Iranian society at large.

And my own sense from talking to people, including one guy who was among the top five, six commanders in the Revolutionary Guards up until a decade ago – I asked them what would happen if the protests continue at a large scale and the Revolutionary Guards are sent out into the streets on a daily basis to crush people who voted for Mousavi, just like many of them did themselves? Would we see, kind of, an internal fight within them? And he said, more likely, they would just lay down their arms. Rather than fighting one another, they would see major splintering and they would lay down their arms. And I thought maybe we were getting to that point last summer, but it didn't reach that point.

MR. INSKEEP: Meaning that you don't see – ?

[1:15:50]

MR. SADJADPOUR: I think we'll see what happens. I think down the road, it's certainly within the realm of possibilities. But at the moment, the Revolutionary Guards are ruled much in the same way that the Iranian public is ruled, in the sense that the regime would prefer to be feared than liked by its citizens and I think the senior commanders of the Revolutionary Guards also instill fear in their subordinates.

MR. MILANI: I tend to disagree. I think there are a lot of empirical signs about these rifts. If you look for them in the right place, they're there for you to see. I specifically refer to you to three websites. They're easily available online. They are published by three different groups within the IRGC. One is – (in Farsi). It's the political organ of the IRGC. The other one is Tabnak. It's a website published by Rezai, for 18 years, the commander of the IRGC. The other one is Jahan News, published by the intelligence ministry of IRGC.

You will see there is profound differences between these people. Rezai was literally siding with the Green movement before they threatened him, and he backed off a little bit. Look at Tabnak. Tabnak is his site which reflects Rezai's views. And I cannot believe that Rezai is standing there alone without his 18 years in power having left him with some ally. So there is a lot of evidence that there are profound differences.

[1:17:29]

Look at Ghalibaf. Ghalibaf was a commander of the IRGC. He is now the top critic of Ahmadinejad. The competition between Ghalibaf, Rezai and Ahmadinejad is not a joke. It's a very serious, constant fight. And look at the commander of the IRGC, whose son was killed in the Green movement. Look at the letter he wrote to Khamenei. It was available online.

And finally, there is an empirical study that shows – I don't know whether it's a reliable methodology but it was a published study that showed 70 percent – as Karim says, these people live in Iran. They're not a different branch of humanity. Seventy percent of them, at least, voted for Khatami in the first round of the presidential election. That shows that the rank-and-file is very much of a different.

And I just wanted to add one comment to what Professor Sick said. I did not believe – I do not believe – that Khamenei commands the IRGC. If you remember, I said the opposite. I said, in that triumvirate, the ascending force is the IRGC. I agree with you fully that they do their thing and the other two have to follow.

MR. INSKEEP: Karim?

[1:18:49]

MR. SADJADPOUR: I'm in the minority here that thinks that Khamenei is still in charge. Just one brief, anecdotal point as well. Last summer, something I heard from, actually, family members in Iran who – some of them live in a neighborhood which is predominantly inhabited by mid-ranking and low-ranking Revolutionary Guardsmen – an apartment building. And they said, at night, the cries of "Allahu Akbar," the anti-government protests, were coming quite loud from those apartment buildings. So I thought that was interesting.

MR. INSKEEP: One quick question: When you look at those three websites, do you sense that you're seeing differences of personality from men who essentially believe and support the same thing or are you seeing differences of policy and differences of opinion about the direction of the country?

MR. MILANI: I think you see profound differences of policy. If you look at Tabnak, you see a policy that is worried about the private sector, is very much concerned about Ahmadinejad's economic policies. You look at – (in Farsi) – I think that tells you what is coming in a few weeks ahead, if you read their lead editorial.

And their last lead editorial, incidentally, published last Monday, does not bode well for Rafsanjani because it was against, directly, Rafsanjani. It did not call him an ayatollah or even a – (in Farsi). It called him – (in Farsi) – which is extremely meaningful in the context of their language. And it took him to task for republishing on his website the letter that he had written before the election to Khamenei. They said, he has shown that he is still very much with the opposition, that he is the brain trust of the opposition. There was no reason why for he should republish. Tabnak is very much in support of Rafsanjani.

[1:20:42]

MR. INSKEEP: What was the – what's the translation of the salutation that was given to – or the title that was given to Rafsanjani?

MR. MILANI: Just Mister.

MR. INSKEEP: Mister. Okay. Okay, next question, let's go over here, sir, if you would.

Q: Thank you. Henri Barkey from the Carnegie Endowment. Professor Milani, you talked about the IRGC essentially having taken over and being this junta. Given the relationship between Ahmadinejad and the IRGC, and given the fact that he is, shall we say, term-limited as we call it here, do you see that they will try to change the constitution to give him another chance? And if they do, what would be the ramifications of that?

MR. MILANI: I would again – I go back to something Professor Gary Sick said. He talked about how Ahmadinejad changed much of the middle level. It is estimated that he changed 10,000 people in mid-level ambassadorial, undersecretary level. I think he shocked Khamenei by the sophistication of the network that he had amongst the IRGC commanders. Remember that one of his closest friends is the founder of the Quds brigade. So he has a very, I think, sophisticated network amongst the IRGC. And I would not be at all surprised if they try to do exactly that because their model is Chavez. They very much emulate Chavez. They are increasingly in contact with him. Whether they will succeed or not, I am not sure.

[1:22:28]

Again, I don't think Iran is Egypt, 1952. Iran is Iran, post the Green movement. You can't have a Nasser come out of nowhere and take over in a society that has been at this level of sophisticated, sustained democratic struggle. This is not Afghanistan. This is not Iraq. This is Iran. It has a sustained movement. And the IRGC, I think, if they change the constitution – try to change the constitution – I think they're fighting a very difficult battle.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Assuming Ahmadinejad lasts until the end of his term, which is 2013, I don't think he is going to go into his post-presidential life gracefully. I think Steve knows better than any of us – he did a wonderful interview with him – that this is a man who loves the limelight. He loves attention and he loves power.

And I've already seen some kind of mentions of this on hardline websites about actually reinstating the position of Prime Minister in Iran, a position that was abolished in 1989, and making Ahmadinejad essentially a Putin-type figure and to have his own Medvedev as well. So I agree with Abbas that I think they are really pushing the limits there but I don't think it's beyond them to go for that option.

MR. INSKEEP: Thank you for the taruf, by the way. I appreciate that. If no one objects, unless somebody feels differently, we should probably dispense with the closing statements we might have been thinking about and continue with questions. Is that okay with everyone? Let's get two or three more questions then, if we can. The gentleman holding the notebook back there, yeah.

[1:24:22]

Q: Michael Allen with the National Endowment for Democracy. We understand that Khamenei personally commissioned a study of the color revolutions, so-called – democratic transitions. And they've clearly learned from that how to frustrate democratic transitions driven by precisely the kind of street-level mobilizations that Karim rightly said the Green movement became dependent upon.

Is there any evidence that the Green movement itself has gone through a learning process and that they are diversifying their strategic repertoire, as it were? Are they using this period of relative acquiescence to organize in communities, to reach out to labor unions, as Mousavi suggested?

MR. INSKEEP: Gentlemen, any thoughts?

MR. SADJADPOUR: You're absolutely right. Khamenei describes these soft revolutions as the new model of colonialism – post-colonialism. Countries no longer are physically based. But they kind of control you from afar.

My own sense – and I hope I’m wrong here, and I’m sure that so many thousand miles away from Iran, I can’t see what’s taking place. But I haven’t seen a lot of signs of organization and strategic thinking taking place among the senior leadership.

And this is one of the first points I made earlier: that it’s very difficult to operate under those circumstances where you can’t even say something to someone in the comforts of your own home without thinking that it’s being somehow picked up by a bug. So I think it’s going to be very difficult for the leadership to organize something strategic and sustained from within the country. But I hope I’m wrong there.

[1:26:10]

MR. INSKEEP: Let’s keep going, other questions. Another man with a notebook; go right ahead please.

Q: Peter – (inaudible) – Tehran Bureau.

MR. INSKEEP: I’m sorry –say that again?

Q: Peter Piedetski (ph), Tehran Bureau. To what extent today do you think the government’s decisions are being driven by institutional interests such as Dolamar (ph) or the IRGC or the whims of leaders such as Rafsanjani or Khamenei or Ahmadinejad?

MR. SICK: It’s an imponderable because I think all governments and all organizations have both mixed together. I guess the thing that concerns me most is you have Ahmadinejad, who I do think came out of nowhere. He was not identified as a great leader or even as somebody that people knew particularly until he actually ran for president. He had been the mayor of Tehran but nobody – he was regarded as a nonentity.

[1:27:15]

And all of a sudden, he is not a nonentity anymore. And he has created this whole structure of support for himself and for his organization. And I think the two are bound together. Without the IRGC, without the Revolutionary Guards, I think Ahmadinejad would be nothing at all. Could we call him dirt and dust? I mean, that’s a phrase that he has made very popular recently. But the fact is that he has the organization and the two work together: you have pride and you have ambition and then you have organization that is put together, and the two drive each other. So I’m not sure – it’s a chicken-and-egg question and I’m not sure there is a very good answer to it.

But the institutional side of it is what I worry about because the institutional side has become so one-sided with the economy, the government structure, all of the key elements of the military and security services, judiciary and even the ideology, all put together in one institution.

And there are two things that you can say about that. One, it’s very hard to beat under those circumstances. And two, when it controls everything, it’s almost certain to split at some point; that organizations that are that big tend to break up into pieces.

MR. INSKEEP: Let’s try to get one or two more questions. There was a woman at the extreme rear of the room. Please go right ahead.

Q: Judith Kipper. Gary and Abbas, nice to see you here. Karim, I see you all the time. One could come to the conclusion from what you've all said that the public, negative pounding on Iran by the United States and Israel in particular, but Europe as well, is only fueling the fires of all the negative developments that you have seen.

[1:29:04]

Is it not true that at this moment, our lack of patience in observing what is a very dangerous, dynamic, historical transition in Iran, which may not come to a conclusion this year, next year, or even five years from now, may in fact be prolonging the agony, and that we ought to reevaluate at least our public diplomacy approach to Iran if not our actual policies toward Iran?

MR. SICK: Judith, it's good to see you too. It's been years and years. Just one quick word and that is, I don't necessarily believe that our negative attacks and Israel's are really making things happen in Iran. I think what they're really doing is preventing us from taking opportunities as they come along. That, to me, is what we're really missing out on this whole thing. And that's very costly.

MR. INSKEEP: Let's stay on that subject for a moment. What else, if anything, is the United States missing out on here?

MR. MILANI: Well, there are a couple of points that I want to make, both addressing this issue and some of the issues that have been raised. I think the opposition is learning from other movements. The leadership is very much in Iran, for example, trying to set up a radio or a television that would be the spokesperson for the opposition. They are very much behind the effort to lift some of the sanctions about technologies and softwares that would allow the opposition to establish networks free from government censorship.

[1:30:58]

And in terms of whether it's personal or institutional, I just invite you to look at the institution of Basij. Basij was created as the most ideological institution. These were the people who would walk over minefields. Now, by every indication, it has become inundated by opportunists who are there to get a job, to get their daughters into university easier, to get a contract, to get free medical. And it reminds me – to go back to Karim's point – it reminds me of Communist League in Soviet Union in the '60s and '70s, a moribund institution filled with opportunists, that was once the housing – the center for ideologues.

And I think that nobody can accuse the United States or of Europe of having a prudent policy on Iran. It's been a long, long time since there has been a policy. I think the United States, specifically – I think they have gone from one initiative to another without having a strategic policy on what to do with Iran, where to go, and not allow the momentary lapses, tactical lapses to derail them. And the regime has been very, very effective in using this to its benefit.

MR. INSKEEP: Karim, as our host, why don't you take the last word?

[1:32:29]

MR. SADJADPOUR: I think, Judith, that the challenge the Obama administration faces is one of competing timelines. We have this enormous sense of urgency because of the nuclear issue. And the leadership of the Green movement doesn't have that same sense of urgency. They're taking a much more deliberate approach. They want to – it's almost like a rope-a-dope strategy of wearing down the regime over time and recruiting as many folks as possible

under the umbrella of the Green movement. And I know that they're frustrated with this sense of urgency from Washington.

A friend of myself and Abbas's once said to me that, you know, a year ago the United States didn't even think we existed. And now they're looking at their watches impatiently and saying when are you going to change the regime for us?

Last comment I would end on is about the Green movement itself. And you know, there is this phrase, this adage from U.S. politics that you campaign in poetry and you govern in prose. And I think for the Green movement to be successful, they're going to have to focus less on the poetry and more on the prose.

MR. INSKEEP: Please join me in thanking our panelists today. Gentlemen, thank you very much. You were good. And thanks for your questions as well. (Applause.)

(END)