



MAY: February 11th is the 42nd anniversary of the revolution that transformed Iran from a Western-line monarchy to an anti-Western Islamic theocracy. So, this seemed like an appropriate moment to have a conversation with Ray Takeyh, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, one of America's leading analysts of contemporary Iran, and the author of a new book, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*.

Also with us is Reuel Marc Gerecht, a Senior Fellow at FDD, a former officer in the CIA's Directorate of Operations, and also an expert in Iran, both contemporary and ancient. I'm Cliff May. And I'm pleased you could be with us too, here on *Foreign Policy*.

Foreign Policy Intro

MAY: Ray, let me start with what seems like an obvious question with all that is happening in Iran and with all that Iran's rulers are doing in the Middle East and beyond, and with the Biden administration looking to get back into a deal with Iran's rulers about which we'll talk, and with all that, why have you been thinking, much less writing about the fall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

TAKEYH: Well, first of all, thanks very much for having me here today and it's always good to be with Reuel, and it's always good to be at FDD.

Why writing about the fall of the Shah, because I think now we can actually do it with some measure of perspective. We've gone beyond polemics and actually it's become a subject of historical interests. We have revelations of new documents, so we can better understand one of the most important revolutions that took place in the contemporary Middle East, and one of the great populous revolutions of the 20th century. And I think when you look at the fall of the Shah and the matter came about there a lot of resonance with today, both in terms of the Islamic Republic itself and American policy toward Iran as well.

MAY: You know, you guys know this, listeners may not, I spent a few months in Iran in 1979 arriving about the same time Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile at that point in France, where he seemed not to have enjoyed the wines and the cheese terribly.

It became clear to me that at that point, that when I got there, that he had broad support, not just Islamists, but I remember young people, very secular I guess mostly social democratic types, telling me that they were sure he valued them as part of a coalition that he was leading. They turned out to be very mistaken, didn't they?

TAKEYH: Well certainly, and they were mistaken by deliberate attempt because Khomeini was rather clear about his objectives. He could be a little ambiguous here and there, but he was rather clear that his aim was to create an Islamic state that would be governed by Islamic cannons and led by clerical rulers. He had little the room for liberalism, secularism or other such things. His hatreds were ancient, his determination was quite profound. So, he was quite clear about what he wanted. He never had much time for parliaments and democratic rule, and he was profoundly contemptuous of liberalism and the West, which he identified, of course, as the basis of liberal thought.

GERECHT: I mean, I'd go even so far as to say that he is, perhaps, the clearest of the major revolutionary figures of the 20th century. Certainly, as clear as Lenin was and the volume of material that was out there to read of his, was quite substantial and it remains one of the great failings of so many and the late 1970s that they just seemed to be obdurately unaware of this or chose to remain ignorant.

MAY: You got interested in Iran before the revolution, right?



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

GERECHT: Yeah. I mean, I started in the 1970s. I was actually ready to go study in Iran and I always remember fondly when it became obvious that things were not going to go well, that I had a very great professor, Martin Dixon, who joked with me, he says, “You know, now is the time to start all of these studies.” So yeah, I mean, it was an early passion. And I have to say the revolution amplified that passion.

TAKEYH: I just want to add one thing about what Reuel said, which is quite correct Khomeini’s body of work, the body of writing and speeches, go back to the 1940s.

GERECHT: Right.

TAKEYH: I mean, it was 30 years of quite persistent and dogmatic rejection of the things that he dogmatically rejected, violent power. So, this is go back to very long periods of time. His contempt for Israel predated Israel’s creation because contempt for the idea of, was antisemitism.

GERECHT: I think it really does show the hubris/naivete of many Iranian players in the 1970s that they thought that they somehow would get the better of the cleric and that he didn’t really mean what he had been writing. I mean, even more than Westerners, I think Iranians themselves are culpable and responsible for the predicament that they got themselves into.

I actually compliment Ray on this. I want – I’d say *The Last Shah* is a very, very enjoyable book to read. And Ray does better than I think anyone else that I can think of, of trying to restore some agency to Iranians. And that is a problem, I think, in a great deal of Western scholarship where we are so egocentric that we can’t let us not be the primary player where in fact Iranians are the primary player.

MAY: Yeah. If I remember correctly and I think I do Bernard Lewis, whom I think we all knew and you studied with him at Princeton, if I recall. You knew him, I’m sure Ray, as well, he had written about Khomeini but in particular, what was it 1970 that Khomeini wrote his book on Islamic jurisprudence that basically he had written before about this, but the concept that the ruling class of Iran or any Islamic countries should be the clerical class that’s who should be running the show. And if I remember correctly, Bernard Lewis attempted to, or proposed to write about this for *The New York Times*, *The New York Times* turned him down. Do you remember that?

GERECHT: Well, I mean, I do remember that Bernard had tried to get to as many people as possible in Washington information about Khomeini because he was certainly – he wasn’t, as *The New York Times* editorial page had described him, an enigma. So, he was doing his best to do so. And I do recall quite pointedly that there was a gentleman who was in charge of the Iran desk at that time, Henry Pract, I later got to know his daughter quite well, in Istanbul. That he actually referred to Bernard it as a sort of a Zionist agent spreading disinformation about Khomeini, that Khomeini wasn’t as bad and as convulsive as Bernard was suggesting,

TAKEYH: I would say the book that you’re talking about Cliff, which was a collection of his lectures.

MAY: Right, right.

TAKEYH: That was published in 1970, under the title, *Islamic Government*. And that book was actually at Princeton University library, at Harvard University library. It was available throughout the West. And I think Louis just went to the library as he always did and read it.



MAY: Right. So, one of the revelations in your book, I found, was that the intelligence community, which Reuel would become a member of, did know full well, that the Shah was getting shaky in the 1970s. And yet President Carter, rather curiously, in December of 1977, announced or made a toast, I forget exactly. And called famously or infamously called Iran, “An island of stability.” Was he not informed? Did he not believe? Or was he just kind of ad-libbing to be polite and flattering to his guests, to his hosts?

TAKEYH: That particular comment that he made in the toast on New Year’s Eve in Iran was actually not in the original speech. He sort of ad-libbed it. And so, he sometimes used to get carried away.

In terms of intelligence community, I would say the following about it. And this record by no means was perfect. Intelligence community as a whole, and there are different branches within it, got number of things right. Number one, it’s spotted that signs of discontent in Iran in the 1970s, which was hard to miss. When Richard Nixon arrived there for one of his state visits, he was subject to four independent bombings. When you can’t protect the head of state there’s something wrong.

Number two, they spotted the rise of religion as an ideology of descent. So, they saw the discontent and the rise of religion. Now there are a number of things that they didn’t get right, which I don’t think you could get right. Predicting a revolution.

MAY: Right.

TAKEYH: A revolution is an extraordinary event. I don’t think it can be prognosticated ahead of time. I don’t think you can even understand it when you’re living through it. And frankly, as someone who’s done this a couple of times, it’s very difficult even to retrospectively chronicle it.

So, a lot of times, for instance, of August 1978, August 1st, the intelligence community would write a report saying the Shah will remain in power. That judgment was correct in August 1st, 1978. It was not correct maybe three weeks later. That is how fast the events moved during the revolution where a judgment made on one date is correct on that date, but not two weeks later. And a lot of people retrospectively go back and said, “In August 1978, you said this and in February, that happened.” So that’s been the difficulty of the intelligence community.

There’s one thing, and one thing the intelligence community got wrong from day one to February 11th, 1979, that even if the Shah was incapable of acting, that Iranian military would step in and has sufficient cohesion and caliber to control the situation. So essentially, they invested a great deal in the ability of military to control events independently of the Shah. And if you hear things today, we say the same thing about how formidable Islamic Republic’s internal security organs are. It’s the same thing. So that that’s one thing they got wrong, and when you get that wrong, it kind of misinforms a lot of your other choices.

MAY: Right. Let me draw on that because in 1978, you mentioned August, by November Ambassador Sullivan, this is in your book, was sending a cable to Washington suggesting that Khomeini might be persuaded to compromise with the moderate dissidents. And then he has a quote, “To return Iran in triumph and holding Gandhi-like position in the political constellation.” And you write, I found this interesting, “As an emissary of a secular Republic known for its pragmatism, Sullivan simply could not comprehend revolutionaries who meant what they said.” And let me just add this and tell me if you think I’m right.



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

Yes, but also modernists, secularists, they find it hard to believe that religion can be taken that seriously by anybody. They would think no – and by the way, the people as a reporter, I was talking to probably didn't, they were kind of, "It was nice, but that's not them." Last thing they expected was what happened, which you should talk about, which is that they would either be arrested, executed, or forced to flee back to Austin, Texas, to teach some university, if they were very lucky.

TAKEYH: It's odd that we get religion wrong because the history of the West itself, all the religious struggles, the religious wars and religious business. Bill Sullivan was another person, in my opinion, that has been given a bad rap. Bill Sullivan was a good foreign service officer in the following sense.

He was very good at assessing people he met. So, he met the Shah and he met the generals of the Shah and said, "These people are worthless." He was not good at assessing people he did not meet. The exiles in Paris. So, the moderates in Iran that he encountered, he assumed they were the opposition. He assumed they were the center of the actives.

So, his cable traffic has an uneven quality to it. He's very good when he tells Brzezinski and others that, "The Shah is incapable of making decisions he's indecisive and the military you're investing in is actually in his phrase, 'A paper tiger.'" Because these are the people he encountered, he dealt with. He never encountered Khomeini.

GERECHT: I mean, it's also important to remember that for foreign service officers or for case officers, even if the local government doesn't prevent them from seeing dissidents, they're not inclined, really, to do so because it does put them in a stressful – can put them in a stressful situation with their official counterparts. And so, there's always friction, pressure going in the opposite direction, and it really does take a lot. And even if you have a very perspicacious officer out there, diplomat, it can be one man, one woman saying something in a sea of either neglect or opposing views. And it's very difficult for that to register. When you go back and you look at the historical record, you can go, "Oh, that was a very, very bright fellow. And he saw what was coming and would that we had listened to him." But in reality, that almost never, never happens.

MAY: Also, in your book, Ray, this is the middle of the Cold War and so his big concern was the Tudeh.

TAKEYH: The communists. Yes.

MAY: The communists. And that's what we have to worry about. Not some crazy religious, yeah.

TAKEYH: That runs through, that distorting obsession with whatever the remnants of the communist party runs through this entire narrative, the fear that the Khomeini people are not going to be formidable enough and the communists are the most organized group with a history of discipline. And the Tudeh party had a history in Iran of long period of activism, but it was eviscerated by the time we get to the 1970s. But that's one thing that was missed. A fear of the Soviet Union and so forth.

And the ironic aspect of all this is when we talk about the great powers is that the Shah had the support of both the United States and in some way, the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union is not a player in this particular cataclysmic event. That's what's so curious about it. This is a distinctively, a non-Cold War crisis.

GERECHT: Well, and there's actually a KGB memoir out there. His name will come to me in one second. Who's in-country during the revolution. And he's very fairly open, at least in retrospect saying, "We had no bloody idea what was going on." So, the KGB wasn't in better shape than we were.



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

MAY: Khomeini was an Ayatollah, a religious scholar, but Ray, you write that his concept of Shia contravened the dominant Shia thought at that time. Is that right? Am I remembering correctly?

TAKEYH: That's right. Reuel can expand on this too. It contravened normative Shia political teaching, mainly the idea that not just a clerical class should come to power but one cleric from the clerical class should assume power, and assume over temporal affairs. That was not unique in a sense that other religious scholars had spoken about that before. He didn't originate a doctrine of the jurist council, but he was, well, it's a minority opinion within the larger spectrum of Shia clerical community. And certainly, it has no real place, no place in a Sunni thing.

GERECHT: No. Yeah, no. I mean, I think you can sort of, again, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps you can draw a straight line between someone like Baqer Majlesi and Ayatollah Khomeini that there is this strain in some Shiite thought about jurors being a preeminent race. Absolutely right.

The notion that one jurist would be preeminent was an innovation on the part of Khomeini. He texted I think a principal that had been there before that, if secular authority is illegitimate in Shi'ism, which it is. If say, because you have to wait for the Hidden Imam to return. The Messiah. That if that's illegitimate, that does seem reasonable to say that those individuals who know the Holy Law the best should be preeminent in society. So, Khomeini took that idea that sort of sits, it's really a philosophy, but sentiment, and just took it to its logical revolutionary conclusion.

MAY: Also, however, and I think I've heard you talk about this, Reuel. I know I have. This was not a pure interpretation of Islamism, or Islam, or Islamic thought because there have been, there were aspects of Marxism that had filtered into the ideology, social justice concepts, as it were, that came from non-Islamic sources or vaguely Islamic sources, several of them preeminent in Iran.

GERECHT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, Marxism is everywhere. I mean, it's not just Iran, it's dominant throughout all the third world. It's the, to be chic, you're a Marxist. So, it's not surprising that you would see the penetration of Marxist thought. I mean, when I was in Najaf in 2003, the Shiite Holy site in Iraq, and I was going through, at that time, I think it's mostly been destroyed now, the great library of Najaf. And I was just looking around books to see what was there. I mean, there was a lot of Marxist literature in Arabic all over the place. So, I mean, it's effect, you might say was, lingering.

MAY: Ray, so moving forward, when the Shah understood what was happening, you write that he believed the Monarch should not kill his subjects. His successors have not shared that, that sentiment. Do you think that if he had been more ruthless, he could have put down this revolution?

TAKEYH: This is a debate, which if he would have to be ruthless and his generals would have to be ruthless. And I think the generals mirrored the shock in their indecisiveness. And the Shah was not – he was a lot of things. He was cynical, he was arrogant, certainly, but he was not cruel. And he confronted the leader, Khomeini, who was completely indifferent to human life. And that cleavage is I think the responsible for such things. Khomeini had no problem with large numbers of human beings dying for the cause of God.

MAY: Oh, and killed quite a few of them. And later regretted he hadn't killed more. Thousands, not hundreds. Thousands. Right?

TAKEYH: Thousands. And then, he sent another hundreds or thousands to deaths during the Iran-Iraq War to achieve an objective, which was unrealizable for eight years, for at least six years that Iran continued the war after Iraq was



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

willing to sign the armistice in 1982. He was completely and utterly indifferent to human life, including his own son. His own son, Mostafa, died. I think his quote was when they told him he died, he said, "Those who come from God return to God." I don't believe he attended the funeral. Reuel?

GERECHT: No, I don't think so.

TAKEYH: You figure he would put that on his schedule, right? Today, son's funeral.

MAY: I have a question, another hypothetical for Ray. I mean, suppose, Reza Shah had not been removed and, or you can even say he is removed. Do you think that Mohammad Reza actually adopted a different approach to the military from his father, that his son seemed to like to have sycophants everywhere and removed as you very admirably discussed in the book, removed a lot of men of talent? Well, so did his father, but the question would be, did his father maintain greater respect for the military? And because he was such a forceful personality, didn't engage in quite the cleaning exercise that his son did?

TAKEYH: His son distrusted powerful figures, and he worried constantly about coups against him. To some extent there's some justification for people plotting against him. So, he wanted, essentially, a system of control whereby nobody made decisions but him and he eventually got people who couldn't make decisions without him. And as the great Persian scholar Ann Lambton said, he was a dictator who couldn't dictate. He couldn't rule Iran and he wouldn't let anybody else do it. But the fact that he created by mid-sixties onward, not just in the military, but in the civilian sector as well, individuals who could not make decisions. And that's what they were there for.

And this is one of the things when Robert Heiser is sent to Iran by Jimmy Carter in 1979, I think in January of 1979, to see what he can do with the Iranian military. Heiser shows up and it's Friday, it's a day off. It's a holiday. And he walks into the barracks. There's nobody there. And so, he calls the head of the Iranian military. He says, where is everybody? He goes, well, we have a day off. He goes, no you don't, there's a revolution in the street! Everybody back to their offices! What do you mean you have the day off?

I mean, the revolution doesn't take a day off. Heiser asks them after a year of this revolt, "What plans do you have?" They said, we have no plans. The Shah makes plans. And the Shah made no plans. As Ardeshir Zahedi recently told me, the Shah's foreign minister and his last minister, his last ambassador to the United States, the revolution didn't win. We collapsed. And I think there is something to that.

MAY: Right? Right. So, I mean, just to remind people, the chronology, January 16th, 1979, the Shah flees the country.

TAKEYH: Yes.

MAY: A few weeks later, February 1st, the Ayatollah Khomeini arrives from France. And he declares very honestly, as you discussed, that this is not a nationalist rebellion. This is not about Iran. This is a Koranic rebellion, an Islamic rebellion. The following month in March, a referendum is held on the founding of the Islamic Republic. And there was a yes ballot, colored green and a red ballot colored no. And voters had to request one or the other. And I remember covering this polling. And I was with a producer. I was working on a documentary for PBS and my producer was Iranian and very, very much pro-revolution and pro-Khomeini. He was not an Islamist, but he was one of these people I tell you, but very pro.



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

And he saw that I didn't appear terribly impressed by this. And he said, why not? And I said, well, it's not secret balloting for one. And he said, you think people would vote any differently if it were secret balloting? If they didn't have to ask red or green, if they weren't imams, mullahs in the voting booths? And I said, no, not this time, but maybe next time. And so, you're setting a very bad precedent and he got very, very angry with me. And then it was, I guess, comment on anything you want. But it was over the months that followed that, that the liberals, the social Democrats, the communists, the students, anybody who wasn't seen as absolutely with Khomeini, even if they were loyal, they began to be cast aside. Women's rights were curtailed. You started to see all the women in shut doors. Religious minorities began to be outright persecuted and Islamic courts were established. I mean, that's when it started to roll out, right?

TAKEYH: Yes. And another group of people that were persecuted along the lines that you suggested were traditional clerks. There was a special court of clergy created. I don't think that had precedent before. The court just dealing with members of the clergy who do not subscribe to the existing orthodoxy, as arcane as that orthodoxy was. This special court of clergy is very interesting because, Reuel can speak about this. I don't think there's a precedent of that.

GERECHT: No, it was a truly a remarkable innovation and it just goes to show you how far they were going. And again, I don't know if you want to call it Marxist importation, but it shows you that this was a very, very modern revolutionary movement. It's in fact, isn't the seventh century coming at you, I think there was a lot of commentary about that in part because some of the things they did were so cruel and you did have the return of child marriage and those things. But this was a very modern movement.

TAKEYH: One thing about the period after the revolution, and I think it's important to talk about this. The period that you were there in Iran, Cliff. March 1979 and so forth, is the level of blood that was shed. The executions. Because the standard practice of the Islamic Republic was to essentially have a very quick trial, which wasn't even a trial. When a General was being tried, he asked the court judge, a tiny deranged man named Sadegh Khalkhali, he was actually mentally deranged. And he said, "What does corruption of Earth mean? The charge, "What does corruption of Earth mean?"

He said, "It's what you're guilty of." And then the person would be executed, and once he's executed, his picture would be taken. And as you recall, Cliff, the next day those pictures would be on front pages of the papers. And I think that needs to be – Among the people that were executed was the Shah's first Minister of Female Affairs, was an elderly Jewish businessman. Then it became religious minorities, ethnic minorities and so forth. The level of execution and arbitrariness of the revolution, I don't think should be discounted, should not in any way be excised from our collective memory.

This was a period in March, April, May, where all the promises were broken, because Khomeini had, privately, given the Shah's generals immunity. He had said that you'd be immunized. One of the Shah's generals, General Moghaddam, who was the head of SAVAK, was on his way to Prime Minister Bazargan's office to hand over the files to him when he was picked up and executed. I think his trial lasted 45 minutes. So, the cruelty of Khomeini was on full display. His mendacity was on full display.

GERECHT: Absolutely.

TAKEYH: Khomeini was actually in that sense, one of the most mendacious rulers we had, but Reuel can comment on that as well.

GERECHT: I was just going to say, I think that in some sense, the regime benefited for quite some time from the initial brutality, which I think shocked Iranians. In certain quarters, in certain apologetic quarters, people like to point out



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

and say, “Well, you know, the Iranian Revolution, compared to other revolutions, it didn’t spill that much blood.” But, I think the only way you can properly look at this is within the context of Iran. It had been a long time since you had a Shah who blinded hundreds and hundreds of people, that the system was not used, the body politic was not used to this level of violence. And I think it really threw people for a Shah – I think a lot of revolutionaries, actually, if you talk to them privately, were ashamed of the way they conducted themselves, or the way they condoned or remained silent when Khomeini and his minions started ripping society apart.

TAKEYH: Well, the head judge, if you want to call him that, Khalkhali, published his memoirs in two volumes. At the end of his memoirs, he has before and after photos. Before somebody is executed, right? Regular picture of an army officer, and after with the bullets written on his body. He has before and after pictures of those he executed. I mean, it’s in his memoirs, this is extraordinary.

GERECHT: I think it’s fair to say the Iranian revolution brought forth those who reveled in the dark side. I mean, that’s not unusual for revolutions, but a lot of folks who would have been considered sort of socially unacceptable within the clergy found room for a promotion.

MAY: You know, I think by summer, most journalists, myself included, left. As I recall, the papers weren’t that interested and this didn’t seem to be going anywhere special. It would seem to be kind of in a – I don’t know, it would appear to be a quiet period. And then you come into the fall, and of course, what you have in November is the takeover of the U.S. Embassy, and the beginning of what will be called the hostage crisis, where our diplomats are being abused and held, and our embassy, which is sort of like sovereign territory, is under their control.

My impression from your book and other places is that at first Khomeini was dubious about this, and then at a certain point, he realized that this was kind of revitalizing the revolution. And of course, the other thing he came to believe, which has been a chant along with “Death to America” ever since, is the Americans cannot do a damn thing. He realized how impotent America really was. They were not going to do anything terrible about this absolute total violation of the most basic international law, holding diplomats hostage, and taking over an embassy, the most basic violation.

TAKEYH: Yeah, it is my contention in the book, and I think there’s evidence on the Persian side and now we have some evidence on the American side, that Khomeini instigated the embassy takeover. He actually ordered it, and that’s been –

GERECHT: Ray, I think you’re being too modest there. I think you did some real groundbreaking research there.

TAKEYH: I mean, you see that on the Persian side, but now a series of documents have come about recently about the Carter administration where in the first week, Stansfield Turner, the Director of the CIA, told Carter that actually Khomeini ordered it. And it is sometimes suggested that, not to get too far in the weeds, that the provisional Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, had recently met Zbigniew Brzezinski in Algiers in November, shortly before the embassy takeover, and that led to a lot of concerns among the revolutionaries. According to the CIA estimates, Khomeini had given the order for embassy seizure on October 16th, before Bazargan’s meeting with Brzezinski. This is in their words.

Now, why does Khomeini order the embassy takeover? Why did he do this? I think at some level, the most important thing he wanted to convey, you can say that the embassy takeover was designed to help the revolution consolidate itself by generating anti-American feelings and so on. That is a legitimate fair point, but that cannot explain 444 days. I think one of the principal motivations that Khomeini had in ordering the embassy seizure was to humiliate the United States.



February 11, 2021

Featuring Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

GERECHT: Absolutely.

TAKEYH: And was to suggest directly, Cliff, what you said, that America is impotent, because America loomed large in the Iranian imagination at that time. He wanted to demonstrate the impotence and inability of the United States to act. He wanted to suggest his revolution was so powerful that it could break and shatter all the things that we have thought and knew about the American power and American ability to condition outcomes in Iran. And I think it was to humiliate the United States, but also to personally punish Jimmy Carter. Khomeini despised Carter. He despised all Americans, but he particularly despised Carter because the support that Carter had offered the Shah during the revolution.

MAY: So, there's a lot of other subjects I want to talk about, but in the interest of time, I'm going to kind of fast forward to the present, or close to it, and just remind people that Khomeini died in 1989. He was succeeded by Ali Khamenei, who has been the Supreme Leader ever since. He's now, what, 81 years old I believe, if memory serves?

TAKEYH: Yeah.

MAY: He is an ardent Khomeinist. He also burns with hatred for the U.S. and here's the – And you have this interesting sentence in your book, that he and his theocrats are in pursuit of the most ambitious imperial venture in Iran's modern history, and indeed, of this century, the most interesting and ambitious imperial venture. And that's not seen by so many, that this is a matter of imperialism.

TAKEYH: Yes, Shia imperialism. I would say people always suggest, a lot of analysts, that there's a continuity between Shah's foreign policy and the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, that they both "sought hegemony in the region." The Shah's principal interests were actually more in the Persian Gulf area and Iraq, because those were neighboring states. He didn't really have that much interest in the Levant. He mucked around a little bit in Lebanon, but the confused politics of Lebanon distracted him. He had no particular investment in Syria's future. If the Shah was exhumed today, he would look at what the Islamic Republic has done in terms of its imperial reach, and he would, a), be impressed, and second, be shocked.

Impressed that they have so much outposts throughout the region, and shocked by the sheer waste of resources that this country has poured into places like Lebanon, the Syrian Civil War, all the other plethora of proxies and groups that they have supported. The Islamic Republic's imperial policy is ideological. It is motivated and driven by an ideological impulse. It has no cost-benefit analysis to it. Frankly, imperialism usually was not that profitable, but in this particular case, the costs are so much more obvious than the profits. I don't even know what the profits means. What does it mean, really, for the benefit of Iran to have a meaningful role in the politics of Lebanon?

MAY: But Khomeini said, "This revolution is not about the price of watermelons." It's an international revolution, and it must spread for, as you say, ideological, or one might say theological reasons. Which brings us probably to the last subject for the last 10 minutes we have, which is that the Obama approach was to say, "You know what? If we tell Ayatollah Khamenei he should have – We understand his equities. We recognize his equities. He should just be reasonable. He and the Saudis, they should share the region," I think was the phrase he used, "I think this will all work out okay." And of course, sharing the region and taking half a loaf made an, I would say – Well, you can correct me if I'm wrong. That was never something that was going to be entertained by the theocrats in Tehran.

GERECHT: Yeah, no. I mean, if anything, actually, what was, I thought, most awry was that I think Obama's evident desire to have an outreach, to embrace the revolutionary clergy, actually drove them away. There's nothing they hate



February 11, 2021

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more than Americans trying to play nice-nice. I mean, I think it is extremely difficult for – It shouldn't be that difficult for Americans, because let's be frank, has anyone had a more powerful "mission sournisatrice" in the Western world than Americans? So, it should be relatively easy for Americans to appreciate when they see an Islamic version of that. And you don't do a cost-benefit analysis if you are motivated by the notion that you are recreating or creating a new civilization. That is an end in itself, and in fact, to put a cost on it, I think, does a disservice.

I think eventually you do reach a point where even the most revolutionary regimes just can't expand the money that they want and they don't have the resources necessary. I don't know in Obama's case whether he thought that, because his commentary on the Islamic Republic is pretty thin. So, I don't know if he thought that the revolution was over, that they were at thermador. I don't know if he thought that the only reason they've been nasty is because we've been nasty. You know, in 1953 we did the coup and everything's in a response to that, which I would argue is just historical nonsense.

But it's difficult to know what really was motivating Obama. He certainly gave the impression, as early as 2008, that if America would simply extend its hand, then things would be better.

MAY: Ray, give us your take on that, but then transition into what you think may be the take of President Biden, of Jake Sullivan, his National Security Advisor, or Antony Blinken, his Secretary of State.

TAKEYH: I would say one of the things that Americans persistently get wrong about Iran along the line that Reuel has suggested, and makes it difficult for them to understand it, is that the revolution has been destructive, but it has not exhausted itself. Most revolutionary states at some point leave behind the slogans of the past and become more pragmatic in some ways. You see that in the reaction of most revolutionaries. The Iranian revolution has not gone through that particular phase. It has never lost its vigor, maybe because it's a revolution that's animated by religion, as opposed to Marxist.

GERECHT: I mean, it's lost people. I mean, there have been –

TAKEYH: It's lost people, it's lost the public, but the ruling class maintains allegiance to this system of ideas. And what Reuel said is actually quite interesting, because even when the constituents abandoned it, they haven't. They're not even smart politicians. I mean, they haven't changed their tune.

They believe in what they believe, irrespective of the fact that they have losses in a constituency. This is something Americans have never been able to understand about the Islamic Republic, is that the Islamic Republic is not about to forfeit these revolutionary ideals for some kind of an arrangement with the United States or Saudi Arabia or so forth. Those who are in charge believe in this mission. They believed the purpose of the regime is to respond to God as they define what God wants.

GERECHT: And I think you could even take it a bit further and say that the collapse of the revolution at home has actually fueled their desire to see the revolution succeeded abroad.

TAKEYH: At considerable cost, which further undermines the rule at home.

GERECHT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's a perverse situation, but I think they're in.



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TAKEYH: For the United States today, and every time people ask me about the Biden administration, I always have a cautionary preface. Namely, I'm not in the council. So, I speak with my impressions. They look at Iran as an arms control issue, and every time an arms control issue enters a debate, it sucks all the life out of it. It becomes so very uninteresting. Iran is an interesting country. It is not about whether you put rotors and centrifuges in year seven or year nine – a year nine or seven, whatever. It's not about IRNs and IR2s. Those are important issues, but I think when I'm looking at Iran today and I've shared this with Reuel others, it's not so much Iran is an arms control issue, as an exhausted revolutionary regime that is incapable of reforming itself and is facing persistent public pressure. And here is a commonality between Iran today and Iran of 1978, because you take what people were saying about the Shah in 1978, and you replaced the Shah with the Islamic Republic, and it's the same point.

They've been around for over 37 years. They faced a lot of crises. He has overcome them. There's discontent in the country, but the regime has resources and security forces to overcome that. That's what they were said about Shah. Exactly the same thing is said about the Islamic Republic. In one sense, the legacy of the revolution is, there is none. There is information and it's erased. So, what I would suggest if anybody wants to look at, it's not so much the arms control issues sharing the region, but I do think the durability of the Islamic Republic cannot be conceded. There is something particularly abnormal about this regime ruling this population, and that imbalance, in my opinion, cannot be historically sustained.

MAY: Well, if the Biden administration does go back into the JCPOA, the Iran deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, does that increase the durability of the regime?

GERECHT: Well, I mean, it's certainly going to give it more money, and that doesn't hurt. I don't think it revives philosophically, spiritually, what's been lost. That's gone. So, I think it is important because if you believe as I do that the revolution now has to derive sustenance, largely abroad, then obviously having more cash to fuel that religious Shiite imperialism is helpful, but it's not going to save the regime at home – in the same sense that having a nuclear weapon won't save the regime at home. I think some in the regime actually believe that having a bomb is a sort of a protective mechanism for their regime itself. I think that's wrong. I don't think it's true. Certainly, wasn't the case in the Soviet Union.

TAKEYH: I would say just one thing about this. The Democratic Party platform of 2020, the Biden platform, said explicitly that the United States does not favor a regime change in Iran. To me, no political party's platform has had a more morally vacuous phrase than that one. To their credit, Republicans had no platform. A platform? Why? Rather not have a platform than that one. The notion that the United States – You can say that we are not actively involving Iranian politics. Well to affirmatively suggest that we do not contest this regime's legitimacy in my opinion was morally reckless.

GERECHT: Well I would also – and here's the historical parallel. I mean, at the end of the Cold War, the Democratic Party had gone completely south on the issue of the Soviet Union and didn't envision, they were détenteists plus. But when the Soviet Union did go down, and the Soviet empire went down, then it was pretty hard to find anyone on the left who didn't say, "Well, we were always in favor of regime change." I suspect the same thing, what would happen with the Islamic Republic, they would suddenly discover that in fact, yes, we were always in favor of regime change. We just weren't in favor of a confrontational approach, something like that.

TAKEYH: But, to be fair, during the entire Cold War, even during the détente period of 1970, no Democratic Party platform ever affirmed the legitimacy of Soviet State, not the one the McGovern ran on, not the one Mondale ran on, not the one Dukakis ran on. This was an extraordinary departure, and a profoundly reckless one, in my opinion.



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MAY: I guess this is my final question. It appears that the Biden administration wants to get back into the Iran deal, but is not rushing to do so. It appears to me that the theocrats would like to revive the Iran deal, but they'd like to humiliate the Americans a little bit more before that happens. Do you have a sense, either of you, of how that plays out and Reuel any sense of whether there's general agreement within this administration, which also has Rob Malley, who is seen as sympathetic to the regime, of what they're going, what policy they're going to settle on and what they're going to do?

GERECHT: Well, I mean, I think they have to figure out some way to throw money. I mean, it begins with them giving cash. So, now, whether they want to do that in a large way, whether they want to try to do that before Hassan Rouhani leaves the presidency is an excellent question. I have been of the impression that they want to do something before he leaves office. In which case the Americans have to move first. They have to throw, I think, a fair amount of cash at the Iranians. The administration may fib in the way that they do it, because I do think they realize there's an embarrassing potential here, but I do think the – It is up to the Americans to actually move first, and the only way they can move is by giving the regime more or less what it wants, which is our currency.

TAKEYH: I would actually agree with that. I think there's a lot of showboating. "We're not going to get back on until you comply," or, "Oh no you got to comply first." This will be choreographed. At some point, both parties will have some kind of a sequence when they essentially get back, quote unquote, to a deal. Iranians will get paid. There'll be some shipping out of enriched uranium, which is a meaningless thing, and then there'll be discussions about renegotiating the deal, which will go nowhere. This is an administration that actually on one level that's been very successful – is rather clever. I don't know if it's successful, but it's clever, in the sense that in 2015, the proponents of the deal, many of the people who are in government today argued with the critics. They said, "No, this is a gold standard deal. This blocks all pathways."

They argued with their critics. Today they have renounced the agreement that they're getting back into. When they say the agreement has to be made longer and stronger, that means it's short and weak. So, they're denouncing the agreement that they want to go back to, but in a way, that's very clever. They're not disagreeing with the critics of the agreement. They're not arguing with the critics of the agreement. They're saying, "You are absolutely correct in all your objections, and we are addressing those objections." When three weeks from now, deputy minister of foreign affairs in charge of oceanic affairs, by the way that exists in the Iranian foreign ministry, will meet his counterpart in Geneva, and a technical group will be set up to discuss this. And that's what I think they'll do for four years, and I actually think the politics are as such, that they'll get away with it.

MAY: Well, this has been fun. This has been fascinating. I've learned a lot. We'll have to get back together in a month or two and see how it's going. Ray, you don't have to write another book in order to get invited back. Reuel, maybe you do. Thanks for being with us Ray. Thank you, Reuel. Thanks to all of you who also have been with us. Hope you've enjoyed it here on *Foreign Podicy*.