Diplomacy, Deception and Iran's War Against America

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Featuring Jay Solomon
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

SOLOMON: Just tactfully, if you are doing a negotiation, you'd think you'd hold out some things till the end. Or like the diplomacy became the policy for a long time. There was a great quote in the *New Yorker* about Kerry, where it said, "He's the guy who'd go to a used car and salesman and say, 'I'm not leaving without that car.'"

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to the Iran Breakdown. I'm Mark Dubowitz. With U.S.-Iran negotiations heating up again, there's no better time and no better guests to help break it all down than Jay Solomon. Jay's one of the top reporters on Iran and U.S. Foreign Policy. He's now a staff writer at *The Free Press*, and before that was the Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. He's also the author of "The Iran Wars," still one of the best accounts of how Washington and Tehran have fought and negotiated over the past few decades. I was privileged to be featured in, "The Iran Wars," as what Jay called, "a financial warrior against Iran's regime." So, it's especially great to have him back on today. Jay has spent years covering Iran's nuclear deception, its terror networks, and the secret back channels most people never hear about. Today we're diving into his latest reporting in *The Free Press* on the new nuclear talks, the stakes for the US and its allies, and what history tells us about where these negotiations could lead. Jay's insight is exactly what we need in a moment like this, so let's break it down.

Jay Solomon, welcome to "The Iran Breakdown."

SOLOMON: Thanks for having me. Excited.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Jay, it's really great to have you on the show. Jay, you and I have known each other. We've been friends for many, many years. I think we share an obsession over the Islamic Republic and the sort of –

SOLOMON: For better or worse,

DUBOWITZ: For better or worse. Your 2016 book, "The Iran Wars," is a must read. It's subtitled, "The Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshape the Middle East," and you've been covering this Iran issue since, I believe, the tail end of the Bush administration, through Obama, the first Trump administration, the Biden administration, and here we are back with President Trump in the office. Sure enough, we've got more spy games, more bank battles, and looks like another deal, maybe this time not secret, that could reshape the Middle East. So, I want to start back with some history for our listeners so that they could really understand today's nuclear talks. Take us back to when you first began covering this issue, tail end of Bush, but particularly through the Obama administration, and what you reported on at time, what you observed at the time, and we can talk about its relevance for today.

SOLOMON: I mean, it does feel like the past becoming the future, but at the end of the Bush administration, it really was, "Are we going to negotiate with them? Will we do it directly? Will we do it through the Europeans?" And at the very end, Condi Rice and Nicholas Burns, who became Biden's ambassador to China, they did agree to sort of couple rounds of negotiations with the Europeans. It didn't really go anywhere, and then there was a transition. What was really interesting to me, as a journalist, was that you could tell with Obama from day one that the Iran issue was kind of going to dominate his entire foreign policy. His relations with Russia and China were in a lot of ways tied to whether they would agree to financial sanctions on the Iranians.

He started, similar to what Trump has done, he sent letters to the Supreme Leader, discussing his desire for negotiations, that he didn't want a conflict, but there could be one if there's no agreement. So, it really dominated the Obama administration from day one, but you could feel the similarities, in that there's a lot of back channel negotiations. The Omanis were very much involved with Obama from day one. They wanted to set up a diplomatic track, but it was unclear if it would be direct. Would it be through some other party? So, you can really see the parallels. In some ways, if you want

to be cynical, it's a broken record in some ways, but the gears are starting to move now very similar to what was going on when Obama took over.

DUBOWITZ: Right, and I want to talk a little bit about that broken record and whether the needle is stuck, for those who still remember what an LP is, on the same song, and are we heading to another Obama deal? But let's go back to that tail end of the Bush administration, so my recollection is that there were at least four or five UN Security Council resolutions that were passed. The Bush administration did a very good job of negotiating those and shepherding that through the Security Council. Those UN Security Council resolutions explicitly prohibit Iran from enriching.

SOLOMON: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: Then, they also laid, at least, the international framework for a set of multilateral and then U.S. unilateral sanctions. There's going to be a lot of discussion about nuclear physics over the coming weeks and months, and certainly, we'll talk a little bit about that on this podcast, but you really covered also the economic and financial warfare campaign that kind of came out of those UN Security Council resolutions, and then really started to get heightened under President Obama, his Treasury department, but particularly Congress. Can you say a few words about the financial warfare campaign of those days?

SOLOMON: I mean, Obama's Iran negotiations, obviously, have gotten a lot of criticism, but in my book and in my writings, they were pretty brilliant in the way they set up the financial pressure to bring about negotiations. Like you said, there was this international framework through the United Nations, and then Obama's diplomats were working with the Russians and the Chinese. I remember early on in Obama, they had meetings with the Chinese where they said, "Look, we've talked to the Saudis. We've talked to the Emiratis. They're willing to jack up their oil production, oil exports to you so you can reduce your purchases of Iranian energy." So, the first four years, it really was almost all pressure, building it up.

DUBOWITZ: All economic pressure.

SOLOMON: All economic pressure, all financial pressure, and it kind of culminated this growing pressure with 2012, where they got the Europeans to essentially embargo purchases of Iranian energy, and then they got sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran, and then they got the "de-SWIFTing" of Iran. So, those four years of Obama built up to 2020, when it was kind of the real knockout sanctions, in my view, which was this embargo on energy purchases from Europe, which was not easy to do, and then sanctions on the Central Bank, and the "de-SWIFTing," as we called it, the SWIFT Banking Network, which controls virtually all transactions, essentially kicked Iran out. So, from 2008 to 2012, the pressure really ratcheted up.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

SOLOMON: And you could see it gradually building up.

DUBOWITZ: Now, you called the Obama Administration's pressure campaign brilliant, and I think there were certain aspects of it that were very clever. Good, multilateral diplomacy. The U.S. Treasury Department, I think under Stuart Levy, who was kept on wisely by President Obama from the Bush administration, and then his successors, David Cohen, Adam Zubin, these are names you and I are intimately familiar with, people that are friends and people I think we admire greatly, but I think there was also an important role that Congress played, in particularly some of those most powerful economic sanctions, which were passed overwhelmingly in a bipartisan way by Senate and House Republicans and Democrats. In some cases, I think dragged the Obama administration into financial economic warfare at a level that they initially objected to. Is that fair?

SOLOMON: I know, particularly on the energy question, there was a lot of debate like, "God, if we cut Iran off of the energy

markets, are the prices going to escalate," and then were, you know, an economic shock? That was part of the pressure, and definitely, Congress pushed, I know, on sanctioning the Central Bank, so yeah, there was definitely give and take. I forgot – later on, I forgot what the issue was, but there was definitely a case where there was pushback from the administration and Treasury, and the Congress said, "No. We're going ahead anyway.'

DUBOWITZ: Well, that was particularly on the Central Bank sanctions, where at the time, the Treasury Secretary wrote a letter to Congress, saying that Central Bank sanctions were unprecedented. They were going to lead to a massive disruption in the global financial system. As you said, also lead to major spikes in oil prices, because sanctioning the Central Bank was linked to oil trade. Yes. I mean, there was quite a lot of pushback, and Congress overrode that pushback in a bipartisan way.

I bring this up only because it's worth us remembering those days, Jay, because the 2009, 2013 were quite remarkable, cooperation between Congress and the Obama administration, and between congressional Republicans and congressional Democrats. It was bipartisan. As you said, it was also multilateral, and I think there the Obama administration deserves a lot of credit for bringing the Europeans on board, and really setting up this multilateral sanctions regime powered by unilateral U.S. sanctions. And that gets us to 2013. Now, the second Obama term, you were reporting very closely on some of the backchannel negotiations and the secret deals that began to reshape American-Iran policy. Tell us a little bit about your recollection of those days.

SOLOMON: Well, it was an interesting period, because you were transitioning from first to second term. In Iran, you were transitioning from [President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, who was kind of this verbally very vocal, anti-Israel, anti-US president, to [President Hassan] Rouhani, who was much more, on the surface anyways, was much more willing to deal with the West. But yeah, that was, again, Oman, like we're hearing again today, Oman had kind of positioned itself as a secret back-channel between the US and Iran, and during the last months of the first administration, Hillary Clinton was still Secretary of State, and then John Kerry followed her. We were the first to report that, at the *Wall Street Journal* at the time, that Jake Sullivan, who became Biden's National Security Advisor, and Bill Burns, who became Biden's CIA director, had meetings in Oman with Iranian officials, and sort of started the diplomatic track that eventually resulted in the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action].

We didn't know at the time, but we reported later – I reported later – that the key issue to these negotiations then was the enrichment issue. Would the US accept Iran enriching even to a small degree? While it was still the first term, they basically said, "Yes, we will," and that's when the process started, and with the Iranians, that was always kind of the crossing the Rubicon, because as you said, the UN Security Council had said Iran couldn't enrich because it was in violation of all this

IAEA inspectors agreements, but that was the real criticism, I think, as the JCPOA is gave that up so early. Basically, the negotiations started after they conceded that Iran was going to be allowed to have enrichment on soil, and we didn't know that initially. When the talks kind of became public, I think in it was the fall of 2013, that this back channel had been established, and that the issue of the enrichment had been conceded. It was just a question of how much.

DUBOWITZ: Right, so again, as we think to the contemporary reality, going back now 12 years, number one, I guess two key differences. Well, let's say one key difference, and that is that at the time the Oman channel was secret until it was discovered. It was discovered by reporters like you. My understanding or my recollection was that the Israelis discovered it, not because the United States had told the Israelis about it, but because Mossad was obviously spying on the Iranians and were able to actually uncover this secret channel by listening to Iranian conversations and monitoring Iranian diplomatic maneuvering, so the Israelis were quite shocked.

SOLOMON: But the Israelis knew. They weren't my source. I will tell you that much.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Well, yes. No, no. We'll clarify that.

SOLOMON: Because there was a lot. It was weird at that time. If you knew my initial source was on this, it was like sometimes your best sources are not what you think they are, but I remember first, it took me a good five months to nail that down, but I initially thought the Israelis had no clue. You might be right.

DUBOWITZ: They initially had no clue until they detected it.

SOLOMON: Right.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, the differences, obviously today it's publicly reported. Everybody knows that there is an Oman channel.

SOLOMON: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: And the lead negotiator of the Trump administration, Steve Witkoff, was in Oman. He met with his counterpart, [Abbas] Araghchi, and then negotiations shifted to Rome. They're shifting back to Oman. The Omanis are playing that key mediation role that they played back in 2013, but you put your finger on, I think, a key point that is now the subject of all lot of debates, and we'll return to this. That is that, up front, Jake Sullivan and Bill Burns gave Iran its most valuable concession, not at the end of negotiations in 2015, but actually, at the beginning of negotiations in 2013, when they conceded Iran enrichment, right? The ability to produce the fissile material on Iranian soil that Iran would need for a nuclear weapon, and that was really a sort of sea change in the U.S. negotiating stance, so we get to 20-

SOLOMON: That's funny, by the way, because I remember talking with George, the late George Shultz, who was not particularly hawkish, but he's like, "I just didn't't" – he was a very accomplished diplomat and negotiator, and he was like, "Even if you're going to give up, why do you give it up at the beginning?" He just didn't understand that negotiating worldview, if you're going to give up kind of the key issue at the beginning.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

SOLOMON: Usually you hold that out.

DUBOWITZ: So, this former Secretary of State, to President Reagan, George Shultz, I think, said that if you want to be successful in negotiations, you need to cast a shadow of power across the negotiating table. The United States, back in that era had cast a shadow of economic power. There's probably a decent argument to be made that that's one of the reasons Iran came to the table in 2013, and then getting that major concession right up front of enrichment, it began a lengthy negotiation process that lasted two years, culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Obama deal in 2015. You covered that extensively. I mean, I remember your reporting was a must read on the ins and outs of that negotiation. What are some of the key lessons you learned in following that negotiation, and particularly how those lessons may apply today?

SOLOMON: Like we just discussed, are you going to – just tactically – if you're doing a negotiation, you'd think you'd hold out some things to the end or at least work on them. I think what's difficult in our system in particular, once the gears of a policy start to shift, they very much become almost, like the diplomacy became the policy for a long time. You could feel it. They'd talk about [John] Kerry's willingness to walk away just tactically, but you never felt that. Once it started...

There was a great quote in the *New Yorker* about Kerry, where it said, "He's the guy who'd go to a used car and salesman

and say, "I'm not leaving without that car.'"

I think it was the combination. Once the process started for political reasons as well as tactical, strategic reasons, you felt like the US was never going to pull the plug. And I think the other part is, partly because our system is so politically fractured, the language that started to get developed to sell the diplomacy, and eventually the agreement I never felt was really true. It was like, well, we're either going to have talks or we're going to have a war like Iraq.

And that was a tactical decision that that's how they were going to sell the deal, and that's how they were going to block out opponents. There was never any middle ground, which I just didn't think was real or true.

DUBOWITZ: So it's, "This deal or war," right.

SOLOMON: So they kind of balked. If that's your rhetoric, how are you going to walk away from something you just said if there's not an agreement, there's going to be a war? And I thought that boxed them in, and I didn't think it was... you know, they could have gone back to pressure. There are a lot of things that might've happened if they didn't have the deal, but that's how they sold it. And I think in some ways they boxed themselves in.

DUBOWITZ: So they've given up their most valuable concession, enrichment, in 2013. The administration then presented this as, "We have to do this deal or there's going to be a war.'

SOLOMON: And they also, in some ways, gave up the financial pressure in that– I remember there were congressmen at the time saying, 'We're going to write up legislation that if there's not a deal by such and such stage, we're going to pull the plug," or something.

And I would've thought the White House might've used that to say, "Look, these guys in Congress, they're assholes," or whatever, "but they're going to do this, so we are limited in what we can give.'

But instead, I think Kerry actually came out and attacked people of Congress saying, "This is totally counterproductive.'

While the Iranians were smart. They would cite their own modulus or parliament and say, "Look, there are real red lines. We can't give this up or give that up even if we want to because our parliament won't take it.'

So yeah, there was stuff like that I just didn't feel was very sophisticated. Even if you're a Democrat and you hate these Republicans, you think, "Okay, I can use this to build up my leverage against the Iranians and play good cop, bad cop." But that's not how they did it.

DUBOWITZ: Do you recall at the time, was there a credible military threat, credible U.S. military threat, credible Israeli military threat that Khamenei and the Guard Corps were concerned about? Or do you think that was also effectively taken off the table?

SOLOMON: There was a double language. I remember Wendy Sherman, one of the chief negotiators, would talk about, publicly she's talking, "Oh, we have this MOAB [Massive Ordnance Air Blast], this bunker buster bomb that could really destroy things.'

So they kind of waved it in. But at the same time, I remember administration officials, Obama administration officials, privately briefing the press and said, "Look, if we attacked, they'd definitely go for a bomb, the pressure would be such that they'd go for a bomb." So if their messaging was that a bomb would almost essentially guarantee a nuclear weapon, then your conclusion is there's no way they're going to use military force.

DUBOWITZ: Right. And military force would lead to World War III.

SOLOMON: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So I think you've rightly described it. It was the Obama administration that had boxed itself in rather than boxing the Iranians in. And the supreme leader at the time who's still the supreme leader today, is the master of setting red lines and enforcing red lines. And one of the key red lines that he set at the time was not only would we keep enrichment, but our enrichment would grow significantly over time so that we would have an industrial-size enrichment capability.

SOLOMON: And they said that pretty early.

DUBOWITZ: They said that right at the beginning of the negotiations. That's exactly right. So we get to 2015, the deal, it's subject to congressional review. It's a huge debate that takes place here in Washington that you cover in detail. And then we get to the first Trump administration. Your reflections on the first Trump administration's Iran policy? What stands out?

SOLOMON: I remember the time Brian Hook was a special envoy. He was tasked to try to essentially strengthen the JCPOA. I think that went on for what, 18 months?

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

SOLOMON: And I felt like the JCPOA was in place, stick with it, and try to strengthen it. There was dissonance because Trump was critical, very critical of the Iran deal, but there was a diplomatic effort.

DUBOWITZ: He called it the worst deal ever negotiated.

SOLOMON: Right. So to me, it was unclear how much did Trump really back the [Brian] Hook diplomacy. It was unclear how much progress he was... He was basically, as I recall, trying to extend the…

DUBOWITZ: Sunsets.

SOLOMON: ... sunsets and potentially widen it to include missiles and other issues.

DUBOWITZ: That's right. He was negotiating, actually, not with the Iranians, but he was negotiating with the Europeans –

SOLOMON: The Europeans, correct.

DUBOWITZ: ... to do a side agreement between the United States and the E3 and the EU, the French, Germans and Brits as well as Brussels, that they would not honor the sunsets. The sunsets, which obviously these key restrictions that would disappear over time, giving Khamenei exactly Khamenei wanted from the outset, which is what? A massive enrichment capability.

SOLOMON: Right.

DUBOWITZ: Not from day one, but over time. In fact, essentially in five years' time from today, in 2030 when most of those restrictions would go away. So Brian Hook was tasked with negotiating with the Europeans, the side agreement. But you're right, at the time, it didn't seem like Trump had really any interest.

SOLOMON: Right.

DUBOWITZ: And he was just playing it out to see if the Europeans would bite, and if they didn't, that would lay the groundwork for him to withdraw from the agreement. Turns out the Europeans, they didn't. They rejected any kind of side agreement. It is interesting counterfactual history. If the Europeans had agreed to the Brian Hook framework, would Trump still have withdrawn from the agreement? I think politically it probably would've been more difficult for him to do so.

SOLOMON: Right. But yeah, it was hard to tell. It felt from the beginning he wanted to pull out. So it was kind of, why go through all of this diplomatic back and forth if he was going to pull out to begin with? But we don't know because he pulled out.

DUBOWITZ: So, he pulls out of the agreement in May 2018, and you then covered the remaining two years of the Trump administration, the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian reaction on the nuclear side, which was sort of incremental increases, not massive increases. Anything that stands out from that two-year period of Maximum Pressure from the Trump administration? Are we back in kind of the Iran wars financial and economic warfare, bank battles, energy battles? Is this –

SOLOMON: The Trump team, after that whole two-year period, they did jack up sanctions, and oil exports did go down, and the Soleimani hit was a pretty – I think that's probably the biggest military operation the US has taken.

DUBOWITZ: Were you surprised by that, or did you see that coming?

SOLOMON: I was surprised.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

SOLOMON: U.S. people forget that the US, in the tanker wars in the late eighties, they hit the Iranian Navy quite hard, because they were blocking exports of oil coming out of Kuwait and Iraq. And those were big military exchanges that people forget about. The US really decimated a lot of their naval assets and unfortunately took down an Iranian commercial airliner at that time. But I was very surprised on the Soleimani hit, just because he was such a symbol. And if you went after that symbol, it's a big deal.

DUBOWITZ: It's interesting because, right, you covered Bush, you covered Obama. Neither of them were prepared obviously to go after Soleimani, even though Soleimani had been responsible for killing and maiming thousands of American troops during the Iraq war. And yet here Donald Trump comes in, he draws a red line, "If you touch and harm an American, they'll be hell to pay.'

And then the Iranians, Soleimani in particular, working with the Iraqi Shiite militias, as I recall, kill an American contractor, gear up to rush the American Embassy. And then Trump says, "That's it. We're taking Soleimani out.'

The after effects of that were interesting. Jay, what sort of stands out to you from that? It wasn't World War III, right?

SOLOMON: It wasn't World War III, but from the U.S. side, for me, as I would recall, it was a little inconsistent. Because in a sense, "wow, they took out Soleimani," didn't lead to World War III, but then the Iranians did hit Saudi oil fields, if you recall.

DUBOWITZ: Before that, three or four months prior to the Soleimani killing.

SOLOMON: Which was a pretty big deal. And there was no response to that. But they did hit Soleimani. So it was a little... As a journalist, I wasn't clear what the red lines were.

DUBOWITZ: That's interesting when you say that.

SOLOMON: I know the Saudis were not happy that, you know, the US did not have their back when their energy infrastructure was getting hit.

DUBOWITZ: That's one of those moments, I remember this very clearly, because what you're pointing to is exactly right. The Iranians directly attacked the Saudi oil facilities, Aramco facilities, took off a significant percentage of Saudi oil

production, which by the way is not just Saudi oil, it's global oil. That was after they had taken down a U.S. drone. President Trump didn't respond. And then maybe, I think it was four months, maybe it was six months later, they killed Qasem Soleimani. And I remember calling some folks in the White House and saying, "By the way, when you're explaining why you took out Soleimani, and you've got a list of reasons, add to that list, "This is a response to Iran attacking Saudi oil facilities.'"

Because then it would be revenge is a dish best served cold. It took us a few months. We had to get the intelligence on this. We had to make sure Soleimani was in the right place. But then your message to the Saudis, your message to the region, your message to the Iranians would be, "You know what? We did respond. And we do have your back, Saudi Arabia, and we have the back of our allies."

And I remember being told at the time, Jay, it was interesting, and you spent enough time in this town to remember or to understand this. I was told, "Our lawyers went through this and we're not allowed to, for legal reasons, connect the killing of Soleimani to the Iranian attack on oil facilities.'

So they kept it out of the public messaging. And I think we've paid the price for that for years, including having the Saudis not trust the American commitment. The Saudis then, in a sense, cozying up to the Islamic Republic under Chinese auspices, and it just would've taken one line.

SOLOMON: But also, that would've made it more of a multinational issue, right? Taking out the global energy supply is a multinational issue. And if the Trump's first administration had said, "Look, this is a red line, not just for us, for the global economy," similar to what's going on with the Houthis right now, where they're causing shipping to go around the Horn of Africa jacking up costs for everyone. That should be a multinational issue. But it doesn't seem like it's really become one to the extent that maybe it should.

DUBOWITZ: That's a great point. Right. We took out Soleimani because he attacked Americans. We took out Soleimani, he had American blood on his hands. We took out Soleimani because it's a dangerous terrorist. We also took out Soleimani because he attacked global oil. And this is a concern not just for the United States, not just for the Saudis, but it's a concern for the entire global community and global economy.

SOLOMON: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: So Trump administration, Maximum Pressure, two years, runs its course. Iranians are careful after Soleimani. I recall for 11 months after that, they froze any expansion of their nuclear program. Prior to that, they had been moving forward incrementally. Joe Biden wins the election. Joe Biden commits to abandoning maximum pressure and taking America back into the JCPOA. What are you... It's a four-year, very active term. But what are your main takeaways from the Biden era with respect to a US-Iran policy?

SOLOMON: The Biden era is weird. I think a lot of people, myself included, thought he was just going to go straight back into the JCPOA, and he didn't, which was kind of strange. Some of the people in his administration were such supporters of it. I think he wanted a stronger deal, which maybe he should have been lauded for, but it was unclear. It was like, if that's what you're going, for a stronger deal, then really enforce the sanctions. If you're just going to go back into the JCPOA, just go back in and let the sanctions lax. So there seemed to be inconsistency. They wanted the deal back, but then they weren't putting the pressure on that might act... I mean, they wanted a new deal. They weren't taking the steps that might actually get one. So it was neither here nor there.

DUBOWITZ: Right, right. So not building the leverage to get back into a longer, stronger, broader deal. On the other hand, just not even taking the steps to get back into the original deal.

SOLOMON: Which a lot of the Democrat side were saying they just wanted to go back in and they didn't.

DUBOWITZ: We've been talking a lot about the nuclear issues, talking about sanctions, but you would agree the Biden era was the most interesting period with respect to Iran's terror activities, obviously its 'axis of resistance' or what we call the 'axis of misery' on this podcast. What observations, where we are today after the past year of particularly Israeli operations? What's your sort of assessment of –

SOLOMON: Well, on the terror stuff, I think it was mentioned earlier, I've been studying the Salman Rushdie case, and it's like, "That stuff goes back to the late eighties through the nineties.'

And a lot of it, when you read the history, it sounds very similar. It's like put out the fatwa for Rushdie. They have to give him security. But there was a lot of hemming and hawing in both Europe and the US, like, "How much should we really pressure the Iranians? Maybe it was Rushdie's fault." And then in recent years, you remember the dissident, Masih Alinejad? People were sent to try to kill her in New York.

DUBOWITZ: Three times.

SOLOMON: And Rushdie, himself, was attacked in August '22 in New York. But you just didn't feel that much pressure back early with the Rushdie case in some ways. And even today, this was an Iranian fatwa. These were Iranian sent agents. Somehow there wasn't that much pressure on the Iranians back then or now, despite what is a history of this stuff. It's gotten really bad in the last couple of years with these plots allegedly to assassinate Trump, plots to assassinate Trump officials from the first term like Secretary of State [Mike] Pompeo and Hook and the plot against Alinejad. But these plots go back, whether it's against Rushdie or others, and they somehow seem to get away with it. Or even the October 7 attack on Israel, the first reports even in the *New York Times* was Iranian involvement and this has never been clear from the U.S. intelligence: Were the Iranians behind 10/7? The narrative now is they were surprised by it.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, it's interesting.

SOLOMON: But there was never a really clear assessment from the U.S. intelligence side, what was Iran's role in that?

DUBOWITZ: So we had Masih Alinejad on this podcast, and when we discussed in great detail the plots against her and the recent trial and conviction of actually Iranian masters, but Azerbaijanis who came to Brooklyn to try to kill her.

SOLOMON: Yep.

DUBOWITZ: We're going to have Roya Hakakian on this show who wrote the great book, "Assassins of the Turquoise Palace," about the Mykonos plot in 1992…

SOLOMON: In Berlin.

DUBOWITZ: …in Berlin where the regime ordered the assassination of Iranian Kurds in that Berlin restaurant. But you've done, I think, the most interesting reporting that I've seen on Salman Rushdie. Let's talk a little bit more about Salman Rushdie, because I think your point is very well taken. It's amazing to me that in 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, the regime feels like an act with impunity on American soil targeting Americans, targeting...

SOLOMON: A Booker Prize winner.

DUBOWITZ: A Booker Prize winner. Somebody who has been celebrated.

SOLOMON: The Rushdie case is very interesting because yes, this fatwa came out in 1989, he lived in England under total security for almost a decade, moves to the US in I think it was 2000 and... maybe it was 2000. He's been here for a

while, but clearly he felt like he was okay here, he was safe. And then this young Lebanese American in August of 2022 stabbed him 15 times, vicious attack, the eye, slit his throat, his liver, and he somehow survived.

DUBOWITZ: And Jay, just to remind some of our listeners, where was Rushdie at the time when he got stabbed?

SOLOMON: He was speaking at the Chautauqua Institution, which is, this is to me, when that attack happened, you had to say there had to been some support for this guy because the Chautauqua Institution is very interesting. It's over 100 years old, it was set up by Methodists, but it has a history of being pacifists. So if you wanted to attack Rushdie, that was the place to get him.

DUBOWITZ: And where is it? It's in upstate?

SOLOMON: It's near Lake Erie. It's like the far west of New York state and they have a summer season where all sorts of, there's a literary festival, music. But I've been there, he was speaking at this amphitheater, totally open, zero security. And this young, at the time, I think he was 24-year-old Lebanese-American kid, just went in there with essentially a bag of knives and rushed the stage and stabbed him almost over 15 times. But I think the interesting, getting back to the Iranian situation, at first he was described as a lone wolf, and he was initially indicted on murder, attempted murder in the second degree.

But last summer, and he got almost no real publicity, he was charged with providing material support to Hezbollah. So it went from he was a lone wolf to like, "wow, he had some connection to Hezbollah," and he has basically two trials. He was convicted about a month ago of attempted murder in the second degree, but he has now an entire second trial of material support for Hezbollah, which that gets back because Hezbollah's late leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was a really vocal supporter of the fatwa against Rushdie. So it still remains an open question, what was this guy's ties to Hezbollah and the regime itself?

DUBOWITZ: Right. And certainly fits a pattern of Iranian overseas assassinations dating back to just after the Islamic Revolution where Khomeini ordered his hit-squads to take out Iranian dissidents and Iranian opposition in Europe, in fact, in America, in Bethesda, Maryland, just down the street from where we're recording this podcast.

SOLOMON: I think the perception that they wouldn't go after Rushdie here, and that was part of the reason he moved here, but...

DUBOWITZ: Well, now they're going after President Trump.

SOLOMON: Right.

DUBOWITZ: And as you said, four former senior administration officials, not to mention Masih Alinejad and threatening others, so it seems like the regime is acting with impunity. So the Biden era marked by a failed attempt to get back into the JCPOA, certainly a failed attempt to do a longer, stronger, and broader deal, a massive expansion in Iranian nuclear activities as they start to believe that there's really no price to be paid if they expand and attempted assassinations on American soil, which brings us to today. We feel like, Jay, we are reliving maybe a bad dream, but it's now 12 years later from 2013 from when the first interim agreement was reached, and 10 years after the JCPOA was reached. What are you seeing today? You've been reporting on this for *The Free Press*, these negotiations that have now started in Oman, switched to Rome, are going to continue in Oman. What are you looking for? What do you find noteworthy? What are you concerned about?

SOLOMON: It feels like there's just a big split in the administration. You could hear it, as I remember, right after Trump was elected, I thought former Secretary of State Pompeo was going to be Secretary of Defense. There was talk of Brian Hook

would be maybe Deputy Secretary of State, but have a big role in the Iran deal. And it's not just they didn't get jobs, they were humiliated by the Trump transition team, and they were portrayed as super hawks and are going to drag us into a war. I think Tucker Carlson might've said some of this stuff. So that surprised me from early on because I had heard that Pompeo might be Secretary of Defense, but then at the same time he – so these people get taken out very publicly and defenestrated publicly. But then people like Michael Waltz was made National Security Advisor, Marco Rubio, who has been historically a hawk, become Secretary of State. So it was unclear...

DUBOWITZ: And Pete Hegseth, who's been a very outspoken opponent of the Islamic Revolution for decades, long as I've known Pete when he was on Fox News, become Secretary of Defense. So arguably you've got three tough-minded people in three of the most important positions.

SOLOMON: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: Right? State, National Security Advisor, and Secretary of Defense.

SOLOMON: Correct. But then you've got this other camp that's just seems on the one hand wary of military engagement, not just with Iran or anywhere else, but casting Israelis as the hawks that are trying to drag us into a war with Iran. So it's very hard to understand which part of that, which camp is really in charge. And I think in the last couple of weeks, as we've seen the talks start in Oman and then Rome, you've got Steve Witkoff, the negotiator, going on Fox and giving even an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. It feels very much like the JCPOA. Essentially, they're going to have enrichment, but it's going to get curbed at 3.7% or whatever.

So essentially going back to, like you said, to 2012 there, accepting enrichment on the front end, but then you had Waltz and then Witkoff's own office come out and say, "It's going to be dismantlement. We're going to get all of it out." And I think there's still clearly a debate going on, but the fact that we're going to a third round feels like the enrichment issue has been, the Iranians at least believe they're going to get it, or they wouldn't be going to a third round. So Trump's mercurial, maybe we'll make a big decision, but it feels like we're back to the, "it's not a question of will they have enrichment, it's how much," unless something really changes. But that feels like where we are right now.

DUBOWITZ: But it's interesting, looking at the history of the Obama administration and fast-forwarding to today's Trump administration, it sounds like it's the same arguments coming from different people. Number one, we have to concede enrichment to Iran, the way that they conceded enrichment to Iran back in 2013, and then ultimately an industrial size enrichment program in 2015 that culminated in the JCPOA. Number two, we don't really have a choice. We have to do this deal or whatever deal ensues or there'll be war.

SOLOMON: Right.

DUBOWITZ: So it's interesting. The same arguments being made by Obama administration officials back in 2013, 2015 are now echoed by certain Trump administration officials and their echo chamber in the media and in the podcast world.

SOLOMON: It's interesting too, a lot of the echo chamber that was the most supportive of Obama's policies are now running behind the Trump administration, or at least elements of the Trump administration. So yeah, it makes it even feel more like repetition.

DUBOWITZ: Actually, that's an interesting observation. So the traditional Iran echo chamber, as it was described in the days of Obama, which was run by Ben Rhodes from the White House. Rhodes was Obama's deputy national security advisor for strategic communications. And he had set up and was running and feeding into this echo chamber mostly of people on the left as well as "technical experts," "non-proliferation technical experts," some Iranian Americans obviously involved in that as well, but it was a left wing, pro-Obama echo chamber. That's sort of fair to say, right?

SOLOMON: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Now the echo chamber has changed.

SOLOMON: Yeah. They've gotten behind Witkoff. When Witkoff was, essentially his statements on Fox and in the *Wall Street Journal* about accepting a pretty significant enrichment, it got a lot of support.

DUBOWITZ: So the old echo chamber, the left-wing Obama echo chamber is now supporting...

SOLOMON: It's MAGA [Make America Great Again].

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's now supporting the same positions that Iran took back then and is taking today, but it now has a different side to it, which is not only a left-wing echo chamber, but as you say, there's a right-wing, I don't like to call that a MAGA echo chamber, but there's a right-wing echo chamber of Tucker Carlson and others who are also pushing actually the exact same demands.

SOLOMON: Now it's about isolationism, I think.

DUBOWITZ: Now it's about isolationism.

SOLOMON: But it's still either war or – it's either a deal or a war. I think Tucker's said that quite a bit on his podcast that we are going to get sucked into an Iraq-type war. So yeah, the language is very similar. It's just mutated.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting, it's mutated and yet the difference between now and 2013, 2015, as I think we've talked about, is to be fair to the Obama team, as you noted, Iran at that time was still relatively strong. The economy was suffering, but it had its entire axis intact, and it had its ballistic missile production capability and a huge inventory of ballistic missiles. And it had its strategic air defenses, and it was fairly strong position vis-a-vis the United States. And even then, the Obama administration squandered the financial and economic leverage that you talked about in order to provide up front this massive concession on enrichment and then reach this fatally flawed agreement. Today, Iran's in a very different situation. Would you agree that it may be weaker than it has been since maybe the end of the Iran-Iraq war, aren't we in a much stronger position to push for a deal? Or do you think that people are overstating that and this really should be...

SOLOMON: I think strategically they're weaker in the sense, like you said, [Bashar al-] Assad is gone in Syria, Hezbollah has been decapitated in Lebanon, Hamas has been hurt in Gaza. And they're ballistic, as you said, these Israeli strikes last year took a lot of the S-300 systems that the Russians have given the Iranians out, so they're much more exposed. I think on the sanctions side, it's probably going to be harder to get Chinese and Russian any buy-in on sanctions today. And we relatively had them onside in 2009, 2010. Maybe, as we've discussed in the past, the threat of unilateral sanctions are strong, so maybe the Chinese will bend but I think overtly they're not going to be looking forward to do us any favors on the Iran side. But yeah, they're definitely, from the strategic side, they're definitely weaker. I think a lot of people were surprised how much of their proxy network was weakened or unwound. I didn't see Assad falling, I didn't think Hezbollah could be hit the way they were hit. So in that sense, they're weaker for sure.

DUBOWITZ: So where do you see this going, Jay? You've covered this issue for almost 20 years. You've covered the spy games, you've seen the financial war, you've looked at the secret deals and the public deals that really have reshaped US-Iran policy and in many respects shaped the Middle East. Where are we going with this administration? Where are we going with Iran? What about Israel? What about the Gulf States? And by the way, we haven't talked about it on this podcast today, but we certainly talk about it a lot on previous episodes and that's the Iranian people who've been on the streets almost continuously since 2009, yelling "Death to the dictator. U.S. President 'X', are you with us or are you with

the dictator?'

And we're only a couple years since Woman, Life, Freedom and the eruption of those protests, never mind significant economic protests from 2017 to 2019, 2020, which is another element of regime weakness. The fact that the majority of Iranians despise the regime and have taken to the streets, and yet they're begging this U.S. president not to sell them out, not to throw them under the bus for some limited deal with Iran that they believe will be violated and will only strengthen the regime.

SOLOMON: My gut tells me it feels like we're headed for a JCPOA-type deal just because the financial markets are in turmoil. I think the market's down over 3% today. I know Trump looks so much at business and the markets and his calculations, it's hard for me to see... He sent this letter to Khamenei last month saying "You basically have a two-month window to show seriousness on the negotiations." It's really hard for me to see by next month, that if this thing's getting strong, that he's going to move towards military strikes, maybe hold back in Israeli strikes, but it just doesn't feel like that seeing the language coming out. And he's kind of the powers with Witkoff as Trump's really close friend, my sense is we're probably headed to a JCPOA type deal and they'll try to dress it up differently. But that said, you've got a lot of curve balls, like maybe Trump starts negotiating and said, "Okay, you can have some in enrichment, but we'll have permanent sunsets." There'll be no sunsets.

DUBOWITZ: Permanent restrictions.

SOLOMON: Right, something like that, I think a lot of people would support if that could be negotiated. I think I said earlier, we were talking in private, the foreign minister of Iran wrote this op-ed in *The Post* a couple of weeks ago, talking about, "Oh, there could be all this business between the US and Iran," clearly trying to reach out to Trump's business nature. Would that really be part of the deal if the Islamic Republic agreed to some, even if the nuclear side was not as strong as we'd like, if they agreed to some formula where the US would open up an embassy or a consulate and lift restrictions on American business going in? Given how the US has been described as, "the great Satan," they actually agreed to that, that would suggest to me there's at least some change in the way they're viewing things.

Because I know John Kerry, when he was Secretary of State, people around him would talk, love to go to Tehran and the Iranians were, "No way." Remember, Obama wanted to meet Rouhani face-to-face and they had to talk over the phone once. It was too much of a risk to be in any way associated with the US. So I don't know, if there are other elements that kind of build up around the JCPOA on missiles, diplomatic engagement, economic, that would be interesting, but I think it seems like Trump wants to deal fast, too. So if you want to deal fast in a few months and Witkoff has this tiny negotiating team, it seems like they're just going to reach to the JCPOA and say, "Oh, these things were agreed to and let's go.'

DUBOWITZ: But let me ask you about the politics of that, Jay. I mean, you covered the politics of this as well as the physics and the economic sanctions piece of this back in 2013 to 2015. I mean, you remember the politics of this. The entire Republican party opposed the JCPOA.

SOLOMON: Yep.

DUBOWITZ: Donald Trump called it the worst deal ever negotiated. He ripped it up and withdrew from it and imposed Maximum Pressure. And now you're suggesting that Donald Trump, the same Donald Trump is going to reach for the same JCPOA –

SOLOMON: Or the similar formula.

DUBOWITZ: A similar formula, and the Iranians are absolutely going to insist, I think you would agree, that that be a treaty and that it be ratified by the Senate. That would mean to be ratified, 67 U.S. senators are going to have to provide advice

and consent for ratification. There's 53 Republicans, that means Trump's got to get all 53 and 14 Democrats in order to ratify that same deal or a similar deal. A deal that gives enrichment, a deal that doesn't shut down the enrichment facilities, a deal that allows Iran to continue to produce, manufacture, and install advanced centrifuges. A deal that allows them to continue to build up their ballistic missile inventories and restore their ballistic missile production capability that has been so hammered by the Israelis. A deal that will probably talk about terrorism, but at the end of the day, will anyone really believe that?

SOLOMON: And the business stuff could be BS.

DUBOWITZ: And the business stuff, as you say, could be BS. How do you think the politics play out? And by the way, many of these senators are the same senators who were there in 2015 who voted against this deal.

SOLOMON: I know. It's going to be interesting because you have guys like [Sen. Tom] Cotton, [Sen.] Ted Cruz, [Mike] Pompeo, who's now out, who's potentially running for president in 2028.

DUBOWITZ: [Sen.] Lindsey Graham, who's leading the charge to calling for full verifiable dismantlement.

SOLOMON: No, it's just, will they stand up to Trump? I guess is the question. I'm sure guys like Pompeo will because he's out and he's probably running for office. But we're headed into, I think it's going to be very interesting in the next couple of months. I think Cruz and Cotton have put out some statements saying they're worried about this. I think they did it in a backward way. They applauded the statement Witkoff put out later on, saying dismantlement was the goal. I think that was their way of putting their marker.

DUBOWITZ: But it's also worth remembering, and I think we've sort of glided over this, President Trump himself laid out dismantlement as –

SOLOMON: The policy.

DUBOWITZ: The policy. He talked very specifically about Iran blowing up its own facilities and the United States verifying that, which is what we're talking about with respect to dismantlement. Essentially getting rid of Iran's nuclear infrastructure that is capable of being turned on at the time of Iran's choosing to develop nuclear weapons. So it's not only Waltz and Hegseth and Rubio –

SOLOMON: It's Trump himself.

DUBOWITZ: It's not just Graham and Cruz and Cotton, it's Trump himself. Trump's going to literally walk away from his own red line on dismantlement and return to an agreement that he called the worst deal ever negotiated.

SOLOMON: Well, I think next, I think there's another round in Oman. They're supposed to start the technical element, so I think a lot is going to be – we'll know in the next few weeks. But it felt like, I don't see how a third round of talks could be already scheduled Oman next week. If Witkoff came in to Rome last week and said, "Dismantlement is our policy," I think that would've been the end of the talks. I think it would've been over. And they've both sides said, "Oh, they were constructive." I know what you're saying, but I'm just saying looking at the diplomatic process, unless we're missing something and the Iranians are in a weaker position than we think and all this stuff about, "we're never going to dismantle," is just rhetoric, it feels like the enrichment issue has already been, we've moved away from dismantling.

SOLOMON: You know what I mean? If he really went in and read that statement that his office put out that said, "Our objective is dismantlement," it feels like there wouldn't be a third round of constructive talks. But it's interesting, I don't know if you saw today, the foreign minister was supposed to speak via to the Carnegie Endowment today, this morning. He was supposed to do a Q&A with Steve Coll, the journalist, and then it got canceled this morning because apparently,

initially the deal was he was going to open up to a Q&A, but the Iranians didn't want that.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, they reneged on their commitment to Carnegie to do an event with Q&A, so sort of –

SOLOMON: You wonder, were journalists going to start asking about this whole dismantling thing really aggressively and they didn't want to touch it?

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

SOLOMON: But yeah, I think it's not going to be waiting for months for this answer. I think we're going to know within the next couple of weeks because if they really come back to, like you said, Trump's line of dismantlement and sending in outside inspectors, I mean, they still talk of the Libya model, right? Which was essentially, we sent in planes and took away the equipment and housed it in Tennessee somewhere. Or they get a hold to something like that? It's a little hard to imagine.

DUBOWITZ: And I think we want to end with this, but Jay, what you're actually painting here is a picture of the Trump administration – and the same President Trump – doing effectively what the Obama administration did between 2013 and 2015.

SOLOMON: Unless we're missing something.

DUBOWITZ: And President Obama sent in his lead negotiators, Bill Burns and Jake Sullivan, to Oman to negotiate agreement. That agreement gave up enrichment as the major concession. That laid the groundwork for negotiations on a JCPOA, an agreement that allowed Iran to retain the capabilities it needed, at the turn of a screw, to develop nuclear weapons. We saw actually Iran, because it retained that infrastructure, dial up its capabilities under the Biden administration, where it went from 3.67%, to 20%, to 60%, 84% enrichment. It started experimenting with uranium metal, which is necessary for developing a warhead. It started installing thousands of centrifuges.

In fact, it actually demonstrated the fundamental flaw of the JCPOA, which was at a time of Iran's choosing once the restrictions sun-setted, Iran would be in a position to turn the dial and go very quickly to the capabilities it needed to develop nuclear weapons. And now we are here all these years later where the very same Trump administration, the very same president who walked away from the deal, is now going back to the same or similar deal, conceding enrichment and giving Iran the capabilities it needs, again, at a time of its choosing to crank right back up and have the capability to develop nuclear weapons. It seems like –

SOLOMON: Unless there's some U-turn we're not seeing yet. I saw some – actually, the *New York Times* had it – I talked to a source close to the Iranian government today, there's some talk about, "Oh, we could have a regional enrichment type agreement maybe with the Saudis." It was unclear. Is there something else percolating? But it's hard to imagine that, to be honest.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting and I think it's worth maybe even two minutes on that. There has been reporting and there was certainly a lot of discussions on the Biden administration that the United States would agree to provide domestic enrichment to Saudi Arabia as part of a diplomatic normalization deal between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

SOLOMON: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: And the Saudis would get enrichment capability because the Saudis had always made the argument, "We're your ally and you are insisting that we adhere to this gold standard non-enrichment proliferation standard, and yet you gave the leading state sponsor of terrorism –"

SOLOMON: Industrial scale.

DUBOWITZ: "Industrial scale enrichment. So if you gave them enrichment, you got to give us enrichment." And it sounds like under Biden, the United States was pretty close to conceding that to Saudi Arabia. It would be interesting, I think important to deny the Islamic Republic enrichment capabilities so that we could turn to the Saudis and do the same thing and say, "We are adhering to the gold standard that the UAE and South Korea and other countries adhere to. If you want civilian nuclear energy, you can be like dozens of other countries and buy your nuclear energy from abroad. But we're not giving Iran and we're not giving Saudi Arabia the key capabilities they need to develop nuclear weapons." On the other hand, if you're right or your fears are correct and we're conceding enrichment to Iran, then it's likely we're going to be conceding enrichment to Saudi Arabia, creating a situation where that cascade of proliferation that everybody worried about for so many years, that cascade has now begun.

SOLOMON: Well, people forget that early on, even going back to Bush, getting back to where we started, they always said, "Iran, you can have a nuclear energy program, just get the enriched uranium from a fuel bank outside." I mean, there was always talk about, "We can help you have a civilian nuclear program, just get the enrichment from – we just don't want it on your soil." If that actually became part of a Trump negotiation, I mean if Iran agreed with that, I think that that would be very different than the JCPOA.

DUBOWITZ: That'd be very different from JCPOA.

SOLOMON: But I mean, that's why some of this, I saw the story in the *New York Times,* and I actually talked to an Iranian source, it's unclear what they're exactly talking about. But if there was some curve ball where they'd get enriched uranium from somewhere else, that might be something that would be pretty positive. But, like you, I'm skeptical.

DUBOWITZ: Two dozen countries – more than two dozen countries – civilian nuclear programs, they buy their fuel rods from abroad. Most of them are U.S. allies, most of them are peaceful. That's the gold standard. And somehow we continue to concede to the mullah standard of giving the key capability to develop nuclear weapons to the leading state sponsor of terrorism that has killed in maimed Americans. It's an unusual place to be. Jay, thank you very much. Your book, "The Iran Wars: The Spy Games, Bank Battles and Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East," is a must read. Even though it's, at this point, nine years old, it is a great history for anyone who's really concerned about where we are today. And love to have you back is the negotiations and the story continues.

SOLOMON: Great, it's great to be here.

DUBOWITZ: Jay Solomon, thanks for helping us pull back the curtain on the latest round of nuclear talks, Tehran's playbook, the risks of another fatally flawed deal, what the West keeps getting wrong, and for reminding us what history makes clear: that the Islamic Republic uses negotiations to buy time, not to make peace. The regime has not changed and neither has this nuclear strategy. It's still about delay, deception and building leverage while the world looks the other way. The question is whether the US and its allies have learned anything or if we're just walking into the same trap again and again. The stakes couldn't be higher. This has been, "The Iran Breakdown." I'm Mark Dubowitz and I'll see you next time when we break it down all over again.