



**MAY:** An election of sorts was held in the Islamic Republic of Iran last week. The victor, Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline theocrat, who has been sanctioned by the U.S. for his involvement in the mass execution of political prisoners. Voter turnout was reportedly low. To discuss these developments and how the Biden administration among others may respond, I'm joined by Ray Takeyh, formerly a senior advisor on Iran at the Department of State, currently a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. And by Reuel Marc Gerecht, formerly a Middle-East specialist at the CIA's Directorate of Operations, currently a senior fellow at FDD. And by Behnam Ben Taleblu, also a senior fellow at FDD, where he focuses on Iranian security and political issues. I'm Cliff May, and I'm pleased you're joining us too here on Foreign Podicy.

**MAY:** All right. So, to give this some context, news consumers hear, oh, the Islamic Republic is having an election. And they may think, oh, how very democratic of them. That's certainly what the regime and its defenders and its sympathizers and its apologists here and in Europe, want people to think. But the truth is more nuanced, right? These are not exactly free and fair elections. Are they, Ray? Why don't you kick this off, this discussion?

**TAKEYH:** No, they're not free and they're not fair. And they're less free and less fair than I think any time in the past 42 years. This was a stage-managed promotion of Ebrahim Raisi to the presidency, in my view, as a means of pre-staging his ultimate rise to that of the position of the Supreme Leader, should that position become available in the next couple of years and so on. He is, as you suggested, a man of checkered background, but I will say this was the least interesting Iranian presidential election that I have seen in the past quarter of century. Every election in the past few years in Iran has had a color, the Green Revolution, the green color from the 2009, the purple of 2013, the color here was black.

**TAKEYH:** It was a lackluster race where candidates essentially talk about sound management and try to avoid the background of Mr. Raisi where he is a blood-soak member of the regime's security apparatus. I have never seen an Iranian leader talk so easily about killing in name of God since Khomeini came to power in 1979. He resembles very much that kind of a person in terms of his determination, discipline and callousness.

**MAY:** And Benham, I'm just flesh out a little bit how this works, because it's not like anybody who wants who can form a political party and then raise a little bit of money and write some op-eds and run for election. It's a little more complex than that. Talk about briefly how it works.

**TALEBLU:** So, Iran, if you begin to map out some of the orients that constitutes the system of government in the Islamic Republic, at first glance, you may think that there are separate branches with checks and balances, but when you look more closely, there's overlapping and competing institutions, some "elected" or selected institutions that are checked by totally unelected institutions. In all the "public elections" or national level elections, there's this body, this 12-person body, called the Guardian Council, that in some way, most importantly acts as a proxy or vetting mechanism on behalf of the Supreme Leader for people who are entering higher stages of national public life. They disqualify candidates en masse to get a smaller pool. And then they have a competition within that smaller pool with almost always a preordained outcome.

**TALEBLU:** One of the political science terms you could say to apply to Iran's political system is competitive authoritarianism. It's an authoritarian state, the regime's obvious philosophy or ideologies Islamist, transnational in nature. But in this case, one reason why Ray is correct to point out how boring it was, is that the competition is less present than ever before. There's more backdoor engineering to prevent less electoral fallout, less electoral shock, like 2009, for instance, where the Green Movement took place. So the body that technically makes an election a selection is the Guardian Council. And in this case, the person who ran and became the president elect, or I like to say, president



select, is Raisi. He's someone who's run before. He ran in 2017 and he failed to oust the incumbents, because the Islamic Republic has a trajectory of the president, if he runs for reelection gets to win. So he lost that contest, but that did not mean the end of his political fortunes.

**TALEBLU:** And with men like Raisi at the helm, I think we know where the Islamic Republic is headed for the next generation, because Khamenei, the country's Supreme Leader, is in the eighth decade of his life, third decade of his career as Supreme Leader and fourth decade living in this thing, this experiment called the Islamic Republic. And he's looking for an agent of spaces not change. And that's why you have all these institutions doing what they're doing now, having an ultra hard-line ascendancy in the parliament, having an ultra hard-liner as president to ensure this revolutionary trajectory.

**MAY:** Reuel, you wrote a piece, I guess, about a week ago in *The Dispatch* and you pretty much predicted that yeah, Raisi was going to win. You knew that, but do you see Raisi winning this job as a way for the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, to say, "This is who I want as my successor. This should be the next Supreme Leader," which means dictator for life. Let's just be clear about that. Is that what's indicated by this election longer term?

**GERECHT:** Yeah. I think it's highly likely, obviously he couldn't set him up to be Supreme Leader and have him lose this election. So that would have been two elections he would have lost. And I think the system is still sufficiently sensitive to popular opinion that that would have been too much for them to handle. I would add on the issue of the tension between democracy and theocracy. I mean, those two forces have been in the Islamic Republic since birth. And I think the Supreme Leader has simply decided that democracy is just too potentially turbulent, that if you look back to say 1997, when Mohammad Khatami was elected, he was a very mild mannered intellectual cleric yet he propelled forward a reform movement that really scared the regime that brought people who had initially supported them actually into opposition, and that movement was crushed by 1999.

**GERECHT:** And that was the end of the Islamic left. You had in 2009, I mean, you had two stalwart revolutionaries, one a lay, left leaning thug, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and the other a left-wing clerical thug, Mehdi Karoubi, who actually brought together, they rode on top of the pro-democracy movement that literally shook the foundations of the state. So I think in Khamenei's view, that democracy is just simply has become too unreliable, that you have to essentially bind it together and restrict it enough that it cannot challenge the state.

**MAY:** Ray, one way that you could argue their democracy functions is in voter turnout. In other words, voters can say, "Okay, you're not giving us much choice." The Guardian Council said, "All these candidates who would like to run, we don't approve them, they're out." The running number of the candidates that dropped out at the last minute for whatever reason, clearing the way for Raisi, so people cannot—What I've seen about voter turnout is that it was very low, less than half of the eligible voters did turn out, which is the lowest rate for a president election I think ever possibly, certainly compared to what? The 70% in 2017, who I would argue, maybe I'm wrong, would've liked to see a more moderate government and thought maybe they could get one if they voted for the candidate who is more pragmatic and less theocratic. Do I have that wrong?

**TAKEYH:** No, I think that's right. The regime suggests that the voter turnout was 49%. I can't believe it was that high. But even by its own acknowledgement, about 10% of the ballots were about 3.7 million ballots were protest ballots in a sense that people turned in a blank ballot or wrote the name of somebody else. There is the tension between democracy and theocracy that Reuel had talked about, there is another tension in the Islamic Republic political cycle, namely, Ali Khamenei likes to have a high voter turnout because that to him is an affirmation of the regime. Well, he



recognizes that a high voter turnout militate begins his preferred candidate getting selected. And so how do you mitigate this tension? The way they chose to do so is to eliminate even pretense of electoral accountability.

**TAKEYH:** Today, Iran is Iran without delusions. There are no more delusions that the system can reform itself. There are no more delusions that electoral cycle can produce surprises. In our debates before the election, I always said to my friends, including Reuel, that Iranian elections always surprise, 1997 and 2005. This election did not surprise, which means the system has become rigid and flexible and arrogant. And I would say, the level of criticism of this election cycle is quite pronounced in Iran. There is a lot of criticism of what is going on. The regime today is in a very difficult situation. It has a very vibrant population that is protesting these electoral irregularities and authoritarian structure that is completely divested from popular accountability. This is not a sustainable situation in the long-term, short-term, medium-term. It is a dilemma that the regime has in terms of how do you control a population that is disaffected, angered and energized? I don't think this should be interpreted as an election of apathy, this is an election that has angered many people, including in critical sectors by the way.

**GERECHT:** And I might add on that. I just think that it will fundamentally alter the rhetoric in the United States. I mean, in the past, you had an amusing situation where you know dogged, profound founding fathers of the Islamic revolution could be called pragmatist moderates. I think Raisi has probably taken that rhetoric to the breaking point. And I think you're going to see a change. I don't think you're going to see people arguing that American engagement is going to moderate the regime. I think we're likely to see, as Ray has often pointed out, a rhetoric that goes back to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong, and that we're going to have to deal with these killers in a real politic way. It doesn't fundamentally change the end result of what the administration is going to do probably, but it is going to cause a significant shift in how they deal with it. And I would fully expect the administration, for example, to give way on sanctions, a lot of different issues to get back to the nuclear deal. But they're probably going to criticize the regime as they do it. They won't do as Obama did, which was essentially to pull all his punches in that he'd adopted a very nice rhetoric towards the Islamic Republic as he was negotiating with them and after he concluded the deal.

**TAKEYH:** Can I just make one point? Apology, Ben. One of the things that this election has changed, Reuel was correct about the administration strategy. One of the things that has changed is the possibility of regime collapse is no longer a fanciful right-wing notion in America. Many left-wing academicians and others now envision the possibility of the system actually at its impasse coming to collapse.

**MAY:** Except for Max Fisher, the New York Times.

**TAKEYH:** Not necessarily regime change, or regime collapse is now an acceptable conversation to have in the United States, the way we all contest it wasn't before, it was conversation that we were happy, me, Reuel, and a few others, but not all of us. That aperture is widened.

**MAY:** Benham, Raisi is a hard-liner, he's a conservative, he's ideological, but I think we need to explain a little more that it's beyond that in the sense that when he's called a killer, that's not like being mean to him. That's an objective description of his past. I think it's worth making sure that listeners understand the extent to which he has been involved in the slaughter really of dissidents inside Iran, no?

**TALEBLU:** Indeed. I want to make a couple of points before Reuel continues to bash realism or we end the conversation about legitimacy and how Iran does like to covet high turnout. Because I agree, there really is a tension unfolding before our eyes. And you can see this tension actually not just in theocracy versus autocracy, but you can also



see it in the slogans or things people inside Iran have been chanting. 1997 reformist Tehran University students who voted for then candidates later on reformist President Mohammad Khatami, they said, and they marked the elections. They said, Meneviseem Khatami, Mikhonand Nategh-Nouri which is, "We write Khatami, they read Nategh-Nouri." So in the ballot they would write their candidate, the reformist candidate, but when you would come up, they would read the name of the principal's candidate. So then the reformist Tehran University students couldn't even fathom that the Islamic Republic would let a reformist run and win and birth the movement that it did.

**TALEBLU:** Then you have the other slogans chanted during the past three, three and a half years of nationalist protests, which no conversation about electoral turnout in Iran can be divorced from, because we've had the most sustained nationwide geographically diverse protests against the Islamic Republic from the ground up, urban and rural poor included, ethnic minorities included, in a way that you've never really had since 1979. And they were violently repressed in a way that was never as a repressed as this, using weapons of war against their own population since 1979. You can't divorce it from that.

**TALEBLU:** And one thing Iranians protested during those three years was (inaudible) which as you can see in Persian, we like to rhyme, which is, "Reformists' principle is the jig is up." So, the chants in the Iranian streets and in the Iranian electorate have moved from '97 to 2017, have moved from '99 to 2021, from reform towards revolution. And you're in a position where another contradiction is that play where you have a revolutionary government continuing to coarsen and a post-revolutionary society continuing to reject that coarsening. Before the way Iranians would protest was to go to the ballot box and vote for the candidate that was perceived to be the furthest away from Khamenei intellectually or ideologically. The way they do it now is to protest the entire ballot box. And Khamenei knows that, so he's trying to get people back in and say, "I don't care about the candidate." He explicitly says this. He just believes any vote is a vote for the system. So, this is not a tenable situation.

**GERECHT:** That is a lie, by the way, but that's okay.

**MAY:** That is what?

**GERECHT:** It's a lie. I mean, he really does care, which-

**TALEBLU:** Obviously he cares, but the thing he's able to use and the reason he can afford to say that is even if you have Hemmati, the winner is not Hemmati, the winner is Khamenei. If you have Raisi, yes, the winner could be Raisi, but the ultimate winner is Khamenei. In every situation, the net winner is Khamenei, the net loser is the Iranian people.

**MAY:** Okay. Two things I think—So I don't want to go be over the heads of too many listeners. When we're talking about Hemmati, we're talking about a candidate who was considered the closest to a technocrat, the furthest from Khamenei. And it's interesting because one thing that he said is, in his final campaign debate, he talked about the hard-liners, which he obviously feels he's not one. And he said, "Look, if they get back into power—" Here, this is a quote from me. "I tell you, there is going to be more sanctions with global consensus." Now that's an interesting thing because if he's wrong and if that's not true, if it's like, "Oh, well, we don't care." And that's the view from the Biden administration and from Europe. That means that the Biden administration and Europe are solidifying the hard-liners and doing damage to those who are furthest from Khamenei, who I wouldn't consider moderates, but I would consider pragmatists who may be willing to make some concessions.



**MAY:** All want the regime to continue to exist. I think that we agree on, but tell me if you don't, but if you're Biden or his advisor, you should say, "You know what? We have to make Hemmati correct. We cannot just—Now we have a hard-liner. We need more sanctions with global consensus in place we can't, relieve the sanction pressure."

**MAY:** And with that, I'm going to ask, say, if somebody, again, I do think we need to get this for the listener. This guy was sanctioned, and I'm talking about Raisi, by the U.S. government. And he was sanctioned for a reason. Just talk about what the verge, just for a second what that reason is so we understand that this guy again, is not just somebody who, oh, we disagree with his ideology. Well, he's a conservative, of course, everybody hates conservatives, whatever they are, American or Iranian or whatever they are. And we're talking about mass executions of dissidents without fair trial. Give me that for 30 seconds, Ben.

**TALEBLU:** Sure. Just very briefly, Raisi is not even sanctioned under human rights authorities. He's sanctioned under an authority that allows the U.S. government to target any individual that is appointed to a position of power inside the Islamic Republic through Khamenei. So the U.S. has an executive order, that the Trump administration signed, that allows the U.S. to target anyone that Khamenei appoints to a position of prominence. So anyone Khamenei appoints into a network or into one position, this is the sanction. So one, the U.S. has been derelict in going after this guy for many years, because they didn't use existing human rights authorities. Two is, it's wrong what they're saying on television that Washington, to the best of my knowledge, has human rights sanctions against him, because he doesn't. Now to your point, why do human rights sanctions even need to exist against this guy?

**TALEBLU:** I'm very lucky. I think I'm the youngest person on this podcast right now talking to you guys. I was the youngest senior fellow in D.C., age 29, when that happened. At age 28, Raisi spilled immense amounts of blood for this regime. And he did it without so much as a quiver or a shake. Raisi at the age of 28 was working his way through the legal system of the Islamic Republic. I believe he was a deputy prosecutor general of Tehran. I have to double-check his resume, but he's had multiple attorney general and deputy prosecutor general and prosecutor general positions in Iran's judiciary for the past three decades. And he was part of a four-member death commission that human rights organizations have talked about implementing two fatwas from the founding father of Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, basically killing people, political prisoners, who were already serving their sentences in jails in Tehran. And this was basically mass purges.

**TALEBLU:** They would ask them very kind of basic questions about their religion and ideology, and then literally select and kill them, according to these two different fatwas. And Raisi was a member of this four-person death commission. There's audio recordings, where his voice is barely heard, not because he's afraid, but because he is literally going along with it all, agreeing and implementing to it all. And it was really this instance, this mass killing of upwards of 5,000 political prisoners in 1988, that cemented Raisi as a loyal follower, willing to shed blood for the regime. But that also kicked out then Khomeini's potential successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, who was sharply critical of what was about to happen. And he even said in the audio tapes, Ayatollah Montazeri said, "I fear for Khomeini's legacy. When this stuff comes out, they will think of us as butchers." But Raisi did not think that way.

**GERECHT:** Yeah. I agree with everything there, though I might have to descent a little bit. I think, I'm not sure that Raisi is actually that much worse when it comes to bloodshed than a lot of the founding fathers of the Islam.

**TALEBLU:** But of presidents, but of presidents. With the exception of Rafsanjani.



**GERECHT:** I would argue that the Rafsanjani was a far more accomplished killer than Raisi and it was worse that he thought the big picture while Raisi, he tends to think the little details of slaughter. I actually think Rafsanjani is far more responsible, Rouhani too actually, far more responsible for creating the police state that everybody has to now live with. So I just think that on the starting quarters, Rafsanjani, Rouhani and others in the technocratic class have gotten past, because you had to have, according to this notion for engagement, you had to have moderates and pragmatists to play off of, and they chose Rafsanjani and Rouhani and others, even though they, I would argue, completely ignored the historical record and ignored, in case of Rafsanjani, his own gleeful commentary about some of his rather unpleasant actions.

**MAY:** But you wrote on your *Dispatch* piece, shouldn't you well—Maybe I remember incorrectly, that it should be difficult for the Biden administration to engage as they have with President Rouhani, with the President Raisi.

**GERECHT:** I think it will be harder for them to do it rhetorically. I think they're going to have to change the way they—

**MAY:** Because?

**GERECHT:** Because he's going to be almost impossible to transmute into a moderate or a pragmatist. They might try a bit down the road. We'll have to see what happens, but I think it's extremely difficult for them to adopt the type of rhetoric that they did with Rouhani. We'll see. If Raisi keeps Zarif, for example, as foreign minister, I would expect to see that old rhetoric perhaps reanimated a bit at *The New York Times* and elsewhere.

**MAY:** Well, Reuel, we have a clue as to how the Biden administration's going to deal with this problem, don't we? Because Jake Sullivan, the national security advisor said, yeah, something to the effect, I think it was on one of the Sunday shows. Yeah, Raisi is not Rouhani, but you know what? It's the Supreme Leader who's really in charge before and after. So, it's not that different, which is really interesting and contradicts what they'd been saying for years and what Obama had been saying for years, which is what we're trying to deal with and bolster the moderates, as opposed to the hard-liners. Now they say it doesn't matter because it's one dictator, I think they say that there's one dictator. That's what you and Reuel and Behnam and others have been saying for years and they tried to contradict that.

**TAKEYH:** Well, I think the rhetoric will change. Here I may have to disagree with Reuel. They're not going to suggest, nobody today suggests that nuclear diplomacy is going to strengthen the forces of moderation in Iran. So it's nuclear diplomacy without lofty ambitions. They are going to talk about, as it happened this weekend. And this issue is an international security issue. We have to "deal with the nuclear madness." Other presidents have dealt with unsavory actors in order to secure international stability, whether it's Nixon and Mao, whose body count far exceeds Raisi's by millions or Ronald Reagan was more than happy to talk to Andropov, the head of the KGB.

**TAKEYH:** The problem they have in Nixon, Mao configuration is who is Nixon and who is Mao in this scenario? Raisi is going to disappoint them, not because he's immoderate, he's going to disappoint them because he's not inclined to deal with the nuclear issue in any meaningful way, as he said in today's press conference. There'll be no longer, stronger and broader, he said, missiles and regional activities are not subjects of discussion. So, he's not—Please go ahead.

**TALEBLU:** Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Sorry, I got excited. However—Raisi, there is a there is a change among what you would call the ultra-right flank in Iran. In 2015/16, the Raisis of the world were critiquing the JCPOA. But now, as you all remember in the debates, the three televised presidential debates, they are trying to take it back and they are



trying to talk about the JCPOA as well, we can implement it in a more manly way, in a tougher way, in a stronger way. Now, I think, why are they doing this? This is key. You're absolutely right. Raisi said today, no conversation on militia, no conversation on missiles, but they're able to do this one, because they don't need to pretend anymore. Rouhani helped the Islamic Republic pretend, Rouhani put on a mask for the Islamic Republic to win the sanctions relief that the JCPOA provided, as much as those inside Iran were kicking and screaming about the JCPOA that some of them didn't like it as much.

**TALEBLU:** You could say the editor in chief of *Kayhan* was attacking the Rouhani administration consistently about it. Raisi's friends were criticizing consistently about it, but now that they see an interest and that there's a chance to actually get the JCPOA, get the sanctions relief, why are they so happy to have it? It's because they know that the Biden administration will not push for longer and stronger. The Biden administration will not make even changing the Iranian government's appearance or rhetoric, a precondition for sanctions relief. They know the U.S. is desperate to revive even a fatally flawed and fast expiring agreement. So no need to have to talk about missiles and militias. We just want the access back to the European marketplace that JCPOA provided us and the fig leaf of an amendment to the Iranian nuclear program that the JCPOA would have for their nuclear infrastructure.

**TALEBLU:** So, there is a change in the way the right flank is dealing with the JCPOA. And everything Ray said in the beginning just reminds me of one word, which is transactional. Deal defenders are going to frame the arguments and having a framing of the arguments about the JCPOA with or without Raisi as being transactional. And I think all this talk about longer or stronger is just a domestic shield for the Biden administration's right flank.

**TAKEYH:** Well. I would say that the Biden administration does have a problem today, the problem they have, and that problem would have persisted even if Rouhani had a third term. The problem they have, is they have conceded to their American critics regarding the flawed nature of the agreement, and they have proposed to fix it. And there's not going to be a fix. By the way, the position of Ebrahim Raisi is no different from President Rouhani. They both suggested that both parties, the United States and Iran, should come back to compliance with the agreement. And they both rejected the idea that there'll be additional negotiations. Foreign Minister Zarif has rejected the idea about the additional negotiations.

**TAKEYH:** So, the position of the Islamic Republic on the JCPOA has not changed. I would say one thing about the Iranian conservatives' critique of the JCPOA that Ben had mentioned, they didn't actually ever criticize the nuclear provisions of the agreement. What they criticized was the idea that the promised economic dividends were not manifesting. They had no problems with the technical arms control provisions of the agreement. I never saw any right-winger with the exception of the former head of the Atomic Energy Organization, Mr. Abbasi, critique the JCPOA on its technological provisions. They critique its economic promises that would yield greater degree of confusion or foreign commerce.

**MAY:** And it turned out to be correct.

**TAKEYH:** And it turned out to be correct. Yeah.

**MAY:** A couple of things striking, one is, I don't think anybody is against talking with this regime. I think the problem is bailing this regime out economically, since there's only two ways this regime collapses, which is what you'd love to see. One is that people rise up against it. That's hard to do because if you're the Shah and you've written about this, you don't want to kill thousands of your people. But if you're Raisi, we already know you don't mind killing thousands



of your people. That's not a problem. So that's hard to see that kind of revolution. The other possibility is the economy implodes, the economic pressure is too severe, but what this deal does, if we get back into it, is relieve that economic pressure, bails the regime out and allows the regime to exist. So that is a good thing also though. And I think this is a point that's been missed for a long time.

**MAY:** We talk about Nixon meeting with Chinese top leaders and drop off in Russia. As we have established in this conversation, the Supreme Leader, Khamenei as the top leader, he won't meet with Biden. He wouldn't meet with Obama. We have never had, there only have been two Supreme Leaders meet with an American president. And it seems odd to me that American presidents want to meet with the number two, it'd be like saying, "Let's meet with the vice president of Russia instead of Putin." And in fact, Raisi, in his press conference on Monday, said he's not open to meeting with Biden. Do they realize what a snub that is for the guy who is not even the leader of the country to say, "I don't deign to sit down with the American president, but I do want some money facilitated from him in exchange for which I'll do certain things that I know, and he probably knows, do not really block my path to nuclear weapons capability."

**GERECHT:** Yeah. Americans are nice. I think it ultimately comes down again, and if you're going to boil it down to the brass tax, and that is, is the United States willing to use force? And I think we have seen repeatedly under both Democratic and Republican administrations, the United States really isn't willing to use force against the Islamic Republic in its quest for nuclear weapons and actually it's (inaudible) its requests for regional domination. We're not willing to engage in a containment policy. So that means, ultimately, for example, if they keep increasing their enrichment, eventually the United States either has to change its approach and could see to them a nuclear weapon or it has to engage in a military strike. I think that the Biden administration is unwilling to accept either, that is they're not willing to publicly say, "I'm going to concede a nuclear weapon to them." And they're certainly not willing to engage in a military strike, which means the other side holds most of the cards in any negotiation, any discussion, any meeting.

**MAY:** And doesn't your argument play into the hands of the Biden administration, because you're essentially saying what they're saying. Look, you either give them what they want or it's war, and we don't want war. So that's it. As opposed to saying, "We have disabled distress, crippled their economy in like 18 months, we can continue to do so and make it worse and worse and they'll suffer from it. And then at some point they may see that as a threat to the regime." And by the way, there are others in the neighborhood. We are not saying we'll never use military force, but we might, and there are others in the neighborhood who are more apt to do so than we are and we don't necessarily-

**GERECHT:** Yeah. I mean, obviously they can default to the Israelis. I'm not sure that's the most mature American foreign policy for a superpower to default to a small little country in the Middle East granted incredibly capable. But again, if they ramp up, publicly ramp up an enrichment to say 90%, if they did it publicly, that would obviously be the thumb in your face. Then you do have to make a decision. And I actually think the regime--They're cautious about those things. They've been very careful because even under Obama, there was the latent possibility of a military confrontation. I think that is evanescing rapidly, so where the Israelis have a red line, I do not know, but I think as a matter of American foreign policy, it's always a bad idea to default certain responsibilities and options to others. We may go in that direction, but I don't think it's a commendable policy for Washington to adopt.

**TAKEYH:** Can I make one point? And this is-

**MAY:** Please.



**TAKEYH:** –this is, we talk about the administration and others talk about Iran getting into weapons capability and so forth. And what does that look like? Iran today is in possession of weapons-grade uranium. 60% enriched uranium can be used for a nuclear weapon. According to IAE guidelines, anything above 20% can be used to build a nuclear weapon. The South African bomb had 85% enriched uranium. The American bomb in Hiroshima had 85% enriched uranium. 60% enriched uranium is weapons-grade uranium. It can be used to make a weapon. You don't have to get to 90% to have a nuclear weapon.

**MAY:** No, No. Absolutely.

**TAKEYH:** So, here's an interesting point. We talk about if you Iran gets to a certain threshold, what if we denied there at that threshold? We're denying today, they have nuclear weapons, the few they have is weapon-grade. I mean, I think barring detonation, they can get pretty far and (inaudible) at our denial.

**MAY:** I'm not going to violate a private conversation, but I'll just say that it was certain senior official in the Obama administration who's a senior official in the Biden administration. It was stated point blank that he would not recommend anything unless we had incontrovertible proof that they were about ready to construct a bomb. I pointed out that historically the United States has never had that information. I mean, that is really going beyond the capacity of the Central Intelligence Agency, which has not done a very good job in a variety of issues, dealing with the Islamic Republic. So, in fact, what you're saying, if you're historically sentient, is that we're not going to do anything. We're going to let it pass, and as Ray said, we'll deny it as eminent possibility.

**TAKEYH:** Can I make one point, Cliff? Because you mentioned, can the administration go back and say, "We are going to sanction, cripple the economy." It'd be very difficult for the administration to do that because they have spent four years plus saying that maximum economic pressure strategy doesn't work, it cannot work, is completely invalid intellectually and tactically. It's very difficult for them to go back and say, "We decided we got to do maximum stretch your pressure now." So that is their claim today. That maximum stretch of pressure, what you're talking about is application of economic pressure in order to yield strategic concessions cannot work. They said that for four years, they're saying it today.

**TALEBLU:** The U.S. has a history of being unaxiomatic on this stuff. I mean, the Obama administration fought tooth and nail the core tenets of the sanctions that got Iran to come to the negotiating table anyway. I mean, look at annex two of the JCPOA, those sanctions when you look at the penalties, they come from about four U.S. laws and those were things passed from 2010 to 2013. The Obama administration vigorously fought all of those, but then once it got the JPOA in 2013 and JCPOA in 2015, it had no problem ex post facto taking credit for the congressionally passed sanctions, and then saying that it was its skillful use of these sanctions that got Iran to come to the table. And I think now we're going to see the same thing play out. And I think we're already hearing it a little bit, perhaps from Jake Sullivan, perhaps some of the folks who are on television, a lot about this issue, that yes, all the op-ed pages are filled with max pressure doesn't work, max pressure has failed. There's a renewed sense of urgency.

**TALEBLU:** But that don't forget we have just proven that the U.S. can do damage unilaterally to the Iranian economy. So you guys need to trust us that there is an exit option, that there is an off-ramp. We keep trying to have our cake and eat it too. And the world doesn't work like that. It just simply doesn't work like that. Either this stuff works or it doesn't, either macroeconomics is real or it's not, either this is a revolutionary regime or it's not, either the presidency matters or it doesn't. And I really wish some of these folks, with Ben's respect, who served in the Obama administration, took a break, and now are serving Biden administration, would offer some measure of consistency on this.



**GERECHT:** The only thing that really matters is they're not put in a situation where they have to use force. That's what really matters and everything else will be altered philosophically and mechanically to ensure that that circumstance doesn't arise.

**TALEBLU:** Yes.

**MAY:** But it's beyond that, is it not? Because what I draw from what you guys are saying, is that we have an administration that refuses to learn from the fact that it was economic sanctions that brought Iran to the table, refuses to learn from the fact that once sanctions were lifted, no further concessions were forthcoming, refuses to not only use force, but to credibly threaten force. And refuses to reinstate economic pressure, because that would contradict their argument that economic pressure never works.

**MAY:** So, if you eliminate all those other possibilities, I think what are you left with? You're left with an administration that is going to economically bail out the Islamic Republic of Iran, ignore the fact that a mass murderer is now the president and there is no longer any such thing as moderates to say we can bolster and allow this regime to continue to move ahead as it has been and will towards a nuclear capability and the missiles to deliver nuclear warheads to targets anywhere in the world. That is in a sense, does anybody disagree? That's where this administration is clearly heading and really no other realistic possibility for us even to consider. Anybody disagree with that?

**TAKEYH:** Cliff, this past week we saw a summit with Vladimir Putin. Now to recap, let's see what Democrats have said about Vladimir Putin. He subverted our democracy. He put a Manchurian candidate in the White House. He pre-staged the rise of fascism in America. So we got to have a summit meeting and established working groups to discuss these issues.

**MAY:** With our worthy adversary.

**TAKEYH:** Yeah. Cliff-

**TALEBLU:** Does anybody remember-

**TAKEYH:** –you were not on vacation last week, you saw what happened. This was a guy who essentially subverted, undermined American democracy and put Donald Trump in the White House as his agent provocateur. And we had a summit with the adversary where he agreed to establish working groups.

**MAY:** But Biden supporters' story and they're sticking to it, is that President Biden did a heck of a job there Brownie. The headline that really made me laugh hardest was from our friend and former ally, Max Boot, who said, "Biden wiped the smirk off Putin's face." I got to tell you, that would be harder to do than removing a tattoo. Does anybody disagree? We know exactly what this administration is going to do, and it's going to be, yep, these guys who are shouting death to America, they can have our money and they can have a nuclear weapon's capability, we can't stop them. We're not going to, the best we can do is try to kick the can down the road a little bit. And who knows? Maybe they'll start to talk, to use that, if you remember that old story.

**TALEBLU:** Not to jump ahead of you guys here, but I think this is exactly the way it's coming. And unfortunately, we all know, it's like watching a car accident. We've seen this movie before. We know how it's going to end. Reuel just gave us the history of intelligence community missing these critical junctures and weaponization. But there's a real three-card



Monte at play. And I don't think the Biden administration is going to be devoting that much time to the Iran issue. I think that for political reasons, for policy reasons, they have some of their priorities set at home and elsewhere abroad. And I see this in a very neat three-stage process, if I can just lay out what I think their Iran policy is.

**TALEBLU:** We've got part one, you talk about longer and stronger, but you really just talk about longer and stronger as a shield to insulate you from resurrecting the JCPOA. And you keep talking about resurrecting this deal, which at least now, even the Europeans have critiques as well, we need a basis, we need a framework for a new deal, for a better deal, but we have to get the current deal because there is an urgent threat, and there is a persistent threat. And the urgent threat is Iran nuclear. And the persistent threat is Iran everything else. So let's just deal with the urgent threat for now and get back the JCPOA and "cap the program." That's step one. You want to claw back the JCPOA.

**TALEBLU:** Step two and three are much more political than policy, because I think it really is going to be defined by the JCPOA all over again. Every time someone like you or me or Ray or Reuel or Danielle or anyone else comes up and says, "But what about Iran's missile program? What about this militia program? What about the fast boats? What about the cyber? What about the human rights violator? What about the mass murderer now at the helm? What about all of this?" Well, they'll talk about U.S. allies in the region, having defensive capabilities to offset that. They'll say, "Oh, this is Pakistan's military budget. This is Saudi Arabia's military budget. Look how capable Israel is. We're trying to restore good ties with Turkey, coordinate against Iran."

**TALEBLU:** They will talk a lot about, "Well Iran's defense budget is really low." Or, "Well, we still have some other non-nuclear sanctions in place," but in reality, they won't be doing anything about it, but they'll cite, they'll get into this what-about-ism game. That's part two in a three-card Monte, to right-size the Iranian threat.

**TAKEYH:** I do think the administration has one problem. They have-

**TALEBLU:** There's one card left.

**TAKEYH:** Well, Ben, it's a problem they have created themselves. The problem they have created is exactly what Behnam have said. They have appropriated the rhetoric of their critics while pursuing their own policy of engagement. But the problem they have is they have went to *The New York Times* and said, "We are not going to get back to the agreement until Iran agrees in writing to have follow-on negotiations." They're going to have to walk that back now because—Or some way has to be figured out. I mean, lawyers get into it. Then they have their own language, but Raisi unequivocally rejected follow-on negotiations. Now it's possible they can say, "Well, we can't bring out whatever we want to bring out in the joint commission or whatever." But they do need some kind of—

**TAKEYH:** The problem that the administration has is that Iranians are denying them the fig leaves that Behnam is talking about. They're denying them that. They're saying, "No, we're not going to do—We're not going to go any more negotiations. You come back to the deal. We come back to the deal, that's it." They needed some kind of an injunction that the negotiations will continue. If they continue inconclusively, that's fine. But they have to continue. The Iranians are now providing them the fig leave of inconclusive stalemated negotiations. And that I think it's a problem.

**GERECHT:** No, I do. I agree with that. I actually think Khameini intends to embarrass the administration. And I suspect the administration will eat the embarrassment, but I don't know.

**TAKEYH:** Reuel, how do you walk this back now?



**GERECHT:** Well, I know, I'd say I think it's impossible to walk back. I mean, longer, stronger, broader was always premised on the assumption of engagement reform, internal moderation, same as essentially the arguments put forth by Obama and then Rhodes.

**TAKEYH:** Reuel, the delusion of longer and broader, the illusion of longer and broader requires stalemate in negotiations. What if Iranians don't give them the stalemate in negotiations?

**GERECHT:** No, it doesn't require stalemate. It just requires a desire to keep on talking.

**TAKEYH:** But how do you do that when the other side says, "We're not going to talk anymore of our issues."

**GERECHT:** But I suspect that the Supreme Leader and Raisi will enjoy watching the administration squirm, and the administration I suspect will take it because again, they don't have any other options but take it in.

**TAKEYH:** Can you unpack what take it means? What is it? They're going to come back and say, "We got to go back to the JCPOA without the assurance of continuing the negotiations?"

**GERECHT:** Yeah. I think it means they're just going to have sanctions relief. They're going to take the JCPOA with its initial defects, and they're going to transfer money. And maybe they won't transfer quite as much money as the Iranians think they're going to transfer, but they are going to transfer money and they'll shift the rhetoric and they'll just take whatever short-term (inaudible) to their anxieties. They can get it, and then they'll hope this turns out better. Now, if the Iranian regime somehow upsets that apple card, then they may have a problem, but it's going to be I think for the Iranian regime to bite back and to deny them this short-term victory.

**MAY:** The Iranian regime has said that they will want more than, just to return, they want reparations. Is that just a negotiating point that they're willing to give up or will they press on? We want reparations for how much you hurt us with your economic terrorism and your sanctions, which they argue are illegal under international law, because if they demand reparations, is that maybe a bridge too far for Biden and Jake Sullivan?

**GERECHT:** I would just add, let the others talk on this too. But I mean, the Islamic Republic has never been known for its economic stability. So I suspect if sanctions relief starts getting into the tens of billions of dollars, they may have some rhetorical fuel, but I don't think they're going to stop the gravy train.

**MAY:** Got it. This occurs to me that we should raise. If it goes as we expect, and Iran is on a patient pathway to nuclear weapons, you have all the various countries who are sort of more lined up with the U.S. for one what's called the gold standard, which means that we've now established that an adversary of America who for 40 years has had as its slogan death to America, gets a better deal on nuclear programs than any friend of the U.S. does. Does that not change this, I mean, do we not know that the Saudis and others at that point say, "Okay, time for us to get ourselves nukes too, because we need an equalizer. And we're not in an age of proliferation at that point." Is that not likely, it's not inevitable? Behnam, go ahead on that.

**TALEBLU:** It's a fairly plausible scenario. I do worry very much about a proliferation cascade, but sadly, that potential has already been set with the JCPOA in 2015. It doesn't matter that the U.S. left that in 2018. It matters that it agreed to it. It gave up this fundamental concession in 2015. Saudi Arabia is currently today hedging, there are Saudi-Chinese missile ties. The Chinese are allegedly helping them build ballistic missiles through procurements of technology.



There's obviously the potential Pakistan purchase a bomb connection that the Saudis could have as well. And Saudi Arabia wouldn't be the only country, you could have countries like Egypt engage in nuclear hedging, using a civilian program to begin to develop a more robust nuclear infrastructure down the line.

**TALEBLU:** This was even talked about in the Middle East since 2007, because many Arab countries were afraid of the direction that Iran's program was going in, but at least they had behind their back then was U.S. policy. Now you have the Iranian nuclear program on a patient pathway to a bomb and U.S. policy adrift at sea. And what? Even on the conventional side, more recently, we're seeing ballistic missile defense batteries being removed from the CENTCOM area of operations. This is the time to be doubling down on those things. And it does not paint a good picture because should the Saudis have to look abroad for that bomb to equalize or hedge against the Iranians, it would only vindicate one man. And that one man would be Qasem Soleimani, the slain former commander of Iran Quds Force, who said, "We're not like the Americans, we don't abandon our friends."

**TAKEYH:** In terms of cascade or proliferation, the Saudis simply don't have the technological infrastructure and that's difficult to purchase.

**MAY:** Really? The Pakistanis won't sell it for the right price?

**TAKEYH:** I mean, the sharp turn in 1972, essentially just purchased a nuclear program. You do require some scientific foundation and some degree of accord. It takes time to develop that. What I would consider or put on the table is the possibility that—Benham, I'm talking about, it's actually real and pronounced, but there's also the possibility that we have seen in the past couple of months, namely Saudis hedging toward Iran a little bit, trying to some degree of a combination with Iran, some degree of negotiation. It's not that it will solve the problems between the two, but perhaps it will mitigate their disputes. And those negotiations at this point, would be decisively in Iranian benefit because they're the ones with the leverage.

**TALEBLU:** I'd strongly agree with that, because this is exactly what Rouhani has been doing, the Rouhani governments, trying to intimidate the Arab states in the Persian Gulf, such that they do against in this kind of bandwagoning rather than balancing position in the Middle East. When Rouhani went to the UN in 2019, he said one Arabic colloquialism at the podium. And he said, "First the neighbor, then the house." He was basically chastising Iran's Arab neighbors for prioritizing their own house, for prioritizing security at the cost of their neighbor. And Iran loves all this talk about a U.S. drawdown. It loves the excitement it sees in the think tank community and in these other scholastic communities about regional security arrangements, regional security solutions. Because that means that the external balancer is gone. And that means that these countries, which have a conventional capability against Islamic Republic, don't know how to use it, won't be able to use it, are too afraid to use it. And it means that the country with the GDP of Iran can basically tackle everyone else.

**MAY:** As we're coming towards the end, are there points that haven't drawn out that you think are important, make them, and then I'll ask one last question. Go ahead, Ray. I think you wanted to jump in-

**TAKEYH:** No, I was just going to say that in his press conference on Monday, Raisi said a lot of no's, but he did say he's open to negotiations with the Saudis.

**MAY:** Yeah, well, I think that means open to having the Saudis kowtow to him and say, "What do we need to do so that you don't come in here and lop off our heads and take over the holy cities Mecca and Medina."



**GERECHT:** I think the Saudis have been kowtowing. They started after the Iranians let loose at the oil facilities at Khurrais and Buqayq and the Americans didn't respond, when President Trump didn't respond there, I think that sent a very clear signal that the Americans had changed their position in the Persian Gulf. It is impossible to imagine the Biden administration being more bold than the Trump administration on this question. So I think that trajectory here is clear. I think the Saudis see it and the Iranians see it. So the Iranians have never been able to stand on their own against Iran. It's just not going to happen.

**MAY:** So, this brings me to what I think is my last question for today. And that is, if you were the Israeli leadership, it's a new leadership under Naftali Bennett as prime minister, a very diverse, let me say, coalition of left and right. And Arab and Jews and all kinds of things, but they disagree on many things. The two things they agree on, they didn't want Netanyahu to be prime minister. And two, they recognize the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran is an existential threat. So they have to be saying, at least privately, it seems to me what Churchill said early on in World War II, "We fight alone." If so, what contingency plans are they likely to make? And I know this is not a sweet spot for any of you, but if you want to speculate on it, take a few minutes to do so. Reuel, you like to speculate?

**GERECHT:** Yeah, I'm going to actually let Ray go first on this.

**TAKEYH:** I don't know the Israeli security establishment and I don't know Israeli politics. I do think the use of military force in aspirants' nuclear installations, which are going to be quite elaborate by the time they're completed by the time the JCPOA is fulfilled, to disable that infrastructure through military attack, which essentially you're talking about a military campaign, not a military attack. I don't know if that's within the logistical capability of the Israelis. But it's politically an extraordinary move. As Reuel has said, and I think correctly, is something that United States is recoiling from. I don't know if the Israelis are going to be in that position to do that.

**TAKEYH:** As I speak as someone who's ignorant of their concerns and I understand they have existential concerns here, I personally never took Prime Minister Netanyahu's threats very seriously against Iran. He kept talking about, this is like 1939, 1939, but he somehow never moved to 1942. He stayed in 1939, and 1939, by the way, was a year of inactivity in Europe. He never moved beyond that. I don't want to be a skunk at a party, but I don't have enough confidence, or I should say enough knowledge, on Israeli politics to be able to speak about this issue definitively or conclusively or informatively, but I tend to be skeptical of their ability to, or willingness to go it all as you suggest. But I happened to be corrected.

**GERECHT:** I would agree with that. I think I can imagine scenarios where the Israelis would try, but those scenarios are all worse than what the present circumstances are. And I think the aftershocks on the American side, particularly with the Democratic Party would be pretty bloody severe. And you would have individuals who are neutral on Israel. There are very few in the Democratic Party who are muscularly in favor of Israel, there are some. I think those who are in the neutral category would probably go quite negative. So it's a dicey proposition for the Israelis to do it. I think it is possible just because the Israelis, many Israelis, I think it's probably true, an increasing number of Israelis view the Iranian ambitions, their nuclear ambitions, as a potential existential threat.

**GERECHT:** I'm certain they're going to continue to explore the fun they've been having with covert action and Mossad operations inside of Iran as to what else they can do, but they would have to be really, really lucky to have any intelligence operation deliver the type of damage that would come with sustained attacks of advanced fighter aircraft and 5,000-pound bombs. So do I think that that scenario is more likely now? Yes. The weaker the United States becomes in the region, the more likely the Israeli scenario becomes that the Israelis will realize, I don't think they want to, but



they will realize that they have to fill the vacuum. So it becomes more likely, but it will be one hell of a step for them politically to do it.

**MAY:** Final thoughts, Behnam?

**TALEBLU:** I think the Israelis have always shown a propensity to surprise Osirak, Deir al-Zor, raid on Entebbe. So we can't take the surprise X-Factor out of here, but the commonality between those centrally that it's one target. As Ray mentioned, this is diverse, geographic, spread out, secret, overt, covert, so that does raise many geographic and logistical, let alone operational challenges.

**TALEBLU:** So I think we're therefore, likely to see the intensification of the same sorts of targets, which is the preventing of the land bridge from being finalized or the rolling back, or the mowing of the grass of the Iranian land bridge in places like Syria, depending on the U.S. force posture in Iraq, perhaps continued pinpricks strikes in places inside Iraq, where some weapons for the land bridge may be pre-staged or where some militias who do cross border activity also pre-stage and have basis. Plus of course, intense cyber and plus of course, intense internal sabotage, as Reuel pointed to, but to make that activity inside of Iran, go from covert to overt, I don't know, A, the capability and B, what their red line would be.

**MAY:** All right. A fascinating and edifying conversation, not one that leaves me feeling optimistic, to be continued. Until then, thank you Ray, thank you Reuel, thank you Behnam, and thanks to all of you for being with us here on Foreign Podicy.