

April 7, 2025

Featuring His Imperial Highness Reza Pahlavi; Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC); with Behnam Ben Taleblu and Cameron Khansarinia
Moderated by Clifford D. May and Negar Mojtahedi
Introductory remarks by Saeed Ghasseminejad

GHASSEMINEJAD: Welcome, and thank you for joining us for today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the National Union for Democracy in Iran. I am Saeed Ghasseminejad, senior advisor in FDD's Iran Program and a member of NUFDI's Advisory Board. It's Monday, April 7, and today's program will unpack the current state of play with Iran and how maximum support can be paired with maximum pressure. We are pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in person, some tuning in live, some listening to our podcast.

Before we dive in, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website, [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org), follow us on X and Instagram, and subscribe to our YouTube channel.

Kicking off our event today is Cliff May, FDD's founder and president, who will sit down with His Imperial Highness Reza Pahlavi, crown prince of Iran, for an exclusive fireside chat. We will also hear from Representative Joe Wilson, congressman from South Carolina's second district, and from an expert panel featuring Behnam Ben Taleblu, senior director of FDD's Iran Program, and Cameron Khansarinia, vice president of NUFDI, the National Union for Democracy in Iran, two Iranian diaspora members who have dedicated their careers to shining a light on the people and politics of their homeland. Negar Mojtahedi, *Iran International* journalist, will moderate the panel.

Before we get into those conversations, I'm pleased to introduce Cliff May, FDD founder and president. Cliff has had a long and distinguished career in international relations, journalism, communications and politics. A veteran news reporter, foreign correspondent and editor at the *New York Times* and other publications, he has covered stories around the world. From 2016 to 2018, Cliff served as commissioner on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission that makes policy recommendation to the president, the secretary of state and Congress in order to advance the pivotal right of religious freedom around the world and integrate religious freedom into America's foreign policy.

Cliff, the stage is yours.

MAY: Thank you, Saeed. Thank you very much, thanks to all of you, again, for being with us in person and online, and it's an honor to welcome His Imperial Royal Highness Reza Pahlavi, crown prince of Iran.

Your Highness, thank you so much for being with us today. It's great to have a chance to talk to you a little bit.

PAHLAVI: Well, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me.

And before we start, allow me to acknowledge and thank both FDD and NUFDI, of course, for their tireless work, as well as Congressman Wilson, which, of course, is a key architect of what turns out to be an important piece of legislation.

MAY: All right. So, as Saeed mentioned, I'm kind of a recovering ink-stained wretched reporter, so I'm nosy. I – so let me start up and get personal. What does it mean to – how early do you start training to be the crown prince when you were in Iran?

(LAUGHTER)

Well, I mean, what do – how does that work? What you have to learn to – in order to – for that?

PAHLAVI: Well, it starts pretty early, because that's part of the process of being groomed to be...

MAY: Yeah.

PAHLAVI: ... next in line. So it was really a parallel life for me because as I was, as a young kid, then later on a teenager, going the same process of every other Iranian, as a student, going through school and everything with the exact same

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curriculum as the rest of the population. Parallel to that, I also had special briefings, or training by means of being briefed by government officials both in the civilian and military side, as well as represent the country in formal visits, for instance, or other duties that is associated usually with the – what you would do, especially being the crown prince. So, it was kind of a dual-type process.

MAY: So, there was all that. Very early on, you were being...

PAHLAVI: Pretty much, they...

MAY: ... groomed for this position.

PAHLAVI: From the late '60s, early '70s, it started.

MAY: Right.

PAHLAVI: So, I was about six or seven years old when they first...

MAY: Yeah.

PAHLAVI: ... put me in that position, and then later on, kept...

MAY: Moving to around 1978, '79, you're a young man compared to me, but as you know, I was in Iran for part of the revolution for several months in 1979. I was a young reporter; less experienced but more skeptical than a lot of my colleagues, I would say. What – do you recall what you were thinking in 1979, 1978, actually, as it start – as this revolution began to unfold? You were young, but you were cognizant of what was going on, I'm sure.

PAHLAVI: Well, I was in a unique situation in the sense that I was already outside of Iran. I left the country in the summer of 1978, right after my high school graduation, where I came to Reese Air Force Base in Texas to start my Air Force training program. So that's about six months before my parents left the country, as well as my siblings who were there much later. So, they were much more exposed to all those anti-regime slogans.

I was not there at the time. I only monitored the news the same way everybody else did at the time. So, it was whatever was on the news in the United States, covering that – you know, the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which, as we remember, without missing a beat, every week there was a picture of my father being burned on the streets and stuff like that.

So, I had an indirect way of monitoring it. And to some extent, both my mother and my father wanted to shield me a little bit so I can stay focused on my training and not be, you know, impacted too much with that. So, I must say that from a distance, it was a different way of monitoring the situation than when they were there themselves.

I remember my siblings saying that they would hear from behind the walls of Niavaran Palace those chants of, "Death to the Shah," and "*Allahu Akbar*," and all those, you know, quite intense reactions that people had at the time.

MAY: Do you remember having an impression and under – of Ayatollah Khomeini and what he represented at that point?

PAHLAVI: I don't think any Iranian really knew what HIH was all about. In fact, by the time people realized his true intentions, I guess it was too late.

MAY: Yes.

PAHLAVI: But I've heard it both from opponents of the previous regime as well as supporters of the previous regime, especially within the academia, that there was very little understanding or knowledge about the person himself.

There's a long story about it but that's for another interview because it's going to be – take too long to explain. But

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basically, you know, the whole idea behind his concept of *Velayat-e faqih* was not quite understood.

MAY: I think it was misunderstood to a great extent, just from my experience, because I remember seeing him in Qom and people were crazy for him. I remember talking to students who spoke English 'cause they had, you know, been at the University of Texas at Austin, and said, "oh, no, no, he's – you know, he is somebody who respects us," and the journalists saying he is going to be a spiritual leader, but that – but not beyond that. They misunderstood that he was going to kill those who were not absolutely with him.

And I know the – now, that's one thing I – that I wanted to raise. I think, tell me if you think I'm wrong, this revolution could have been suppressed but that would have required your father, the Shah, to kill thousands and thousands of people. And I think he was not going to do that to his people, he was just not going to. You agree with me on that?

PAHLAVI: Oh, absolutely. I mean, after 37 years of reign and it came to a point where there was such a frenzy happening, the option was either you stand firm, or you voluntarily leave the country. Say, "If that's really what you want, then so be it."

Now, post, you know – it's always – they say hindsight is 20/20, and it's a little bit of Monday morning quarterbacking, because if they sent people who would have shouted, you know, about anything that could have touched the people, to – they blame him for not having stood firm. So, it's a kind of a bizarre reaction. The same students who today say, you know, why did he let us down by leaving the country were, at the time, asking for his head.

And I remember the interview my father had with David Frost in Panama, one of his last interviews, at which point he said, "It might take 40 or 50 years before people finally catch up to reality." And guess what? Today's Gen Z is saying the same things that he anticipated would happen but with the passage of time.

It would have been impossible for people to really understand what happened to them shortly after the revolution. It took all of this time for people to realize the consequences of a religious dictatorship, to understand the consequences of such level of discrimination against people because of their religious – religions, or their ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or what have you.

We could not have had that comparison without having to experience the consequences of living under a religious dictatorship. Now people have to – totally understood what the consequence was. It had nothing to do with the rhetoric that first came as a promise but turned out to be hell on Earth.

MAY: Yeah. And this is jumping ahead a little bit but I want to – my fear is that the regime that is in charge in Tehran now and has been since 1979, they wouldn't hesitate to kill thousands and thousands of people in order to stay in power, unlike your father. That's – that kind of a – that they are that oppressive and that ruthless. That's my fear.

PAHLAVI: Yes, but you know it's not the first time in history that a nation has to a face extremely tough and totalitarian system. The Soviet Union is perhaps the best example. Nobody killed more people on the planet than the Communists did under Stalin and what have you, but yet, you know, they were able to finally put an end to that totalitarian system.

And I think when you look at the resolve that people have, fighting different types of tyrannies or dictatorships, the models may be different but the quest for freedom, for liberty, is so strong, regardless of your culture or where you come from or which country you represent. And that's, I think, the bond that unites us all, what we are talking about, how people deserve to have those things achieved.

Recently, I was in Geneva for a human rights conference, and I remember seeing many of the dissidents coming from different countries, from Hong Kong, from Venezuela, from Cuba, and it's a shared story.

So, you know, the resolve is there. Despite the repression, we don't give up because, you know, you might as well, you know, commit suicide. Some of whom unfortunately do, but the majority stand there. And that's why we are here today, by

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the way.

Why maximum support? Because that's the equalizing field for people to have a better chance to overcome, because they're fighting the fight regardless. And I've been always saying to my fellow Iranians, we cannot rely on anybody else but ourselves to succeed, but it will so much less costly to all of us if we had constant support from the free world.

MAY: Right. But let's – I mean, we've had three waves of protests that – in particular, right? 2017, 2019, 2022. They failed to achieve their goal of ending the Islamic Republic regime. The question is, and you've started to talk about it, what can make the next wave of protests, of revolution, perhaps, you were talking about, more successful? And what can the US, if it wants to – if the US wants to – I hope the US does, and others, the Europeans and others – what can they be doing to help the people of Iran liberate themselves?

PAHLAVI: You know, it's – there is such a thing as the alignment of the planets, if I could put it in that sense. You know, sometimes you have people inside ready, but the world is not. Sometimes the world is ahead of the curve, people are not quite ready yet.

I think you have to take it as a whole, that all the ingredients have to be in the right place. When you have ebbs and flows in such campaigns, especially if it's based on civil disobedience in a non-violent way to overcome extremely repressive regimes, you have to have a better chance of success by having more support, which is the – which was the missing link so far, because, you know, in reality, all of the movements that you've seen in Iran, especially the more recent ones in the last, let's say, decade, we see that there's – a campaign starts – stops, but the next wave or even more in numbers, it lasts longer.

So, the momentum progressively has been quite remarkable, despite the fact that has been total absence of any kind of support. Because world diplomacy has been all these years focused only on negotiating with the regime or have a dialogue with the regime and never with the alternative; whereas the solution lies in the Iranian people themselves who are the alternative.

And unless that paradigm doesn't shift, we're stuck with the status quo. A status quo simply means dragging their foot. And in the meantime, the regime tries to buy time. Tactically tries to show a demeanor of, "we're willing to talk, or not," all to preserve more time for themselves, but in the meantime the people suffer.

So, I think Iranians have understood that the more they are in numbers, and they reach that critical number where change can really happen – we are getting pretty close to that number. The magical number is about three, three and a half percent of the population, so we're talking about two and a half to three million people being on the streets.

And if you look at the recent demonstrations in Iran, the gatherings are becoming more and more in numbers and that's without any help. Imagine now if they got that additional support, how much the field will be equal for them to have more leverage vis-a-vis the regime.

And why is this important? Because when we're talking about regime change of a nonviolent form, we're not just talking about changing a regime. We are talking about: how do you fill the void, post-regime collapse? And how do you kind of have a controlled implosion rather than explosion?

A big factor in a controlled implosion is maximum defections from those who are stuck with the regime, want out, but want to have a place in the alternative that follows.

So, if you have maximum pressure, which we have so far, but it's not sufficient, you add to it the component of maximum support that will lead to maximum defection, which facilitates the transition to be much smoother, with a much better understanding of the outcome, as opposed to any other scenario. That's the logic behind the policy or strategy that I proposed as a means to get to that end.

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MAY: Quite a few presidents over the past almost 50 years have taken the view and been advised to take the view that, really, what you need to do is show respect to the regime, make some concessions to the regime, maybe apologize for the Mosaddegh. Again, if you read people like Ray Takeyh, you know that there's a lot of myths about what happened there.

I think you believe – I think I believe at this point, that that is a fool's errand, that that will never – that they will – you can reach out your hand and say, “unclench your fist,” and that's not going to happen. Not with Khomeini – not Khamenei, I mean, it's not going to happen.

So, when we talk about maximum pressure, and we talk in terms of the regime and maximum support for the people, maybe be a little more specific about what that means and how it's achieved. Well, I'll let you describe a little more specifically what maximum pressure and maximum support look like.

PAHLAVI: Well, first, let me just say something that perhaps a lot of people may not have necessarily followed, but it's amply demonstrated in Iranian social media. The footages of people, you know, hitting a mullah's head turban off his head and things like that.

The disrespect for the religious establishment from the people who have had it to a point of rejecting not just the establishment, but religion itself, has been tremendously weakened.

So, you know, when you are apologizing to those who are the reason and the culprit for the faith itself to have weakened, you're totally misreading the realities on the ground. In Iran you have people who are still pious, which is fine, but they understand their reasoning in the argument for a secular system.

We have clerics who advocate secularism in the sense of separation of religion from government. Clerics, mind you, not just some academic scholar in some university in Iran. Why? Because they understand the consequences when religion and politics mix.

And that's a very important aspect for everybody here that is listening to us to understand because when I make the contrast between Iran as a predominantly Muslim country to the rest of the Muslim world, we are so far ahead of the rest of them in terms of understanding the importance of that, which is not quite distinct in many of other countries that I know of in the region.

Only recently we have seen some changes, example Saudi Arabia. But Iran has discovered that quite early, more than 30 years ago. So, in that sense, they are ready for understanding why we need to have an absolute secular system where there's a clear separation of religions from government without which you cannot have democracy. That's a prerequisite to democracy.

And I think also because in the spirit of human rights, if you go back to the issue of faith itself, I personally think it's a private matter. It should not matter to any of us or to give ourselves the right to interrogate a fellow citizen, “What is your faith or what do you believe in?” It's none of my business.

And that ought to be the way it's treated, as opposed to a regime that tries to impose an ideology on you. If you said the slightest thing against it, you're subject to not only discrimination, but torture, execution, and, basically, you're not even part of that very narrow-minded system that believes in a singular ideology dominating at the expense of the others. So, I think this is part of the learning curve that Iranians have gone through.

But back to your question of – well, let me be more specific about maximum support. You know, when we had the issue of the regime threatening disruption or interruption of internet service to the Iranian people, it is one of the most crucial tools for all dissidents or activists against tyrannical regime to be able to communicate among each other, have access to information, have access to the outside world.

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So, if you restrict them in having that access and information, of course, they are heavily curtailed. And the regime have tried everything to suppress information, to censorship of every form.

The counter– countering that, that means what kind of specific help can be given so we make sure that Iranians are able to continue communicating with one another through social media, through VPNs?

When Starlink came into the picture that was a huge and important function. You know, reporters, journalists inside Iran, are just as much in need of having that means of communicating messages. So, that's one of the very critical aspects without which it will be very difficult to organize and continue.

There are some other aspects, which I think to some extent this legislation indicates, which I've always argued that there's one way to become creative of how can we actually support and fund this kind of campaigns. For instance, even if it's a question of funding labor strikes inside Iran.

Well, you know, I understand that many foreign countries, particularly American citizens, are wary of long campaigns of, you know, sending troops half the way the world over and as a taxpayer, having to fund this or that process. And of course, President Trump certainly is not an advocate of that. But that's exactly why we've said, "In our case, we neither require your boots on the ground nor your money, because the boots on the ground are the Iranian people who are already in place. And the way you can help us is by repurposing frozen assets that belong to the Iranian people themselves, in the first place, to fund such kind of campaigns without having a single American, or British, or French, or German taxpayer having to foot the bill." And that's part of the approach that, how can we maximize support to the Iranian people with minimal cost to outside nations, but with the intent and resolution this time to understand that the solution is regime change in Iran, not behavior change by the regime. Because guess what, for 40 years, and that's the biggest flaw in Western politics in terms of their diplomacy and approach, and their misread of the Iranian situation, that somehow, their behavior will change.

Sometime, we can make them to become good boys and not be nasty anymore or terrorists or what have you. And that simply means that their DNA was not comprehended fully. It is a regime that is dead set against all the values of freedom and democracy and human rights that the Western free world cherishes. Which, by the way, is the ask of the Iranian people. We have the same desire. We have the same common interest. And what saddens me is the fact that until now, and fortunately this is changing, but until now, nobody took into consideration that our best allies are the people of Iran themselves, with the same values that we have, as opposed to a regime that denies all these values that is against it. Their only objective was to use Iran as a launching platform to export this ideology by means of repression at home and by means of everything they've done whether through their proxies in the region, in the case of, like, Hamas and Hezbollah, just to give you a few examples, but all the way to the rest of the world. They didn't care about Iran. Khomeini said it. He said it very clearly. When a reporter asked him on his way back to Tehran, "What is your feeling, after 15 years of exile, returning to Iran?" He said, "Nothing." No feeling whatsoever.

MAY: And by the way, he explained that, maybe in that same interview, by saying that patriotism is paganism. If you love your country, you're not loving Allah sufficiently. You cannot – so you cannot be an Islamist revolutionary Khomeinist and be an Iranian patriot.

You mentioned journalists. It's my contention as a former journalist that we have not had good journalism out of Iran for many years. You cannot do it there. You simply cannot work in that country and report honestly. And that's been the case for a long time. But you're in touch with people. You're in touch with social media. Just give us a sense of what the situation is. Economically, is it worse than ever? Are people more frustrated than ever? Just what you understand and your impression of what's going on inside Iran if we were there today?

PAHLAVI: Sure. Quickly, on what you just said. At the time you were there, you barely had the means to send a wire or a

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telex to your, you know, agency, what have you. You know, none of the tools available to all of us these days was unavailable [sic]. I remember when I started 44 years ago in Cairo, I had to wait for two or three hours just to get an outside line to dial a number and call somebody.

MAY: I remember that.

PAHLAVI: Now, you have all these various platform, Telegram, Instagram, this, that. And I think that's a way to benefit from something that was not available for reporters specifically, and to hear it directly from the horse's mouth because, yes, maybe the regime will deny you a visa to come to Iran if they think you are going to go and report something they don't want you to see or to report.

I remember in the mid-90s...

MAY: Or won't let you out.

(LAUGHTER)

PAHLAVI: In the mid-90s, there were crews of journalists who would admit to me that they had their footage confiscated to be allowed an exit visa because they were filming what they were not supposed to film. Anyway, today, you have citizen reporters who can send you clips and videos from every single part of Iran that tells you exactly what's happening.

And by the way, a lot of the information that I get on a daily basis from Iran is by seeing what these people report on every state or condition in which they are, whether it is protests by retirees or those who have lost their money, or the agricultural community, or small businesses that have to shut down their operation because there are electrical, you know, disturbances and shortages. They cannot keep their employees.

I mean...

MAY: So, the economy is in very bad shape. And people are suffering from that.

PAHLAVI: No. In 1978...

MAY: Yeah...

PAHLAVI: ...'79, you could buy a dollar at 7.6 toman, 7.6 toman to the dollar. As of yesterday, it became 110,000 tomans for a dollar.

MAY: Yeah. I mean, another question...

PAHLAVI: Just do the math. I mean, the devaluation of our currency, by itself, not to mention inflation, not to mention the poverty line and so many other aspects. Absolutely, the economy has been driven down. You know why? Another thing Khomeini said, a brilliant remark, "The economy is for the donkey." Well, look at where we are today as a result.

So, you know, that mindset, that sort of gross negligence of even running the basic needs of the country with water, with electricity, and all these things as a result of not just mismanagement, but a highly corrupt system that simply is sucking the blood out of the Iranian people, filling their own pockets. And meanwhile, our country is going down the tubes. And, you know, people have every reason to revolt.

So, it's beyond just liberty, and freedom and repression, and what have you. It's also because our country is getting destroyed, literally destroyed. And so even after the mess is cleared up, I wonder what it will take to put our country back on track. We have a plan for that. But the more we wait, imagine the opportunity cost to the nation, and people are aware of that. We don't want yet another generation of Iranians being deprived of an opportunity to strive, as opposed today, too, being a victim of this tragedy.

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MAY: You remind me of another Ayatollah Khomeini quote: "This revolution is not about the price of watermelon." In other words, he doesn't care about the prosperity of the country. President Trump right now is getting, I'm sure, advice from very different actors on what he should do about the regime getting closer to having nuclear weapons. There are those who say you should see if you can open negotiations. The regime says they can't be direct, "We won't deign to speak to you people directly."

Maybe just give us some of your thoughts on how this should – I fear that if negotiations start, one of two things happens: The regime drags out the negotiations while they weaponized and try to fit nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles, or they end up with a deal that's as fatally flawed as the deal that President Obama had. But the alternative to that, obviously, we know what the alternative is. There are about six B-2s right now in Diego Garcia. They could take out the Iranian nuclear weapons program within about 24 hours, if President Trump chose to do so. Just give us some of your quick thoughts on nuclear weapons.

PAHLAVI: Well, you know, obviously there's a reason we've been insisting that, you know, it's a waste of time trying to negotiate because the best that will be achieved is allowing the regime to buy more time. And they have done that until now. Oddly enough, you mentioned that – I saw this video that was an AI-generated video, I think, by the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] that is a response to the Iranian regime nuc– bombing Diego Garcia. I'm not sure if you saw it. Any of you have seen it in the media?

Well, you know, the – if they actually put this out there, it's not just to make fun but it's a way of saying, "You know what? Even if you have to attempt to assassinate President Trump yet again, we will do that." And, you know, is that conducive to good faith in negotiation? How many...

MAY: They're still threatening to do that.

PAHLAVI: ...how many times are we going to fall in the same trappings? And, you know, it's – the tragedy is that you're still insisting to have a change of DNA in this regime and its comportment when the Iranians are saying, look, in – understand that if we succeed in liberating ourselves, every aspect that this regime has caused in terms of world instability, terrorism, funding radical movements, having a nuclear weapon, existential threat to a country like Israel, and what have you, all of these things are tied to this regime still being there.

So even if you assume for the sake of argument that some kind of a deal over the nuclear issue could be struck, what about all the other aspects? What about everything else that happens in the meantime?

But one thing has proven to be true in all these years, not just specific to Iran but also specific to what ultimately helps curb an undesirable system, even leading to their collapse. And there's one language that, at the end of the day, they all understand. You have to be firm. Reagan proved it when he had to deal with Gorbachev.

Every time you've seen strength, this regime has backfired. Today, even at the risk of knowing that they will suffer still severe consequences, in Iraq they're beginning to disband themselves because they know this time is serious.

Now, what's interesting here is make a difference about those who make the top decisions, who are the first ones to take flight if they have to disappear, leaving the rest of the troops behind. And you know, part of the reason I'm going back to the issue of maximum defection is because if this doesn't happen, guess what the people first in line are being attacked? The so-called military and paramilitary forces who are in place, whether in Iran or in the region under this regime. They'll be the first to be the victim of these attacks, and for what? To protect this regime?

This is a questioning that is going through their heads. And it's important for this administration not to only understand what this regime is capable of, but understand the mindset, the psychology that is happening at the same time. If you don't understand that, then you cannot understand how change can occur.

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And we are here to help, to share with you our assessment, our analysis, on what's going through people's mind, because that's crucial. If you are unable to comprehend each other, then the policy is going to lead to another bad policy and not just necessarily one that could be win/win.

And at the end of the day, we would like to have a win/win scenario. For once, let the only loser be the regime itself, let the Iranian people and the free world finally have a win on this subject.

MAY: I have dozens of ...

(APPLAUSE)

MAY: I have a dozen more questions but I'm only going to ask one because of time, but I want to get it in, and then we'll go to your questions. So signal if you can, so we waste no time, that you have a question and we'll get a microphone to you after.

But I also have this commercial announcement. My colleague Mark Dubowitz has a podcast with you. It's about an hour long. It's really good, it's really interesting. You're fascinating. So, listen to the podcast when you have time.

My last question for today is just to give a glimpse of the kind of government and the kind of monarchy you foresee in a post-regime Iran.

PAHLAVI: Well, you know, I've always said that the ultimate form is something that the Iranian people have to decide, and that can only come as a constitutional process taking place because when you look at different models and comparisons, and I'm not taking any position for or against one or the other, I think either model could function. It's up for the people to decide. But we have seen successful models that exist, where you have, let's say, a monarchy like the one in Japan or the one in Sweden or even in Great Britain, and the republican models that we see in many countries.

Now, exactly what shape it takes, we'll have to see. Is it a republic like we have in India or Israel, where you have a President, which in fact has somehow played the roles of the monarch because it's not directly, he or she involved, with responsibilities of that administration or decision-making or policy, the Prime Minister does? Or in the form of monarchies, where the monarchs are not at all held in the position of responsibility in terms of the executive or policy-making? Again, it's a different system.

So ultimately, when we talk about the, you know, self-determination by means of a government of the people, by the people, for the people, the same principles, and of course there has to be a checks and balance system, it goes without saying.

I think there are also other components that we can add to it, which is I hope that our constitution is ultimately based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to incorporate all the aspects of people's rights and putting, finally, an end to any type of discrimination. Certainly, a distribution of powers so power doesn't get concentrated. All the watchdog and institutions besides government that have to come in place.

So, the vision has to be really holistic. And this is a process that happens during the transition phase. So, now we are in the phase between now and until the regime collapses. What happens after the regime collapse? An interim government has to take charge to obviously manage the country's affairs during that period, but to immediately prepare the stage for the election of the first – the constitutional assembly.

That's where all the debates takes place – ultimately what we want, because I think the majority of the Iranian secular democratic forces, whether they are monarchists or republicans, whether they are from the right, the middle, or from the left, agree on three core principle, for what I know. We all agree, and we value, the importance of Iran's territorial integrity. We also believe in the principles of human rights. That has to be part and parcels of what we're doing. We believe in a

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secular democratic system, meaning a clear separation of religions from governance. On this, you will find that the great majority of Iranian secular democrats believe in that. That's our common denominator. We have differences of opinion, of course, on the form, which is fine, but this is not the time for us to debate it.

We take the only venue where such a debate makes sense, and without such venue, we cannot get the result we seek. We are behooved as secular democrats to work together to make sure that the process that will finally determine our faith has to occur, and we need to work towards that.

And I have offered my role to lead this campaign, to manage this transition on a basis of having monarchists and republicans, left and right, cooperate with one another towards that end.

And the only thing ultimately that measures the will of the majority is the ballot box. We are not reinventing the wheel. How do you measure the result of people's will? By the ballot box. Right now, we have no free elections in Iran, and the ballot box doesn't speak, Khamenei speaks. We are the antithesis to a regime that says everything that will have a legitimate acceptance of the people has to be by their hands. Their destiny has to be determined by nothing but their own free will and that's what it's all about.

That's the spirit of our campaign; that's the spirit of our cooperation. And I think this is the element that is more and more tangible now when you look at Iran, because if you look within Iran today, we have the highest level in the past 46 years and counting, since the inception of the revolution, of unity among the people, regardless of which ethnicity they represent, what faith do they have, what part of Iran they represent.

I have never seen such level of unity within Iran. And it was as of recent weeks, amply displayed on our New Year celebration, and that's the biggest slap in the face of the regime. And they tell the world this is our identity, and these people don't represent us.

MAY: All right, let's go to your questions. And yes? Identify yourself, if you would.

GHARAEI: Thank you so much. Prince Pahlavi, thank you for your time and this opportunity. My question is...

MAY: Wait. Just identify yourself.

GHARAEI: Yes, sorry. I'm sorry. This is Samira Gharaei from *Iran International*.

MAY: Got it.

GHARAEI: Thank you so much.

Prince Pahlavi, my question is about tensions and the region and what is going on at this very moment. The tensions between the US and the Islamic Republic have significantly escalated in these days and weeks, and perhaps, more than ever we are on the brink of a military confrontation, if you may.

I want to ask you: how do you view the recent military developments in the region? And what role do you see for yourself amid these heightened tensions? And also, what is your diplomatic and political assessment of what is unfolding at the moment in the region?

PAHLAVI: OK. Thank you for your question. I've been saying for, at least, the last two decades, the fact that we should not jump from failed diplomacy to military confrontation as if it's either/or scenario, because nobody wants to have military confrontation.

And if diplomacy doesn't work and you don't want to have military confrontation, you are left with the only other solution which is the third way, which is empowerment of the people as the agent of change and the alternative to avoid having scenarios that are less desirable which will have to be, ultimately, confrontation.

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And past U.S. administration and the European allies, in particular, have always been stuck with this idea that, well, we have to try diplomacy but then we have to get ready for conflict and confrontation. Never thinking of the third way, which is making the alternative the solution, as opposed to within the status quo either use the carrot or the stick. And sometimes, it may require military strikes.

The scenario of change that I see in Iran is in line with what I just proposed, the third way, because the solution are the people of Iran themselves, who have never been part of the consideration of the equation.

Now there is a timeline. There's a window in front of us that has opened. Ever since October 7, ever since what Israel had to do, to emasculate the regime's proxies by retaliating against Hamas and Hezbollah. When we saw the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, we noticed that the regime is becoming more and more and more isolated but also weakened.

This is a perfect opportunity to finally cut the snake's head, not by an outside force doing it for us, but as I said time and again, by supporting a change which is a combination of external pressure, but internal pressure combined, to ultimately bring the regime to its knees.

If that is successful, you won't have to worry about having to have military strikes. You won't have to worry about the existential threat. That Israel will have to say, "Until when are we supposed to wait and see how much the Western world is dragging its feet in making such a crucial decision?" And we may have to preempt Iran's nuclear capability by striking Iranian installation.

So, as long as we are not thinking that the best way is to go beyond this either/or choice of, well, diplomacy or strike, as opposed to let's bring the new element, this new equation in place.

Let's help that change, but this time making the Iranian people the solution to our problems, as opposed to our military B-2s doing this or I don't know what. That's where you will see that shift of policy, that shift of interpretation, is going to work hand-in-glove with the strategy that we're proposing. But they need to come to this conclusion.

Now, I've always said, look, opportunities come and go. And yes, we're not denying the fact that having to act militarily is always an option on the table. But I think it will be historically criminal not to give the Iranian people a chance to make that happen before you have to resort to those less-likable scenarios.

And this opportunity, my friends, in 46 years, have yet to be given to the Iranian people, ever. And all I'm asking is give the Iranian people a chance to put an end to all of these concerns. And if we fail, and I hope we won't, but if we were to fail, you always have those options.

But jumping straight from diplomacy is not working, to "Let's go bomb the hell out of them." Once again, you're throwing the people of Iran under the bus, which will only add insult to injury.

MAY: Another question back there.

NEROZZI: Thank you. Thank you, Your Highness. My name is Timothy Nerozzi with the *Washington Examiner*.

You referenced the idea of a secularized government, one that divorces religion from politics. Obviously, the monarchy was – had a religious foundation to its legitimacy. And if a new monarchy were to be established through the will of the people, what would be the role of religion in that monarchy? And what would be the role of religion in Iranian society in general?

PAHLAVI: Well, again, regardless of whether we have a republic or a monarchy at the end of the day, it's the appreciation that in every country, when you have an element of separation of church from state, the American Constitution describes it one way, "freedom of religion." If you go to the level of *laïcité*, as the French will say, it's even more pronounced and distinct. So, there are variations between one. It's OK for you, as an American, to wear the Star of David, or the cross or a

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symbol of another faith. But in France, it's actually forbidden to do, at least in public.

So, every country has one way of treating the issue of secularism. And I think in terms of – if we truly believe in religious freedoms, if we truly believe in terms of people's rights, part of their human rights to practice whatever faith they want, then I don't think that you should singularly officialize one faith versus another. There shouldn't be a difference between Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, or any other religion. And what about, by the way, the atheists? They should have also their rights of not believing in something.

These are all guarantees under the law. So, every citizen has to be protected, that irrespective of the statistics of their numbers, we don't value people's faith on the basis of how many people have – you know, how much is the weight of this faith versus the other faith. It should be equal to all, irrespective of their numbers. That's – it's a matter of principle.

And I think today, when you look at Iranians beyond just a matter of laws, because at the end of the day, it's the rule of law that protects all of us as citizens. But it's also the culture that is now existing in Iran. And the fact that you see that, whether it's a loss of faith or as elemental protest or retaliation, these defections from Islam to, let's say, the fa– one of the fastest-growing religion in Iran right now is Christianity. A lot of Iranians are converting to Christians. Why? They have to ask the question, "Why? Why has it – why have we come to this point?" But if tomorrow we say irrespective of what you choose to believe in, that's your right under the constitution. And as I said earlier, it should not matter, and it's nobody's business to ask another one, what do you believe in? I wouldn't give myself the right to ask my fellow Iranians what – whatever you choose to believe, that's fine, as long as we are all operating under the same law that governs all of us, because it's the rule of law that protects us to begin with.

So, we have – more than we believe in a faith, we have to believe in the law in the first place. And I think that political democratic culture is becoming more and more tangible and understood, and today's generation, I think, is certainly far more mature in understanding the complexities of this.

So, at the end, based on your question, it's just beyond the institution. It has to be something that is now impregnated, or how can I say, absorbed totally in this modern culture of tolerance and diversity and pluralism, because that's what ultimately makes countries survive in terms of being democratic countries: tolerance versus bigotry, acceptance versus enmity.

And I think, you know, many countries in the Western free world had to go through many stages of getting where they are today. I'm not suggesting that it should take Iran two centuries to get there. They could be there very fast, because the knowledge now is known. I mean, Iranians know why they see success in Iranians who had to flee their countries on the subject of just religion itself, because of religious persecution, to come to a country like America, or Sweden, or France, to be then able to continue not being fearful of practicing their faith because they are Jewish, or Baha'i, or what have you, and how successful they become in these countries. And they should not have had to leave their country in order to have those liberties and those guarantees. What guarantees their freedom here that they don't have it in Iran, at the end of the day? It's the laws of these countries that protects them. Well, we want the same thing for us, so we don't have to migrate to another country to benefit from the same rights we have here in America back in Tehran, or Isfahan, or Tabriz. It's as simple as that. And that's our vision, and that's why I say the community of values makes it logical to say if we want to live like the people who are free in the Western world, we have to have the same mechanisms in place in our country to make sure that as citizens, we have exactly these guarantees.

So, this is really the process where we can get to. It was well beyond the ultimate form of institution; it's a much more complex issue, but I think we're there in terms of comprehension today, more than ever before.

MAY: Michael, you had somebody else back there? Yeah.

POURZIAIEE: Thank you so much. Mehrnoosh Pourziaiee from *BBC Persian*. I have two questions. One is about the

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defection and proposal. In many cases, defections of high-level security officials being very useful and influential in toppling the dictatorships around the world. But at the same time, in some countries, it has led to military rule after that. So, what do you propose to be in place to avoid such a situation?

And my second question is – kind of goes to the talking about the alignment of stars, as you mentioned, now that you're proposing, among other things, about supporting maximum support. We have a U.S. government who has stopped funding the VOA [Voice of America] and RFE/RL [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty], which have been broadcasting to Iranian people, and also at the same time, cutting funds for NGOs who've been working for Iran. And at the same time, a government whose doctrine is that United States shouldn't be into the democracy-building in other countries, or supporting regime change in other countries. How do you think you can face this challenge and solve it?

PAHLAVI: Well, actually, for the beginning part of your question, which was actually more of a statement than a question, but I'll try to get the question part of it.

Look, precisely why it is important to support the Iranian democracy movement, it's because failing to do that could lead to a plausible scenario where some elements within the military or paramilitary forces may push towards a coup of some form, maybe eliminating the religious aspect of this regime. And guess what? For a few decades, we'll have another Pinochet-type regime in Iran. One reason more, if you don't want to get there as a democrat to support and strengthen Iranian civil society, support labor unions, support media, because these are the watchdogs that will prevent the country going on the wrong direction. But if you – not address the issue of, how do we strengthen democratic institutions to prevent the country to fall yet to another form of dictatorship? That's the very part of my argument as well: why it is important for you to now support the Iranian democracy movement? Because democrats are not going to create a dictatorship. But if you don't strengthen their hand, opportunists may be out there who just want to control, and again, we are going to have the same problem being prolonged.

Now, as far as funding, look, I don't think it's a zero-sum game of either you do it or you not do it. But I think it has to be correctly identified: What are the worthy entities that need to continue have funding and support? What is legitimate, or has it turned to some kind of a profiteering business for some, but it's not really addressing the real issue? That has to be categorized. That has to be properly analyzed and assessed.

So, cutting funds for the sake of cutting funds, to me doesn't make sense. But funding without verification, without a clear agenda and mandate is also problematic. As long as you are able to assess it correctly and fund the right entities that deserve to re– continue having funding, as opposed to those who are not addressing the problem and have been just draining the cash, and have not served the objective, that analysis has to be made. If you do that, then I think we can find a solution to what you raised as a problem.

MAY: Your Highness, this has been a fascinating and elucidating conversation. I want to thank you very much, and it's...

PAHLAVI: Thank you. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

MAY: And I now have the pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker, Representative Joe Wilson, who serves as congressman for South Carolina's 2nd district. He's been serving in Congress since 2001, when he was first elected in a special election. I'll give you time to get up there.

(LAUGHTER)

He serves as a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, where he is the Chair of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia Subcommittee, a member of the Subcommittee on Europe. He is also the most senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, where he is on the Subcommittee on Readiness and also Strategic Forces.

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Representative Wilson, thank you again for joining us here today, and the floor is yours.

WILSON: And thank you very much, President Clifford May. And indeed, ladies and gentlemen and friends of a free Iran, I am so grateful to be with you today, standing in support of the brave people of Iran and firmly against the theocratic terrorist regime in Tehran that— with its enablers and puppets.

It's very significant today that we have a real dignitary on the front row, and that is Congressman Cory Mills from Florida. Congressman Mills should be remembered with his military background but more importantly as the horror of what happened in August 2022 with the abandonment of the people of Afghanistan – 2021, the just horrific abandonment. He took upon himself to go and rescue people who had stood for democracy, stood for freedom, and fought alongside our military and made a difference.

And it's – there are – I'm just not aware of anybody who has just made such a difference recognizing the horror of the era of the abandonment of the people of Afghanistan. So, it's – Congressman, please, thank you for your being here today.

(APPLAUSE)

And I also want to point out there is worldwide respect for the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the National Union for Democracy in Iran, for efforts in hosting this event today and supporting meaningful legislative action for the benefit of the people of the – Iran and the world.

President Clifford May is the – of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies is a champion for supporting stability and prosperity throughout the world. And by hosting a podcast, *Foreign Policy* [Note: *Foreign Podicy*] – and additionally, he is a columnist for the *Washington Times*, understanding that the Global War on Terrorism still continues. What a visionary he is on behalf of the people of freedom and democracy.

The corrupt Islamic Republic has never been weaker. The escalation of its nuclear program against the backdrop of plummeting economy and the sustained internal unrest have proven to be a disaster, with the currency devaluation that we also noticed. And I believe so much of this is because of the strength of President Donald Trump, who understands that the – we should be supporting the termination of terrorism wherever it occurs.

The horrific murder of Mahsa Amini in 2022 sparked outrage around the world and put the plight of the Iranians in a global spotlight. From the pensioners to young students, Iranians of all backgrounds continue taking to the streets to protest the draconian and brutal theocratic regime under which they are forced to live and have no historical connection to.

These protests have grown in size and scope, and the brutal regime uses disappearance, torture, and execution to quash dissent. Today, the regime is over-leveraged in the support of terrorist puppets and has revealed with the deficiency of its air defense following the direct attacks on Israel, which was a – with the attacks by Israel responding to the unprovoked October 1 missile attacks, indiscriminate against the people of Israel directly, not by puppets, directly from Iran.

The removal of the narco-trafficking mass murderer Bashar al-Assad, who has departed to Moscow, appropriately, from Damascus, has cut off the weapons trafficking routes of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and war criminal Putin, a major partner in the regime of Tehran.

I'm very hopeful that the success of the people of Syria should be the equivalent for the Middle East of the fall of the Berlin Wall for the Europe and Central Asia for ultimately the liberation of countries around the world.

Preventing the regime from acquiring a nuclear weapon, which is existential for the United States and for the American families, and has been cited about the missile programs, is of foremost urgency. However, the policy of excluding demands on the regime for the intercontinental ballistic missile program and proliferation of terrorism through its puppets was disastrous, removing leverage to enforce any compliance. You cannot meaningfully negotiate with those in bad faith

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as the head of a snake, and terrorist snake as we see, which is also oppressing the people of their country.

During his first administration, President Donald Trump correctly implemented a policy of maximum pressure to regain leverage against the regime and those policies which have been correctly restored. Now, on behalf of the people of Iran, actually, I was grateful to support Congressman Zach Nunn of Iowa in his legislation to codify maximum pressure sanctions last week. The world currently, correctly, differentiates the Iranian regime from the Iranian people.

With the regime chants of, "Death to America, death to Israel", the people of Iran chant, quote, "Down with the regime," they do not want war, yet the regime commands it and sacrifices the people of Iran.

I introduced bipartisan legislation last week, the Maximum Support Act, with Congressman Jimmy Panetta of California, to aid and amplify the message that the regime is so desperate to silence, quote, "the people of Iran will be free," end of quote. The legislation contains a multi-pronged strategy to empower those peacefully fighting the regime so that one day the world will not have to.

First, the countering of – counter – filtering of internet control. This bill provides for critical communication support, like the virtual private networks and satellite to sell technology to circumvent the regime blackouts.

Secondly, additionally, this bill calls for a strategy to manage inevitable regime defections and utilizes asset forfeiture of illicit regime funds to support humanitarian assistance for the Iranian people.

And third, finally, the bill calls for terrorism sanctions against the regime's transnational criminal repression arm, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

And all of this will be done very carefully with the leadership of President Donald Trump and his extraordinary persons who he now has in leadership, as we know, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who I like to point out, and certainly like Cory Mills. You don't have to explain to him what totalitarianism is. His family had to move to Florida, because he recognized what totalitarianism is. And so how exciting to have the leadership that we have today.

Iranians are among the most pro-American and pro-Israel people in the region. The Iranian and American community, and there are a number here today, are extraordinarily successful achieving the American regime.

And it's so inspiring to hear from Iranian-Americans in my home district, all across America. They come across as so positive and so appreciative of their Persian heritage, which we all want to promote.

I appreciate the opportunity to compliment the efforts of President Trump, of holding the regime accountable, with an effort to support those who truly put their lives on the line to live in stability and prosperity as a partner of the American people. Thank you. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

MAY: Yep. Again, thanks so much for that. Those are inspiring words.

I'd like now to introduce Negar Mojtahedi. Is that pronounced right?

MOJTAHEDI: Mojtahedi.

MAY: Mojtahedi.

MOJTAHEDI: Close enough.

MAY: And she will moderate the final portion of today's event. Negar is a journalist. She's a writer. She's a reporter. She's a producer, award-winning documentary filmmaker from Vancouver, British Columbia. In addition to her current work at *Iran International*, she's worked with *Global BC*, *CTV*, *CBC*. I welcome you to the stage and give it over to you.

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(APPLAUSE)

MOJTAHEDI: Thank you so much.

Thank you again, Cliff. I'm Negar Mojtahedi. I'm a journalist at *Iran International* and also the host of the podcast, *Eye for Iran*. Joining us now are Behnam Ben Taleblu, the senior director of FDD's Iran program; and Cameron Khansarinia, vice president of NUFDI, the National Union for Democracy in Iran.

Behnam oversees FDD's work on Iran in addition to serving as a senior fellow specializing in Iranian security and political issues. For well over a decade, Behnam has supported FDD's Iran program as a senior fellow, research fellow, and senior analyst.

Cameron is the vice president of NUFDI, having previously served as policy director where he led research and writing, legislative efforts, and media relations. As vice president, he has led efforts to expand NUFDI into Washington's leading Iranian-American organization. He leads the organization's special projects, high-level relationships, and strategic growth initiatives. Thank you to you both.

TALEBLU: Thank you.

KHANSARINIA: Thank you.

MOJTAHEDI: OK, let's unpack and analyze the maximum support bill, which is truly historic. Behnam let's start with you. We often think in the paradigm of either, you know, it's nuclear negotiations or it's military options.

Is maximum support a third way? Meaning, is it an alternative to those two other paths that we just mentioned? Or does it complement one path? So, can it be independent and be its own way?

TALEBLU: Well, thank you very much, Negar, for the question. And Negar and Cameron, it's a real pleasure to be on this panel with you. A lot of tough acts to follow – Congressman, Crowned Prince, it's a pleasure. Thanks for everyone to coming out to FDD today, dealing with the rain.

Listen, for too long Iran policy in this town [Washington, DC] has been dogmatic. There are some people who dogmatically, almost like a religion, support engagement with the Islamic Republic. And also, honestly, there's people who dogmatically see everything through the prism, or through the lens, of pressure and confrontation.

Now, zooming out for a second, both diplomacy and military options are mere tools in the national security toolkit. As an analyst, and not just Iran watcher, but someone interested in foreign policy, you're supposed to look at the efficacy of the tool and assess its utility towards the target.

And we need to have an honest conversation about some of these tools. And in this sense, the need for maximum support as a third way builds on the shortcomings in the past of some of those tools, directly and indirectly, over the past 46 years with the Islamic Republic of Iran but also tries to carve out a third way.

It doesn't mean that it's only maximum support. It is actually to take the best of what has worked over the past 46 years, and the best of what – and ignore that which has not worked over the past 46 years.

And to marry it as a tool, to take advantage of something that exists in the Middle East with respect to Iran that does not really exist much of anywhere else in the region, which is to take advantage of the chasm between state and society, and that chasm shows that you have, fundamentally, the most pro-American population in the region and perhaps in the Muslim world, ironically living under the most anti-American and even anti-Israel government in the region.

And to take advantage of that chasm, to actually align American strategy and values in the Middle East, which far too long has been forcing you to choose between your head and your heart. So, if I had to put it a different way, I would say

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maximum support for the Iranian people allows you to marry your head and your heart on Iran policy.

MOJTAHEDI: And Cameron, when it comes to maximum support, tell us how you can implement and how this goes beyond, you know, academic or theory, but can actually be tangible.

You know one question I get asked often: you know, if this becomes law, how would you ensure – what types of checks and balances would you have in place to ensure that, for example, the strike fund would go to the right people? And in terms of civil dissidents, would it go to particular opposition groups? Or how would that all work out if this, in fact, does become law, to measure the success and potentially any failures?

KHANSARINIA: It's a great question. And allow me to thank you, Negar, for moderating, and Behnam and also FDD for working on this important project with us at NUFDI. It's really great to have an organization in Washington like FDD that has for, really, years now if not decades, known what the right Iran policy is and had the courage to push for it.

The Iran team at FDD I think, you know, is outstanding. And so, kudos to Mark and Cliff, and of course, to Benham and Saeed and Jonathan who do such a great job. I know it's appreciated by Iranians. So, thanks to you guys and great to partner with you on this.

Negar, your question is important because there's a lot of – to borrow a phrase from the president, “fake news” about strike funds and, you know, how to support the Iranian people.

A lot of keyboard warriors and people who, frankly, do little more than, you know, post on Twitter all day long and have never really done anything for the people of Iran in their lives, talk about, you know, “How are we going to do this? So, this money was raised, then where has it gone?” And it's all, you know, lies.

I think which you're probably accustomed to, lies when it comes to social media, particularly, on Iran, when the regime is so active in pushing misinformation, disinformation. So, now we have a real opportunity with this legislation to, as the Crown Prince said, not use American taxpayer dollars, not use American troops, but to use the Iranian people's money itself, the money that is called the Islamic Republic's money or the assets of the regime – is not the Islamic Republic's money, it's the Iranian people's money.

And as the Iranians are on the streets fighting for their liberation, fighting to free Iran from this regime, but also fighting to free the Middle East and the United States from 46 years of terror, they should be able to access their own resources. This is the money that was stolen from them. So, they should be able to, through a verified, transparent way, access that money to liberate themselves from this criminal, frankly, occupying, regime.

And so, I just want to make a few things clear about the strike fund and what this legislation proposes. This legislation does not name names. This legislation doesn't say, “Take these billions of dollars and give it to NUFDI.” It doesn't say, “Give it to this person or that person.” If anything, it puts in place very strict transparency.

This would be monitored and managed, should this legislation be passed, by the U.S. Department of Treasury, which I think, any of you who are about to file your taxes in the next few weeks know just how much they value transparency and clarity and attention to detail.

So, it's important, when we talk about strike funds and these sort of tangible means of helping the Iranian people, to ignore Iranian or Persian language social media, ignore the naysayers, ignore the people who, if they're not actually bots, act like bots, and focus on how we can make these solutions implementable.

Something that the Crown Prince has often said, when it regards a strike fund or in general Iran policy, to counter this lack of imagination, is a phrase you're all well aware of: “If there is a will, there is a way.” If we decide to do this policy, there are ways to implement it.

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It's not as if it hasn't happened before. The United States played a critical role in supporting laborers to overthrow other brutal dictatorships behind the Soviet Union's wall of terror. Look what the Poles were able to do in conjunction with the United States, with the Catholic Church, to overthrow their own Communist dictatorship. Now with an Islamist dictatorship, we can do the very same thing.

So, where there's a will, there is a way. This piece of legislation is very transparent, it's very clear. It's not giving money to this person or that person, or this group or that group. It's simply putting options on the table for the Congress to force the Department of Treasury and the government to act to enable this policy.

MOJTAHEDI: Thank you.

TALEBLU: I just got Twitter. What the ...

KHANSARINIA: Yep...

(LAUGHTER, CROSS-TALK)

MOJTAHEDI: And how would you characterize the maximum support bill in the context of the "America First" foreign policy framework, Behnam?

TALEBLU: I actually think it allows you to have a proper Iran policy, taking advantage of, how shall we say, the current political zeitgeist, where you know, full disclosure, there's something of a civil war over Republican hearts and minds and over Republican foreign policy, between what you might call on one end internationalists and what you might call on the other end isolationists. Sometimes, at FDD, we call them retainers versus restrainers.

Whatever discourse you choose to use, I think it's imperative to make Iran policy as broadly appealing and to take advantage of the fact that, you know, this is a regime that does not distinguish between shades of Republicans, nor does it really distinguish between Republican and Democrats. When it says, "Death to America," and when it says, "Death to Israel," it really means it. Unfortunately, the regime takes a very holistic approach towards its adversaries. And I think it's a – proper for the Iran policy to be holistic to offset that.

So if you are going to continually see everything perhaps through the lens of budget cuts, or see everything through the hangover of the Iraq War, the 2003 hangover that still exists, you might do well to take a more cost-efficient or cost-effective approach to Iran policy, which means if you're going to perennially deal with all the fires created by the Islamic Republic, I think a more cost-effective Iran policy that can be consistent with some of the things we're hearing and seeing from the America First crowd is to not just deal with those fires, but perhaps pivot and deal with the arsonist behind the fires.

That would be fundamentally cheaper, that would be fundamentally more cost-effective, because if you go outside-in, you are ultimately still going to have to deal with the in– deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. You might as well focus on countering the breadth and depth of the threats posed by that regime than go outside-in. So, deal with the arsonist, not with the little fires.

KHANSARINIA: Negar, may I just add briefly, if President Trump – as we all know, wrote the book on making a deal, in all of his experience in the private sector and business and then in politics, of course, and as President, where I think that the policies that he led made America safer, stronger, and I'm sure there are those who would disagree, but if you look at the record of all these years that President Trump has had to negotiate, he has never yet had to negotiate with an Iranian mullah.

And I think that the President will realize that trying to deal with somebody like that, who is not acting in national interest, who is not acting even really in the interests of the people he claims to represent, is very different.

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And I hope that the President's advisors are telling him about the true nature of this regime, because President Trump had, in his first term, the best Iran policy I think that we have seen in four decades of U.S. policy towards the Islamic Republic.

And now is time to double down on that, now is time to reinvest in the policies that worked the first time, maximum pressure, not to achieve a deal with this regime because this regime does not want a deal with President Trump, this regime wants to keep itself in power, it wants to buy time.

And what President Trump can do is reinforce, reimplement his most successful policy – again, really the most successful policy against this regime in four decades of presidents. And in order to achieve his America First objectives, in order to achieve the peace in the Middle East that he seeks, and I think he's uniquely capable of bringing about, you have to solve the Iran issue.

The Abraham Accords were a historic step forward, and then we saw what the Islamic Republic did in its – via its terrorist proxies on October 7 to undermine that peace process. The Abraham Accords, regional peace, none of these things will ever advance, the United States will never be able to refocus at home, as the President is trying to do, until you solve the Iran issue.

And the President is uniquely capable to be able to do that, and if he combines his successful policy of maximum pressure with maximum support to change – to support the Iranian people, to do the change themselves, not to send troops or anything like that, he is on a clear path to a Nobel Peace Prize. And he would deserve it because solving the Iran issue will not just solve Iran, it will fundamentally alter the trajectory and the course of the Middle East. And he can be the President who sets the Middle East on the path to peace, but you have to solve the Iran issue first.

And so that's how maximum support squares with America First policy, because if you solve Iran, you solve the Middle East, you can focus back here at home.

TALEBLU: And not just as a footnote, not just back here at home, but to the things that actually do have nonpartisan or bipartisan support in this town, which is countering the rising threat from the Chinese Communist Party, which is really the entity that's been keeping the Islamic Republic in business for all of these years.

Pre-deal, during deal, post-deal, China is the largest licit and illicit, depending on the time period you look at, importer of Iranian crude oil. So, it's literally greasing the wheels behind the regime's nuclear program, terrorism apparatus. There is no straight line in the world from losing or coming up short against the ayatollahs and then winning against the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]. So, that has to be kept in mind for President Trump as he refocuses the Pentagon, the budget, what have you. You have to get this right.

MOJTAHEDI: That's a great segue and it leads to my last and final question, which is going to be twofold.

Behnam, I'll start with you. Let's talk deal or no deal. If they do go down, potentially, this negotiation path, how would that affect the maximum support initiative? Of course, all the Iran experts say that negotiation with the regime only helps to preserve it and keep it in power.

And then as we've talked about before, Iran is overwhelmingly pro-American, one of the most in the Middle East. Now, when it comes to this alternative, potentially, military option, of bombing nuclear sites, how would the "Do No Harm" policy or principle in the maximum support bill address the potential negative consequences of bombing?

TALEBLU: And I'll be brief to make sure we leave time for Q&A, as well. But long story short, when we were coming up together, FDD and NUFDI, with this maximum support paradigm or this maximum support framework, we thought you need an operating principle, and that operating principle was Do No Harm.

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And fundamentally, if you engage with the Islamic Republic of Iran and you try again for a Faustian bargain, that only kicks the can down the road. And, as we all see, the can has hit the wall and is now coming back at the US much faster than ever before.

I mean, Iran is the only country with a 2,000-kilometer ballistic missile to not develop nuclear weapons. It's developing enriched – it's enriching uranium at 60 percent purity, briefly went to 83, 84 percent purity back in 2023. The US, which dropped two atomic bombs in the past, one uranium, one plutonium; the uranium one we dropped was enriched just to 79 percent to 80 percent.

So, the cat is out of the bag for so many of the threats we face from the Islamic Republic today. And the reason we took the Do No Harm principle is because anything that sets back the most important contest between the state in Iran and the street in Iran will also set back the American counterterrorism operation, the American counterproliferation operations.

Everything that we have that puts time on the side of the government and takes away time from the people ends up actually running the clock on the threats that we're trying to counter. So, again, not getting this right, this is an ordering principle. Governance is about limited time, limited resources. And the art of governance is about prioritizing those limited times and those limited resources towards your most ultimate interest. So, this is an attempt to get America to rebalance and actually focus on its own interests.

MOJTAHEDI: Would you like to answer the question in terms of how negotiations might negatively impact them? Or potentially, what type of impact would that have on the maximum support bill, if at all, any?

KHANSARINIA: Well, again, negotiations haven't worked with this regime. Negotiations won't work with this regime because it doesn't seek the same ends. You're not operating on the same plane of reality.

The president is looking to advance American national security interests, global peace, regional stability. The Islamic Republic is not seeking Iran's national interests. It's not seeking regional peace. It's not seeking pleasant relationships with its neighbors. It's seeking to wipe Israel off the map, the "Little Satan." And then, by means of that, wipe the United States, the "Big Satan," off the map.

How many more times does the Islamic Republic have to put out videos? How many more times does Ali Khamenei's spokespeople in the media or his official media outlets have to say, "Our goal is to assassinate President Trump? Our goal is to turn the White House into a place to worship Imam Hussain." I mean, how many more times does this regime have to show? These are not negotiating tactics. The regime itself says that "*Death to America* is not a slogan, it is our policy." It is their policy to destroy the United States.

And so, all that those advocating for these negotiations are doing is, as Behnam said, kicking the can down the road. And at some point, that can is going to bounce off the end of that road and smack us in the face, because the Islamic Republic is an expert at this. They're an expert at buying time. And what they're trying to do is solidify their regime. The regime is at the weakest point it has been in its existence. And as opposed to trying to negotiate how much to sell them a lifeline for, we could be investing in the alternative. We could be investing in a different path ahead.

We could be investing in a whole new Middle East. And again, for the naysayers, for those who would mislead the president or misadvise him, we are not talking about Iraq. We're not talking about Afghanistan. We're not talking about foreign invasion. We're not talking about foreign occupation, U.S. soldiers being on the ground. This is not that. That's been the false dichotomy between which Iran policy has been forced, negotiating with this regime or occupying the country, as we did in Iraq or Afghanistan. Nobody's talking about that. Unfortunately, false arguments continue to be presented in the media. They continue to be presented in the think tank community by so-called analysts. These are lies. They've always been lies.

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So, the quickest way to solve this is to look for the alternative, look for alternative policy. Einstein was very clear in his quote about trying the same thing over and over again. And that is a definition of insanity, if you're expecting a different result.

And we can try the same thing again, but we cannot expect a different result, unless we are willing to accept the fact that we are insane. And for a long time, Iran policy in the United States has been insane because we've been doing exactly that. So, it's time to think outside the box. It doesn't require anything crazy. NUFDI' s written it down; FDD's written it down.

So, if we can think of it, certainly the U.S. government can think of it, and they can do it much better. So, there is a way to do this without U.S. troops, without U.S. dollars. And achieve the president's objectives for peace in the region and to refocus here in the United States.

MOJTAHEDI: Thank you. That's a great way to conclude. Now, we're eager to take questions from the audience. If you have a question, please raise your hand and our colleague will bring the mic over.

SAYAN: Hi. So, I'm not a politician or a journalist or any of that. I'm a psychologist.

MOJTAHEDI: Even better. Hi.

(LAUGHTER)

SAYAN: So, I watched in 1970...

KHANSARINIA: Iranians definitely need you...

SAYAN: Dr. Azita Sayan – and I'm very much connected to the people of Iran. I'm privileged to work with them inside of Iran for the past 38 years. I watched in 1977, the American media start a campaign against a very beloved Shah and systematically take him down without firing a shot and just brainwashing the whole world against a regime that was 90 percent for its leader.

And I'm wondering: why are we wasting our time when we can do what was done before? Which is, we've seen in 2009 millions of people poured into the streets with the help of the American media. And, as long as they were winning, they were being covered. And then, as soon as the American media took its attention away to deal with Michael Jackson's death, we got screwed. And then they started systematically killing the people, and then nobody wanted to cover that.

And then again, two years, two and a half years ago, the Iranian people poured out into the street over Mahsa. As long as the American media was covering it and all the social media, the Iranian people felt like they had the support, and they were willing to risk their lives. And then the support got taken away and they started killing its people.

So why are we not using a methodology that works on the Iranian psyche, which is give us the support, maximum support, through media, showing the world what is being done to us, showing what is happening inside of Iran so that we can have the maximum support?

The Iranian people will do the job. We have the leadership. Why aren't we using what we know works, which is inspiring the Iranian people because they are maximally unhappy? And if we can use what we know works, which is the American media and the world media, to get them to do the job themselves, why aren't we using boots on the ground, which is inside of Iran, and use our funds the right way?

And my question is, why is the American media not doing that? Why don't we put maximum pressure on the media or the world media to support the people of Iran? And where are those voices? And then how do we unite to make sure that they hear us?

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And thank you for the fantastic job that you're all doing. Thanks.

KHANSARINIA: Behnam...

TALEBLU: I'll be very brief. I know we have time for one or two more questions, so if you want – if you want to link them together; if not.

I'm sure you know the joke about 2009, which is no joking matter, which is that the Basij killed Michael Jackson to turn the attention away from everything that was going on, largely but not exclusively in Tehran.

But I will say this, it's our responsibility, you know, you have a panel of Iranian North Americans – Negar lives in Canada, we live in the US – you have a panel of, you know, members of the Iranian diaspora where it's not just our personal duty, it's not just our professional duty, it's our personal duty to make sure these stories get out there, particularly because we live in democracies where the informed individual, the informed citizen doesn't just exist in a vacuum, they exist in an ecosystem of informed politicians and informed press.

And it's our job, when you go to work in the morning, when you go to school, when you meet with your family, to be the best brand ambassador and to help to make sure that the country you came from that gave you those roots, that has such great potential, can actually live up to that potential. And I always say, as an Iranian-American, it really is our luck, in some weird way, that you have this odious, despotic regime, where even if you focus the camera on it slightly, makes its own best arguments against it.

So that's why I see this as a marriage of strategy and values. It's not about a clever comms strategy with respect for telecommunications, it's about just having politicians do the right thing, that is in their interests, because this is one of those few times when interests and values actually do go together, and that's really the long and short of today and that's really the long and short of maximum support.

This isn't a crusade to remake the world, this is a crusade – this is actually a policy that can actually further the Iranian people and the American national interest.

MOJTAHEDI: And just a quick – oh, sorry, go ahead.

I just wanted to quickly add – and that's why it's important to have, you know, diversity in newsrooms. When the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement broke out, I was working at *Global BC* and *Global National*, and I was one of the only ones in the entire country to be nationalizing and localizing those stories. So, it's so important to have.

I encourage, you know, the next generation to have more of it, to give us that agency, because since the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, I believe that the image of the Iranian people has changed in the world, and they know what Iranian women are about, they know that Iranian men are willing to risk their lives to support the – their people as well. And, you know, no longer do you see people in dark veils and cloaks saying, “Death to America.” The image of the Iranian people has changed, and that helps a lot too.

KHANSARINIA: It's an excellent question, Dr. Sayan. And I think you may have started the new Twitter campaign on maximum pressure on the media, which is needed because for so long, we all saw how poorly the media, and how incorrectly and how inadequately the quote-unquote, mainstream media covered Iran.

I remember vividly – actually, this is the reason that we decided to relaunch NUFDI in its current form five years ago, was during the Aban protests in November. And you had people on the streets chanting, “Death to the Islamic Republic, death to Khamenei,” chanting in support of the Crown Prince. These were happening – it's not like it was happening in a black box. These videos were coming out to social media. And you would turn on CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, whatever, back and forth, and none of these videos were being played.

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You know those split screens they have on news? You know, John and Bill are going back and forth. And John's in the studio and he says, "Bill, what do the Iranians want?" And Bill says, "John, it's not really clear what the Iranians want. It's not..."

(LAUGHTER)

... if you just had subtitles on these videos to see what Iranians are saying, it's very obvious. You don't need to read their horoscope, or you don't need to look into a crystal ball. Iranians are very overt in what they're support– what they're against and what they're in favor for. And so there does need to be pressure on the media, not only efforts to educate them, because those efforts are being made – FDD is doing a great job, my colleagues at NUFDI are doing a great job in trying to show journalists what the truth is, but journalists have to politely, respectfully, and properly be pressured to tell the truth, because they are so often ignoring the truth and it's no longer a suitable excuse to say, "Oh, I don't know what's going on inside Iran."

Every one of these journalists has an Iranian friend, every one of these journalists can look at the NUFDI Twitter or the FDD Twitter or the Twitter of so many independent Iranian activists or other Iran analysts and what – there is no excuse. If they're not covering the truth, I think it's, at this point, reasonable to say that they have some preference for the Islamic Republic.

Just tell the truth. We're not asking you to push a particular narrative over another, just tell the truth. How many international journalists reported the events inside Iran from the Charshanbeh Sur to the Sizdah Bedar holiday, this two-week period in which Iranians across the country gathered at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great, of Hafez, of Khayyam, these national symbols chanting against the regime, chanting to reclaim Iran, chanting for Reza Shah or the Crown Prince? How many international media covered this? Very few.

And these journalists are receiving this information, I know, because I personally clicked "send" on an email to send it to dozens of these journalists. So why aren't they reporting it? Do they have some antipathy with the Iranian people? There is no excuse.

So, you're absolutely right. And I think there was a long time where the argument was, "Wait, well, they need to be informed." No, they don't need to – they are informed. They have to take the ethical decision to tell the truth. So, I'm glad you raised that question, because it's absolutely critical. And forgive me for going on a bit there.

MOJTAHEDI: Oh and no worries. Unfortunately, due to the livestream, we do have to wrap up. Maybe we can stick around after and just take questions if that's OK with everyone here?

As we close, of course several thanks are in order. First, to each of our speakers: Saeed, Representative Wilson, Behnam, Cameron, and Cliff. Thank you for your time and your insights today. And of course, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, it's been an honor to host you this afternoon, and thank you for your tireless activism for the Iranian people. Thank you.

And finally, thanks to all of you ...

(APPLAUSE)

... for joining in-person and online.

END