



48 Hours in Iran

January 28, 2026

Featuring Behnam Ben Taleblu

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to “The Iran Breakdown.” I’m your host, Mark Dubowitz. We’re recording this episode during one of the darkest chapters in the Islamic Republic’s history – indeed in Iran’s history. One of the most horrific human rights crises of our time. Right now, the Iranian regime is waging open war on its own people.

Thousands have been murdered, tens of thousands arrested, countless more tortured, disappeared, or silenced – all under the COVID of Internet blackouts, secret trials, and mass fear. This isn’t crowd control. This isn’t law enforcement. This is systematic, state-directed violence unfolding at a scale and speed not seen since the regime’s earliest days after 1979.

History will remember this moment. The only question is whether the world responds now. Whether President Trump makes the decision to use military force or explains his silence later. To help us understand what’s happening, why it’s escalating, what are the options, and why Iran’s human rights catastrophe is not just a moral crisis, but a strategic one.

I’m joined by my FDD colleague and good friend, Behnam Ben Taleblu. This conversation is difficult, but necessary.

Welcome back to “The Iran Breakdown.”

TALEBLU: Good to see you, sir. How are you?

DUBOWITZ: I am good. I mean, this is. These are, incredibly emotional times, very tense times.

TALEBLU: Very little sleep for both of us and the whole team, actually.

DUBOWITZ: And the whole team. And certainly, I mean, again, I want to express my, at a really personal, emotional level, obviously care deeply about the people. It’s been an absolutely brutal time. So my sympathies and, I hope, you know, friends and loved ones are okay.

TALEBLU: Bless you, Mark. I mean, I can’t speak on behalf of the entire community, but I feel like I can speak on behalf of the entire community when I say thank you for standing with us.

And this month is 13 years of me at FDD. And you’ve not just stood with us in principle, you’ve done it in practice. I’ve seen it behind closed doors. I’ve seen it in TV. I’ve seen it in Congress. I’ve seen it in foreign countries. You told me when I started 13 years ago, love what you do, never work a day in your life.

And even though we’re on about max, two, three hours of sleep a night, I’m still not working because I love what I do. And how can you not love what you do and care about the people and care about the national interest and see all of this and be indifferent or apathetic? So thanks for creating the work environment to love what you do and never work a day in your life.

DUBOWITZ: It’s an absolute pleasure. Look, I mean, I just want to sort of step back and just kind of recognize you know, the scale of the slaughter and the suffering of Iranians, which is really, I think in modern history it may be unprecedented.

On January 8th and 9th, if reports are correct, 33,000 Iranians were killed in two days. It may be the greatest two-day slaughter in modern history. I was looking the other day that in 1941 the Nazis killed 33,000 Jews in Babi Yar in Ukraine, in again brutal, mass execution.

And to think that in 2026, over 80 years since the Babi Yar massacre, that this regime, murdered 33,000 Iranians in 48 hours is just beyond, beyond belief.



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TALEBLU: It's beyond belief. We really do need to live by the words. Like you said, "never again." But, it should not be beyond belief because we've seen it in fits and starts from this regime fueling the civil war in Iraq, fueling the civil war in Syria, flipping, multiple sides in Afghanistan over many, many years, and again keeping a lid with brute force on the population at home for so many years.

One of the things I've heard consistently is, we knew they were bad, we never knew they were this bad. Like when push comes to shove, there even was a certain level of that they couldn't authorize such a thing. No, no, they have authorized such a thing. This is a regime that, its theory of the case is to shoot your way through it.

They are colored by the Shah's experience, which is to say, hear the voice of your revolution and then to leave. They're colored by the Gorbachev experience of trying to reform. And they're colored by the color revolution experience of trying to have civil society work with international NGOs. And that's why they have locked down every single peaceful alternative to reform.

That's why they have basically made revolution in the way that we're seeing now be really the only way against this regime. And even then they are armed to the teeth, lethal and brutal. And I fear that the number is only going to continue to grow.

You've been tracking the number growing from 3,000 to 5,000 to 12,000 to 16,000 to 20,000 to 30,000, now 36,000. I fear that this number is only going to continue to grow. And when the Internet comes back on in Iran fully, you know, we have a picture in fits and starts of the crackdown, the repression, the brutality.

But I feel like Iranians, just because they've had challenges communicating with one another, may not know exactly what other Iranians went through. And when other Iranians find out, I am terrified about the social, emotional, effects of that across Iranian society. And I fear that those effects is what the Islamic Republic wanted.

DUBOWITZ: So the one thing I'm wrestling with, Benham, is, I mean, the regime, as you said, has demonstrated, ruthless brutality for decades. Certainly since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, in the 1980s, it's the chain murders –

TALEBLU: In the 90s. And the 80s was the executions.

DUBOWITZ: Executions, 90s chain murders, 1999 the student protest, 2009 the Green Revolution, certainly 2017, 18, 19, and then the 2022, 2023 Women, Life, Freedom. And in every case the regime used brutal power to put down protests, peaceful protests, and killed the hundreds, sometimes over a thousand, jails, tortured, executed.

But the scale of the slaughter this time around was beyond anything in Islamic Republic history. What, was different? Why?

TALEBLU: I think they were rightly cognizant of how cornered they were abroad and at home. How, morally, politically and structurally bankrupt they were.

And they fled to the one thing they had a monopoly on, which was a monopoly on violence. And like I said, they believed, and have unfortunately acted on that belief on the theory of shooting your way through the crisis and trying to intimidate as many people as possible. And yet still there are wave after wave of protests.

But I just want to one more time foot stomp the historicity of this, because, yes, it's important to see it in terms of even the 20th century massacres, these numbers are appalling. But also in terms of contemporary Iranian history, which hasn't been peaceful for a century and a half, if not two centuries, the only kind of speed and scale and scope that we have about this is in the late 1790s, someone who was trying to become king and establish a different dynasty laid siege to two cities and took out 40,000 eyeballs.



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That is the last recorded precedent. Otherwise you've had assassinations of monarchs, constitutional revolutions, multiple different periods of protest across three totally different regimes, and still no number comes close to this. So this is unprecedented, not just for the Islamic Republic for 47 years, but for the past century and a half, if not two centuries of contemporary Iranian political history.

So this is again, really terrifying and goes to kind of the sense of moral political bankruptcy that the regime knows it has. And the sudden reliance, or if not the over reliance on this tool, just goes to tell you that they know there's no way out but through.

And they just hope the world doesn't see that. And that's why coterminous with all of this was the Internet blackout.

DUBOWITZ: You know, our friend, Karim Sadjadpour wrote a good piece in *The Atlantic*, with Jack Goldstone I think it was, talking about some of the six pillars of regime, survival, like what it actually takes to bring down a regime.

And I think you very much are underscoring that for this regime, at least four pillars were gone. Right? Economic stability. They're an economic collapse. Popular mobilization. These were the most significant protests, I think in Islamic Republic history, if not in Iranian history, perhaps.

But there were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. Over a million people perhaps. So popular mobilization. The regime was facing this wave of anti-regime protests. Ideological legitimacy, I mean, it's clear it's gone. It was gone before, and it's certainly gone now.

I mean, the mosques are empty. People have abandoned, any sort of connection to the state religion. And this regime has no ideological credibility left.

TALEBLU: Just two quick footnotes to that, just on the religious veneer. The jokes always within Iran, under much of the Islamic Republic, was, you know, if you need to find a public bathroom, I can find you a mosque. Because that was the only reason people were going to mosque was to use a public restroom. And then you fast forward to now and the slaughter and the funerals after the slaughter. Iranians are refusing to engage in traditional Islamic ceremonies, funerals, mourning rights, and they're not even using the word *shaheed* or the word martyr, which comes from Arabic for the word martyr, for quite literally their martyrs, who have been killed.

Young teenagers, young men and women, because they're fighting even a lexical and a discursive fight against the Islamic Republic. That is the degree to which opposition to the Islamic Republic animates and orients the very being of Iranians today. So when you're looking at people's names, the list of names that had been killed, you'll see before that, *Javid Nam*, which means eternal name.

So they're not even saying martyr. They're using a really old Persian word. *Nam* is also the suffix in my name. *Beh Nam*. Best name, *Javid Nam*. Eternal name. To simply say that this is even the level of which we are fighting you on an ideational and ideological batter.

The rupture, the divorce between state and society Iran is unprecedented.

DUBOWITZ: Actually. That's a remarkable insight. I didn't know that. And I think it, underscores that that pillar of regime stability, ideological legitimacy is gone. So that's gone.

Economic stability is gone. Clear public mobilization, massive economic stability collapse, which leaves the remaining two; elite cohesion and the willingness of the security forces to both cohere and to use brutal force.



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And I think by all evidence, those two pillars still remain potentially shaky. There may have been some cracks in elite cohesion. There may be more cracks to come. And I was actually fascinated to see. There was an interview. Was it on Manato, maybe?

TALEBLU: Oh, a caller, a daughter,

DUBOWITZ: A daughter of an IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] senior commander called in to the show and she was talking about her father, who it seemed that she really despised and was horrified by, and talking about also the IRGC and how corrupt they are, how they're moving their money out of the country, how they move their family out of the country.

But it was a very emotional call. Maybe we'd play an excerpt of it.

(Arabic Speaking)

But it gave me at least a sense, like it's very anecdotal, but maybe even in the younger generation of the elite, they are so horrified by what they're seeing in the Islamic Republic even before these round of protests. And one wonders in the wake of the slaughter, whether you're going to see more of that in the coming weeks, months, and years as maybe the younger generation of the elite start to back away even with all the privileges that they've got and being part of the elite, given this, the scale of the murder.

TALEBLU: I think that's a very important observation, and that gets to also a policy option and a certain realization I think we need to have as people interested in Iran, as Iran watchers, as people living and working in DC. Which is there has been a change in the makeup or the supporter or the constituency of who is your average Islamic Republic voter.

Who is your average Islamic Republic sympathizer. The regime long betted that it would be the downtrodden and the dispossessed. But actually, one of the few, few weird flip scripts of the past two decades is that those who could, under tough circumstances, sanctions abroad, fragmentation and political corruption at home, those who could be a little bit more upwardly mobile were the ones who ended up because of reasons like, you know, capitalist coward, you get to be able to make money under a tough situation, you have that position, become socially and politically and economically privileged.

Those people didn't have an ideational affinity with Islamism, particularly of the Khomeinist form. But they had a economic attachment. And they were able to cloak that economic attachment in some, with respect, perverse form of patriotism.

To pretend that, oh no, we're here because we love Iran. But in reality they live lifestyles. The rich and famous, from many, many years ago, the rich kids of Tehran, Instagram, to the things you see on walking tours today, to the fact that the biggest mall in the world is the one that just went bust because Bank Ayandeh, the underwriter for that bank, you know, was part a gigantic Ponzi scheme in the Islamic Republic.

So the things that you do see on social media about Iran, the things that you do hear when people come and go, it is far, far from that Islamist paradise that Khomeini wanted. It is that under the Islamic Republic, these are the people. It is the craziest parties of the rich and famous, but only for the privileged few.

And it is that hypocrisy of these privileged few being able to generate wealth off of an Islamist regime and have the children of the many poor masses have to live like a 7th century Islamist regime, whereas the children of the privileged few live like 21st, 22nd century Western European partygoers.

And this, this dissonance is opening up a space for us to be able to go after that capital, especially capital flight that may be happening out of the country now.



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DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting, I mean if you, if you did sort of the rough math on this, I'm not saying this is perfect math, but if you, if you imagine that say 80% of Iranians oppose this regime and let's say 20% support it, and of the 20%, 80% are crooks and—

TALEBLU: These opportunists

DUBOWITZ: 20% are true believers. You're down to 20% of 20%, which suggests that 4% of the support base of the regime are actually true believers, like hardcore ideologues. And the 16% are opportunists who are enjoying their status, their ill gotten gains from their regime insider positions, and at the end of the day they just want to keep their money and keep their lives and keep their positions.

But are they necessarily want to go and fight to the death to preserve the Islamic Republic? Perhaps therein lies an opportunity for a regime fracturing strategy. And I want to talk a little bit about first the policy side of this and then I want to return back to where we are now.

We have for many years at FDD and you certainly have led the way on so much of this, we've had a maximum pressure strategy. Two decades to put maximum pressure on the regime, and that's through sanctions, through diplomatic isolation, through political warfare.

Certainly the United States, Israel, others have engaged in cyber warfare. Most recently kinetic strikes and 12 Day War. President Trump's contemplating additional kinetic strikes. We wanted to talk about that. But a maximum pressure strategy, which has put immense pressure on the Islamic Republic.

You created a kind of the term maximum support at FDD was right. How do we think about why real tools we can provide to the Iranian people to help support them against this regime. That when they take to the streets, what can they have in the way of circumvention tools when the regime shuts down the Internet? So, you know, Starlink terminals and other applications so they can communicate.

We've done a lot of work, obviously, on that.

TALEBLU: VPN front.

DUBOWITZ: VPN, et cetera. And I think that there's been a lot of work done by others on that. And you saw some of that at play on the streets in the latest round of protests. Details we may not want to discuss in a public broadcast.

The third is really where I think we need to focus our efforts is on a campaign of maximum fracturing. How do you actually fracture this elite cohesion that is one of the last remaining pillars of the Islamic Republic? And I think that's where the conversation, policy, conversation needs to go.

But I want to ask you specifically today. I mean, President Trump is about to make a decision one way or the other. Tell us a little bit about your assessment of where things stand from a U.S. perspective and some of his recent rhetoric, which is in very Trumpian way, tends to go from very aggressive to the very accommodating. What would it mean for the US to actually strike Iran? Where should those strikes be? What would be the point for the United States to engage in negotiations with Iran?

As President Trump is intimating, what would be the impact on the regime? And I think, more importantly, what would the impact be on the 80% of Iranians who despise this regime and the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets and families of, 30, 40,000 who are mourning this slaughter?



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TALEBLU: I mean, there's so much there, but let me just begin with the one thing that I do hear. When you do manage to get a connection, from Iran, which is this one word, which means several words, but the word you hear is *mizaneh*, which is, will he strike? That's just on everybody's tongue.

It's on the tip of everybody's tongue. People are waking up and going to sleep wondering what President Trump will do. It's like, you can change that sign, "What would Jesus Do," to what would Trump do? Everybody in Iran is wondering that. There's memes online about graphs about the highs and the lows of Trump's popularity in Iran.

There's all this stuff out there. There's so much in terms of even memes and even bad language that Iranians are finding a refuge for themselves in dark humor and black humor to be able to explain the situation that they're in. This highly nationalistic population now actually calling for and looking out abroad for a foreign government to call in the cavalry.

And that's because they know the cavalry that they've seen before. Contrary to things like the Iran-Iraq War that the Islamic Republic is trying to put together, America, Israel are not hostile nations with predations and designs on Iranian territory. This is a huge difference when we're talking about foreign supported assistance, foreign support to, to Iranian protesters and how that support looks military.

I mean you've dealt with me for so many years in the office. I've been pro max pressure, pro max support. I've really dragged my feet on the military side of things. But even to have someone like me saying this tells you how far the Islamic Republic has fallen and how much.

There is space within Iranian nationalist discourse to be able to frame military intervention as being consistent with Iranian nationalism versus those today with who oppose it are actually now standing against the Iranian nation and the 30 plus thousand that were so bravely killed for just trying to have a government that articulates their views, values and interests. This is a sea change in the way Iranians see the world and their relationship with the outside world and who is and isn't Iranian and who is and isn't foreign.

I mean the one foreign entity here is not America, is not Israel, is the Islamic Republic itself. Which even some of the founding elites said is neither Islamic nor republic. It's just we are seeing the Ayatollah for what it is, which is a third world, kleptocratic, oil rich mafia state.

DUBOWITZ: That is illegally occupied nation of Iraq.

TALEBLU: Exactly. And it is in that space that we can get to other tools like max pressure, max support, max defections. But they all are tied to what the President will do. And I think the President has us, and I mean us is in the world and allies and adversaries alike, right where he wants us, which is we're waiting on him.

And I think we've seen a little bit of this movie in 2025, which is he can pursue all options on the table all at once. In the first six to nine months, he did what it took four administrations to do all at the same time. He laid the path work for maximum pressure sanctions.

He laid the path work for direct and indirect negotiations. He laid the path work to support our ally Israel in the region. He engaged in unilateral military action on the back end of that to take the crown jewelry of the regime's nuclear program. Then he worked by, with, and through the Europeans and even the United nations to get snapback.

So he did ran the gambits on every kind of Iran policy. And so to me, it's no surprise that he's offering the Islamic Republic a final off ramp here. I remember from Trump term one, he would be, you know, dueling with an Iranian official on Twitter and the next day saying he would meet Rouhani.



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These are, the inconsistencies are now consistent. My one fear is that the moral cost of these inconsistencies is so high now. You know, there is, we articulated at FDD, me, you, Andrea, Orde, our colleagues back in 2025, we articulated what the actual good nuclear deal, missile deal, disarmament deal looked like.

We framed it as dismantlement. We framed it as disarmament. That was before there were 36,000 killed. There is no deal to be had. There is no diplomatic off ramp. Now, for a regime that has engaged in these violations and for a regime that doesn't even have the nuclear card that it used to be able to threaten.

We have survived now, we, as in the policy community, not one, but two crisis that for the first and now second time ever. The Islamic Republic doesn't have a tried and true tool to threaten us with. The first crisis snapback, the second crisis, the massive massacring of the protesters.

Traditionally, anytime that America would threaten to intervene or just levy more pressure, step number one for Iran, we're going to ratchet up the pressure. Go back to the centrifuges, go back to the machines, go back to Natanz, go back to Fordow. President Trump took that card away from them. And what a gross political, strategic and moral mistake for the President to realign his Iran policy with President Obama's Iran policy of A, selling out protesters, but B, not living up to his own red line and think that this would be some way to get a clever deal and avoid military action and then pivot and go deal with Iran's partners, Russia and China, who are nuclear armed, who are 10, 20, 100 times more dangerous and still think you have the credibility and the resolve to deter them when you weren't able to act against a much weaker, a much smaller power.

DUBOWITZ: Now, you've done a lot of work on Iran's missile programs, so I want to ask you a, kind of scenario which I can imagine taking place in the Oval Office today or in the coming days, or it may have taken place already where one of President Trump's advisors comes to him and says, Mr. President, the reason we were so successful last June is that after the Israelis cleared the skies and took out 14 nuclear weapons scientists and the senior IRGC command and control and took out the serious damage to Iran's nuclear program and took out a high percentage of their missile inventory and destroyed 50% of their missile launchers, there was basically no risk to U.S. aircraft in Iranian airspace.

And so we could send in the B-2 bombers that had planned for years for this mission and we could drop massive ordnance penetrators on Fordow, the only facility that Israel didn't have the air power to destroy. And while we were at it, we took the rest of Natanz and we launched Tomahawk missiles and we hit Isfahan.

But it was basically almost a risk-free military operation. And you could get significant military strategic and political benefits from. I think that's a fair description unless you disagree with me, what happened in June of last year.

But Mr. President, I mean if you are thinking now of an all out military campaign to decapitate this regime, to kill thousands and thousands of IRGC, Basij, Ministry of Intelligence, members of the law enforcement, police, and really take out the regime's repression apparatus.

Maybe you're even thinking, Mr. President, about killing Khamenei. That is incredibly risky and escalatory step and we may end up in a massive war with Iran. I think the Iranian people would be delighted or those 80% who oppose the regime.

And we would have fulfilled our moral obligation, Mr. President, which you made clear in your rhetoric. But we would be – you're not going to get a clean win and things can go really badly. So Mr. President, here's my advice, and Behnam I want you to respond to this. My advice Mr. President, is that the regime in Iran is reconstituting its missile program, actively reconstituting the help from China and other players and they're going to rebuild it. And at some point, Mr. President, the Israelis are going to have to strike.



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And last December, by the way he told Prime Minister Netanyahu at Mar a Lago that he has your full backing for Israel to go in there and destroy Iran's reconstituting missile program, which is the last remaining strategic threat the regime has to U.S. forces in the region, Gulf allies, Israel, and by the way, they have an active intercontinental ballistic missile program which one day could threaten American homeland. So, my advice Mr. President, let's hit the strategic missile program and then let's tell Khamenei that if he doesn't go, to Oman and negotiate the full dismantlement of these nuclear missiles and terrorist networks and capabilities, then they'll be hell to pay and at that point, we can reconsider other options.

Okay, Behnam why is that a good idea or a bad idea?

TALEBLU: I would say, am I the President or—

DUBOWITZ: No, no, you are responding to

TALEBLU: The NSC.

DUBOWITZ: The National Security Advisor's recommendations to the President.

TALEBLU: Okay. So I would say it's an interesting idea that we can expand on, but that alone will not get us out of the crisis. Remember, it was not a nuclear crisis that brought us here. It was not a missile crisis that brought us here. It was not even a terrorism crisis that brought us here. It was the President consistently drawing a red line related to the internal situation in Iran.

And so there is no way out but through in terms of trying to fix that internal situation. Now, we're lucky. The strategic and the moral and the political dots all align for us. The strategic being that we can continue this kind of campaign against Iran's long range strike, stuff like missiles, like missile production factories, arms depots, underground missile labs, underground missile facilities, you name it.

That's the stuff that the US can hit and can hit fairly comprehensively, both in terms of the firepower brought into the region as well as what it can do with air power. The challenge is, even as you proceed to hit that, as in if you are trying to disarm and defang the Islamic Republic, as the Israelis did pretty successfully to pave the pathway for us to enter with Operation Midnight Hammer, there was a lot of stuff on the ground the Israelis did with drone strikes, for example, in Operation Rising Line, to pave the pathway for an easier American entry into this conflict, as you begin to disarm and defang the regime, it will still have the capability to fire.

So if you want to pick this option, which is go after the regime's nuclear, what's left of the nuclear and their missile program, and then reassess. One – you would not be avoiding the fire that would come anyway because the regime would increasingly move towards a use it or lose it scenario because if you defang them, then you can get them to surrender.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, okay, let me sort of push back and the idea would be you go in there and you take out all the missile capabilities, including the short and medium range missile.

TALEBLU: We will get hit.

DUBOWITZ: Threaten U.S. forces. And the idea would be go in there, take out their long range ballistic missiles, take out their cruise missiles, take out their drones, take out their short and medium range missiles, neutralize that in order to limit the retaliatory capabilities of the regime against U.S. forces, U.S. allies, take that out.

And by the way, on the nuclear side, drop massive orange penetrators on Pickaxe Mountain.

TALEBLU: Absolutely.



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DUBOWITZ: With the regimes that is trying to build, which is going to go even deeper than Fordow, which they're going to turn into an enrichment facility, potentially a place where they do weaponization, certainly centrifuge manufacturing.

And not now, but the next administration or the one after that is going to face an even bigger problem than this administration faced with Fordow, which was a deeply buried, heavily fortified nuclear weapons facility that should be destroyed today, not punted for three to five years.

TALEBLU: Yeah, just the assumption there is that we're going to compare it to Midnight Hammer, which was, was relatively cost free for America. Yes, the Iranians were able to strike one radome at the Al-Udeid base in Qatar, but that was after. But to think we can neutralize or defang all of the regime's long range strike apparatus, including by the way stuff in the Persian Gulf which has not been turned on since the October 7. The multiple cycles of violence we lived through in the region since October 7th, something will get hit.

So if the option of defanging the regime is chosen as the primary policy objective in the hopes of not getting hit, we will still get hit. Because there is no guarantee you can disarm that entire apparatus all at once. You have to begin with going after the radar as a suppression of enemy air defenses and then move in against the long range strike stuff.

Iran has three chains, western, central, eastern of missile bases. We have to pick which one to defend against versus which one to strike. So the contrast that to Midnight Hammer picking this option rather than going all the way for repression apparatus, regime change, decapitation, whatever you want to call it, it's not a clean comparison because we will still get hit.

Those weapons that we want to take out will still be used and the Iranians have said so. Contrary to all their messaging and what they call Operation True Promise One, True Promise Two, True Promise Three. They're talking about front loading the response. So it is for us in my, with the policy option I would respect, I would advocate for is at this point in time, whether we like it or not, it is about a go big or go home situation.

And that means going after both the repression apparatus as well as the defanging and disarming. And that means a bigger force for sure. But one thing we haven't discussed is submarines. Another thing we haven't discussed is the B-2s that could be brought in. But we have to have a political theory to nest this win on.

And the political theory is that you have to begin to collapse the house of cards around Khamenei and the security forces. I'm not interested in getting the political elite to defect. I'm interested in popular pressure being able to be turned back online. And my fear is if we focus only on the strategic systems, given that it was literally a human rights crisis that brought us into this situation to begin with, and the President's choice to stand with the Iranian people and then to drive protests, we will not have gotten ourselves out of that pickle.

We might lose one of the most pro-American populations in the region. And then worse, if we think that our military activity will drive the next round of protests, I think if we replicate the target set from the 12 Day War, the Iranian people will replicate the behavior we saw from them during the 12 Day War. Which is, if you're not targeting the apparatus of repression, if you're not going after a high level political elite, they're going to run, duck, hide and cover and flee.

And then we could get that mixed messaging that unfortunately we saw at the end of the 12 Day War where the Israelis were saying, "come out." And then President Trump was saying, "leave Tehran." And the Iranians are like, what am I supposed to do? Come out or leave Tehran. And we could easily get into this kind of a situation.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, well, let me expand the scenarios and again, I'm not endorsing them.

TALEBLU: Same. I'm just, I'm just theorizing with you.



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DUBOWITZ: I want to talk through them because I think it's sort of interesting as we await the decision, I think we all, at least you and I, both agree President Trump has to do something. He has to do something militarily. It'd be a huge mistake to try to negotiate a deal with this regime for reasons that we've discussed, Yesterday with Rich Goldberg on this podcast, and we've discussed many times in previous episodes.

So we assume that there should be a military strike and we certainly endorse it.

TALEBLU: What did Rich recommend? I'll be safe. I'll go behind Rich.

DUBOWITZ: Well, so, no, no, certainly Rich. We talked about the missiles. We talked about, going after the IRGC maybe. We talked about going after their short and medium range missile capability. We talked about the regime's repression apparatus and that's where I want to go to next.

Let's say that the strategy is we take out their last remaining strategic capabilities, and then we make it very clear that we are going to now really focus national resources together with the Israelis and other allies on building up a serious maximum support plan and a serious maximum fracturing plan.

And so that the next time that Iranians can take to the streets, we have a target bank full of regime apparatus targets. We know exactly who to strike, exactly who to eliminate. And we do that in a very decisive way.

Because part of the reason that I think President Trump didn't act is I'm not sure that the US Military was ready to target regime apparatus repression. I'm not sure they had the targets. It may not necessarily have had the intelligence on it.

I don't think that was already – was part of the military planning and the options presented to President Trump. We also didn't have necessarily the forces in the region because a lot of that had been diverted to

TALEBLU: Venezuela.

DUBOWITZ: Venezuela. Right. We didn't have a carrier strike group in the region.

The USS Ford, which I think was in the Mediterranean, ended up being sent to Venezuela. So we had to send The USS Lincoln from the South China Sea to back to the Middle East. And that's important firepower that not only on the offensive side, but on the defensive side in the case of, Iranian retaliation.

So I'm not sure he was quite ready for it. It would seem to me that what we need to be doing over the coming days, weeks, months, is starting to prepare for that next round. And that next round is military targets on regime repression, Massive, influence operations against the regime elite with messaging about, you can be with us or you will end up hanging from a flagpole, right. And cyber covert action, huge economic pressures, putting together a defection plan. I mean, all the things that one should put in place if you really want to undermine and weaken elite cohesion and if you want to next time around, make it more dangerous for the security apparatus to repress Iranians the way they did it.

And this is a phased approach rather than a

TALEBLU: All in now.

DUBOWITZ: All in now. What do you make of that?



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TALEBLU: You know, phased and incremental. Phased and incremental sometimes people joke is my middle name. You know, I can be very slow rolling, slow moving. I totally understood the logic under Trump, max pressure 1.0 Incremental escalation, graduated escalation. We talked for hours and hours a day about those things. But here I still have some concerns and reservations that we may not get the next round at the next most propitious time. And with immense respect, the light lift that these things were in 2025 alone, not just with the White House, but with Congress.

And the fact that this, forgive me for using the word talking point or line, but this line that I've been saying, Iranians have been dying in the darkness. You probably are sick of hearing me say it because I've been saying it since November 2019, since 1,500 Iranians have died and still no hundred percent on direct sell.

That is such a light lift for Uncle Sam. That is such a light lift for USG. And my fear is that if we get around this hump, this political crisis, I don't know, I mean, I know FDD will be involved in the fight 100%, but I can't guarantee the kaleidoscope of DC domestic politics.

And I worry greatly that that'll be something that goes to the wayside. And you mentioned the word defection several times today. One of the amendments in the NDAA that didn't make its way through most unfortunately –

DUBOWITZ: The National Defense Authorization Act. Yeah, the must be passed legislation that funds the Pentagon.

TALEBLU: – was a defection strategy.

And you know, I gotta tell you, seeing the opportunity for one to be erected and then see it be taken down was really disheartening. And then three, three weeks time, four weeks time, friends and colleagues and acquaintances in Congress professing support for the Iranian people.

But we were caught flat footed. And I fear that we'll be caught flat footed again if we miss the forcing function of the moment. And I would never say that the Iranian people would turn their back on Uncle Sam or on Israel or anyone else. But given the fact that Iran, contrary to its neighbors, has not been through, thank God, civil war, massive military conflict on your territory, insurgency, the openness to certain conflicts, bloody revolution since 1979, it had the longest war in the 20th century was the Iran-Iraq War.

But that was fought on Iranian territory for sure. And there were a lot of casualties, but it was largely fought on Iraqi territory. Iranian society hasn't seen this crackdown. Again, the historicity that we talked about, and in that world, I really do wonder when the next time may come.

And that's why I think one of the discussions we need to have about military power, if we're going to bring on the military element, is how can military power drive rather than dampen the next round of protest? That's the conversation the IC [International Community] needs to have. That's the conversation Trump needs to have with the Israelis.

That's the conversation that needs to be had with the opposition. Which is, how do you know you know when to come out? How do you feel Uncle Sam is behind you versus how do you know Uncle Sam is behind you? These are real tough conversations, but I think it's better to have them now.

I don't think that there was a shortage of intelligence for a potential target bank. I think one of the few things that Pentagon does really well consistently is plan to plan about a plan. So I do feel like they have contingencies. There has been quite the bit of musical chairs due to the success the Israelis have had taking out the IRGC, taking out the command and control during the 12 Day War.



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So those target banks will need to be updated anyway. I assume that some of them have been updated since the summer of 2025. But I do want to stress the forcing function of the moment, the fact that Iranian society has never seen anything like this, and the fact that there really will be no way out but through, and that we can't guarantee the kaleidoscope of DC politics and President Trump's intentions at time 3, 4, 5, when the pressure will be less compared to time 1, when the pressure is more.

So I would be the last person, and I am the last person to force a loaded gun into a shaky hand, but I also know enough about the trajectory to say that that is not a safe alternative either.

DUBOWITZ: A decisive, consequential, potentially regime ending military force at this moment, given.

TALEBLU: Who knew Behnam would say that?

But that is how far the Islamic Republic has failed and fallen, you know.

DUBOWITZ: Do you worry about, some kind of insurgency? That if we do do that, the sort of surviving members of the regime, I mean, the IRGC is 150,000 strong, Basij is 2 to 3 million. Obviously there's millions of Iranians who do support this regime. And if we go in with some kind of massive, comprehensive regime ending military campaign, that we could precipitate the kind of insurgency we saw in Iraq after U.S. Forces went in there.

And I mean Iraq is not Iran. And we can talk about all the differences, but do you worry that there will be hundreds of thousands of angry armed men taking to the streets?

TALEBLU: Obviously, yes, I do worry. One key difference about the Iran is not Iraq is that one major reason for the insurgency and the casualties by the way, inflicted upon us and coalition partners was the Islamic Republic of Iran, was the IRGC. Now this is against them. And there is a real forcing function that we can have here against this regime, and I think that begins with consistent street pressure married with consistent foreign pressure.

You know, the US is talking about this as a massive military operation. What I would have really liked to see instead now we're having conversations about carriers and B-2s. There really was an opportunity for a Trumpian R2P. There really was an opportunity –

DUBOWITZ: Responsibility to protect.

TALEBLU: Absolutely. There was an opportunity for low and slow flying drones and at most A-10s, and at most standoff weaponry like Tomahawks to be able to level the playing field against the state while Iranians were in the street. We made this have to become a situation like a Venezuela situation.

There's also the chance of an insurgency. If we go to Venezuela, if we think we can play musical chairs with the regime's elite. By the way, that is not at all going to solve the protest issue and that'll risk driving anti-American sentiment in Iran. Something that is the farthest thing that I think we want to do both at FDD as well as certainly in the White House.

So yes, there's always the concern that whenever you decentralize power, there'll be the rise of non central authority. But one of the things I think that Karim has said on a recent podcast that I strongly agree with is that the vast majority of these security personnel are opportunistic as well.

You know, it's not just that like they get paid, but they also don't see something to defect to. What we have to do in terms of the military messaging, you know, military power, and forgive me, public violence, a la Machiavelli that satisfies and stupefies, is communication is a kind of language.



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And the kind of language that this has to convey is it's best for you to step aside. And by having consistent street pressure deracinating high-level and mid-level IRGC commanders and consistently pounding your way down, that creates the fracturing effect that fosters defections.

Not defection to this party or that party, but to keep your gun and stay at home. Remember the 1979 Revolution Victory Day is February 11, 1979. The reason February 11 is Victory Day is because February 11 is the day the Artesh, the national military declared neutrality.

You need to get the armed forces out of the way, and nothing other than pressure on downward from the, from abroad can do that. Because we are in a situation where military elites are cohesive, and we need to break that chain of command and control to foster that sense of the need for individual survival to come about.

And if you have an adversary that is more opportunistic than ideological, and that is at least one of the things that various grades of people who've come out of Iran, whether they're students, whether they're protesters, whether they're activists, whether they're defectors, people that have served in government ministries in Iran in the 90s and in the 2000s have told us that, you know, the people here are opportunistic.

The first criticism people have of FDD is you guys are focusing too much on Islamism, and you're forgetting about the ability of the Islamic Republic to be a rentier state and to buy people off. And that buying off something that we actually have to tap into more for the security forces than the political elites.

With immense respect, I couldn't care less if Pezeshkian defects or not. Iran's current president. I'm more interested in getting the body of the security forces offside to think about leveling the pathway for the street against the state. That is what I want military force to be able to drive, to be able to satisfy and stupefy again, per Machiavelli, and to help push the way through for protests.

Because I don't know when we can turn on these protests like a flip of a switch or not. And it's about creating the imagery in the minds of your average Iranian protester that it is safe to go out. Because right now we're going to have a currency of a crisis of confidence. And hitting a missile base in Yazd or a production facility in Shahrud is not going to drive the next round.

It will help us with a disarmament mission. And we have to nest that disarmament mission into this larger mission and pave the pathway for protests. Otherwise, I think we are going to be in a very dangerous cycle where the president has built up an expectation and may not be able to deliver, which, again, would have political ramifications for him, strategic ramifications for the United States, and not to mention the immense moral ones as well.

DUBOWITZ: Behnam I would love to have you back once we see what President Trump decides to do. But certainly, you know, and, we all at FDD know that, our mission is not over and will not be over until the Islamic Republic ends up in the ash heap of history and we see a peaceful and prosperous and stable Iran. And we can all be in Tehran celebrating, drinking a glass of Shiraz wine.

TALEBLU: Absolutely. And to partner, create Iran into a partner.

DUBOWITZ: God willing.



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What's happening in Iran today is not an aberration. It's the Islamic Republic stripped bare and acting in its nature – a regime that's survives by terrorizing its own population. It's not a regime that's stable. It's a regime that is desperate. With the pillars of regime stability crumbling except for elite cohesion and security apparatus that has murdered its way through the past few weeks. A government that must rule through mass arrests, execution and fear has definitely lost its legitimacy.

Iran's human rights catastrophe is not separate from the regime's nuclear ambitions, its regional aggression, its use of ballistic missiles, or its hostage diplomacy. It's the foundation beneath all of them. And this moment will leave a permanent record in graves, in prison cells, and the memories of the Iranian people.

The question is no longer whether these crimes are happening. They are. The question is whether the world treats them as background noise and gets distracted – or as the historic, moral, and strategic emergency that they are. The U.S. responsibility to act has never been more important. Thanks for listening to “The Iran Breakdown.”

Until next time, when we break it down again.