

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **QI Panel:**

#### **Iran at a Crossroads: Protests, Repression, and the Risk of U.S. Military Escalation**

January 12th, 2025  
12:00 - 1:00 PM ET

#### **Trita Parsi 0:34**

Good afternoon and welcome to the Quincy Institute's webinar titled Iran at a crossroads protests repression and the risk of US military escalation. My name is Prita Parsi. I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a Washington based think tank 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 restraints. Today, we're going to talk about Iran. The Islamic Republic is confronting the largest and potentially most consequential wave of protests since 2009 nationwide uprisings have shaken the foundation of the state, igniting speculation that the regime may be approaching a breaking point or even face an internal coup. At the same time, regional and international tensions are escalating, Israel, backed by growing voices in Washington, has urged Donald Trump to take military action. Trump has issued those threats, of course, that is also not just on the grounds of nuclear or missile developments in Iran, but now also under the guise of protecting the protesters.

Is the theocratic regime in Iran nearing its end? If it falls? Could Iran finally embark on a path towards democracy or will power simply shift from clericals to generals through a coup led by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Alternatively, does the country risk descending into chaos and civil war and make it look more like Syria than a path towards democratization, and if the United States and Israel intervene militarily, what chain of consequences might follow for Iran, for the region, for the cause of democracy, and for the United States itself, to answer these questions, we have a fantastic panel with Vali Nasr, Ali, Gerard, Mayer and Muhammad Ali Shabani. I'm going to introduce them more properly in a second, but let me just sit down some of the ground rules. Those of you are watching this on Zoom, please use the Q and A function to ask your questions. If you're watching this on Twitter, on Facebook, you can put it in the comment section or on YouTube Live, and I will try to get to those questions as well.

But no further ado. Let me introduce our esteemed panelists. Vali Nasr is professor of International Relations at my old alma mater, Johns Hopkins Sais, which he also served as dean for for a couple of years, he was a senior advisor to US Special representatives of Afghanistan and Pakistan Ambassador Richard Holbrook, and he's the author of several different books on Iran and on US foreign policy. Ellie Geranmayeh is a Senior Policy Fellow and Deputy Head of the Middle East and North Africa program at ECFR European Council on Foreign Relations. She specializes in European foreign policy concerning Iran, focusing on

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

nuclear negotiations and sanctions policy. And she is and her analysis is frequently featured in international media. And finally, Mohammad Ali Shabani is an award winning Middle East expert and scholar. He's the off editor of Amwaj media, which has emerged as one of the most important outlets, news outlets focusing on Iran Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, having broken numerous stories in the last couple of years.

So let's get straight into it. This is a very fluid situation. We fully understand that any major predictions may be very difficult to make, but give us your assessments of where we actually are. It seems like the protests for the last couple of days have actually slowed down. Is that a temporary lull and then we're going to see an increase again come Friday or so? Or has the regime essentially successfully managed to clamp down on the protest in a way that makes it very difficult for them to continue as they are? And what does we what do we know about the state of the system itself, in the sense that it doesn't appear as if any major defections have occurred. But is it too early to be able to draw any conclusions on that? Why don't I start with you value? Why don't you give us your assessment in a minute and a half, and then I'll go to Ellie and then to Mohammad?

### **Vali Nasr 4:52**

Well, first of all, thank you very much for inviting us here, and it's great to be on this panel with Mohammed and Ali. Since January 8, which is like three days ago, when the when the protests really exploded, in a way that people expected the Islamic Republic to be collapsing. I think the protests have attenuated significantly. I mean, obviously we're on an internet blackout. We don't know what's going on, but the reality, but the reason for this is these protests are based on huge amount of public anger. The government has cracked down very brutally, which does dissuade at least some protesters from coming out. But also the internet shutdown makes it very difficult for protesters to communicate. It makes it very difficult from news from one city or pictures from one city in sense or motivate action in another city. The protests are leaderless. They're organization less. They're actually genuine eruption of popular anger and without leadership an and direction and organization such protests, not just in Iran, elsewhere in the world, are it's very difficult for them to sustain themselves. I mean, protests have to get bigger. Have to find direction, have to find leadership. If they're going to get to a goal, you have to go from lashing out to actually pursuing a very specific agenda of overthrowing the regime.

And that's not happening on the other side, we also have seen a regime that is being very determined and disciplined in an application of huge amount of violence without major dissent that is meaningful. I'm not talking about descent behind closed doors, but we haven't seen units defecting police refusing to shoot, at least from what we see. And so I think you know, the protests were extremely significant, and even if they dissipate, the anger that they produced has not gone away. But whether, in the next few days, they can actually be consequential and force the collapse of the regime, it's difficult to say definitively, but I don't think they're building the necessary head of steam to get there.

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **Trita Parsi 7:02**

Thank you so much, Vali. I want to follow up later on, on two key points you made. One was lack of leadership. And secondly, also in terms of you said that this is driven by and large by a tremendous amount of anger. The clamp down the killings must have also generated a tremendous amount of new anger. We'll get back to that. Vali, what is your assessment?

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 7:28**

Thank you for having me Trita. And just want to start by saying this is an incredibly dark moment for many Iranians watching what's going on in the country, and, of course, those in the country. But to answer your question, look, I do think that sometimes we confuse the fact that many rounds of protests in Iran have led to different types of process of change with necessarily regime change. And I think it's important to note that with every major political upheaval we have seen in the country in the past, it has forced the Islamic Republic of Iran to provide some gifts to the people. It hasn't at all met the expectations of those leading the demonstrations and giving their lives for the protests. But you know, following 2009 the Green Movement, the system showed a bit of flexibility by allowing Rouhani with his campaign of a promise for change and negotiation with us to come to the fore in 2019 the predominantly economic led protests, they were still able to respond by using the coffers and the purse of the system to continue with the subsidies for the poorest in 2022 with the woman life freedom protests. The protests led to a process of change and flexibility on social issues to do with the mandatory hijab, which, while it's there on the books, the enforcement we know from reporting in Iran has changed.

So the question is, the degree of anger we have seen from the protests on the ground in the past two weeks down the third week, are they going to lead to a process of some sort of a change or a reconciliation offer from the state to the citizen? And I think this is a key question, because the off ramps right now are limited for a system that is facing huge economic problems, so that economic part of the social contract is going to be very, very difficult to repair, so long as sanctions remain and so long as the corruption networks continue to lead the way on the economy, but also on the social and political freedoms, the system may have hit a ceiling in what it can do under current Supreme Leader.

And I think one of the things that I am looking at as an analyst is that does this unprecedented bottom up pressure, plus the top down pressure coming from President Trump, who, after Venezuela, I think we can, you know, say that he has some cowboy tactics under his belt and how he approaches foreign policy and the question of regime change, does this create certain shifts and changes within the political structure that understands or reflects an understanding that the status quo cannot continue and something has to give.

### **Trita Parsi 10:40**

Thank you so much, Elaine, and several excellent points that we'll get back to, particularly when it comes to off ramps. Mohammed?

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **Mohammed Ali Shabani 10:46**

Thank you, Trita, for organizing this timely event, and I don't want to repeat what the other panelists said. Excellent points they made. I would only emphasize one piece of the puzzle that I feel is missing in the debate, which is that every time we've seen this, these kinds of rounds of unrest, there has been movement towards regime change, only not the kind of regime change most people in Western capitals envisage. So what do I mean by that? In 2009 with the rise of the Green Movement, we saw the emergence and empowerment of the intelligence organization of the IRGC, that's when it truly, kind of came to the fore. And now with these protests, or after the war with Israel. We've seen in recent weeks, for instance, the appointment of figures who were part of the Raisi administration, people who were, for instance, serving as interior ministers under Raisi, as senior commanders of the military. These are people who are really in favor of crackdowns, people like, for instance, Vahidi, who is this interior minister. I'm talking about people like police commander, who was set aside for years. People like Rodan, the National Police Chief, was a reputation for cracking down hard.

So these are kind of figures that I think whenever things cool down a bit, such as when Ellie mentioned about the system trying to readjust by allowing the rise of Rouhani, allowing the rise of Khamenei, whenever there is an external threat, whenever there's kind of this kind of unrest, they move towards regime change. Tends to be that the system move towards its factory settings, and this means the empowerment of these hard liners, these tough forces. And I can give you one other example of how this is kind of playing out in the internal power dynamic today. There are massive space sponsored rallies across Iran. It's an attempt by the Islamic Republic to show that it still has a base.

And not only that, it still has a base, however small that it can mobilize that base in an organized manner. And the number one person addressing the crowd and Revolution Square in Tehran was not reformist president. He was, in fact, the conservative Parliament Speaker, Khatami, a former Iranian Air Force Commander. I think this says a lot about where Iran may be headed, particularly if there's a renewed military confrontation with the United States. So I think when we talk about regime change, we have to look at it as a multi dimensional kind of chess game that it actually is moving towards a different kind of regime change than people envisage.

And what are the consequences of that, apart from all of this, of course, within the internal push and pull, what we've been seeing, and what President Trump confirmed last night, and you may want to address this later in the webinar, is this kind of internal discussion about how to exit the stalemate within Tehran. Are they going to move towards dialog with the Trump administration? If yes, is there any flexibility on the kind of parameters that previously prevented dialog? So I'll leave it there, but maybe you want to bring it up in more detail.

### **Trita Parsi 13:56**

Now I'm the one who messed up absolutely those excellent point, and we will definitely get to that. But I want to first get to a different issue, which is that Trump did issue clear threats for the

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

first time he talked about protecting protesters. The extent to which anyone should take that seriously, in the sense that he really cares about protesters, that would probably be the first time that such care would come about. But nevertheless, what impact do you see that having had on the conduct of the government? Because what we see so far, it does not seem to be any degree of restraint left the eyewitness reports that come out indicate, and also the images that come out of Iranian TV from the morgue center suggested a very large number of people were killed. So how do you read the manner in which the government reacted to the protesters and the components? Perhaps they had no impact at all of what Trump said in all of this, you want to go first.

### **Mohammed Al Shabani 15:01**

Yeah, sure. I mean, I think one of the striking factors of this kind of bloodshed is that the government is not trying to hide the kind of death toll, at least parts of it. We've seen these shocking images of dozens, if not hundreds of body bags outside a morgue in southern Tehran devastating grieving families, and the government has broadcast that, probably for multiple reasons. Number one reason could probably be that it wants to tell its own people that it's ready to go all out if it faces an existential crisis. We have the irdc putting out statements telling parents, control your children, because many of these kids going out into the streets or Gen Z or younger. On the other hand, I think that the government has understood or adopted a position that for any kind of negotiation with the Trump administration, the Trump administration must not feel that Iran's options are limited.

And what do I mean by this? I think in the past couple of years, Khamenei particularly has given away his rationality in the face of US military power. And what do I mean by this? Specifically, it's that, for instance, in 2020 when Soleimani, the commander of the host force, was killed, Iran reacted by bombing an empty US military base in Iraq, when the Trump administration bombed Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025 Iran reacted by bombing an empty US military base in Qatar. So today, for instance, when alibaf, the Parliament Speaker, was addressing the crowds, he was saying very explicitly that that time is over. We're going to attack directly. We're going to respond directly to any kind of American strike. I don't know if that's enough to convince Trump that Iran is ready to bite back, because I think Iranian consideration, the calculations have changed. They see now that Trump is very much going to be determined in his in his decision, by whether he's going to be sucked into something that may be dragged out. Trump is out after one off events that can be wrapped up quickly. It's going to get messy. It's going to drag him down, and especially if it's going to be impacting gasoline prices down the line, that's a that's a big factor for him to consider. I think the one is kind of waking up to that and in that context.

And without being too cynical, I think Iran is broadcasting the images of these body bags to kind of say, we know that you drew the red line, but we don't have any red lines when it comes to defending our existential kind of considerations, when it comes to defending our right to kind of govern Iran. So I hope that makes sense.

### **Trita Parsi 17:31**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

Perhaps makes sense, it is absolutely terrifying, though. Vali, would you say that Trump's statement had no impact or that it backfired?

### **Vali Nasr 17:40**

Well, it's difficult to sort of ascertain that this decision making correlated with it. I mean, first of all, the protests started slow. Approach started as economic protests by bazaaris. They gradually grew. It's possible that the government calculated that economic protests in the past have never been existential. Also, there was a there was a honeymoon between the Iranian public and the government after the June attacks, when the Iranian government officials repeatedly acknowledged that they owed the Iranian public the fact that they had not listened to Israel's call to come into the streets and rebel during the war, and they didn't want to disrupt that. But then there's a turning point. When the protests get bigger, they get more violent, and they also become much more about regime change, rather than economic grievances.

I think if the Iranian government took, I think the Iranian government understands, or is this belief that the United States is after regime change in Iran. It's not interested in a nuclear issue. It's not interested in anything other than the regime to be gone, and that the reason that it has not intervened in previous protests was because Iran was much stronger regionally, or had a nuclear program that the United States wanted to negotiate over that this time the United States thought Iran is weak and its back is to the wall, and President Trump feels comfortable to threaten intervention. But if you're Iranians, you would say that the longer that the protests go on, the more there is a chance and motivation by the US to use the protests to intervene in Iran. So I think if there was a motivation by the security forces was to clamp down, clamp down hard, cut the images that could go outside of Iran, that could probably inflame public opinion in the West as well, and that, like we are today, we're talking about dissipation of the protests, as opposed to their inflammation. And Trump was has not made, yet made the decision to attack. So the idea being that that that you just make the end the protest quickly and take this off the table. So if that's the excuse for intervention, it's no longer going to be there. So if anything, I think it encouraged them to to act much more aggressively and brutally, to finish this off quickly.

### **Trita Parsi 20:08**

Ellie, if you want to jump in on that, please do. I also have two questions from Tom O'Connor at Newsweek, if you want to address them. One is that, you know, there was a huge loss of commanders in the IRGC during the 12 day war, and so its capacity to act and suppress has it been impacted by all of this? And what do we see in the last couple of days in regards to that? But also, what does this do in terms of the strength or weakness of some of these groups allied to the Islamic Republic, such as the Houthis, such as Hezbollah, and the impact, particularly as well, on the threats that Israel would or the US and Israel would attack Lebanon after December 31 if there wasn't any disarmament of Hezbollah.

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 20:59**

## Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Thanks, a lot of questions. But So in part, let me say that what we have seen particularly since Thursday, when the protests, I think, reached a tipping point, when the pesky young government lost the internal battle over how to respond, because the government for the first week, I would say, was trying to push for a national dialog process with the protesters. And Vali said they started off slow. They were led by the buzzer is and some small towns, lower income households, and they were trying to desperately keep it in in that lens. But as the protests mushroomed and mobilized and radicalized quite quickly, I think Thursday reached a tipping point when the security forces took over to impose control as they as they saw it.

And I think it's important to note, and it's related to the question that right now the security apparatus in Iran views the, I think, the second week of the protests in the context of the extension of the 12 day war. And this is unfortunately because of irresponsible comments by several high profile former US officials, Israeli officials, that has created even more ammunition for the security apparatus to say there is a direct hand of foreign influence, which they always do in every protest. But it's given them more fodder this round to exert this position. And so this has become about a sign of strength, to show that we control the borders inside our country, again, an extension of the 12 day war.

But also, I think, in light of voices opposition, voices that are saying that there has been defections amongst the security forces, I think we have seen a doubling down following Trump's threat of the conventional military, the Irish for the first time, coming out in a very unified position with the IRGC with respect to domestic unrest that this has now become a matter of national security. And so they have presented a very unified show of force to I think, defect from this view that the regime is on the verge of collapse. And I would say, some would argue that within the security establishment that in order to create that deterrence, which Iran didn't manage to perhaps do in the 12 day war vis a vis Israel, they need to show that they are strong men at home, and that this is the language that President Trump understands.

So if you look at his position, for example, on North Korea or with Putin, that the strong men are counterparts which you could sit down and negotiate with. And so they have seen it as necessary in response to threat of military action, to, as Mohammed said, showcase unashamedly gut wrenching, I think body bags in huge numbers coming out of these protests. The question on, what are Iran's regional allies? The shrinking regional alliance. What are they thinking? I think it's a really interesting question, because we're also seeing a lot of things unfold in Yemen at the moment which impacts the position of the Houthis, which I think, following the events of the past two years, the Houthis have come to the fore as perhaps Iran's prime ally in any regional war vis a vis the US and Israel.

And perhaps some would argue that the position of the Houthis has been strengthened by the events of the past month on Yemen directly, but also Iran's foreign minister was just in Lebanon, where the issue of Hezbollah's. Armament is obviously a heat topic for the local government, and I do not think that in the current conditions that Iran faces with the threats from the US, with the imminency of a potential strike by Israel, that Iran is going to play a helpful role in the

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

disarmament process of Hezbollah, and that actual remaining Alliance, although tattered, this is their sort of make or break moment now going forward.

### **Trita Parsi 25:30**

You mentioned that there is a degree of consolidation in the in the regime right now, and with the step by the Irish is quite unprecedented. We have a question from Professor Fatima Kelley Mustafa about how we should read these pro government or anti protest, protests that are that took place in Iran today. Should those just be dismissed because they're orchestrated by the government? Is there a genuine popular support for some of those sentiments. Does their size, or what we know of their size, tell us something about this. Ellie, if you want to quickly go on this and I'm going to move on to Mohammed?

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 26:16**

About this look, I'll say a brief response. One is that the Islamic Republic of Iran, has a base. We can't deny that it has a base, and it is able to mobilize that base in times of crisis, or when they're marking an anniversary, or when they are, you know, in the past week, doing funerals for security service members that have been killed in the course of the protest. But it is also clear that with each round of protests, particularly those that are brutally cracked down on, which has been every major protest round, not only do they actively turn more of the Iranian citizenry against them, but they are also shrinking their own base and losing their own legitimacy based on that social contract offering that the Islamic Republic made to its people in 1979 so it's very hard with opinion polling to understand what level of public opinion still supports this structure of rule, but it is clear that that is diminishing each time there are these kind of repressive crackdowns.

### **Trita Parsi 27:20**

Marla, do you want to quickly come in on this?

### **Mohammed Al Shabani 27:26**

I think it's important to understand that among the hard line, hard liners, on the very bright there's an active and ongoing debate about the source of legitimacy, the real, real part. Liners argue that it's divinely derived. Others say it must be popular. So what I mean by divinely derived, the logical conclusion of that argument is that it doesn't really matter what people may think we're doing the best for them, even though they may not be aware or welcoming, right? But looking at these state sponsored values and what they're trying to project, they're taking place in two important contexts. Number one is the shadow of a foreign military attack on Iran. Iranians saw in June, 2025 that when Iran is under attack, bombs don't really distinguish between military targets and civilian targets. Israel may say that it's it's quite a pinpoint in its precision and its strikes. But we saw, for instance, in a single bombing in northeastern Tehran, 70 people were killed when an apartment building was blown up. So there was a death toll of

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

1000 people in the span of 12 days. So Iranians were reminded of the horrors that they experienced in 1980 1988 Iran Iraq war for the first time the capital was born by a foreign power.

So that's the shadow of the foreign war, and there are segments of the populations who may not be supporters of the Islamic Republic by any means, but nonetheless feel like they are powerless in trying to reject foreign intervention. What's the least we can do to kind of try to deter that? Well, we can go join a rally in the street and show our faces in front of camera. That's the very least we can do. So I think that segment shouldn't be dismissed. Another, I think, segment, and this has come up in some of the debates that you have with observers from Iran, it said, initially, the protests were economically driven, right? So it was by the bazaaris and the kind of smaller towns in the periphery. But then, when they became more violent in recent days, many people saw the destruction.

For instance, I think on Friday night alone, the authorities reported the torching of 25 mosques, 20 banks. I mean, again, these are aspects of them are quite violent. There's confrontations that was claimed hundreds of lives. Hundreds of protesters, at the very least, have been killed. Some people are, say, 1000s. But on the other side of the spectrum. The Iranian authorities are saying now that at least 100 security force members have been killed as well. Imagine that protest in the United States killing 100 police officers. That's quite violent, right? So this is a new dynamic in these in this protest dynamic in Iran it's a two way kind of confrontation. People are fighting back. So when people see. Destruction, people who are, again, not necessarily supporters of the Islamic Republic, but who fear instability, which may be a total lose, lose scenario, especially having seen Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. It's not that they rally around the flag or rally behind the regime. It's rally. It's rather that they don't want a situation of complete security collapse and instability and the state's ability to somehow draw some kind of backing from these people, these segments of society, I think that's a factor that should not be discounted. So again, I think when you look at the protest and these rallies, need to consider the shadow of foreign threat, and again, the disinclination to have Iran be essentially turned into Syria.

### **Vali Nasr 30:48**

Now we just going to say it's important, actually the government named today's rally not to come and support the Islamic Republic, but to come out and decry wanton violence and destruction, and the President said that people should come and do their legitimate protests, but but not not attack. Secondly, I would say the value of bringing out their crowds, even if they're small, one, is to send the message that they still have control of the streets to their own population. And secondly, I think the crowds today is a message directed at President Trump to say that the regime is not as isolated as you know, some exile leaders or others may be, may be saying that it's not teetering. It's not, it's not, it's not as isolated as at least a group of Iranians that support it. And that's that, I think, is the that message is also directed at the US.

### **Trita Parsi 31:47**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

But Vali going to Mohammed's point. It clearly is a segment of the population who wants to get rid of the regime, but not at the cost of complete chaos. But there also seems to be a growing element inside as well who have reached the conclusion that in the absence of actually getting rid of the regime in one way or another, nothing will really change, because the trajectory has just been so negative. And once you draw that conclusion or that, you adopt that position, slowly but surely, your resistance to violence, your resistance to chaos, etc, starts to come down. And I wonder if you could answer a question. I'm sure it's not a popular question for anyone to have to deal with, but we have several people in the audience, including Stephan Bussard from Swiss newspaper, ask, what is the role of Reza Pahlavi and his movement in all of this? You mentioned earlier on valley that there is no leadership. He claims leadership. Does he have leadership? What are the indications in favor of his argument or against?

### **Vali Nasr 32:48**

Well, I think he proved surprisingly important in terms of at least maybe contributing to the sudden explosion of these protests on January 8, because it happened to be a day that he had called people to come out, and that's when it expanded, and also, for the first time, we saw a lot more his name being called in some of the protests, as opposed to the past, which was mostly his father and his grandfather, who were remembered, and there was the nostalgia for them. But having said that, he didn't start these protests, he didn't lay the agenda for them. He actually came in late, just as similarly, in 2022 it was not he or the opposition that actually started the protest. They may have a role to play in terms of giving some direction to people on the streets, but having no organizations, no presence on the ground. They are not, they are not really leading these protests in any way.

And so, and I think the closer in fact, you come to, let's say the regime falling, the more the question would be, not who is going to encourage us to go into the streets, but who's actually going to lead the country the day after? And I think he has not. He has not built any coalition with bureaucrats, with military people, the kinds of things Khomeini did, actually, in 1978 79 there's no broad based way in which to force the state, or elements of the state, to join with the people. I would actually add to what Mohammed was saying. I mean, you know, the bloodletting that's happening in Iran actually would tell anybody working in the Iranian government, in Iranian security services, that now, if the regime falls, there's got their they their families, their neighborhoods, are going to be subject of vengeance, and ultimately they're going to defend the situation. And I think there's no leadership, not just Reza Panay, but also inside Iran that actually is leading this movement going forward and is trying to build a political co. Listen, that actually would bring down the Islamic Republic.

### **Trita Parsi 35:05**

I see, I see. Thank you, Ellie, what is your view on this?

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 35:11**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

Look, a lot of points have been made. I just wanted to add that we shouldn't forget that inside Iran, there is a shrinking but there is a civil society coalition, those who have worked through unions and student movements and different types of bodies to organize some of these protests that we've seen over the past two decades, and those figures that are in prison and are pushing for a peaceful resistance to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and I think too often in the in the West, we are forgetting that those people in the country exists, and that those people have not been necessarily calling for foreign intervention through military strikes, and they have not been calling for a turn of violence by the protesters. So we mustn't forget that that coalition exists. There is a political arm to it. There is a civil society, human rights part to it. And so those are some of the people we should also be focusing on and looking at how they are organizing on the ground under extremely severe and repressive conditions.

### **Trita Parsi 36:28**

That's an excellent point. And as you pointed out, it is unfortunately a shrinking NGO sector, partly because of the repression, but also partly because of the sanctions and the difficulties that that has imposed on the population as a whole. We have a question that kind of goes in the opposite direction. In fact, several people are asking this in the audience, which is, what about the potential that there also are foreign elements involved? And of course, this is something that the Iranian government itself oftentimes throws out. It may not have had much credibility in the past, but a lot of the questioners are asking this, and I think a few of them also pointing to the fact that you do have an open conversation in Israel, in which Israeli officials have said openly that the Mossad is on the ground in these protests. Mike Pompeo, the former head of the CIA, tweeted it as well. Is that part of a psyop to throw off the Iranian government, or is that a smoking gun that reveals that there actually is a foreign component in all of this Mohammed? You want to go first?

### **Mohammed Ali Shabani 37:34**

I mean, that's a million dollar question. It's a tricky question that comes up every time if you dismiss unrest in Iran as a foreign plot. I think that's just a Islamic Republic talking point. But then if you dismiss that after a devastating war, with a US administration that is so stridently and openly, explicitly trying to undermine the Iranian state, and with Netanyahu openly saying he wants to get rid of the Islam Republic, if you then go out and say, Well, hold on, there cannot possibly any any foreign interference, I think that's quite naive. So there's a middle way between these two things, I think, and that's where, this time, what's striking to me is the openness of a lot of these kinds of talking that previously were derided as talking points of the design Republic.

And I'll give you one example. For instance, during the recent clashes, one of the major Kurdish groups, Kurdish militant groups, which is actually based in Iraq, has a Twitter account. It's called Park and park doing these protests, has actually attacked military facilities, military outposts near the border with Iraq. And this is, again, not a conspiracy theory. The group itself puts out first hand footage of it shooting at security personnel. Now we don't have the data yet about the full extent of the death toll. We don't know exactly where people have died, right this is a key, I

## Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

think, metric that is missing right now, but we're seeing that these protests, they consist probably of multiple different layers of violence. One level is potentially actions by groups in the periphery, such as Kurdish militant groups. We've also seen open attacks by Baluch militant groups. Again, these these groups are not hiding. They have Twitter accounts. They have actual spokesman going on, putting out videos. 10 years ago, the Islamic public would blame these groups, but then it was always kind of question, do they really exist? Because this time, they're going out themselves in the open and say, We exist, and we're taking action, right?

So this is a militant groups in the periphery, and then you have the question of what the Islamic probably calls infiltration, which is that there are protests in the street, and these protests may be infiltrated by actors who want to serve violence. That's where it gets very, very fuzzy. And I think in the middle of all of this, then there's a question of, what's the role of someone like Reza Pahlavi? I think the number one question people need to think about when they consider his role is, where are the. People inside Iran. Why are they calling on some, some guy who hasn't been Iran 47 years, sitting in Virginia for change inside Iran? Surely, within among the 90 million people, there must be somebody who is doing something. And the answer to that question is that there is, there are people jailed in Iran right now.

For instance, there's most of a Taj other who's among the most popular and known figures, and that guy is actually jailed in Evin. And incidentally, guess who bombed Evan in June? 2025 killing 70 people Israel. So these people are literally having their lives threatened both by Iran and Israel in the past. So these guys are really the ones that are stuck in the middle. And when you look at the the chanting of slogans such as Javi SHA along with the Shah. We won't see these videos, but I think that what's really missing in an analysis of those videos is, what does Java shop? What does it mean in a context where essentially there's no other alternative, you have a desperate population under crushing sanctions, their livelihoods impacted? I think that the true meaning of it, at least in my point of view. For many Iranians. And I don't want to speak on behalf of anybody, this is my own personal assessment, not interpreting the wishes of 92 million people. Think that it's about showing a sticking it to Khamenei. If you want to stay To hell with you, Khamenei. It's not just about down with Khamenei, that to pick that to the dictator, which is very common chat. I'll say it's the most common, Chad, if you shout even Javid Shah, that's really, really sticking it to him right, after 47 years of the design Republic, this is what's what the what the youth is shouting in the streets, right? This is the biggest possible insult.

But again, as Vali said, Does this mean that Kelley has an organization? No. Is there a political party that people can sign up for? No, there are QR codes being broadcast on London based news channels where security personnel supposedly can defect, and supposedly 50,000 security officers have signed up for that. Where is the proof of it? Where are these mass defections? If hundreds of people are being killed, and 1000s of people are being killed in recent arrests. Where were they? Why is the army not rebelling against the IRGC? You see, I think so. There are limits to what can be done when I think we shouldn't discount the role of Pahlavi in all of this, but we should also understand why are people chanting his name? And if you think about why, it really comes down to the absence of options. When you look at absence of options, it's really because of the civil society leaders who are under pressure by the Islamic

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

Republic, by Islamic Republic's foreign adversaries, including Israel, as well as exiled opposition groups. So they're being hit from three different directions, right? So I think this is really vital to look at.

### **Trita Parsi 42:40**

So you mentioned absence of options, and you're pointing to the fact that years of sanctions, threats of war, etc, have really decimated this middle class, the internal NGO opposition, etc. But one other option that has emerged, at least in the conversations in Washington, and it's to a large extent, because of what Trump did in Venezuela, which in first he was going for threatening some sort of a capitulation by the Venezuelans, but then ended up using the option of military force, but in a way of just getting rid of him while handing the country essentially over to his number two. This has then fueled speculation that perhaps there is another option, which is that there would be an internal coup, whether the IRGC would get rid of the Khamenei or something of that kind. I'm not sure whether that is realistic or not. But valley, in your view, is this wishful thinking? Is this trying to impose a Venezuela blueprint on Iran even though it doesn't fit? Or is there actually a likelihood that, in face with all of these different threats and no visible exit, that something like this actually could happen, in which the very entity that was supposed to defend to the end, the Supreme Leader, actually may be the ones that would oust him?

### **Vali Nasr 43:59**

Well, you know, the idea of a of a of a of a defection from within the regime, or regime change, in a sense of regime transforming itself, has been on the table for a while, and I think it's the talk of it got accelerated after the June war, largely because I think everybody in the class in Iran knows that the regime as is, is at the dead end. It cannot get out of its economic situation. It's, it's, it's mismanaging the country. The country has water shortages, electricity shortages. It has an on unhappy population in a security terms. Their country now is, is, is completely isolated. Iran really does not have any options under its current circumstance to address these things. And so this idea that the country needed a new direction has been out there. I mean, there are people in the political class, some like former President Rouhani et cetera, are coming very close to saying you need to sit down and solve all your problems with the United States.

And the country has to go in a very different direction. I mean, there are people who are saying these things in a very quiet, indirect way. If you listen to the public debate in Iran, among the people who intellectuals with relations with the in the regime, one foot in, one foot out, civil society, one foot one foot out. And it's actually incredible how open these debates are in Iran, for a country that is closed that they are openly talking about the fact that the country's strategy foreign policy is bankrupt, that it needs to change now this the Venezuela's scenario essentially suggests America putting its finger on this debate in a way to fast forward it, and perhaps the protesters are doing so in their own way of pushing things much more forward.

course, you have the person of Ayatollah Khamenei, who's there, and it's it's difficult to see him be the change agent, but, and that's why there's been talk that either Israel or the United States

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

would want to kill him in order to pave the way for this debate to come out. So we shall see. But I would say thinking about IRGC, first of all, I don't think IRGC is a monolith, and largely after the decapitation of a lot of its leaders, it's more difficult to see how who actually really is the center of gravity of IRGC. Ironically, I think people who could bring all of IRGC under one command are not actually serving commanders. Is somebody like Kyle Bob, whom Muhammad Ali mentioned, who is actually not a serving general, is a former general, but that's the way Khamenei had actually designed IRGC, but I don't think actually, to say, I think it's pretty important to think about this, that IRGC is not loyal to Khamenei. IRGC is loyal to Iran. This is an organization that was born out of fighting tooth and nail to save Iran's territory from Iraq. We view them outside, or a lot of Iranians view them as ideological regime hacks, right? But that's not the way they see themselves. They see themselves as defenders of Iran and so if it comes to a point where the you know, the future of the country, etc, is that is at stake, I don't think that they would go down necessarily, with a political leadership without asking question, I would see them much more take when necessary, taking a pragmatic decision if that opportunity is there, and even to the points that Muhammad Ali was saying, that they are arguing like we should kill Americans. We should target Americans. We should not do show responses. These are also all based on the fact that that showy ways in which Khamenei has responded in the past has actually invited more aggression and has not been rewarded by the US. And so defending Iran requires you to show real deterrence.

Now, just the last word, I actually don't think the coup is the only option. I think what I think the way Iran, maybe even is working today. Iran has a deep state. And I don't mean it in terms of just intelligence people. I mean technocrats, bureaucrats, political people that basically are right now running the country. When Khamenei disappeared from the scene deep on the ground so he wouldn't get killed, somebody was running the country. It's not one person. It was a sort of a cabal of a deep state. And I think that deep state is not just IRGC, it's also politicians and members of the political class and senior bureaucrats. And I think if there is a coup, it's really a coup. By that, the by that, by that deep state.

### **Trita Parsi 48:46**

Ellie, Vali talks about how the IRGC is talking about if there is an attack, attacking or striking back in a completely different way from what has happened before, if Trump does take military action in the next couple of days. What do you see as the most likely outcome of such a move? Could the United States effectively decapitate the regime in a manner that the Israelis failed to do in June of last year? If the Iranians strike back and they would do so differently. What real capabilities do they have? And is Trump as a result, potentially, instead of walking into a very quick Venezuela style type of operation, walking into what potentially could become a quagmire?

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 49:35**

So I think that it's hugely important what type of a strike the US conducts, and it seems, from what we heard in the last 24 hours from Trump, he's seriously considering some sort of a kinetic

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

action. I mean, he may always change his mind. We know Trump is very, very unpredictable, but there is a real risk, I think, right now, that with a US. Strike that is from everything we have seen from Trump, whether it was the attacks on the Houthis, the attacks in Iran in June, attacks in in Venezuela, it's about big theatrics that doesn't massively change some of the core facts on the ground, but it gives him a real strong man boost. And so I think there is a danger that he does decide to strike in a way that sends a strong signal that he's acted and that he's importantly not like Obama, where he sets red lines and doesn't act through but there is a real danger that then there's a follow up by Israel on those strikes, that then bog down the US further and further. And I think here it's important to distinguish that the US end game, particularly under a Trump administration, is not necessarily the same as the Israeli end game, particularly under a Benjamin Netanyahu government, and for the US, particularly under Trump.

My assessment is that a strong Iran, an Iran that is open economically to the US, an Iran that is integrated with the Arab world that brings stability in the region is a positive net gain for US interests, whereas for Israel, with the current government in place and the mentality we have seen in places like Syria and Lebanon, it's about actually removing Iran as a viable, strong state in The region that can ever in the future, present a threat to Israeli interests. And so there is a greater Israeli interest here in stoking collapse inside Iran, state chaos, busying Iran with the war in itself for for many, many years to come. And so what may start as a US surgical strike in Iran may actually extend and bog down this US administration in ways that are very unpredictable.

### **Trita Parsi 52:12**

We have discussed what the potential reactions would be, both militarily by Iran, if it's attacked by the population, if there is a strike by Trump. What we haven't discussed is, what if Trump goes in a different direction and actually tries to strike a deal? We have a question from Nader shandu, who asked whether she says that it seems like the analysis here is going in the direction of saying that the protests are futile. I don't know if there wasn't any intent at all behind the analysis, but she's asking, should the message really be for the US to strike a deal with Iran? What would be the impact of that, given the fact that you know, this regime just killed a very large number of protesters, is that you know, what would the population's reaction be to such a scenario? Mohammed, you want to go first message.

### **Mohammed Ali Shabani 53:02**

A tricky question. I don't want to by any means downplay the protest. That's not my intention of the remarks I made previously. My intention was to convey that I believe the protests require organization to be able to succeed in achieving its declared aims of changing the political structure. And right now, it doesn't seem like that organization exists in terms of the kind of message that Trump may send to Iranians by engaging in discussions with the Islamic Republic. I think I may instill some kind of controversy here. I think that vast majority of Iranians would welcome a deal that lifts the Shadow of War and invites the removal of sanctions. I think this would supersede any kind of short term survival for the Islamic Republic, because the way

## Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

things are structured, I think most Iranians at this point accept that the Islamic Republic is not going to be there forever. And in fact, what we have seen over the past 20 years is that its survival is almost extended by sanctions.

And what do I mean by this? There's plenty of academic literature on the drivers of political change and middle income countries, and every single one of them point as the middle class as a driver for political change. The outcome of the sanctions regime imposed by the United States for the past 20 years has been the following out of the middle class. So by lifting sanctions and allowing the middle class in Iran to kind of return after having dissipated, to come to kind of characterize that as a as, I don't know, undermining political change Iran. I think it's mistaken. I think that misses the kind of bigger picture. Another thing, a final thing I would like to add is that there's a huge generational question here that hasn't been addressed. What do I mean by generational question? The 1979 removal of the Shah was a revolution. Led by youths for the decades after revolution, the Iranian political elites prided themselves on having youthful leaderships. They used to make fun of these so called geriatric rulers of the of the of the Gulf at these Arab shakes or in the 80s and the 90s.

And what have you seen in recent years, complete leadership transformation in places like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc, and Iranians see all of that. And what are we left with in Iran right now, whether you have us bombings or not, whether you have sanctions or protests or not, the reality is that Ayatollah Khamenei is turning 87 years old in April. Is not going to be around forever. There will need to be some kind of generational change in the near future. Khamenei himself has spoken about the need for what he calls the second step of the revolution. That's number one. Number two with the replacement of the IRGC commanders who were killed in Israel's initial surprise strike in June. I think one message by Khamenei in appointing replacements very fascist to say that I govern. I'm the head of a state. I'm not the head of a revolutionary cause, right? I'm also the head of a state that functions. I think that's very important for him.

But beyond all of that, I think another detail to look at is what was the average age of the commanders who were killed. Most of them, I have to look into the details, but I think they were around 65 so most of them were either supposed to be retired or about to be retired, right under Iranian regulations. So there's a huge generational shift. And it'd be a great irony, almost, if Israeli attacks and pressure would compel Iran to undergo a generational transformation that so far it has refused or resisted, and in that way, kind of almost rejuvenate the Islamic Republic in a way that Khamenei has failed to do so far. So I think there are many different demographic leadership questions to look at as well when addressing the future of the Islam group. But ultimately, the point I want to make is that a diplomatic negotiation between Iran and the US that lift the shadow of war and removes sanctions and improves the liability of Iranians. Shouldn't be dismissed as, oh, solely enriching the IRGC. The bigger picture is you're going to have a middle class again, and you cannot have a push for political change without a middle class. You need that middle class to have a political transition. They are the ones that are going to demand change and political rights and social liberties in a way that can be much more difficult with impoverished people who have to worry about paying their rent or paying for food day to day. So

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

they have different priorities. Unfortunately, the sanctions the past 20 years has hollowed out that middle class, and I think it's really vital to reverse that trend.

### **Trita Parsi 57:35**

Vali, quickly from you. do you think diplomacy should be pursued now, and do you think it even can be pursued, given everything else going on? There are now reports that the Iranian foreign minister in Witkoff are texting. I don't think, frankly, that never really ended up. Trump said that the Iranians have reached out to talk, and then he might do so, but he may also bomb them before he does so. How do you see the situation?

### **Vali Nasr 57:56**

I mean, first of all, I agree with Mohammad as important and as significant as as the protests are, and I do believe that the Iranian public want a very different future than the one they have, but they cannot afford. What we can do here is to sit here and think about absolute ideals. They have to look at what choices are in front of them, and they have to choose the least bad option, which potential, which might include negotiations. But whether negotiations diplomacy are viable, it really depends on what the two sides want. Countries don't engage in diplomacy out of sport. You have to see what is it that Iran wants and what is it that the United States wants?

I think the United States, right until after the June war, has not been interested in talking to Iran, because it really all it wants is surrender. President Trump thinks that he got what he wanted with bombing Iran's nuclear sites. Iran is not enriching its program. Is, is right now, you know, shuttered for all practical purposes, and he didn't have to give Iran anything. And and now he's actually says that if I, if we talk, you have to also hand over your missiles as well. So, you know, the US is not really keen on talking to Iran. And in fact, the President said, Well, you know, there might be meeting scheduled, but I may have to hit them before we have the meeting. So almost like, you know, I'm going to hit them anyways, whether we talk or not. Yes, Iran has a reason to talk and, and, and the obvious reason is that they want to avoid war. I mean, the fundamental purpose of negotiations with the US is to is to stop another round of the war and then to see whether you can actually lift sanctions. And I think we'll see. I don't think right now the condition is ripe for this to happen, given where we are right now.

### **Trita Parsi 59:52**

Thank you, Vali. I'm going to give Ellie the last chance, and I'm going to ask you something that increasingly ends up becoming a smaller and smaller portion. Of conversations about Iran, which is, what is the role of Europe in all of this? Do you see anything for Europe? And I'm asking this, Do we have questions from the audience, from Albert Grech, but we also have a lot of European diplomats listening in on this? What would your message be?

### **Ellie Geranmayeh 1:00:17**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

So yes, you're right. Compared to the past, the role of the e3 and Europe has extensively shrunk. And currently, as we're seeing it play out, there's a tendency to sort of relapse to just words of condemnation, which, while important, I think Europeans should be going beyond this. And I think one of the if they're looking at ways to enhance protection of peaceful protesters on the ground, I think there are ways to coordinate with NGOs, with private sector actors on looking at how that protection can be enhanced, particularly looking at the lessons From the women life, freedom protest movement, whether that's through supporting technical capabilities internet access, which is a big issue, the safe passage of activists or those who are facing imminent threat, but also continuing to push for that spotlight on civil society actors inside the country and the release of political prisoners and the halting of potential mass executions in the country is something that is very much part of the fabric of European identity, and an area that they can lead on.

And one last point is that I do think right now, some European countries, not all, could play a very meaningful role in upping their outreach and cooperation with key regional partners like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to look at what can jointly be done in pushing both Tehran and Trump towards a de escalation roadmap that can at least provide some handrails against a broadening of a regional war if we enter into another round of military conflict. And I do think some European countries, namely France and the UK, have the ability to do that with their partners on the ground.

### **Trita Parsi 1:02:17**

Very interesting, excellent points. Thank you so much for a fantastic conversation. Thank you. Vali, Ellie Mohammad, excellent points, not necessarily always very uplifting, but the situation, of course, is very dire. Before I let everyone else go, let me just plug our next webinar, which will take place on January 27 at 12 o'clock noon Washington, DC time. It is on Europe and the crisis and transatlantic relations, featuring sir Tony Brenton, Rod koskovich, Zachary Pekin, and quincy's Anatole Lieve. For those of you are not subscribed to the Quincy mailing list, please go to [Quincyinst.org](http://Quincyinst.org) and sign up so that you get invitations for all of these different webinars, as well as other programmatic programmatic events that we have with all that. Thank you so much, and hope to see you soon. Thank you.

**Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**