

## FDD's Virtual Town Hall

*Introductory Remarks by Brian Hook. Featuring a panel with Suzanne Maloney, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Alireza Nader. Moderated by Clifford D. May*

MAY: I'm pleased to welcome you to this first virtual town hall hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Cliff May, I'm FDD's founder and president.

Anger and resentment of the clerical regime that rules Iran reached new heights in recent weeks under the cover of an internet blackout. Theocrats have reportedly killed hundreds of people. Some estimates may be over a thousand. With the internet now mostly restored, videos of what's been happening have been pouring out of the country. A campaign of mass arrests also has been underway. Today's conversation will attempt to shed some light on what all this means, where Iran may be heading, and what US policy is, and perhaps what a US policy should be. So please join in on today's conversation on Twitter @FDD, and use hashtag FDD Virtual Town Hall.

We've already received quite a few questions from around the world. We will try to get to as many as we possibly can. If you would like to submit a question while you're watching this, you can do that. Please email to us at [questions@fdd.org](mailto:questions@fdd.org). As most of you know, FDD is a nonpartisan policy institute. Our Iran team looks at a wide range of issues including human rights, non-proliferation and the nuclear file, economics and politics. While today's town hall features two members of our Iran team, look forward to an upcoming podcast I plan to do with FDD's Saeed Ghasseminejad, a brilliant economist and former political prisoner in Iran with a keen understanding of the Islamic republic's ideology and ambitions.

I always like to note to our audience that we call balls and strikes at FDD as we see them, and FDD takes no foreign government or foreign corporate funding, no foreign money. We never have, we never will. For more information on our work, I encourage you to visit our website that's just [fdd.org](http://fdd.org). So thank you again for joining us virtually. I'm now pleased to introduce Brian Hook. Brian Hook serves as special representative for Iran and senior policy advisor to Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Previously, he held a number of senior government positions including Director of the Policy Planning Staff, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, and Senior Advisor to the US Ambassador to the United Nations. We are very pleased to have him here with us today to discuss these significant and timely issues. Thank you, Brian. Please welcome, Brian Hook. Thank you.

HOOK: Well, this is an honor to be a part of this first livestream that FDD is doing. I work very closely with Cliff and with Mark Dubowitz and the Iran team. I would say that there are few organizations in Washington that are more effective, in not only just the Iran space but in any policy space as FDD. And so thank you for the work that you do. It is very important and it's also very timely. I wanted to maybe just say a few words about the protests, the recent protests in Iran and then look forward a little bit. We just had a successful hostage exchange over the weekend.

But I want to first start by addressing the atrocities that the Iranian regime committed against its own people. On November 18th protests were spreading throughout Iran. In

Mahshahr, a city in Southwest Iran, a number of Iranian demonstrators blocked a road. The State Department has received videos of what happened next. Without warning, the IRGC opened fire and killed the protestors. Many of the protesters who escaped gunfire fled to nearby marshlands to escape. The IRGC tracked them down and surrounded them with machine guns mounted on trucks. They then sprayed the protesters with bullets. Between the rounds of machine gun fire, the screams of victims can be heard.

In this one incident alone the regime murdered as many as a hundred Iranians and possibly more. When it was over the regime loaded the bodies into trucks. We do not yet know where these bodies went, but we are learning more and more about how the regime treats its own people. We have seen reports of many hundreds more killed in and around Tehran. And as the truth is trickling out of Iran, it appears the regime could have murdered over a thousand Iranian citizens since the protests began. It's very hard to have a concrete number because the regime blocks information in the unprecedented shutdown of the internet throughout the country. But among those murdered are at least a dozen children, including 13 and 14 year olds.

We have received reports from family members of victims who tried to recover the bodies. The Iranian regime demanded that the families first pay the cost of the bullets they used to kill their family members. In many cases, authorities would not hand over the bodies until the family promised not to hold a public funeral. Many thousands of Iranians have been wounded, and at least 7,000 protestors have been detained in Iran's prisons, which are notorious for harvesting the bravest elements in any protest and killing them out of sight of the public. And so many of these protesters were sent to two prisons, the great Tehran penitentiary and to Gharchak prison.

And last week, Secretary Pompeo determined that these entities, these two prisons, meet the criteria for gross human rights violations set out in CATSA. And we submitted to Congress the names of the prisons for further action. The great Tehran penitentiary is known for its inhumane living conditions, unsanitary and overcrowded quarters, rodent infestations, insufficient food, water, and medical care. We have seen reports that protesters have been subject to abuse and mistreatment during interrogations, arbitrary beatings and even rape.

Gharchak prison is Iran's largest women's prison, and also holds many members of religious minority communities. It is known for unbearable conditions including regular assaults and inappropriate behavior of prison guards towards women, chronic lack of water, unclean living spaces, and an environment that enables rape and murder.

The United States calls for the immediate release of all prisoners held during the protests, as well as for all political prisoners held by the regime. We believe that now is the time for all nations of the world to stand with the Iranian people, diplomatically isolate the regime, and sanction those government officials and organizations who are responsible for the human rights abuses and for murdering innocent Iranians.

There has been overwhelming support for the Iranian people from the American people. It is clear that there is a bipartisan consensus in the United States that the regime's treatment of

its own people is abhorrent and unacceptable. We are unified here in the United States. We need to see an international community that is likewise unified in support of the Iranian people.

These protests have made clear what Secretary Pompeo and I have been saying for quite some time: The Iranian people want their government to focus on investing in their own people instead of their proxies. They are sick of the regime squandering its own wealth on proxy warfare, which only leads to diplomatic isolation and economic pressure. And so what we have done in our campaign of maximum economic pressure is in many ways, to make the same demands on the Iranian government that its own people are making. We would like to see the Iranian regime behave more like a normal nation and less like a revolutionary cause, to prioritize people over ideology. With the defeat of ISIS, the Iranian regime is the principle driver of instability in today's Middle East. And so our campaign of maximum economic pressure will continue. A year and a half ago when Secretary Pompeo gave his remarks outlining our new Iran strategy post Iran nuclear deal, he made clear that the regime faces a choice: it can either start behaving like a normal nation or it can watch its economy collapse. The supreme leader keeps making bad decisions and choosing the collapse of his own economy over the welfare of his own people.

We have made clear repeatedly that there are diplomatic off-ramps for this regime. These have been on the table for years. And it's not just the United States that is offering the diplomatic off-ramps, we have seen vigorous efforts made by President Macron, Prime Minister Abe, leaders from Pakistan, Oman and other countries, trying to deescalate Iran's escalatory activities. And Iran continues to reject diplomacy. We have kept our foreign policy squarely within the left right limits of diplomatic isolation and economic pressure. We need the regime to meet our diplomacy with diplomacy and not with kinetic force. Attacking Saudi Arabia, threatening the UAE, shooting down American drones in international airspace, this is the kind of behavior that is consistent with an outlaw regime. And for as long as the regime continues and makes the wrong choices, it will continue to experience deeper economic pressure and economic isolation.

I want to close on a positive note. When the Secretary made his remarks a year and a half ago, he said that if we can reach a comprehensive agreement with this regime that covers the range of threats that Iran presents to peace and security, and this includes its nuclear program, its missile proliferation and missile testing, its regional aggression and its hostage taking, that we are prepared to end all American sanctions and to restore diplomatic ties. There are so many things in common between the Iranian people and the American people and this regime, for a great deal of time, misrepresents its own people to the United States and to the world. There are a few countries that represent their people worse than this regime.

And so we know that the Iranian people do not chant, "Death to America." You had protests in 100 cities and there has been no evidence over the periods of those protests that any of these protests were directed at the United States, our sanctions, or to President Trump. All of the protests were directed squarely at the regime, and there were many people in the commentariat who were predicting a year and a half ago that our sanctions would unify the Iranian people against the United States, and it would have a rally around the flag effect. None of those predictions have proven true, it's quite the opposite. We have had 40 years of this regime failing and brutalizing its own people, and there is a much better future for the peoples of America and

the peoples of Iran if the regime would start behaving like a normal nation. We have put in place a policy that has been very successful at denying the regime historic levels of revenue, the regime is weaker today than when it was two and a half years ago, and its proxies are weaker.

I am very pleased that we were able to conclude an exchange over the weekend in Zurich, Switzerland. I am hopeful that this is a first step and these confidence building measures can lead to, I hope, the release of all innocent Americans who are currently detained in Iran. It does show that there is a way for the United States and Iran to reach an agreement. And over the last few weeks we conducted diplomatically very good exchanges that were brokered by the Swiss, and I think diplomatically and logistically it was successful on both fronts. And we hope that this will lead to the consular dialogue so that we can get the remaining Americans who are detained in Iran out. And especially Bob Levinson who has the longest – No American has been missing longer than Bob Levinson. So we continue to demand his release and others who are innocently held by the regime. So with that, I'm happy to have a conversation with Cliff and we can answer the questions that are submitted virtually.

MAY: The scene you painted of what has been going on, what you've seen. Are there other scenes like that you want to describe, or from having seen many of them, is there a larger conclusion you want to draw?

HOOK: After the exchange?

MAY: Yeah.

HOOK: What I'm pleased about, about what we were able to conduct over the weekend, we were able to win the release of an innocent American who was in Iranian prisons for over three years. And there were no pallets of cash, no sanctions relief and no change in our policy. And this I think tells us that we're on the right track, we're doing the right things. It was a fair negotiation, and I do hope it's a first step. President Trump and Secretary Pompeo have made clear repeatedly, that they are ready to meet with the regime, and Iran needs to stop projecting diplomacy.

And I think it's important for the supreme leader to listen to his own people, and to represent the views of his own people who would like to end this diplomatic isolation and economic pressure, and to start – I can't tell you the billions and tens of billions of dollars this regime spends in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Hamas, Palestine Islamic jihad. Imagine if that money had been invested in clean air, clean water, schools, better roads, better standard of living. Iran would look very different today and so would the Middle East. I think Iran for the last 40 years has been so successful at proxy warfare and sectarian warfare, that we have lost the ability to imagine a peaceful Iran and what that would mean for a peaceful Middle East.

And so I hope this is the beginning of something, there were some comments that were made in the press today by the Iranian official who sat at the table with me in Zurich at the airport hangar. So those were I think, positive comments, and let's see if we can build on it.

MAY: And today you called on all nations of the world to be supportive of this. Our European allies, I would argue have been less than supportive. I understand they feel they've been whipsawed by one administration with one set of policies and another with a different one. But they have, it seems to me, been working hard, not successfully, to get some economic relief to this regime, despite the sanctions which have had more of a bite than, as you pointed out, some members of the commentariat probably thought they would without European participation of the governments. The companies in Europe understand it would be a bad idea to go in. Do you see as a result of the protests and the uprising of recent days, any change in European attitudes?

HOOK: There's been a few incidents that you can trace to Iran that I think are changing the view of not just European governments but other countries. The Iranian regime has now violated the Iran nuclear deal four times, and we can probably expect a fifth violation in January. And the Europeans for the first time are now publicly talking about using the dispute resolution mechanism, when there are breaches under the Iran nuclear deal. That is the first step that would, if Iran does not cure the breaches of increasing the purity of enrichment and the stockpiling of heavy water, that it is the first step toward UN snapback sanctions. So it was an important step that the Europeans, I think, were willing to say that publicly.

I have been arguing for the last year and a half that the Iran nuclear deal has undermined missile non-proliferation in the Middle East. Under the Iran nuclear deal, there was a prohibition on Iran's ballistic missile testing in the UN Security Council, and I had negotiated that resolution when I used to be up at the UN. And that prohibition was dropped as part of the Iran nuclear deal. And it went from a prohibition under chapter seven to, "Calls upon," language, which is not legally binding. And as a consequence, I think the regime interpreted that shift in policy to be permissive. And as a consequence during the life of the Iran nuclear deal, we have seen an increase in the missile testing, the space launch vehicles, and missile proliferation.

Just last week we announced that we interdicted a shipment of sophisticated missile systems that seemed like they were heading to Yemen. It's the most sophisticated of all the weapons shipments we've interdicted. These weapons were the most sophisticated that the US Coast Guard and the US Navy interdicted. This comes at a point when the Saudis and the Houthis, are trying to reach an agreement, and there is a ceasefire around air and missile attacks. So while the Saudis and the Houthis are trying to deescalate, you have the Iranian regime – And while the Iranian people are protesting the regime for its adventurism in Yemen, they're exporting weapons to Yemen to the Houthis. And I think this demonstrates the corrosive role that this regime's foreign policy of exporting revolution is doing to the Middle East.

So we need to keep exposing the regime. I think the Europeans understand after the September 14th attack by Iran on Saudi Arabia, that we need to get after the missile program. We have lost deterrence around Iran's missile program and we need to restore it. And I think that there is an increasing understanding of that. We're out of the deal and happily to be out of the deal, because now we have the kind of leverage to prevent Iran from achieving its goals of being a nuclear weapon state. We're also able to go after the missiles and the regional aggression in a much more significant way. And I'm not going to give counsel to the Europeans on what to do since we're not in the deal anymore, but I think Europe is heading more directionally in the right direction.

MAY: You're more hopeful that you'll have snapbacks at the UN. That's a possibility without Europeans, but it's easier if the Europeans want to be involved in it, am I right about that?

HOOK: I think that's right. I think that the Iranian behavior is making it harder for the other members of the Iran nuclear deal to justify the continuance of it.

MAY: Yeah. I mean I agree with you that Iranian behavior in terms of proliferation and other activities, and its violations of the deal should impel the Europeans, but they should also, it seems to me you can comment or not, when they should look at the human rights violations of recent weeks. That also should be a motivating factor for Europeans who do care about human rights normally.

HOOK: Yes. And it is important, as I said in my remarks, for all nations of the world to condemn this regime for its brutality against its own citizens. The numbers of murders, staggering. Just to give you some context, we talk a lot about the 2009 Green Revolution, which had I think over a million protestors, and you had 10 months of protests from the stolen election. The regime killed 72 people during that entire period. They killed more people than that in one massacre. And even in Tehran alone, you're talking about hundreds who are murdered. So this is the deadliest political unrest the regime has faced in its history.

MAY: In 40 years of history.

HOOK: Its 40 year history, yes. Yes. And so this started as protests against the increases in the price of gas, the regime, our assessment is that more price hikes are going to be coming because they don't have the money that they used to.

MAY: I want to be respectful of your time, but a couple of questions from me and others. One would be this: We've also seen protests, demonstrations, unrest in Iraq particularly, and in Lebanon. There's a link among these various protests in these countries because in each of these cases they're protesting essentially the neo-imperialism of the Iranian regime. I can certainly say that.

HOOK: When you look at Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran, the people of each of these countries are saying they want their country back. And Iran has this model and it's the Hezbollah model, and they have been trying – That was successful, and it started in the early eighties, and you essentially have this cookie cutter model that they then try to replicate. The Houthis are only the most recent version of Hezbollah. And I had declassified some intelligence a few months ago where we announced what Hezbollah operatives are active in Yemen supporting the Houthis.

We cannot allow, like the Lebanization nation of Syria, the Lebanization of Yemen, the Lebanization of Iraq, where the government no longer has a monopoly on military force and people's national identities are replaced with sectarian identities. And then this leads to all sorts of bloodshed and misery and suffering, and a lack of prosperity. So when I look at a place like Yemen, Iran's return on investment has been enormous compared to the billions they've spent in Syria, relative to the hundreds of millions they've spent in Yemen. Iran has no legitimate interest

in Yemen, and they would like to be in a position where they can threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb. And we cannot allow this.

MAY: Just so people know if they're watching, those are two of the most strategic waterways in the world, certainly in the Middle East in terms of all the oil that flows through them into the Red Sea and out into the Arabian Gulf.

HOOK: Exactly right, Cliff. So, Iran regularly threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz. And thanks to our military and the FONOP's that we do, we navigate international waters wherever international law permits. And we're going to continue to do that. Iran threatens to close the straight. But imagine if the regime were allowed to be in a position where they could try to close both. That has enormous global consequences. So we've made clear, this is not between the United States and Iran. We have our bilateral differences, but this is a much larger issue, and it's an international problem. When Iran attacks the world's largest oil processing facility, that's not a dispute between the US and Iran. It's a global problem and it requires an international response.

MAY: Right. And I think it requires support that the US has not yet necessarily received. Since a lot of other nations would feel the impact of those kinds of closures, much beyond what the US would feel. They're much more reliant on that.

HOOK: It's very true. I think, if I have my statistics correct, 70% of the oil coming out of the straight now goes to Asia, and 30% I think goes to Europe. And it's very important for these countries to take the measures that are necessary. We've been very pleased, our international maritime security initiative, we think has helped disrupt and deter some of the maritime attacks, the follow-on attacks that Iran has contemplated. So the combination of us sending 14,000 additional troops since May, getting the international maritime security initiative going, and we've got a number of countries participating in that. We've enhanced our intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance efforts, and all of that I think has helped to deescalate. That doesn't that Iran is out of options, but we've put in place extra effort.

MAY: I've spoken in recent days to quite a few Iranian dissidents, many of whom would say that they wish the US would openly favor regime change at this point. And I think their argument is that this regime won't change its behavior because it's revolutionary, it's Khomeinist, it's jihadist, it's Islamist, and it simply cannot be anything else. How do you respond to what the dissidents are saying?

HOOK: Well, I do engage with Iranian diaspora on a pretty regular basis. It's a very passionate diaspora. And I met with them all over the world and so has Secretary Pompeo. I know that they have their differences, but what I say to them is that we agree on more than we disagree. Let's not get too hung up on some of the differences we have, let's just focus on standing with the Iranian people, and supporting their wishes for a more representative government. The future of Iran will be decided by the Iranian people. It will not be decided by the United States government, and I think that that's appropriate. We have put in place a policy which we think expands the space for the Iranian people to demand the reforms that not only the Iranian people are seeking, but the United States and other countries seek.

And so we're very pleased with the success that our foreign policy has had. We know that we have put – And we are reversing many of the gains that the regime has made over the last many years. So we're focusing on a change in behavior, and it was Cicero who said that money is the sinews of war. And this regime doesn't have the money that it used to and its proxies don't either. And that's not the view of the United States government, it's also the view of the New York Times and the Washington Post, who in March and May respectively, ran stories on the front page documenting that because of our sanctions, the proxies are much weaker today financially. That includes Hezbollah, Shia proxies in Iraq and Syria, Hamas. So these are good things. We weren't reading those headlines three or four years ago.

MAY: True. Let me see if I can get in two more questions quickly. One is from one of our online viewers, Alireza Kiani. He says, "What are you doing to make VOA Persian a more effective media outlet for the benefit of the Iranian people?" And there have been criticisms of American broadcasting abroad, of course you have a nominee for the CEO of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees all American broadcasting, can't seem to get that position in place. And there are quite a few positions like that that I'm sure you'd like to get in place before the administration ends its first term.

HOOK: Well on VOA, it's funny you mention. I am working on an op ed, I've got somebody from my Iran team here, Mora, who has worked on these issues with me. I don't want to say too much about something that we're going to be saying publicly, but it is an issue that I track closely. I'm aware of it. It's a frequent concern that I hear when I engage with the Iranian diaspora. And so I'll have more to say on it soon.

MAY: All right. I'll ask you this for our final question.

HOOK: You could do two more since the want I just gave was too short.

MAY: Okay. Let's go to this one. Look, this administration has taken a different approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran than any other administration, Republican or Democratic. I think a generous way to put it is, but you tell me, is that you looked at the other approaches of ignoring the Islamic Republic of Iran, being conciliatory, attempting to engage with the Islamic Republic of Iran. And perhaps you've learned from the mistakes and the things that haven't worked, and didn't want to simply repeat policy approaches that have failed in the past, and are likely to fail in the future.

HOOK: I'm glad you asked that, Cliff. Because I think it's something which, it's a good question because it requires one to take a few steps back and get some altitude on this. We don't get lost in this question of empowering moderates in the government. I think that that can be kind of a Washington parlor game that sends you down roads that don't end up really promoting America's national security interests or a better future for the Iranian people. If you are in this regime, you're a hard liner. And that includes...I know people find Zarif very charming and everything else, but I've seen the same videos of him chanting, "Death to America," along with the other regime leaders.

When I look at the Iran nuclear deal, five years from the time of its implementation, they agreed to end the UN arms embargo on the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. I'm just completely baffled by this, and the only thing I can come up with is that it's based on this theory that over five years the moderates that they were trying to empower would in fact be in a position where when the UN arms embargo was lifted on conventional weapons, that it won't matter. The problem is that, look, this is the problem: Why would Iran spend less money on terrorism if given more money to spend on terrorism? And that's what they did with the sanctions relief. It didn't go to the Iranian people, but I think one could have predicted that. This is the nature of this regime. So you need to starve the regime of the revenue that it spends on exporting revolution and sectarian warfare. And you need to stand with the Iranian people and not get lost in this question of who's a moderate and who's a hardliner? Take a very realistic and sober assessment of what's happening.

I had asked some folks within our government to do an assessment of the 40 year history of the regime. When do we see a change in behavior? When do we see them come to the table? You need one or more of three things, historically: diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, the threat of military force. That's it. If talking nicely worked, we would have settled this 40 years ago when they took our diplomats hostage, but it doesn't work with this regime. And they exploit the good faith that the United States has shown. I've heard people say, "Oh, the Trump administration is obsessed with sanctions, and you think sanctions are the answer to everything, and why don't you try sanctions relief?" We tried sanctions relief. It's called the Iran nuclear deal, and that is a modest and temporary nuclear deal that starts expiring in 10 months and it completely expires in a number of years.

And I have yet for anybody to tell me what is the plan after the deal expires. I do know this, that at the end of that expiration date, the regime will be economically stronger and so will its proxies, and they will have retained the infrastructure, as they've demonstrated, the nuclear infrastructure so that if they want to race to a bomb, they'd be in a position to do that. So we pulled forward the expiration date of the Iran nuclear deal, before Iran is stronger. And we're not going to kick the can down the road, we're going to address this now. And we're not going to just limit a deal to the nuclear piece. You need to hold up a mirror to the threats that Iran presents, be honest about it and present them. And that list is Secretary Pompeo's list of 12 demands.

MAY: My last question is on those demands, because I've heard so many people say those demands are unreasonable, those demands are unfair. Those demands are tantamount to asking the regime to just simply surrender. I'm sure you would like to address that.

HOOK: Well, here's what I would say to those watching. Go down the list of 12 and tell me which of the 12 you would like Iran to keep doing.

MAY: Tick off a couple, so they know what you're talking about here.

HOOK: So the world's leading sponsor of terrorism should be enriching nuclear material. So Iran should continue giving Hezbollah \$700 million a year. The regime should continue taking dual citizens hostage and arbitrarily detaining them for years and putting them in prison.

The regime should continue ballistic missile testing. The regime should continue exporting missiles to Iraq and Syria and Lebanon.

And if you go down the list, you'll discover two things. One, there's nothing that anyone in the international community wants Iran to keep doing. Okay? Second thing you'll notice is that many of the items on that list of 12 you can find in a UN Security Council resolution that was passed unanimously. That includes the Russians and the Chinese. They voted for the arms embargo. They voted to put Qassem Soleimani and 22 other Iranian terrorists on a UN travel ban and assets freeze. They voted for a prohibition on ballistic missile testing and sanctions on banks that were facilitating Iran's nuclear and missile program.

So to those who say that is tantamount to regime change, they don't know their history. This is very realistic. But I'd much rather be in this position than being in the position of sort of thinking small and hoping for the best. I've never thought that lighting candles is a very good strategy when you're dealing with the Iranians. You've got to be very tough. And the language that they understand and respond to are sanctions and diplomatic isolation. I wish it were otherwise. 99% of the countries in the world, they speak a different language, but this regime over 40 years has shown a consistent disregard for the basic norms of civility and respect for human rights.

MAY: Well I think you've given viewers a lot to think about. I know you've give them the panel a lot to talk about, so thank you very much for coming by.

HOOK: Thanks, this was good. Thanks for the conversation. Good to see you again.

MAY: Thank you.

HOOK: Thanks.

MAY: And let me introduce the members of our panel. On my far right, Behnam Taleblu is a senior fellow with FDD covering Iranian political and security issues. Next to him, Alireza Nader is a senior fellow with FDD. He previously was a senior researcher at the Rand Corporation, where he authored numerous reports and studies on Iran. Suzanne Maloney is deputy director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution, formerly served in the policy planning staff at the State Department. Alireza, let's start with the basics here. Talk a little bit, describe now that we know better, exactly as best as you can what happened in Iran in recent days. Are these protests over the price of gasoline? An uprising against the clerical regime? Both or something else entirely?

NADER: As Brian Hooks said, this is the most serious political unrest we've witnessed in Iran since the 1979 revolution. It's fundamentally different than anything else we've seen. This is very different than the 2009 green protests, which were focused on a presidential election that was widely perceived to be fraudulent. Iranians, from what we've seen in the past two years when this started, do not believe in reforms. They have lost faith in elections completely. This current round of unrest started in December of 2017 during the month of "Day," so they call it Daymar protests in Iran. And from that time on, since now, we've witnessed Iranians coming to

the streets of hundreds of cities, denounce the Islamic Republic, say that they do not want a clerical government, that they do not want the dictator Khamenei to rule them, that they believe the president Rouhani is a liar. We've seen this continue for two years.

What to me was unusual and very shocking and disturbing was the regimes level of violence committed against peaceful protestors and it started as a peaceful protests that the regime responded to with brutal force. The security forces, the revolutionary guards, and the Basij especially, had shoot to kill orders from Khomeini and the rest of the establishment. They had orders to shoot at protesters' vital organs, the head and the heart. IranWire has described this very well.

There is a lot of documentary evidence, including videos, testimonials, to demonstrate this was a massacre. I believe this was a crimes against humanity and all regime officials are complicit from Khomeini to Rouhani. And even Khatami, this so-called reformist leader who stated that the problem with these protests was that they were meant to overthrow the regime and he backed the regime and its use of force. And I think what the Islamic Republic has managed to do in its response to the protesters is to basically pit the entire country of Iran against this regime. If Iranians go into the streets to demand their natural rights and are met with bullets, how can anybody trust this regime anymore? How do we expect the regime to moderate on other issues like the nuclear program, the missile program, and the regime's regional activities?

MAY: Behnam, Alireza mentioned that there have been other uprisings. 1989 comes to mind, 2009 obviously, 2017. We don't really know that this is different. Do we accept that it's on a larger scale?

TALEBLU: Well, first of all, great question, Cliff, and great to share the panel with all of you as well as the online audience, which is watching. I think when you look at Iranian protest and when you look at the history of the Islamic Republic and indeed the history of Iran in the 20th and 21st century, it's often been the state versus society. Street power people, people power is always a popular theme in Iranian history, but especially so in the past 40 years. You know, I like to say as long as there's been an Islamic Republic, there's been protests against the Islamic Republic. 94', 99' as you mentioned, 2017, 18', and the continuation of those qualms from the outside in. Those who live on the metaphorical, literal, and geographic periphery of Iran, outside in, have had qualms of the way this country is being run.

So looking at these protests, a couple of trends come to mind. In fact, five trends come to mind, looking at these most recent protests and comparing them on. The first is the increasing frequency of the protests and the diminishing gap between protests. Look at it. It used to be a decade, 99', 2009, then you have 2017, 18', and then 19'. I expect in the future this trend to continue and there to be more protests in less time. The next trend of course is looking at what the protesters are saying. You know, there's more nationalist rhetoric than ever before. There's more of an Iran first vibe and there's a much stronger anti regime vibe. So I think Alireza is right when he says it's the death of reform and perhaps even if I may say so, the birth pangs of revolt or revolution or rebellion. The qualm is not the gas price. The gas price is the spark. The political difference between state and society is the substance of the protest, is the substance of the chance. So expect Iranians to continue to show their dissatisfaction with the state.

The next, of course, is the increasing violence. That's the third. The longer these protests go on, expect the regime to do more violent things and quickly and more damaging, more deadly. Like Alireza said, the shoot to kill order. I expect this to grow. As the shoot to kill orders grow, the next trend comes to mind, which is of course the growing frustration of the Iranian people. Those protesting aren't those in, as we like to say in North Iran, with jeans cooler than you and I. It's people from the outside in, the downtrodden, the dispossessed. There's a reason it's in impoverished counties and cities and towns first, and then makes its way to the big cities.

So there's a growing frustration. And as there is growing frustration, there is vandalism, there is the targeting of IRGC owned or controlled banks. And I think in this most recent protest there were three to five deaths of Basij and IRGC personnel. I would actually expect that to grow a little bit as the frustration continues and people's demands are not met in the future.

And lastly, this has been the huge trend for protest from the 1890s to today, the growing reliance on communications technology both by the street and the state. The state to repress the street and the street to communicate with one another and with the world. From the telegraph in the 1890s to Twitter, Iranians have used communications technology effectively to get their message out to the world. And I expect that to continue to happen, which is why the regime went from censoring the internet to blacking it out altogether.

MAY: Suzanne, you heard my exchange with Brian Hook over whether or not this regime can become what he wants it to be, a normal nation rather than a revolutionary nation. In your view, is that a realistic possibility or is the ideology of revolution, of Islamic revolution, Khomeinism, so ingrained that there's no way that those who rule Iran right now can evolve into a normal nation?

MALONEY: Thanks. That's a great question and a tough one. I really want to thank you and FDD for inviting me to be a part of this conversation. I think it's a testament to the value of an institution when you bring a diverse set of perspectives together. And so we'll hear, I think, differing opinions on different elements of this challenge.

MAY: Please. Let's argue.

MALONEY: I look forward to being part of this conversation. I am relatively pessimistic about the prospects for reform in Iran today and I don't see it so much as a function of the ideology of the system as it is a function of the structure of power in Iran. That fundamentally the strategies for reform that have been pursued over the course of the past 20 years in earnest and with some at least initial success have run aground because those who retain ultimate power are simply averse to giving up any of that power and they have the tools and the means to preserve their position within the system. So the security services, the office of the Supreme leader, they really control the playing field. And to even participate in elections, to participate in the sort of permissible political sphere within Iran, you have to essentially sign on to the rules of the game, which means obeisance to the office of the Supreme leader and to the entire structure of power in Iran.

And fundamentally, that means that those who come from a very different perspective don't have an opportunity for political voice within the system and they find themselves, I think, driven to these kinds of upheaval on the streets to express their views, to try to generate some traction around their grievances, which they don't feel are being represented by the system itself. What we're seeing today I think is very much a function of the coming of age of the post revolutionary baby boom. Iran had one of the highest birth rates in the world in the early years, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. And those people are now essentially coming to the age of maturity. They're 30, 35. They're looking to have some opportunity for a meaningful life, to get married, to move out of their family's homes. And because of the state of the economy, because those who have power have hoarded opportunities for themselves and for their own families, ordinary Iranians who are terribly well educated, who are incredibly well positioned to contribute to society, don't have access to the same opportunities and they're feeling the brunt of years of mismanagement and corruption, as well as American sanctions. And they have no way to express it because they don't have access to the political system.

MAY: So just to follow up on that, whether the reason that reform is difficult is because of ideology as I suggested or structural and those who have a hold on power and don't want to give it up as you suggested, does that make a difference from the perspective of forging US policy or is the policy response the same? They don't want to reform, they're not going to reform, therefore we should –

MALONEY: Well, here is probably where I do differ, at least with some of my fellow panelists here. I think as Brian Hooks said, the future of Iran is very much in the hands of Iranians. I think that there are things that the United States government can do around the margins, particularly speaking out on behalf of those who are the victims of this government's policies in Iran and particularly those who suffered as a result of the unprecedented repression that we saw over the course of the past month. But ultimately, I don't think we have any sort of magic beans that will enable us to intervene in Iranian politics in a way that would alter the structure of power in Iran. I think what we are likely to see as a result of the increasing difficulty that the regime is having in managing its own economic situation as well as the response to this shockingly violent backlash against peaceful protestors over the course of the past month is further fissures within the regime. Those aren't created by the United States. They will not in fact be directed by the United States, but they will contribute to I think new openings and new opportunities for change within Iran.

MAY: I'm going to do one more follow-up. Maximum pressure 2.0, putting as much sanction pressure as possible on the regime. That's certainly I think what FDD has been pushing for and I think it's what the administration more or less has. You support that or you think no, no, we need to let up the pressure a little bit?

MALONEY: I think what maximum pressure has done is create two very big problems. One of which is specific to the Iranian people and one of which is specific to the broader regional security environment. On the ladder, I'm concerned that we have jettisoned a mechanism for constraining Iran's nuclear ambitions without actually having a better one to replace it with. I understand and appreciate the criticisms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of which I was a supporter. And I would be entirely supportive of measures that actually sought to redress

some of those deficiencies. But in fact, what we have now is the potential for a nuclear crisis as Iran walks back its own compliance with the deal. We have disarray and lack of consensus with our key partners and allies on this issue, and we don't have a real game plan for preventing a further acceleration of Iran's nuclear program at this time.

The other consequence of maximum pressure, which causes me great concern, is the extent to which the consequences of that policy have been born by ordinary Iranians. The elite can in fact insulate themselves. In fact, in some cases, take advantage of the isolation that Iran is now suffering and ordinary Iranians cannot. They're the ones who are suffering most directly. And at a time when the United States has now banned entry on the part of Iranians during this current administration, I think that we are left without the kind of leverage that Brian Hook was talking about to really help the Iranian people.

MAY: Alireza, I know you have a response to this. I can tell.

NADER: I think to understand this regime and its capacity for reform and change, you just have to listen what the regime says about itself. And I would advise anybody looking at Iran to also listen to what your Iranians want and listen to their chants. But starting with the regime, after more than a thousand people were massacred, Khamenei's representative in Tehran, the religious prayer leader in Tehran, said that Khamenei was carrying out God's command by killing a thousand Iranians, injuring countless more, and arresting countless more, and God knows what else in those prisons. To me that shows this is a theological dictatorship that holds itself accountable to what it thinks is God, and it is not accountable to Iranians. There's no political system for Iranians to participate in. When you have a religious dictator who is maintaining his rule through the revolutionary guards and responds to the people by shooting them.

I have no doubt that this regime is beyond reform, that this regime – I am absolutely certain it's beyond reform. It's beyond moderation. Even, look, as the regime fights an existential crisis, largely of its own making, it is still shipping sophisticated weapons to Yemen. It's still building a vast military infrastructure in Syria. It is spending money all over the Middle East and beyond. It's funding Shia groups in Nigeria even. As Iranians are crying, "Let go of Syria, think of us." And "no to Gaza, no to Lebanon."

MAY: These are some of the chants.

NADER: These are the chants we've been hearing for two years. That "don't spend our money outside of Iran. We're literally dying here." And I agree. Iranians are suffering the most, but Iranians have been suffering since 1979 and this regime has made false promises of change for 40 years. When we look at the sanctions regime against Islamic Republic, it did not start with the Trump administration or the Obama administration or the Bush administration.

It started after 1979, when this regime took American diplomats hostage. A practice that continued to this day. And no matter what kind of negotiations you have with this regime, no matter what kind of deals you have, this is a tactic that will continue well into the future. Even if

Khamenei passes away, they've chosen a successor for him, most likely reported to be widely in Iran, Raisi, a man involved in the mass execution of Iranians in 1988.

So how do we expect the system to reform when we have clerics say during the protest and after that don't even mention Iran. There is no Iran. This is the Islamic Republic. I believe fundamentally, if the United States will want it's 12 points met, and I would add a 13th point by the way to that, and we can talk about it later, but if it wants those 12 points met, this is not the regime to meet them. And Iranians know that very well. They've been saying in the streets. They've been saying, "We don't want this regime. We don't want our money spent elsewhere." So why base your plan on a regime that has zero credibility is inauthentic, is un-Iranian, and un-Islamic, and seeks to expand its power across the Middle East to the bitter end.

MAY: But it's worth talking about this a little bit because Meet The Press won't discuss this. We talk about this is a theocracy and it's sort of uncomfortable for Americans and for Europeans to think of it that way. But what we're talking about is that it's a country in which the ruling class is the religious class, or really a part of the religious class, because not all the Imams in Iran, as I understand it, either it's in 79' or 89' or today agree with Khomeinism as an ideology, as an ideology of Islamic revolution and conquest and imperialism. Talk a little bit about the – We may disagree with Suzanne in this, that these are serious men of faith, but it's a very perverse faith from a Western point of view.

TALEBLU: Yeah, and the funny thing is it's a perverse faith from the mainstream Shiite worldview as well. Remember the doctrine, the governing doctrine in the Islamic Republic of Iran. "Velayat-e faqih," the guardianship of the jurisprudent is in many ways in what Islamic studies would call "Bid'ah," innovation. You know, Shiite Islam has "Bid'ah Hasanah," a good innovation, positive innovation. So that's how you can get around riffing on Islamic law. But Khomeini in many ways did riff on Islamic law and that's why sometimes people do say that that kind of position of the "velayat-e faqih," the guardian jurist, the philosopher king if you will, is part Plato, part Quran, and part third-world authoritarianism, par excellence. So there are many things that make Iran and the Islamic Republic of Iran very different. But there's things that make it look like a lot of other third world tin pot dictatorships that are one crop countries. And the main loser in that of course is the Iranian people.

I think Alireza's list of qualms with Iran, the best charge I could say in there is that it's an anti-Iranian government and that's something that as an Iranian American you feel particularly proud to say. Brian Hook, who was sitting right here when Cliff was interviewing him, said that best in his own way. And to kind of incorporate Suzanne's comments into this about max pressure, I think the administration has a good policy towards the government of Iran. The max pressure policy is the correct policy. What Washington needs to do better and to conceptualize better is what's the approach, what's the policy towards the people of Iran. We have a max pressure component. What is Washington going to be able to do the next time there's a protest because there will be one and the trends indicate there will be one soon and there will be one that is violent and destabilizing and will continue. There will be more and more protests. That's the history of this country. State versus society in the modern era.

What's the max care component to the max pressure components? Where is this component? And at FDD, there's another friend and colleague of mine, Saeed Ghasseminejad. We had a small op-ed talking about towards a protest policy playbook. What are the things that Washington can do, what are the right framing Washington can do and think about and then later on implement the next time Iranians take to the streets? You know, how can Washington not get caught flat footed and what kind of predicate towards a better policy towards the Iranian people can Washington begin to lay now and disabusing ourselves as some of these –I would say now disproven notions of reform or moderation is the first one.

You know, the next of course would be do no harm. The next of course would be target the regime and its assets. So right now, when the Iranian people are talking about getting jailed and killed and shot, look at the plethora of videos on Twitter and YouTube. You know, I don't even have Twitter, so I refer yourselves to Alireza's account. That actually have small local level officials in Iran bragging that they recommended the police shoot and kill protesters and name and shame and designate and target these people. Then build multilateral coalitions with the Europeans, get them to put their money where their mouth is. The next time there's an internet blackout, let's think about creative ways that, you know, can get Iranians online, whether it's wifi from the periphery or distribution of satellite phones through whatever networks may exist. There are many, many ways and creativity you should always be respected and accepted on Iran policy.

That's why it's healthy to have a vibrant debate. But first and foremost, the product of this debate is to disabuse ourselves of these notions about what the regime is and isn't and let them speak for themselves.

MAY: And a quick follow-up on that. Your impression, I don't know if there's evidence for this, but your impression is that Iranians today want to be proud of their nation, the nation of Iran, and are not proud of the Islamic Republic, which is ambitious to be hegemon of the Middle East, ambitious to be imperialist, wants to control Lebanon, wants to control Yemen, wants to control Iraq, wants to control Syria. That's not their interest. They'd like to, well, to coin a phrase, to make Iran great again.

TALEBLU: I think you hit the nail on the head there and there's ample room for this administration to be able to make that case. That doesn't mean Iranians who want change don't want Iranian power to be respected in the Middle East. The fundamental question is how is Iranian power being wielded at home and abroad? No one is trying to push Iran away. Iran is a country in the Middle East. The Iranianis, the saying goes, are successful all around the world except in their own country, except in Iran. So what are we going to do about that? What is Washington going to do about that? And when you listen to the chants on the streets, Sooriya-ra raha ron. Fekri be ma kon, "Forget Syria. Think about us." These are claims that roll back Iran's influence and to use its wealth for its own national purposes.

And there's a reason why the Islamic Republic of Iran, it's foremost revolutionary militarist entity, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps doesn't even have the name Iran in it.

MAY: Let me go to a couple of questions from our virtual cyber audience. Our first comes from a member of Congress, Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina, also a ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee in the Middle East, North Africa, and international terrorism. He writes, "I'm so pleased FDD is hosting this virtual town hall. I wanted to use it as an opportunity to send a message to those protesting in Iran. We in Congress are watching and the world is watching. We hear your voices. We support peaceful efforts to determine your own future and to stand up to brutality and I want to ask the panel what more specifically can we, in Congress – " We've talked about the administration – "Can we in Congress do to support human rights and democracy in Iran?" Alireza, why don't you start?"

NADER: I think the number one thing Congress can do, and that's a great question, thank you Congressman. Both Congress and any US administration, whether Republican or Democratic, has to acknowledge and recognize and have a policy shaped around the fact that Iranians do not want the Islamic Republic. They've expressed that very clearly. We don't know what kind of political system Iranians want. We won't know that until Iran is a freer country, because under current circumstances it's just a guess. But we know Iranians do not want the Islamic Republic and they don't want the clergy and power. I think it's very important for Washington not to believe in this falsehood that they're moderates in this regime.

If Rouhani is a moderate, then the world is in big trouble. A president that's involved in the mass shooting of people is not a moderate. And I think that should be the 13th point that the political aspirations of the Iranian people are important and that Iranians like everybody deserve an open and democratic system. There are lots of other things I think the United States can do. Brian Hook mentioned Voice of America. Look forward to seeing what he was talking about, in terms of changes there. Because when we look at Iran, outside broadcasters have been very successful, like Manitoba TV, Iran International, and I think the US really deserves a very credible voice in that. So look forward to those efforts. I think a key is to convince our European friends that there are no moderates in this regime and that they shouldn't get such wide space for the regime to operate in Europe, to maintain networks, and for European officials not to be so intent on just investing and trading with this regime as it faces revolt.

I think very regular statements from Congress and the United States really matter to Iranians because this regime wants to convince the world that it doesn't hear the Iranian public as it is getting slaughtered at home. And that's why the internet was shut down and there were mass shootings. So anything in terms of providing internet to Iranians, I think any sort of material assistance is important as well. We've seen during the cold war for example, how \$30 million to solidarity was very helpful. The US can fund various groups, labor groups, civil society groups that are seeking fundamental transformation of the system. And there's much more.

MAY: Suzanne, anything specific to Congress? Which, the executive branch carries most of the load on this obviously, but what about Congress?

MALONEY: I think Congress is an incredibly important voice on human rights issues across the board and needs to be out in front on expressing concern about what's happened in Iran and holding Iranian government to account for any future reiteration of the kind of violence that we've seen over these recent weeks. I think Congress can also contribute to encouraging the

administration to improve some of the existing channels. For example, for access to humanitarian goods. That's completely not contradictory to the maximum pressure policy. It doesn't require the administration to reverse face. In fact, Congress is the body that legislated that food and medicine should not be subject to sanctions with respect to any sanctions program, and so they should in fact be pressing the administration to ensure that there is good access to agricultural products to pharmaceuticals to medical devices.

If anything, this bolsters the utility of American sanctions because it eliminates one of the primary criticisms of these measures from the government in Iran and from some of our allies and partners around the world. I think the other element of the sanctions where Congress could be very useful is looking for more opportunities for exemptions to enable Iranians to have access to technology. It's been an inadvertent consequence, I think, of the sanctions that whether it's various messaging apps or other types of platforms, accessing the cloud. All of this has been off limits to Iranians because companies are simply so cowed by the overwhelming reach of American sanctions that they simply avoid anything that might be perceived as sanctionable. And so, a specific licensing really pressing those issues because as I think Behnam said, communications technology has been critical for both Iranians to coordinate amongst one another, but also for the world to be aware of what's happening inside the country.

MAY: Behnam, I know you've looked a lot into humanitarian exemptions to the sanctions. Talk about that. Could this be done better or better than people realize?

TALEBLU: As has most of our Iran team led by Mark Dubowitz, there's lots of minutia as you know, to the sanctions, the sanctions policy, the sanctions regime. As Suzanne just mentioned, a lot of these penalties that were resurrected by the Trump administration were actually passed through statute. It was a congressional action that presidents, Bush, Obama, Trump, signed onto, resurrected, enforced. And they all had these humanitarian exemptions, these humanitarian channels. So the carve out exists in US law. Something that FDD has done, particularly two scholars, two analysts, Saeed Ghasseminejad and David Adesnik, they've looked at actually trade data, EU trade data, Chinese trade data, and said, hmm, actually, medicine flows from pharmaceutical imports, seemed exports seem to be the same if not growing a touch then in previous years. And so if there is some kind of pharmaceutical shortage in the country, what is this the result of? Then you go back and look at stuff that the regime itself had put out through semi-official media in 2012, 2013. The previous peak of Iran sanctions under President Obama. And that's when you had different government ministers, different officials talking about things that were prioritized at the border through corrupt officials where corruption, of course unfortunately, is rampant in Iran. But it was things like automobiles, dog food, luxury vehicles, cosmetics, that these corrupt border guards, corrupt border crossing officials were prioritizing at this thing we call in Persian, the Gomrok. The – Kind of the border crossing. So I expect much of that to be happening here. You know, Suzanne also mentioned the oversight function of Congress, which I think is crucial, moving ahead. Congress and administration should be on the same page about locking down Iran's escrow money abroad, for instance, making sure that Iran is not taking advantage of existing humanitarian channels and existing cash it has sitting all around the world.

NADER: Can I add to that, actually?

MAY: Yeah, sure.

NADER: We have to be careful too by the regime's narrative on medicine shortages, because there have been regime officials who have admitted they're responsible for medicine shortages. They stockpile them, steal them, and then make money off of them. And even the health minister yesterday said that there is no medicine shortage in Iran. While I think it's important to have mechanisms to facilitate humanitarian trade, we have to be really cognizant of the fact that the regime creates a humanitarian disaster for Iranians and blames the United States and uses that narrative very effectively. Zarif actually really takes advantage of that narrative. You know, if you look at his communications in the last few days, he said nothing about the slaughter on Iran, but he has time to mention medical goods that are not being exported to Iran. I think from Sweden or Swedish company. So we have to be very aware of how this regime uses the suffering of Iranians as propaganda and a political tool.

MAY: Mm-hmm. Another question from a member of our virtual town hall audience. Michael Shields. Actually he has two questions that are related. He's asking: Right now, the Iranian regime is probably considering various actions against US military forces and coalition forces in the region. They've threatened our military bases with their rockets and they're probably thinking about what else they need to do to squash the dissident movement that – Because they, like you, think, okay, this could rise up again if we're not careful. What are they likely thinking about doing right now both in terms of hitting the US or retaliating against US – Hitting or retaliating against those who, those dissidents who are not dead, wounded, in jail, that sort of thing? Behnam, go. You start and –

TALEBLU: Sure. I'll try to keep it brief. Listen, I think Iran has a very highly calibrated graduated policy of escalation. Escalation on the nuclear front, escalation on the home front, escalation in the region, terrorism, missile, cyber. They know that they're poking and prodding much like the Soviet Union did, where to look for where is the red line, where is the cap. And I think that they unfortunately understand that the US in some of these theaters of conflict, in some of these areas where the US and Iran are at loggerheads, places like Iraq for instance, other places, that the US seems to have a pretty high bar. And so now they're getting a couple of their licks in. They're getting a couple of their punches in. And that's why you've had these rocket and mortar attacks on the green zone almost semi-consistently in places like Iraq. You've had missile proliferation continue despite the dwindling revenues by the regime. These are things that they believe are in their ideological and strategic imperative, so they're looking constantly to get a one up on the US. And in some perverse way these are measures of success for max pressure. If you're choking someone and they begin to flail wildly at you, it means that asphyxiation is setting in. The choking is setting in. That the regime realizes how effective your tool is and is now looking to deter you from continuing along that path.

NADER: International and regional, the Islamic Republic wants to scare everyone so maximum pressure can be eased. And I think the Aramco attacks where our demonstration as are the attacks against US military bases. The regime, wants to up the ante, not to launch a full scale war, but to make the rest of the world anxious about the possibility of war, especially oil importers, especially in East Asia and Europe. In terms of what the regime will do to dissidents, we've seen what it does. It's been killing dissidents, assassinating the dissidents for 40 years. And

there definitely has been an increase of assassinations, especially in Europe. A former Iranian official for example was assassinated in Istanbul recently, and a lot of Iranian dissidents and political activists and human rights activists have told me they fear going to Europe now. A trip to Paris was very regular for them, or a trip to London. A friend of mine actually was telling me that he was invited to a very important event in Germany, and his response was, "No way". I think even dissidents and activists and figures who are very popular in Iran are also at risk in Washington DC. We have to be honest about that assessment. I don't think this regime would hesitate to use physical violence anywhere from Iran to Iraq, where dissidents are getting assassinated, to Europe and here.

MAY: I want to just go back to the protest of recent days. More than a hundred cities had protests. That's correct?

NADER: Many more.

MAY: Many more. Rural and urban alike. And we know also those participating – Iran is a multi-ethnic, multinational country in a way. They were equally or even disproportionately Kurds, Arabs, Azaris, Baluchis. Do we kind of know the answer in terms of who was trying to rise up against the regime? Suzanne, I don't know if you know this question, so it may be a hard one to figure out, but give me your impressions if you know them.

MALONEY: I don't feel as though we have credible data at this stage to state conclusively, you know, precisely who was protesting and precisely what the locus of those protests were. We know that in fact, I think as Behnam said, this was very much an outside-in phenomena. That in fact this, the protests appeared to proliferate in smaller, less wealthy suburbs of major cities on the periphery of Iran in various parts of the country where there are significant populations of ethnic minorities. There are some reports that suggest the death toll was much higher in the parts of the country where there are a large number of Arab Iranians. There is certainly evidence that Iran kept the internet shut down for a longer period of time in areas like Sistan and Baluchestan again, where there are ethnic Baluch minorities. And so, you know, I think that there is some reason to believe that in fact those parts of the country that are more diverse may have experienced higher levels of turmoil and/or a more violent crackdown.

I want to bookend that by reinforcing the fact that I think there's very little evidence in my mind that this in some way could be interpreted as a kind of fragmentation of the country, as both my co-panelists have suggested. Everything that we can verify from the material that's coming out of Iran since the internet has been restored suggests that the slogans and the types of rhetoric that people were using in protest was highly nationalistic. And I think that that's a very important caveat.

MAY: Okay. And let me just – A number of questions for that. When we say it's nationalism, we're saying that to a great extent, the Arab Iranians, the Azeri Iranians, even the Kurdish Iranians, perhaps, were not thinking of separatism, they're thinking of being part of an Iranian nation, but part of an Iranian nation that is not theocratic in nature. Is that – I have, again, I'm asking you to speculate. A little bit hard to know, but is that what your impression is?

NADER: So from what I've seen since the protest, as we're getting more information, the protest to place everywhere, all over Iran, from Tehran to Mashhad to Tabriz, Shiraz, Khuzestan, any place in Iran you can imagine. The epicenters of the uprising appear to be Shiraz in the South and much of the Farz province, the heartland of the Iranian nation, where the Iranian people first settled. So these are very nationalist areas, areas where the Lurs and Bahtaris live. Again, very nationalist people. But also Khuzestan has experienced a lot of unrest in the last two years, as have the Kurdish areas. And when it comes to Tehran, there were very few protests I saw in north Tehran, but there were major demonstrations and acts of violence by the regime and then responses by the protesters all around Tehran to the west and east.

Some of the worst violence were in the suburbs of Tehran. The chants have been very highly nationalist for the past two years. Iranians have expressed support for the Pahlavis. "Javid Shah," "Long live the king" has become a major chant. So I don't think this, I don't see this as an ethnic issue. This isn't more of a national revolt against Islam.

MAY: And I want to – just for viewers who may not – I want to make it clear. When you talk about north Tehran, you're talking about some of the more elite and wealthier neighborhoods. You talk of the Pahlavis, you're talking about the Shah of Iran and his son.

NADER: Yes. So north Tehran – Look, there's a class of people in Iran which is a very small part of the population in Iran that is very well off, and depends on the regime to maintain sometimes a very spectacular lifestyle. The rest of Iran, 99% of the population is relatively poor. And I just want to read to you what a Khatami himself said how he sees this relation-

MAY: And just tell us who Khatami is, so people understand.

NADER: The former president who's a conservative leading reformist. More in the West and in Iran, but he said this was his analysis of the uprising: "if the middle and upper class joined forces with working class protesters, then no amount of military and security power can do anything. It will be the Hokumat, or the regime, versus the people." So while Tehran and some of the bigger cities have been quieter, the regime itself has an expectation that the unrest will come to Tehran.

MAY: By the way, Ben, Khatami notwithstanding this revolution, particularly with this – Well, I shouldn't call it – This uprising, this protest movement, compared particularly to 2009 seems to be almost leaderless, seems to be much more spontaneous. Is its leaderlessness a liability or an asset?

TALEBLU: Well you know, I agree that it's a bit of both. It's a liability of an asset. I know many analysts in Washington of all different political stripes believe it to be the same way. You know, sort of to borrow from Star Wars, there will be another. There will be another because it is leaderless, but because it's leaderless, you can't jail, maim, rape, torture one or two people. It's systemic. And you know, you mentioned earlier the media clip. I want to riff on this again if we can for a quick minute or two. You know, the media has been very enchanted by the sparks that set off these protests in Iran, whether they have leaders like Mousavi and Karroubi, the former prime minister Mousavi, the former speaker of parliament, Karroubi, in the 2009

Green Movement or you know, the more recent batch, 2017, 18, and 19. They've been enchanted by some of these protests.

But really they're enchanted by the sparks and not the substance. And the most enduring thing about these protests is that they have a political substance and that political substance tells you a bit more about the worldview of your average Iranian. You know, while we can disaggregate all we want to Iranians of this ethnicity, Iranians of this geography, Iranians of this class, Iranians in this part of Tehran, the slogans across all these different parts of the protests seem to be unified and some of them have a continued across protests. The Na Ghazeh, Na Lubnan, Janem Fadaye Iran, the "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran." That was a qualm, a chance you could say Iranians had since 2009. And it escalated and escalated and these are unmet demands and as they continue to be unmet, the grievance moves from one town to another and picks up kind of like a contagion effect. Before Tehran was always going to be the primal point of the protest. Now it's, as Suzanne has mentioned, again outside-in.

I mentioned something about you know, Islamic law before. I'll do something biblical now. You know that that phrase from Matthew where it's the first and the last, the last and the first? The next protest, you can almost guarantee based on this same trend will be met by those, will be led by those who were the last in Iran. Who were, who live as second class citizens. The second class citizens will be the first to protest and that usually is the ethnic poor, the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the religious classes, the rural folks, but it won't be exclusively them. This is in many ways a national issue.

MAY: Go ahead. Yes.

MALONEY: Could I – I just wanted to jump in because I think, you know, as we've been analyzing what happened in this go around just as happened in late 2017, early 2018, there is this insistence that the economic genesis of the protests shouldn't, shouldn't bound our analysis of it. I think that's important, but let's be clear: economics is political. People are coming to the streets fundamentally because they have genuine day to day concerns that affect their quality of life, and they don't see the government as addressing those concerns. And so I don't think it's in any way diminishing the protest that these have economic sparks, that they are in fact precipitated by the really difficult straits that the Iranian economy is in.

And in fact that very fact makes it more likely that we're going to see more of this, because the Iranian government has almost no choice but to adopt additional measures, whether it's new price hikes on other commodities or on fuel, whether it's an attempt to collect more in taxation to meet the hold on the government budget, whether it's the crackdown on profiteering that has already begun to try to ensure that, you know, people aren't essentially making money off of the shortages that have been imposed by sanctions. All of these measures that the government of the Islamic Republic has been forced to adopt, have a political and social consequence, which is that people are very unhappy and they are going to the streets because they don't have other mechanisms for making their voice heard.

MAY: But isn't that exactly the purpose of this, of a maximum pressure campaign to force the government to make hard choices? And, maybe pushing back on you, I wouldn't say

they have no choice. They have a, they have a hard choice. They have limited funds. They can use those funds to increase the standard of living or they can spend on the Houthis and Hezbollah and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and those concerns. They have a choice, but they're making that choice. And it's not a choice that people in the streets like, which I think is why their anger is not so much against America, but against the regime that is making choices that do not benefit the people of Iran, that benefit the Houthi struggle to take over Yemen, which they see as not in their best interest.

MALONEY: I don't disagree that the government is having to make hard choices and that fundamentally those hard choices are contributing to the unrest that we're seeing in the streets. And that's why I expect to see more.

MAY: You expect to see more. Go ahead, yeah.

NADER: No, the public doesn't blame the United States. One of the chants for the last two years has been that "They lie when they say our enemy is America. The enemy is right here in Iran". Meaning the Islamic Republic. Iranians understand what the root cause of the problem is, is the Islamic Republic. And the economic problems are rooted in the Islamic Republic. They are rooted in its corruption and its avarice and-

MAY: And by, its mismanagement to an extent. To the idea that Khomeini, or Khamenei or Rouhani or Zarif, that these are wonderful economic managers who really know how to put together a modern economy. And get it going. I mean I that's probably unlikely, don't you think?

NADER: I mean, no, no person with the ability or the education or the morals to run a country wants to work with these guys. It's just a matter of that. But basically Islamic Republic is a mafia state. It extracts wealth from Iran everywhere else and spends it on itself at the expense of the Iranian people. That is the basic model, I think, to view Iran. Maybe there was an intention 40 years ago to create some sort of a republican with a small 'r' and representative system. But the system we see today, right now, is a mafia state backed by military force.

MAY: You know, my impression is that the major media do not cover the Islamic Republic of Iran very well. But that it's also very difficult to do. If you're a journalist, and I've been – My background is as a journalist. And you're plunked down in the middle of Tehran, you take your life and your freedom in your hand. If you tell the story straight and you don't in some way placate the government. The kind of thing we haven't heard that much about is who exactly was – We talk about the government putting out forces to shoot Iranians who are protesting. I've seen some information, again it's not easy to get, that it was useful to them to have a unit that was made up of Afghans doing the shooting. Of having Persians in the Arab places and Arabs in the Persian places and in Iraq and actually Iraqis coming and people from abroad and using them because they are less likely to be reluctant to pull the trigger because it's not their brothers. Am I wrong about that? Is that what you're hearing as well?

NADER: That they've used foreign forces?

MAY: Absolutely.

NADER: Definitely. The Hashd al-Shaabi from Iraq occupied-

MAY: Which are a Shia militia.

NADER: Yes, a Shia militia.

MAY: So people get that.

NADER: A proxy for the revolutionary guards in Iran, essentially. They were used to put down protests and control Khuzestan province after the floods and it would not be surprising to see if security forces within Iran defect eventually or are unwilling to shoot people en masse, that the regime resource to foreign forces like the Hashd al-Shaabi and the Afghan Fatemiyoun forces, because those forces are meant to serve the regime's interests, and they're less – They're more likely to kill Iranians than actual Iranians.

MAY: Mm-hmm. According to some reports, and these come from the UN, that the authorities were saying "shoot to kill", not just use tear gas but shoot to kill. Behnam, why does the regime, I guess pretty obvious question, why does the regime want to shoot to kill? I think it's, the answer is I guess serious, serious intimidation. Actually let me use that as a bridge to what final subject we should talk about, and that is there may be enthusiasm and hopefulness that the people are rising up against a regime that they see as oppressive, but a seriously oppressive regime, a regime that doesn't respond, I don't know, like the Brits in India, or perhaps you might even say like the Shah did – a regime that responds like Bashar al-Assad did in Syria and who essentially said, "I don't care how many Syrians have to be killed. I'm staying in power. I'll do what is necessary". Serious repression historically works. No?

TALEBLU: Well, I don't want to get into the history of it, but it has worked in the more recent past in the Islamic Republic. Suzanne mentioned something in her initial comments about preparedness and to me the big shock is how prepared the regime was for this and prepared to use violence and prepared to dispense with protesters in this way. You know, I always liked to talk to my friends in the diaspora that they track the protests, I track the security forces, then we can meet in the middle and talk about it.

And you know, Iran uses a different security force for a different type of protest for a different type of result. You know, in some places it does more jailing. In some places it does more killing. In some places it's snipers. In some places the Revolutionary Guard Corps, in some places it's the paramilitary of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's all-volunteer force, the Basij, in other places. But in particularly the 2017-18 protests, it's been the law enforcement forces. Niroo Entezami with their special forces Niroo-hayeh Vjeh, you know, they have this layered mosaic approach. The security force they need prepares the proper amount of force that they need. It's a highly methodical cocktail of lethality and cunningness that they apply to this. But now it just seemed to be as Alireza and the UN and everyone else was saying earlier, "shoot to kill". It was lethality. And I think they knew they had to be so lethal. They couldn't take this more traditional 94, 95, 99, 2009, 17, 18 approach. They had to be more lethal and they had to be quick about it and that's why it incurred, it occurred not with censorship but with a blackout. You

know, you talked about the press earlier, the Washington Post has the saying "democracy dies in darkness". Well guess what? Iranians are dying in the darkness.

NADER: Yes.

MAY: And maybe for a final question, your thoughts – If the Iranians were, the Islamic Republic rulers were well prepared for this, there'll be well prepared for the next round, the next time the protests. I'm not sure, you tell me, that the US was as prepared as it might've been for this? Perhaps it should be preparing for the next time there is an eruption like this. As well as the Europeans. As well as those in the Gulf who might want to be supportive of the Iranian people. Is there more that can be done and should be done to prepare if the Iranian people do as Suzanne suggests and say, "We are going to change either the behavior of this regime or change this regime on our own", but if the rest of the world or part of the rest of the world wants to be supportive – Suzanne, you start, we'll go down the row here.

MALONEY: Sure. I think, you know, we'll watch carefully to see what happens next. The degree of violence that was utilized to repress this latest outburst in Iran was absolutely unprecedented. You know, I'm sure to people who hear about Iran as an authoritarian state, the imagery – It may be predictable, but in fact is, as we've discussed today – Nothing like this has happened in modern Iran where you see gunmen in the streets, snipers in buildings. That's not the normal mode of disrupting popular upheaval in Iran. And it's not clear to me that in fact it is considered a success by the regime, given how much dissatisfaction has been expressed within the political establishment itself. It's not clear to me whether or not there may have been concerns about the reliability of security forces. Obviously we know that in fact people were willing to shoot to kill, but we don't know of cases, and there may be cases, where in fact there were, there were doubts about the reliability of the security forces, as there were in 2009 and after previous periods of upheaval in Iran.

So I think, you know, there's a lot of uncertainty about exactly how this proceeds. The two things that the United States government should and must be doing now, first and foremost, are to begin, if they haven't already, to really try to find a way to make good on the promises that were made in fact publicly by a few Trump administration officials that we would reconnect Iran to the broader world internet. That didn't succeed. And we should be working on that now to try to find mechanisms to maintain some level of connectivity in as broad a fashion as possible so that if Iran in fact tries to repeat the blackout that they imposed in November, that we can find ways to mitigate it.

The other important thing that I think the administration ought to be doing is to ensure that across the board that there is a readiness on the part of our partners and allies to speak up in a really vociferous way. Unfortunately, what has happened is our European allies in particular are so focused on the nuclear issue as their highest priority and preserving the nuclear deal because of what the administration has done in terms of walking away from the deal. And so for them, you know, this is always – Human rights issues are never top of the list for the Europeans and they're even further down the list as a result of the administration's policies. We really need to make sure that whatever our asks are of the Europeans today, that we are demanding and helping them to find ways to speak out and not just to speak, but in fact to put their money where

their mouth is and to contemplate what types of reduction in diplomatic engagement and other types of measures they'd be prepared to undertake if in fact we see similar repeats of what's happened over the course of the past few weeks.

MAY: Alireza, your final thoughts on this.

NADER: Providing internet is key. And I know the administration has been working on that, and it's a very, very difficult technical situation. But I also think the US media, the private sector plays a huge role in this. There's barely any coverage. There was one interview by a prominent media personality that was focused on the travel ban. This, the travel ban is unfortunate and a counterproductive, but the vast majority of Iranians cannot travel to the United States period. They can't afford it. So that really impacts a very, very small section of Iranians and the diaspora. But I think the media can play a much, much better job, and do a much better job on this. I think that any administration should be open minded as to what comes next. We shouldn't just think that Iran only has the Zarifs of the world to engage with. There are lots of other people, both outside of Iran and within Iran.

I do not believe this was completely leaderless. Even the woman who was reported by The Guardian to lead civilian protesters and blocking major roadways, to me, that's a leader. Those people are showing leadership. There are Iranians outside every round that are showing leadership. The more the administration engages with those forces, the better. And finally, I think the United States really needs to recognize that first and foremost the aspirations of the Iranian people matter, and that the Iranian people are pro-American. I believe a lot of them are pro-democracy, and ultimately we have to have the imagination to envision Iran at peace with itself and the world and the United States and its allies, and I think that's doable. I think it will be a very difficult objective to me. I do not believe the United States should sit aside. I think it should be vocal. It has a major role to play in Iran. The destinies of the two countries have been bound together for more than 60 years and I think the US has a moral and strategic imperative to back opposition democratic forces in Iran.

MAY: Behnam, your final thoughts.

TALEBLU: I agree with so much of what is being said. Modern Iran most unfortunately is a tragedy. Brian Hook was standing just right where you are talking about these two prisons that have been recommended for designation. I remember when he first mentioned that at the State Department, I spoke to my family later on that day and my mother very casually just said, "When the hell did Iran build so many prisons? There weren't this many prisons before 1979." Yes, there were prisons, but this proliferation of the Kahrizaks and Qarchaks and all of these other penitentiaries that exist in Iran today is really a measure of what that state has become. And so keeping that in mind, that framing in mind for US policy I think is going to be critical. How can you stand with the Iranian people? How can you name and shame those who oppress them and how can you continue pressure on the regime to successfully impose costs and make their foreign policy harder and make their domestic repression harder?

So everything on the satellite technology, communications technology front Suzanne and everyone else was saying. Absolutely critical. Everything on meeting with opposition and

standing with the Iranian people that Alireza was saying was absolutely critical. But just getting creative about some of the ways that we do things that you know Washington does, like sanctions. There's tons of videos now. You know, Washington should be able to geo-tag some of the protests. You see protests in Karaj. You see deaths in Karaj, you see arrests in Karaj. Going after the entire chain of oppression in Karaj will be a great idea for US sanctions. That would really stand with the Iranian people, whether it's the law enforcement police commander, the Basij commander, the Revolutionary Guard commander, the governor-general. There is a chain of repression that exists in Iran, and every time you see these different protests in different places, signaling to the Iranian people that we understand, "It's not one or two people that's against you, it's an entire system" would do exactly what President Obama said many years ago about, I think, relationships, which was to say, "I've got your back".

MAY: Well, there's nothing I have to say except thanks to Behnam, thanks to Alireza, thanks to Suzanne. Thanks also to you. This is an experiment. A virtual town hall. If you liked it, let us know through Twitter or through email. If you have criticisms or suggestions, we want to hear that as well. I'm Cliff May. This is FDD. Thanks again. See you next time.