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QI Panel:

Book Talk | Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History

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Trita Parsi 0:34

Welcome to the Quincy Institute's webinar with Vali Nasr on his new book, Iran's grand strategy, a Political History. My name is Trita Parsi, I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We favor a national security strategy that is centered on diplomacy and military restraint. Why does Iran behave the way it does, and what does the West still misunderstand about Iranian foreign policy? This is a question that Vali Nasr addresses in his new landmark book. He dismantles the myth that of Iran as an irrational, ideologically driven state. Instead, he traces a coldly pragmatic strategy shaped by war, isolation and existential fear, drawing on rare interviews with Iranian insiders, Nasr reveals how Tehran's foreign policy, its pursuit of a nuclear capability, its forward defense, its defiance of us, power is animated not by dogma but by the logic of survival and the scars of history, from the Iraq Iran war to the fallout of the US invasion of Iraq, this book provides a sweeping reinterpretation of Iran's long game and what it means for us policy in the region on edge as tensions rise once again, this conversation is essential for anyone seeking to understand the deeper motivations behind Iran's move on the world stage and how Washington might finally stop misreading them. And of course, for a potential agreement between the Trump administration and Iran, if diplomacy is pursued in the right way.

We are, of course, delighted to have Vali here today. And although he needs no introduction since he's been on so many of our different webinars, let me just mention that he is Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies science. And from 2012 to 2019 he served as the dean of the school, and from 2009 to 2011 he was the senior advisor to us, Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ambassador. Richard Holbrook, for those of you who are joining us via zoom, you can ask your questions via the Q and A function. If you are watching this on Twitter, on Facebook, or any other platform, you can actually ask your questions in the comment section, and we will try to get to those as well. So with no further ado, let's get started. Vali, congratulations on a really magnificent book, so well researched, so much that I learned from it, particularly some of the interviews that he had with people inside the Iranian system. Why don't you take a couple of minutes and just let us know what the thesis is that you're presenting in this book and what it means for the United States?

Vali Nasr 3:32

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First of all, thank you very much to you and to the Quincy Institute for inviting me. It's really wonderful to be here and have this opportunity to talk about the book. I worked on this book for about 10 years, and these have been the 10 years that have been quite furtive in US Iran relations, literally going from the first nuclear deal through the ordeal of us withdrawal, maximum pressure, Arab Israeli pressure on Iran for its regional behavior. Arab spring onto where we are we are today, and whenever the tensions when Iran goes up, there's always a way of thinking about Iran as essentially a theocracy, as a state led by mullahs who are either, you know, purely ideological or irrational, or if there is any rationalities driven by the reading of the Quran and the religious text, et cetera. And even policy makers who might have a less of a simplistic view of Iran still don't quite appreciate the degree to which Iran, like many of other of America's adversaries, for better or for worse, actually has a strategy, has a set of assumptions about its national security, sees its national security in a particular way, feels threats, feels opportunities, and then calculates about how to achieve them.

And unless you understand that, you really cannot figure out what the other side is about like, for instance, as we are speaking today, why is Iran so determined not to give up the. Right to enrichment. It's not simply that they want to make a bomb. There's a whole host of national security calculations that goes into this. Now it also so happens that Iran, ironically, is actually very open with information. I mean that now there's volumes of memoirs and accounts of Iran's foreign policy, going to the first years of the revolution, the Iran Iraq War, forward defense have been written. There are all oral history memoirs. There are people who are willing to talk as you mentioned. And it's a trove of information which allows you to actually chart why and how this the Islamic Republic behaves the way it does.

And I do think the ideology was very important at the beginning of the revolution, but anti Americanism, it was very it is even more clear in the in the history that you can put your hands on was not the monopoly of the religious faction of the revolution. In fact, the secular communist leftist were, in fact, more anti American, or as influential in making revolution Iran anti American as was the religious sector. Secondly, aside from religion, is very clear that in the thinking of Khomeini, the single most important thing for Iran was independence. What that was that his reading of Iran's history was that Iran had continuously struggled to be independent in the 19th century, when Britain and Russia dominated Iran, when Iran was occupied during World War Two, when, in their view Iran, the United States intervened to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh, support the Shah, they had a view of Iran as having been essentially colonized until the revolution, and to this day, even Ayatollah Khomeini would see the singular most important achievement of the revolution, not that Iran is Islamic, but that Iran is quote, unquote independent, and independent from whom is independence from the United States.

And I sort of you can see that they have become entangled in this sort of a Sisyphean effort of continuously trying to make themselves independent of the US, getting entangled in sanctions, more conflict with the US, more more attempt to preserve and so their National Strategy has been built around this struggle to maintain Iran's independence first, get the United States out of Iran. Get the United States out of the Middle East. Essentially leave us alone. Let us do what we want. I mean, I start the book with an anecdote of a senior Iranian leader who met with Henry

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Kissinger around about the time of the first nuclear deal. And Kissinger true, as he wrote also in an op ed, wanted to know when Iran is going to behave like a nation and stop behaving like a movement, and when was it going to get tired of of, you know, continuously banging his head against the United States in the region and and the question tired was very interesting because the spokes the Iranian statesman told him, We want to know, when are you going to get tired and leave us alone? It's not about conquering the world. It's about being allowed to be independent.

Now you might think this is a folly, but this is a very big driving force. And I also tracing this book that, aside from this sort of grand narrative, which is still dominant on Iran, that you know, the Iran Iraq war, the US invasion of Iraq, these have been transformative events for Iran. In eight years of brutal war, really shaped the mind of, for instance, Ayatollah Khomeini, general awesome, Soleimani, the current commanders of IRGC very early in their life as leaders of Iran, this was the massive experience they went through. They saw Iran was alone. Nobody helped it. It had to do everything to survive, get its territory back on its own, and this basically shaped the way in which they see the United Nations, their Arab neighbors, the United States and us, invasion of Iraq similarly. And the way in which the US rejected the first nuclear deal threatened to take the war to Iran later on, the double dealing they see in the in the JCPOA.

I think these, these are important formative experiences on them. You can trace how they read it, how they interpreted it, and how internalizing it, this became part of their strategy. So I think, you know, in in a nutshell, Iran is still struggling to deal with what it sees as the single biggest threat to its national security, which is the United States and everything it does, ambition, fear, negotiations, confrontation, has to be understood in the way in which they look at this, the situation that they find the country in.

Trita Parsi 10:01

Yeah, and the emphasis on independence, as you point out, also helps, as you also alluded, to explain not only why they won't give up enrichment, but even when it comes to ideas such as consortiums, et cetera, which they appear to have been open to, as long as the enrichment continues to take place, on Iranian soul to not give up that independence. There's another very interesting thing that happens that you explain in your book, which is to show that the forward defense strategy of Iran actually traces back to a strategy that the Shah himself utilized, the green strategy, and that essentially there is continuity there, despite the fact that these are otherwise very, very ideologically different types of regimes. Could you explain what forward defense is, how it's worked out, and how it is parallel, in some ways, with a strategy that the Shah himself pursued prior to the Islamic Revolution?

Vali Nasr 10:58

I mean, first of all, the fundamental point that that you mentioned is that even though the Islamic Republic has a view of the Shah as a puppet of the United States and is ideologically opposed to it, I mean, that's not the reality that was. I mean, the Shah also saw Iran as a great power in

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the region. He was also responding to certain strategic realities about Iran, and which the Islamic Republic has to do. Iran is a very big piece of territory. Is a very proud nation. He has a long civilization, but it's also alone. It's a lonely country. Its language is Persian. It's not Arabic and Turkish. Its religion is predominantly Shia. It's not Sunni in this region. It is in the middle of this region, but it's almost, almost like it's not welcome in this region. And that was a reality the Shah dealt with. It's a reality that the Islamic Republic deals with. Now, the shot for the Shah, the greatest threat to Iran was the Soviet Union. For the Islamic Republic, the greatest threat to Iran is, is America. For the Shah, the Soviet threat was directed to Iran, not only on Iran's Iran Soviet borders, but it came through the Arab world in the name of Iraq in particular, and for the Islamic Republic in its own imagination, at least, the American threat also came to Iran through Iraq, first in 1980 when Iran believed right or wrong that the United States and Israel and the Arab countries, which were allies with the United States, basically encouraged and supported Saddam to invade Iran.

And then in 2003 when the United States itself became the threat to Iran sitting inside of Iraq. So this mindset that the that the major threat to Iran does not come from Turkmenistan. It doesn't come from Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan. It comes from that border where, where Iran is is vulnerable to the Arab world and and the biggest threat in the region to Iran is not the Turks, Pakistanis, Afghans, the greatest threat to Iran are the Arabs. This was true of the time of the Shah, which actually led Iran to get very close to Israel at that point in time. And it's also true of the Islamic Republic and then. But is a point in which, in the 1970s the Shah becomes aware that the best way for Iran to defend itself in the Arab world is to have a presence in the Arab world. And this presence was an alliance he built with the Kurds, was an alliance that he was trying to build with the with the Shia militias in Lebanon, and then was by basically assuming responsibility for security in the Persian Gulf and deploying Iranian troops in Oman in order to save the sultanated Oman from a communist separatist insurgency. And this was the same slippery slope that the Islamic Republic began to go down, starting also with Lebanon, like the Shah. I

mean, the scholar Arash Raisinejad, who's done a lot of work on this, has, and I quote him, he says that, you know, a major officer in the SAVAK, the secret police of the Shah, who was in charge of the Arab world, said that unless we are willing to shed blood on the Mediterranean we will have to defend that. We would have to defend the enemies inside of our own border, which could have been taken out of General Soleimani mouth so certain you know strategic realities that you know the Islamic Republic first was antagonistic towards the Arabs, nice trying to hug the Arabs is almost mimics the dilemma the Shah went through in the 1960s and 70s. First there was Nasser and Baathist and Iraqi threat to Iran, and then eventually he made up with Saddam. He embraced Sadat. He embraced the Arabs. And in a way, the idea of forward defense is a sort of an acknowledgement by Iran that it really cannot defend itself against the Arab world. Sitting on the border of Khuzestan with Iraq, that border is too vulnerable, and that its national security demands it to be involved in the Arab world, and that involvement can go wrong, of course, as we saw in Syria or recently with Iran, but Iran really cannot afford not to be, not to be present in the Arab world. And that's that's a strategic dilemma, because I don't think

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either the Shah or the Islamic Republic has found a way in which it can do that without the blowback that that came, for instance, in Syria against Iran.

Trita Parsi 15:45

At the same time, though you point out that it is not until 2003 in a particular meeting that was held between Assad of Syria and Ayatollah Khomeini, in which this strategy essentially took a major leap forward and became what we have seen in the last 20 years. So that did not really exist in the same way the 1980s or 1990s the IBAS may have tried, but it is the invasion of Iraq and that meeting. Could you tell us a little bit more what happened the context, but also what happened specifically in that meeting?

Vali Nasr 16:18

I mean, one has to acknowledge that Iran has had a presence in the form of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which predates that, but that remained very specific about management of Israeli threat, or threatening Israel in that in that milieu. But when the United States invaded Iraq, it was very obvious to both Syria and to Iran that the United States is not going to remain satisfied with Iraq. This was not like George Bush the first, where he had a limited operation of only expelling Saddam from Kuwait, restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty, and no ambitions of remaking the Middle East. George Bush the Junior, the second George Bush administration was far more ambitious in re engineering the Middle East, essentially starting with Iraq and then dealing with other so called rogue nations, Syria and Iran.

And again, memoirs of Iran's leaders, for instance, that of its first ambassador to Iraq after US and US invasion, Azariokomi says very specifically that Iran had a firm belief that after Iraq, it would be Iran's turn. Iran very quickly played it played its hand by by trying to reach out to the US president Khatami, who was a reformist then send the fax offering negotiations on nuclear, Hezbollah everything to the administration. The US pretended they never received the facts, throw it in the garbage, and adopted an attitude which has a parallel today. Iran is weak. We are strong. Why should we negotiate with them? Which I'm glad to see that the Trump administration is not making the same mistake, although Israel is making the same argument. Don't talk to them. They're weak. Just attack them. And once that happened, I think Iran's supreme leader, who was not in favor of President Khatami outreach, essentially gave the mission to General Soleimani to figure a way to defend Iran against the potential invasion of Iran from Iraq and the Syrians also had the same ambition. And I quote that in a meeting in Tehran on the eve of the War of the invasion, Khamenei tells Assad that this crocodile must not swallow its bite easily, and that's the way.

So resistance is the way to slow the United States down douse its triumphant attitude of dismantling the Iraqi army in a couple of weeks, and what results is a Sunni insurgency, which was supported from Syria, essentially, and a Shia insurgency which Soleimani sets up in southern Iraq. Now, neither of them could have expected the spectacular success of the insurgencies. Neither of them could have assumed that not only they would disabuse the United

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States of the desire or expectation that they could just march into Baghdad for breakfast, Tehran for lunch and Damascus for dinner, which is the kind of language which was being bandied about, but they actually would, would be defeated in Iraq.

And years later, Ayatollah Khamenei basically says that the entire recalibration of US foreign policy, starting from President Obama, of pivoting to Asia, owes to Iran. That everybody in the Middle East, Russia, Russia, etc, owe a debt of gratitude to Iran for actually. Defeating the US and Iraq. Now, we may say this is over reading what they did, but it's real to them. And so when Iran's, you know, experienced that kind of success in Iraq, you know, Soleimani became a larger than life hero within the revolution. Regards, he became a regional, you know, operator and Iran began to double down on this idea that it can, it can manage security operations by setting up militias, by following a symmetric warfare but it was a strategy that they stumbled upon because they their back was to the wall because they feared imminent invasion by by a US military that had arrived in Baghdad in record time, and they knew that they cannot defend against the United States with tanks, aircraft and artillery, and so they came up with this guerrilla warfare strategy, which had roots in the Iran Iraq war, because that's how they wage that war against Iraq. It had roots in Hezbollah's War against Israel in the 1980s and 1990s and and once and that and this degree of success then turn this into into a into a major pillar of Iran's regional strategy.

Trita Parsi 21:27

The way you describe it is, and the context of it, I think, lends credence to your assessment there, which is that this was a defensive strategy, at least at its outset. The United States had invaded Iraq. Iran had already been invaded by Iraq earlier on. The sense of threat vulnerability was immense, and a strategy was designed to be able to make it as difficult as possible for the United States to be able to carry on and go all the way to Tehran after Baghdad or Damascus. The way it's perceived elsewhere in the region is that Iran was seeking to establish hegemony throughout the region, that this was from the outset, driven not by defensive measures, not by existential concerns, but rather by a long standing Iranian desire for dominating the region, going back 2500 years since the first Persian Empire. Is there any truth in that assessment? In your view, did this strategy perhaps start off as being defensive, but because of its unlikely success, or unexpected success, actually stumbled upon becoming more hegemonic?

Vali Nasr 22:41

Well, you know, elsewhere in history, we've seen Trita that one man's defense is another man's offense. Most countries that engage in war, including, let's say, Russia, going into Ukraine, explain their aggression against Ukraine in terms of defending themselves against against NATO. And it's also possible that wars or strategies can begin defensively, and then at some point, those who are executing it see ambitions in it. It's also possible that when the Shah first embraced a presence in the Arab world. He was defensive. But then towards the end of his rule, he began to imagine that with friendship with Sadat, Saddam, a base in Oman, you know, intervening in, sorry, intervening in Oman, a base in Lebanon, Iran, can become the dominant

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force in the region, not with militias, but but in the different way. So I don't want to say that the Islamic Republic has not, at no point, began to imagine sort of grandiose control of the region.

But you have to look at the actual facts of the case. The facts is that there is no evidence in any memoir, in any history, in any account of the times that these things were happening of a grand plan, what you see is panic when the US arrives in Iraq that they are going to imminently attack us, and then when Assad comes under fire in 2011 you see panic in Tehran. I mean, again, I quote the way Khamenei was speaking to the commanders he was sending to Syria that at one point they complained that Assad doesn't listen to us. You know, we can't save the place. We should just pack up and leave. And he tells them, Assad is like a sick man. He doesn't know he's sick. You got to take him to the doctor. The doctor gives him medicine. You got to force him to eat it. In other words, don't come back to me and say that you know you're really you're resigned to Syria falling, because the consequences would be enormously grave.

Now if later on, they succeeded and they stabilized Assad and then they defeated ISIS in. In in Syria by 2016 now, from 2016 2017 onwards, they became ambitious in terms of turning Syria into a base of operations against Israel. That does not mean that in 2011 that's the way they were thinking in 2011 it was, it was literally panic that if Assad fell, Baghdad would not be sustainable. Iran would be on its heel, a combination of Israel, angry Sunni, Arab states and America will be coming at Iran like a tsunami. And so they put everything into Syria, the billions of dollars they put into Syria, everybody says it's a waste. It's not a waste in their view, because they they saved that moment and then they defeated ISIS. It begins to look like waste when they begin to spend money in Syria for grandiose ideas of encircling Israel, that's when it falls. So I think Arab view is is not historically accurate. That doesn't mean that Iranian expansion in the Arab territories is not real. It doesn't mean that Iran's behavior is not a threat to them. It doesn't mean that Iran cannot begin to imagine itself as an empire in the Middle East. But there was no grand plan of doing that.

I mean, beyond this ambition, there is an insecure state. It was insecure with US invasion of Iraq. It was insecure with the fall of Assad, and it's insecure right now. And and if, and the reality is that when you look at the internal debates in Iran memoirs, you don't see you do you do see the way they think and plan is all around the idea of of defending the revolution, defending the Islamic Republic, and defending Iran. And I have to say, for the Islamic Republic, these three things are the same. Country revolution and Islamic Republic is one. And so the talk is always not about how we expand the Islamic Republic, but how we protect it? And so I think that's exactly why you have to put this into perspective. This is not a state that is, that is, that is that is imagining expanding its borders. It's a state that wants to be left alone.

Trita Parsi 27:16

I want to get back to Syria mindful of the fact that, of course, Assad now has fallen, which I think happened after you had finished writing the book. But I want to point to an interesting parallel, because the forward defense, in some ways, sounds very much like the American strategy, grand strategy of privacy, the belief that the US does need to dominate almost every corner of

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the world, because otherwise instability ultimately will reach the US itself and will be a threat to the US. Now, of course, the scale here is very different. The US is going beyond two oceans to implement that strategy, and in many ways, of course, has backfired. In the Iranian case, it's much more local. It's in the region. It's in its own region, but it seems to have had a similar impact domestically, which is the securitization of the state. You write in the book that the state, at this point, the revolution, is no longer based on Villa at the farl and the theories and concepts that Khomeini had as the foundation for the revolution, but rather it's turned into resistance. It's the complete securitization of the state. Explain a little bit about that process, but also what it means for today's moment.

Vali Nasr 28:28

So we can, I mean, based on everything we've been discussing, you could look at Iran and say, this is, this is a country that has been at war since, literally, the year after the revolution, in one way or the other. That I mean, this is not the kind of war like Russia and Ukraine are involved in eight years of it with Iraq was like that, but it's a state that is continuously on high alert and sees itself in confrontation with the US. It also, from the perspective in Tehran, it sees the us building a big wall around Iran in the form of, first of all economic sanctions, then trying to exclude Iran from the Middle East. I think President Trump probably is the first president who openly says that I want Iran to participate in the region. This is actually not been part of the language there for 40 years, and so states that are in a condition of war, ultimately, the security forces get more and more and more power in the name and for the service of defending the country, which means they get a bigger share of the budget. They get a bigger share of the decision making in foreign policy.

And at some point in time, they also get begin to penetrate the economy. So in the case of Iran, this has meant that the revolution, regards, has gone from being a fairly professional force at the end of the Iran Iraq war to steadily becoming a state within a state, a. In Iran, it's now, it's now very similar to the military in Pakistan or military in Egypt. In other words, it has sway over large parts of the economy. It has many governorships or former Revolutionary Guard commanders. It has members of the Parliament. It has allies in the political process, and is highly integrated with the clerical establishment, and like generals everywhere, they have a security perspective that they impose on the country. But in the case of Iran, and you could say it's their own fault, I wouldn't dispute with that, but it is, what it is, is that they are operating as if Iran is in a continuous situation of war, they look around and they see you, dozens of us, bases in all the countries around them with capability to hit Iran and so, and it's their job to actually defend Iran.

So then they say, you know, we need to take over Ministry of telecommunications. We need to control the banks. We need to control these routes. We need to control shipping. We need to have a share of the oil. We need to control the government. Intelligence services become bigger and bigger. So in a way, even though Iran's leader is civilian, because it's a cleric, essentially, Iran is now a state like Pakistan or Egypt, really run by the military. It doesn't have a face like General Sisi or the chief, the chairman of the army staff in Pakistan, but as a whole, the IRGC is now a big pillar of the state. A

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nd I also argue that Khamenei, much like the Shah, is a civilian who sees himself as the Commander in Chief of the military. It's wrong to think of Khamenei as a cleric. Yes, it comes from that background, but that's not the way Khamenei sees himself. He's at home with his generals the way the Shah was at home with his generals. He was an he was a president during wartime. He's deeply entrenched in the military decision making in Iran, and he appoints all the commanders of IRGC who respond and report to him directly, in a way, they don't have a kind of a command structure like Pakistan, where the military makes his own decisions without civilian supervision. Khamenei has the last word on war, on peace, on which division of IRGC gets what kind of funding, which commanders are relieved, which commanders are appointed and and, in a way, what it is no longer between authoritarianism and democracy or clerics and secularism in Iran. I think it's largely about the security, military structure that dominates Iran, and how that will happen go forward in a post harmony scenario.

Trita Parsi 33:07

It's very interesting, because what you're pointing to here, I mean, we see so many different, very valid parallels. And if we go forward to today and what is happening? What's happened to Syria? Iran's defeat by and large in Syria, the significant weakening of Hezbollah, all of these things would perhaps make one think that, okay, this strategy of forward defense has now been defeated, and Iran needs to go in a different direction. What I'm pointing to is you've shown how a strategy that is defensive at its origin, because of its success, ended up becoming somewhat offensive and grandiose ideas which then had a lot of cost and has now then been ingrained into the state. Can that be reversed? Or can it only be reversed once Iran faces some very significant military defeats.

Vali Nasr 34:05

Well, in some ways it has not, not in a ground war, but, but, but the forward defense has, has failed. It's true of also the United States, other parts of the world that military men generals are are very attached to strategies from which for which they get budget and their power comes from. After 2003 the quotes wars went from being the smallest division of IRGC to becoming an empire with regional expanse and significant amount of budgetary and political influence in Iran. Now, those who are in the gods force, whether it's Soleimani or Ghani or they obviously would try to defend their turf against other divisions. Divisions of IRGC.

Now, what happened in Syria, essentially and actually, what happened during In other words, I believe that the moment that Israel attacked Iran's consulate in Syria, it was proved to Iran that forward defense wasn't going to work. Forward defense was no longer going to deter Israel, that they were facing a different Israel than they were facing before October 7, and Iran makes a decision to actually launch missiles from its own territory. The minute it does that, it really within Iran, it shows that the ultimate defense of the country, the defense of the country, ultimately rests not with the Qods Force, but with that division of IRGC that is control of the drones,

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missiles at A forward defending there it is. There is any logic to rebuilding it the way they had done before, because it's not going to perform that function anymore.

First of all, they don't have Syria. Lebanon is going to be a very uphill battle to build Hezbollah to what it was, if it's at all possible, and ultimately, given the way Israel has conducted the war in Gaza, it actually doesn't make sense for them to put money over there, as some have said in these debates in Iran, it was a great strategy for A time, it worked really well, times have changed, and so that strategy, you cannot apply an old strategy for the future. Now, one of the things we've seen with Iran, it's very obvious, when you look at their history, is that they have learned on the go about how to deal with problems. S

o, you know, for two years, Iraq occupied the Iranian territory, until the Iranians came up with the idea of asymmetric warfare to win their territory back when, when American threat arrived in Iraq, they came up with the idea of of creating resistance. So I think we're in a sort of eye of the storm. We're in a we're in a period of transition where there's intense debate in Iran about what what should be Iran's principal national security strategy going forward. I don't think the core issue that Iran needs to protect itself, against us, against Israel. It lives in a hostile region. It has to be vigilant. That hasn't gone away, but forward defense is going to play a much less smaller role in providing Iran with the security it wants, particularly because what we see after October 7 is that the singular regional threat to Iran is not going to come from Israel, not from the Arabs, and Iran needs a strategy that would deter Israel and forward defense is not it.

Trita Parsi 38:03

But does that mean that it helps shift the debate inside of Iran away from nuclear negotiations and towards nuclear weaponization?

Vali Nasr 38:12

I think for now, it's actually shifted it towards nuclear deal, because Iran, first of all, needs the deal in order to arrive at a cease fire with the United States and take the United States out of a war scenario with Iran. Secondly, if there is a nuclear deal between US and Iran, it means a de facto cease fire between Israel and Iran, whether Israelis wanted or not, just like President Trump is not right now, not allowing Israel to attack Iran. He's not going to allow Israel to attack Iran after a deal, and then he's going to also get from Iran guarantees that the Iranians will will not provoke Israel in a way that would lead to a confrontation. That does not mean peace between them, but it means a de facto Cease fire. Iran and Israel have had this in the past as well. After 2006 war in Lebanon, right, they agreed to some kind of a cold ceasefire.

So that's the nuclear deal. Is the way to get there. The nuclear deal also allows Iran deep relations with the countries, not just in the and the benefit of that is also to provide Iran with the with the different kind of a strategic asset in the region. Now, economic reasons, the nuclear deal now is part of this strategic calculation of, how do you defend Iran? And the way to defend Iran is not to end up in war with the US, not to end up in isolation and buy Iran time to basically

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think about what comes next and then the quality of the nuclear deal, and if actually it produces economic benefits to Iranians, if there is trust built in the nuclear. Deal, then that also will be part of the debate going forward.

Trita Parsi 40:06

But if there isn't a nuclear deal, do you think now, as a result of Iran's weakening the largely defeated strategy of forward defense makes a nuclear deterrence all the more important to the minus.

Vali Nasr 40:22

Yes, it does, but the path from where they are now to actually having nuclear deterrence is not short, it's fairly long, and it's also very, very dangerous and costly. So if you had two strategies in front of you in the short run, let's say that a nuclear deal is the best way to stabilize the situation, given where Iran is, or should Iran go nuclear? I think the more attractive choice right now is actually to have a nuclear deal. Because, as I said, ceasefire with America, ceasefire with Israel, economic stability, deepening of relations with the Arab world. If a nuclear deal reduces threats to Iran. And after all, as I've mentioned, everything about Iran's strategic thinking is about threat management, right? So this is the easier, cheaper way. And of course, once you go down in this path, then it has its own logic there. And I don't, I can't say that. You know, five years of nuclear deal Iran will look like the way it does now, or think like the way it does now. On the other hand, if the if this option is not on the table, and they're only left with the option of having a nuclear weapon as a deterrence, then they may go there, but, but that's not the first choice. And I think that the people outside who keep saying Iran wants a bomb, wants a bomb, don't sort of they need to think about the fact that the Iranians understand that the bomb, getting a bomb, actually increases threat to the country, not reduce it until you get the bomb, until you get 10 bombs. And managing this period is not, they don't have a solution for that. And the whole name of the game is not to, is to reduce threat, not to actually increase threat to Iran.

Trita Parsi 42:13

So we have a question from Johannes Olefels about what the securitization of Iran has meant and will mean in the future for the democratization of Iran, we've seen in other places, the securitization tends to come at the expense of internal freedoms. How has Iran's forward defense strategy interplay with the reform this movement and the movement to open up the country internally from inside.

Vali Nasr 42:45

I mean, I would say it's not just the forward defense. It's the entire, you know, this idea of Iran being at war with the West, it has all it has meant a number of things. One is that the lesson they took from Iran Iraq war was that there was that Iran was able to survive the war and get his territory back because it was because there was ideological bond between the people and the

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government. And I told Khamenei on and on as repeated, that that Iran has to be has to sort of inculcate ideology in its population because of national security needs. It's not the other way around. It's not that ideology requires national security. It's the other way around. National security requires ideology. Even during the Mahsa Amini protests, one senior cleric said, Well, if we allow young people to do whatever they want. Where is going to be? Where are the Vigilant people who are going to defend this country going to come from? Who are the people who are going to be willing to go die on the battlefield if everybody wants to be in Tiktok and at cafes, etc? It shows the sort of the way in which they see the importance of ideology for national security. And secondly, they have clamped down on dissent, on elections, on varieties of things in the name of national security, which is not very different from many other developing countries, in a way, emergency powers, interferences and the like. I mean, in a way, the direction that Iran has been going for the past two, three decades is not dissimilar to Russia to China, to Egypt, to Pakistan, to many other countries in which the civilian military balance has broken in the favor of the military And the military dominates society, economy and politics.

I think what is refreshing about Iran is that despite this, it still has a very vibrant civil society, fairly open press, even for Middle East standards, a lot more political discourse and possibilities of. Having an open society are much more. But I would say that the idea that democratization is around the corner is more, is more wishful thinking than than a realistic, you know, future for Iran in the medium term turn at least. I think even Iranians within Iran are now more even those who are opposed to the Islamic Republic are more interested in a normal state than a democratic state. They're more interested in Mohammed bin Salman than they are interested in in Rousseau. In other words, to me, I don't see democracy as really the struggle in Iran right now. It's the struggle for a state that is not isolated, is normal, and that the population can prosper and have cultural freedoms of the kind they see in UAE, in Saudi Arabia, or, let's say, in Azerbaijan, none of which are democratic states, but all of which idealized in Iran as a potential outcome.

Trita Parsi 46:07

You mentioned China and Russia as well. We have a question from Anne Phillips that asks, What how the Iranians see the role of China. But I would widen the question a little bit and say, Where does China and Russia figure into Iran's larger foreign policy and grand strategy, and how has that shifted in various ways, and particularly after the defeat of forward defense?

Vali Nasr 46:32

Well, I mean, if we went five years back, there was a there was a very strong faction within Iran which thought that Russia and China will provide all of Iran's solutions. They would they would help it economically, they would help it diplomatically, they would provide it with even military capabilities, and particularly in the revolutionary regards, there's a very strong Russo fill faction which has very tight Deep State to Deep State relationship with Russia. But I think Iran is now much more sober about this, and that's partly why it is engaged in these negotiations with the US. It understands that Russia and China are not an economic solution for Iran. They don't have

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the capacity or the ability to provide Iran with the kind of economic relief it needs that their ability to defend Iran at the United Nations internationally is much more limited. And thirdly, that they cannot solve Iran's security threats. Russia and China are not able to step into the breach and prevent Israel from, for instance, from bombing Iran or carrying acts of sabotage. So ultimately, the strategic depth that they provide Iran is limited. It is important, but it's not the lifeline that Iran thought it would be, and particularly with Russia, has not delivered a lot of weaponry it promised Iran, and it has a history of double dealing on Iran to get favors from Europeans or Americans, and the Chinese have been buying Iranian oil, but they're not willing to go too much far beyond that. And even if they do, the Iranians find that the economic terms that the Chinese want for massive investment in Iran are not ones that a country that touts independence, wants to submit to.

Trita Parsi 48:25

Now there's an important differentiation between forward defense and resistance that you're making in the book, and while forward defense has largely been defeated, resistance is likely not going to go away because it's rooted in deeper things, but there's limitations to it everything from economic to ideological to domestic factors. Another one that you're pointing to that is quite fascinating is to see what the average age of Iranian society is today, which, if I remember correctly, is closer to 30 at this point, whereas in Yemen, you're pointing out it's 19. And I would assume that if you were to make a calculation on the average age of the Iranian leadership right now is pushing well above 70, whereas the Houthis leadership seems to be around 40 or so. Are there limitations of that kind that really shows that so much of this theme of the revolution has now aged out and has been replaced by younger, more revolutionary zealous forces in the region. What does that do for Iran's ability to continue, whether it's resistance, forward, defense or some other strategy, because it seems to be a country that, at the end of the day is very, very tired.

Vali Nasr 49:35

Absolutely. I mean, first of all, there are different dimensions to this demographic issue, which is pretty important. One is, I mean forward defense is a military strategy. Resistance is an idea. I mean Iran resistance obviously worked on the back of of forward defense, but forward defense was a strategy of Iran's goods force and Iran's IRGC, whereas resistance is. A view of opposing us and Israel's policies in the region that Iran believes that it shares with the Arab Street, as well as with groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Houthis, et cetera, et cetera. And therefore the Iranians believe that even if they withdraw from forward defense, given Israel and America's policies in the region, they will have a bond with significant forces in the Arab world along the lines of resistance. And in fact, after after October 7, they believe that they will have this bond also with develop with everybody from Greta Thunberg to New Zealander natives to people in Europe and the US. So resistance is more like a third worldism of the 1960s but this time, Iran is at the center of it, and it does see that as an important strategic asset, but separates that from the idea of actual military campaign in the form of forward defense.

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Now demography is very important, because we have to know that when the revolution happened in Iran, Iran's average age was around 19 years old. During Iran Iraq War, the average age was the same. So therefore Iran could afford losing two, 300,000 young men in the war in order to, you know, liberate its territory and then take the war into Iraq. That's not there anymore. So Iran is now has varieties of forms of labor shortage. Its problems are the same as those of European countries or Japan, because its fertility rates are the same, 1.7 1.6 because he had a very successful family planning campaign after the Iran Iraq war. That has caused another problem, which is Iran has a as a migration problem, very serious, similar to us, or France or or Germany, in the form of Afghans are coming to Iran. Similar kinds of anti immigration attitudes have formed. Afghans are now basically producing, if you would, the younger labor force that Iran doesn't have in large numbers.

And then, as you mentioned, Iran is sitting in a region that is considerably younger than it. The average age in the Arab world is much younger than Iran as a whole, which, yes, has military implication, which means Iran cannot have a kind of military force that can dominate in the Arab world, but it can maybe use these younger Arab forces in the region to do its bidding, in Yemen, in Iraq, etc, but it also means that Iran in the future will rely much more on technology than soldiers for its national defense. That's That's why the missiles and and drones part of IRGC are bound to be more important than the growth force going going into the future. But he also has another important note. I mean, there is a there is a leftover language that came out of 911 and Arab Spring, that the Middle East is really, really young. Young people all want change, and therefore these societies are on the cusp of change, and look at their old leaders, et cetera. Yes, Iran's leaders are very old, much older than Mohammed bin Salman, or, let's say, Ilhan Aliyev, et cetera. But the reality is that the demography of Iran is not the same as the Arab world. The youth in Iran are absolute minority. The mainstream Iranians are in their 30s, 40s, 50s, which means they're of an age that as angry as they may be, they're not risk takers. People, young people who go and cause revolution, democracy movements, Arab Spring, are of a particular age. Older people don't carry out revolutions.

And so it's important to note for those people who constantly think that there's going to be an uprising in Iran I don't believe there's going to be an uprising, not because Iranians are unhappy. Iranians are deeply unhappy, but because the demographic factor isn't there. The angry young Iranian is a minority in Iranian society. And as I said, the predominant number of Iranians are 30s and up. I mean, in five years time, Iran's average age is going to be 37 that's not that long from now, actually four years. Because when I got this data, was a year ago. So in four years time, they're going to be 3730 a society that is 37 and up is not a revolutionary society. Doesn't mean they won't change but, but the models that worked in 79 the models that we saw in 2011 to 2014 in the Arab world, I don't believe, apply to Iran.

Trita Parsi 54:59

What does an average age of 37 mean for a country's foreign policy, particularly one in the context that Iran finds itself?

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Vali Nasr 55:07

I think it means pragmatism. I mean, the older you get, the more likely you are going to vote for change that is not disruptive. That is not going to mean that you're going to lose your job or lose your livelihood, the kind of risk taking that young people might take, both with their own lives, of going before bullets and batons as well as be willing to risk everything to try some new regime, is not true of older people. So I think the and I think the Islamic Republic understands that that the nuclear deal will satisfy a large number of Iranians, not that they will become pro regime, but it will satisfy a lot of things that that makes them unhappy, like inflation, unemployment, varieties of things.

And I have to say that, you know, after the uprisings in Iran, they have basically relinquished a lot of the culture. The main cultural issue that brought the women into the streets, which is that they have de facto adopted a Don't Ask, Don't Tell, policy with hijab, large numbers of Iranian women now really don't wear hijab, particularly middle class and up areas where this the cultural issues were more important, they basically have taken a hands off policy which addresses at least a cultural anger to some extent, and they think that the nuclear issue will address some of the economic anger, and that leaves only a very smaller group of people who won the Islamic Republic gone at all cost, but, but I think the age structure in Iran is suggestive of a population that is not willing to go to war with its government at all costs.

Trita Parsi 56:56

We have only three minutes left. But I do have to ask this question, because I see it from several people in the Q and A from Valentino, Adam, Henry Wang and others, asking, What if Iran did change his position on Israel agreed to recognize obviously difficult in the current circumstances. But would that take away a lot of the threat that has been at the root of Iran's sense of threat, its sense of vulnerability.

Vali Nasr 57:23

I mean, absolutely. I mean, if there was a way in which Iran and Israel could could actually first start, let's say, pacify the relations, I think it would change both countries. Because you also forget the extent to which Israeli national security is now built around Iran. The Arab world is no longer a threat to Israel. Yes, you have Hamas, which they can pound to death fairly easily. Hezbollah, they dealt with there's no Arab government that is either going to go to war with Israel. Is a threat to Israel. So the only regional threat that supports Israel's military posture is Iran. And if Iran wasn't there or was pacified, Israel would have to also change in fundamental ways. Yes, I would say it would be a big shift. But unfortunately, it's not that. It's not in the short run, I don't think Iran's foreign policy has understood that it cannot separate America and Israel from each other. Iran is right now following a policy that is simultaneously getting more aggressive on Israel while it's trying to make peace with the US. And in fact, that's exactly what is making President Trump's life so difficult. Because, you know, it's really left to President Trump to try to fix the problem that Iran is creating of of wanting to deal, on the one hand, with

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the US and and escalating with Israel. But yes, I think we're entering a period where Iran Israeli confrontation rivalry is the single biggest decider for the future of this region.

Trita Parsi 58:53

Thank you so much, Vali, this has been a fantastic conversation. I strongly, strongly recommend the book. It's called Iran's grand strategy, of political history to everyone. And before we go, let me also say something about our next book talk or webinar, which will take place on June 24 at noon, Eastern Time, which, incidentally, will also be on Iran. We will be hosting Professor Mohsen Milani, who will speak about his new book, Iran's rise and rivalry with the United States in the Middle East till then. Thank you so much for joining us, and hope to see you all very soon again. Thank you.