A Reagan-Approved Blueprint for Iran

February 13, 2026
Featuring Charlie Laderman and Nazee Moinian
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome to The Iran Breakdown.

For decades, U.S. policy towards Iran has swung between two poles: pressure on the regime or engagement with the regime. What it's almost never done is something different: systematically empower the Iranian people themselves. But history suggests there's another way.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan faced a Soviet –backed dictatorship in Poland. Instead of invading, instead of toppling it by force, the United States supported an independent labor movement, funded dissident media, and waged an information war that helped bring down communism from within. That strategy helped Solidarity survive martial law, weaken Moscow's grip, and ultimately contributed to the peaceful collapse of the Eastern bloc.

An FDD research memo argues that this same model – pressure from the outside, support from the inside – offers a practical blueprint for dealing with the Islamic Republic today. So, the question we're asking: can America help Iranians achieve freedom the way it once helped the Poles – without another Middle Eastern war?

To discuss this, I'm joined by the authors of that memo. Charlie Laderman is a historian of U.S. foreign policy and international relations, currently affiliated with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He has written extensively on Cold War strategy, American diplomacy, and the use of non –military tools to counter authoritarian regimes. He's an associate professor at the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida.

And Nazee Moinian's focus is on the intersection of Iranian history and politics and how Iran's ancient history is one of its charms and also one of its challenges. She's looked at how Iran's ancient civilization offers hope and why in this rapidly changing environment, it also hampers bold change. She's an associate fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington and an advisor to INSS in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Together, they've written an important FDD paper titled, "Freedom for Iran: Learning from U.S. Support for Polish Anti-Communists in the 1980s." I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz, and this is The Iran Breakdown. So, let's break it down.

Charlie, Nazee, welcome.

MOINIAN: Thank you for having me.

LADERMAN: Thank you for having us.

DUBOWITZ: Wonderful to have you guys on. So, you wrote a very important paper, and we're obviously going to dig into the details, but I want to just frame the big picture at sort of 30,000 feet. Your memo argues that President Reagan's Poland policy – and maybe his overall policy against the Soviet Union really – offers a roadmap for Iran today, maybe. Charlie, I want to start with you. Single biggest lesson that American policymakers should take from the Solidarity experience?

LADERMAN: Well, thank you so much for having us on, first of all, at this critical moment in U.S.-Iran relations. I'd say the most important aspect of this is that revanchist, revolutionary regimes are inherently unstable and weak, however they present themselves to the outside world. And that true realpolitik recognizes that states aren't just black boxes, that any regime that denies their people's most basic aspirations are intrinsically vulnerable. And this is something that every realist, every statesman has recognized since Machiavelli. And the Reagan administration recognized this. They recognized that the Soviet system was weak, it was [sic, sporadic], and that that was their greatest vulnerability, and that waging political warfare against it was vital to its broader grand strategy. And I think something very similar could occur with the US facing similar revanchist, revolutionary regimes around the world today, not least the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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DUBOWITZ: So Nazee, what Charlie's saying obviously has broad lessons for the Islamic Republic. You've followed the Islamic Republic for many years. You're an Iranian American, proud Iranian American. Reagan's insight in the Soviet Union was this – was a regime that was ideologically bankrupt; economically bankrupt; had a military that was overstretched around the world; really hated by the majority of Soviet citizens, particularly those in Eastern Europe under the jackboot of a communist dictatorship. What do you think is the single biggest lesson that we can learn from that experience, and maybe tie it into the Islamic Republic today?

MOINIAN: Well, thank you, Mark, again, for having both of us, and it's great to talk about this paper. It's been a delight to work with Charlie to write it, and I'm happy that we're discussing it now, because I think this is one of the best times to discuss this. We are at a precipice of change in Iran, and there's so many lessons that could be applied. I think the lessons are manifold, actually. I think lifting the veil of the autocratic regimes to see what's really happening inside the country. What are the citizens asking for? What are their aspirations? Where the weaknesses are, instead of repeating the narrative that the regime repeats about itself, about its adversaries, about America, about Israel, and actually about the hapless Shah.

You know, I found myself many times in discussions where I had to defend his position. I came to admiring his foreign policy when I was writing my dissertation paper. I delved into archives in London – the foreign offices in London – and also State Department here in America, and I found that he was a true patriot. And in America, he was portrayed as this despot that didn't know what to do, how to navigate, was waiting for any moment to hear from an American diplomat or a president of what to do with his own people. And I found the opposite to be true. So, I wouldn't take the narrative that the regime puts out as a given. I would want to know the truth and would also look for moments or people or even personalities that are changemakers and try to create an environment where they can discipline themselves, organize themselves, and hopefully create change.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. We're definitely going to dig into that – where the Islamic Republic is today and how we can actually change the regime. And Charlie, I want to ask you about redefining regime change, because you make a crucial point in the paper that regime change does not necessarily mean tanks and fighter jets and occupation. And in fact, in Poland I think what Reagan demonstrated is that you can really bring down a brutal dictatorship – in that case they brought down a brutal Soviet-backed dictatorship – without firing a shot. It's a distinction that is very difficult for many to grasp because of our experience with Iraq and Afghanistan. Why do you think that is the case? Why are we so stuck in this mental model that everything is about Iraq and Afghanistan? And maybe again, draw from the lessons of President Reagan and Poland to imagine a different strategy for the Islamic Republic.

LADERMAN: Yeah. So, I think there is definitely a recency bias to this. Like obviously, it's the most recent instances. We look at Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya. We look at military interventions that haven't exactly panned out as had been intended. And so, there's an understandable, realistic aversion to getting involved in proactive, kinetic regime change because the consequences are too complicated to foresee, and the sense is this might lead to resentment both at home and in the target country as well. So, there's an understandable aversion to this.

But I think that word – that term, as you mentioned, regime change – has been defined very narrowly, and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been really adept at playing on that – not least as they were largely responsible for how things turned out a lot of the time in Iraq with their attacks on, not just American troops, but also on Iraqi civilians to further their own agenda. But they've also made it clear that any change or even modification in their behavior constitutes regime change. They constantly parrot that line, and I think as a result that has been internalized within the U.S. as well, that this sense that anything that sort of shifts their behavior constitutes regime change.

And I think if we take a broader historical perspective on this – and the Reagan administration provides an example of this – is that it doesn't just have to involve tanks. There is pressure that you can put on regimes, particularly ones who recognize their own weakness. And ultimately, when it comes to pressure on a regime, particularly one that relies on repression, that is their number one fear – is this internal security – domestic security – that they are facing from their own population. So by not putting that pressure on these regimes when we're negotiating with them, we have essentially engaged in ideological unilateral disarmament against regimes that have no opposition to engaging in regime change in our own countries, whether that's across the Middle East, whether that's in the United States, or their – or their interventions overseas in Europe as well. I mean, this is a regime that constantly tries to influence domestic politics in other countries while constantly shouting about regime change in their own country.

DUBOWITZ: What's interesting to me, Charlie, is that – and I think it was one of the striking themes in your paper – is that – I mean, Reagan engaged in both pressure and diplomacy. While negotiating arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, he was working on undermining Soviet control of Eastern Europe. And through economic power and undermining the Red Army across the world – certainly using political warfare and the power of the pulpit – but he was negotiating while undermining.

And we're in a situation now with the Islamic Republic where President Reagan is echoing in the Middle East and in 2026 with President Trump's strategy, right? He's got this armada now that he's assembled in the Middle East. He's threatening to use American and military power, as he did last June during the 12-Day War. And at the same time, he sent Jared Kushner, Steve Witkoff to go negotiate with Foreign Minister Araghchi on a – on a deal. So, I guess the question is – and he's getting criticized for it. I mean, I think many of us are very worried about negotiating with this Islamic Republic, and yet Reagan balanced these two goals. Can you – any sort of insights in what the Reagan strategy should teach us about dealing with Tehran today?

LADERMAN: Yeah. I think for a long-time scholars and analysts at the time found it very hard to understand these two Reagans, as they saw it. This person who during the 1970s hammered away at Henry Kissinger for détente policies, a sense that that was legitimizing the Soviet regime, but then he gets into office, and by the end of his administration he's willing to engage in negotiations. So, the sense was, how do you – how do you combine those two things? And I think what's clear is that for Reagan they were always intrinsically linked. There was a sequential element to this that, in order to negotiate with these regimes, you have to do so from a position of strength. And Reagan is saying this really from the '70s on his radio shows. He has a – he has a wonderful line where he says, "A little less détente and more encouragement to the dissenters might be worth a lot of armored divisions."

So, there's a sense that he recognizes from a very early point that actually, as we've been talking about, the greatest weakness of these regimes is the pressure from within. That, actually, you will find allies within those regimes, and that that puts these regimes under a huge amount of pressure. And so, what he does is this buildup of American military power, this strategy of checking Soviet external expansion, and then coupling that with very prudent support for those struggling for these basic rights behind the Iron Curtain. He recognizes that this is a fundamentally – I just – just a sequential strategy. You start with one, and as a result your negotiations are going to be far more effective.

And he – and just before he leaves office – his last meeting with Gorbachev, just before he goes, he tells the press, he says that really the Soviets only get down to serious negotiations after they're convinced that their counterparts have no illusions about their system and their regime. And so, Reagan always recognized this, that if you had no illusions, if you recognized what this regime was, then you could actually pressure it far more effectively, and hopefully President Trump can learn something from that approach.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So, Naz, I see a few differences with the Soviet Union. I mean, I think it's – Reagan was right that the Soviet Union wasn't just a rival state, that ideologically its system could not be moderated. I think hopefully now many people have finally realized that the Islamic Republic cannot be reformed, cannot be moderated. Certainly, the Iranian people have recognized that, and I think...

MOINIAN: And doesn't want to.

DUBOWITZ: ...and doesn't want to. I think – so, they're ideologically similar in that respect. They are revolutionary states, expansionist ideology, cannot be reformed, but I do think there's a couple of differences. One is Ronald Reagan was not negotiating with the Soviet Union in the wake of the slaughter of Hungarians in '56. He was not negotiating with the Soviet Union in the wake of the slaughter of Czechoslovakians in '68. He was negotiating in the 1980s, whereas Donald Trump is negotiating with Islamic Republic in the wake of this most brutal slaughter of Iranians. 30 – 40,000 people killed, potentially 33 – 34,000 killed on January 8 and 9, which is the biggest slaughter in modern history, maybe akin to Babi Yar when the Nazis killed 33,000 Jews in two days in Ukraine. So, negotiating in the wake of a slaughter is one thing.

The second is, when Reagan negotiated arms control agreements, it was, "We will reduce our nuclear-tipped missiles if you will reduce your nuclear-tipped missiles." Right? It was essentially a way to minimize the risk of a nuclear exchange, which Reagan very much believed in. Here we're negotiating not an arms control agreement, but an agreement where, if they restrict their nuclear activities, we have to unleash or provide tens of billions, hundreds of billions of dollars of sanctions relief. Money that ends up in the pockets of this regime that it can use to restore its nuclear program – missile program at a time of its choosing. But even more dangerously, give it the funds that it needs to fund its external terrorist proxy. So, there's a couple of key differences there, and I wonder if you could sort of pick up on that line of argument?

MOINIAN: Yeah. Those are all great points that you made, Mark. Just before this started, you and I were talking about Jack Matlock, who was the ambassador of U.S. to the Soviet Union, and he also happened to be my professor at Columbia University. And a big chunk of our class was dedicated to Reagan strategies and his style of leadership. Actually, I think the class was called Style of Leaderships. And – you know – he always made sure that we understand that what Reagan said on TV, what Reagan said in Westminster in 1982 and 1983, calling them a Soviet empire – 1982, the march of democracy will deposit Marxism and Leninism in ash heaps of history – I'm paraphrasing, but in any case, he had a visceral dislike for the Soviet empire. He thought that any treaty is not going to be worth the paper it's written on. He called them cheaters and liars. You know, he was very abrasive in his narrative towards the Russians, towards the Soviets, and he wouldn't hold back.

So, you couldn't dissociate the policymaker, the president, from the person. They both disliked the Soviet's empire. They both disliked their policies, and that showed. And he assembled the cabinet, Caspar Weinberger, George Shultz – actually, George Shultz became his alter ego – and they saw like – of like-minded people. One of those people was William Clark, his deputy secretary assistant, the art – art historian – no, the Russian historian, Richard Pipes. And they all came together to exchange ideas of how to change the internal behavior of the regime so that the external behavior of the regime could be changed. And they collected a set of directives, which is – we might get to later – which is called NSD, National Security Directive Decisions [sic, National Security Decision Directive] 75, that involved every U.S. department, the Treasury, the Defense, Pentagon, the office of the CIA, to make sure that they all say the same thing about rolling back the Soviet communism.

So here we have President Trump who is basically relying on a few people – Steve Witkoff is one of them, Jared Kushner has been the other one – to create an Iran strategy, which they've been – I mean, I know Steve very well and my family knows the Kushner's very well. They're brilliant negotiators. They are dealmakers. They understand the psychology of what goes on when they sit at a table with the other person. Psychology is a big deal in negotiating contracts and also negotiating peace treaties.

But to your point that the Reagan strategy with dealing with Islamic Republic – I'm sorry, with dealing with the Soviet Union and the president – President Trump – are they similar in many ways? I think we could learn a few things from what Reagan did with the – with the Polish and with the Soviets. The narrative was kept up constantly. The pressure – economic pressure – was kept up constantly. And he also sat at the table. He sat at the table where SALT [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks] was being discussed and then he changed it to START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty], because he said he truly believed that nuclear deterrence was mad. It's not mutually assured destruction. It was just mad to talk about millions of people being killed. So, he drove the policy from an internal conviction that this regime needed to go, and that made all the difference.

DUBOWITZ: So, let's get more concrete. So, Charlie, I want to talk about the sort of tools of support. So, Naz talked about this kind of interagency, all-of-government approach that Ronald Reagan implemented against the Soviet Union. And I think, actually, one of the personalities most important in implementation of that was actually Bill Casey, his CIA director. Reagan's, you know, very close friend – he was his campaign manager. And Casey headed up the CIA, flew around the world in his black plane, and really put together a comprehensive strategy of undermining the Soviet Union, backing anti-Soviet dissidents, using tools of American information warfare and power to roll back the Soviet Union ideologically. And Casey also had an obsession with Soviet economic data, and he was the first to really realize that the Soviet Union was bankrupt, despite the fact that the conventional wisdom was that it had expanded faster than any industrial economy in history.

So, let's talk about these concrete tools of support. Tell us a little bit about what Reagan and Casey used, and then maybe, Naz, you could talk about some of the sort of modern parallels that we could be using against the Islamic Republic.

LADERMAN: Absolutely. Thank you. And can I just come in on something which Naz said? Because it's always the pleasure of talking with you both as, Mark, you're getting us to go concrete is absolutely essential. We need to do that. And as Naz was pointing out, there's important similarities, but there's also important differences with the – Iran and Soviet Union, and any sort of applied history, any sort of lessons from history has got to account for those differences. And as you pointed out, Mark, the level of brutality that we've seen that the Iranian – Islamic Republic regime – as you say, very little Iranian about it – but what they've done to the Iranian people is on a – is on a scale beyond anything that we were seeing in this late Cold War period. It's utterly brutal and heinous in terms of the way in which they have conducted this.

So obviously that needs to be taken into account. But as you say, there were precedents for what was going on behind the Iron Curtain, Soviet Union. What they were doing within the borders of the Soviet Union, what they did in Hungary, what they did in Czechoslovakia, what Ceaușescu was doing in Romania. And the fears of what might have happened in Poland without the American policy that they adopt – [Wojciech] Jaruzelski, the Polish leader, was calling on the Soviets to send in their troops and to do in Poland what the Hungarian – happened to Hungary and Czechoslovakia. So, the Reagan administration don't know where this is going to – where this is going to fall in the 1980s, and there was every conceivable possibility that the level of brutality that we'd seen in Hungary and Czechoslovakia would have been visited on Poland as well.

So, what they're doing in that context – they're having to be very, very careful. They don't want to over – they don't want to promise too much. They know what happened with the Hungarians who'd felt extremely disillusioned by feeling like they'd been led up the garden path towards revolution and then hadn't been supported. They were conscious that the Poles themselves were concerned about the historical ramifications of Yalta and a sense to which they had been sold out to the Soviets at that point. So, they're having to keep this in mind. So, they're thinking very prudently. They are thinking that we need to support what's going on in Poland, that this was a watershed moment. The – and that people like Bill Clark, as Nazee pointed out, and others within the Reagan administration, people like Richard Pipes as well; they recognized that this was something which was not – which was unprecedented, and that Reagan didn't want to lose this opportunity to put pressure on the Soviet Union, while at the same time not overestimating the role of this.

So, they're not – they don't believe at this point that their support for Solidarity is going to bring down the communist government in Poland or the whole Soviet Union. That's not what they have in mind. They're thinking very, very cautiously, and the sort of things that they're doing are sort of covert assistance – particularly communication support – support for the labor unions. There's the National Endowment for Democracy that's coming out of Congress, there's Radio Free Europe, and there's the rhetorical bully pulpit that you mentioned as well. And all of these things are to ensure that there's financial support, logistical support, to ensure that the Solidarity movement isn't completely crushed. They need to keep it alive. They need to provide economic support, and they need to provide rhetorical support.

But they are clear that there are limitations at that point for what the U.S. can do militarily at that time, even while at the same time you have sanctions, you have, really, pressure on the Soviet Union and the wider Eastern Bloc in terms of its energy, resources. And so, they can do that sort of thing, but they can't militarily intervene at this point. They just need to keep Solidarity alive as a pressure point on the regime and to ensure that the communist forces can't completely crush the Polish people.

DUBOWITZ: So, Naz, we – Charlie's talking about some of the support tools. I thought it was really interesting in your paper, I hadn't heard about it before, this little – known CIA program called QRHELPFUL. It was about $20 million, and it really kept the Polish opposition functioning under martial law. Tell me, if you were designing QRHELPFUL for Iran, what would – what would it actually look like? And I also want you, if you could, comment on Charlie's historical insight that the Reagan administration was actually very cautious in not wanting to overpromise and underdeliver to the Polish opposition after the – after '56 in Hungary, where really Hungarians thought the US was – had their backs and it turned out they didn't and they were slaughtered in the streets. Well, this sounds familiar, doesn't it?

MOINIAN: Yeah, it does.

DUBOWITZ: …with President Trump promising that the U.S. has the backs of Iranians, help is on the way, take over your institutions, and then Iranians getting slaughtered on the streets by this regime. So maybe comment on QRHELPFUL, but it's also sort of the – I think – eerie kind of modern echoes that we're actually seeing in recent months.

MOINIAN: Well, I want to differentiate between '56 and now. I think the impression that they had – the Hungarians had in '56 was through an interpretation of the Office of the Presidency, of the American presidency. It was never, "We're coming militarily to help you." It was always some kind of a hint that, you know, “You will be successful. You will be running your own country.” It was all these messages of hope, but it was never a deliberate message of, “The U.S. military is coming to intervene and support you.” But the difference in this case is that, actually, our President Trump has said in eight or nine times, "Concrete help is on the way, guns locked and loaded."

And – you know – I think I'm an American. I'm an Iranian – but I'm an American. My loyalty is to this country. I hang on – onto every word that comes out of the White House. And I can't imagine after – as Charlie correctly said – and I should have actually brought it up – that there is a reset button after January 8 and January 9, where the massacres happened, that those words even matter most, more than before. If the most powerful person in the world says, "Hang on," you know, "Take over your institutions. Help is on the way." I'm led to believe that we will – they will do as they promised. And I still, I'm holding out the hope that the American president will come through on his promise.

So, if I – first of all, QRHELPFUL should have been named QRVERYHELPFUL, because it ended up, actually, to a series of events that toppled the Soviet power in Poland. If I were to design a QRHELPFUL for the Iranian regime to either collapse under the weight of its own contradictions or incompetence, I would really exploit the weaknesses of the regime. It's a very unpopular regime. You know, at the beginning of the revolution, there might have been 80 percent that held the line for the Imam coming down the plane – I think February 1st marked the 47th year – and embracing Islamism as an alternate governance to monarchism. That number has shrunk to 20 percent, maybe not even 20 percent. After the massacres, there's no survey done to see how many people actually support this regime.

So, I would – I would empower the Iranian people, because that's probably the biggest weapon we have right now against the regime. We don't – we don't need much more than making sure that the organic uprisings that have happened every 10 years – 1999, 2009, 2019 – and then from 2019, they basically never left the streets. It has become a battle of nationalism versus Islamism. And in my opinion – and history has shown as a historian – that nationalism has always won the day. I would create opportunities for Iranians on the street to be able to communicate with each other more carefully and more openly. There are already satellite dishes that – when they entered in the shutdown – those don't work – but Elon Musk has done a great job at providing links to Starlink, but we need to do more of that. Maybe more Starlink dishes need to be sent, or Starlink pies – I'm not sure – terminals.

DUBOWITZ: Terminals, yeah.

MOINIAN: Terminals, that's what it is. Also, you know, one thing that is remarkably not looked upon as it should is that the regime's still sending out about 2.1 million barrels a day of oil, and that had come down to about 700 to 800,000 barrels under maximum pressure. 1.0 under the...

DUBOWITZ: ...Well, actually, I'm going to slightly correct you there...

MOINIAN: Correct me.

DUBOWITZ: ... just because I followed this really closely.

MOINIAN: Yeah?

DUBOWITZ: They were actually down to under 200,000 barrels a day under President Trump's maximum pressure campaign...

MOINIAN: That low, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: ... in Trump one. And as you say, they're up to two million barrels a day now, most of it going to China.

MOINIAN: Yes. 90 percent of the oil is going at deep discounts. I think that's an area where we could do better. We could also do better with stopping the shadow tankers that are exporting the oil to various parts of the world. We should also seize these oils and set up a strike fund. So, if and when the oil strikers – the oil workers go on strike, the truckers that deliver the oil go on strike, teachers, judges, nurses, people who keep Iran intact, there's – we should be able to tell them, "Here's the money for your livelihood for your children. Hang in there. This is how the regime comes down." Those areas are not fully developed, and I'm hoping that President Trump will allow some form of interagency cooperation that these things can be taken care of.

DUBOWITZ: So, Charlie, look, Iran is not Poland, right? I mean, we don't have a single Solidarity movement. There's no union of trade unionists, as Nazee is talking about, who can come together in a unified way, the way Solidarity came and organize a nationwide strike. But there are some – there are some similarities, right? Having a strike fund is something that the Reagan administration helped support with Solidarity. There's no independent church. The role of the Catholic Church was obviously very important in Poland, and – but there's no Soviet patron controlling Tehran, right? There's no great power. Certainly, Russia and China provide support to Iran but were not there during the 12-Day War to actually save their Iranian patron.

What – those are key differences I think that complicate the Polish model being adapted to Iran, but there are other perhaps similarities. I want you to maybe talk about it. You're a Brit, you like soccer, or football as you call it in the UK. Talk a little bit about the sports arena in Poland and how it applies to Iran?

LADERMAN: Yeah. So, I think the differences are, as we talked about, very important to consider, and as you mentioned, there are no institutions comparable to Solidarity. But as Nazee will be able to tell you better than I will, the Iranian history hasn't always required leaders to be at the forefront of social movements. If you go back to 1906 and the Constitutional Revolution, there's multiple leaders. The same thing happens with the Green Revolution, where Karroubi and Mousavi become figureheads rather than necessarily the leaders, and that's – there's been a wave of protests in contemporary Iran. So, I think that sense that, one, that we shouldn't always seek out leaders, they will emerge, and the opposition is quite profound to this regime, but also the role of the diaspora leadership. That was also the case with Poland in the 1980s as well. A lot of the funneling in the funds and literature was going through émigré Poles in Europe, and I think there's a similar role that the diaspora can play in Iran today.

And as you say, that there isn't a religious institution that's comparable to the Catholic Church, but there are cultural forces that are really important, and soccer is one that the CIA really exploited in Poland in the 1980s. Now, as – one thing I want to make completely clear, and as Nazee said, this requires empowerment from without – this is not, sort of, the intelligence forces playing the role of the opposition. And the most important book by Gregory Domber on the Polish revolution is entitled *Empowering Revolution*. That's what intelligence forces did. This was very much a homegrown organization, an organic movement in Poland in the same way that it is in Iran today. But the role of outside forces to help empower that, that can come through communications, but it can also come through these cultural forces.

So, what the CIA is able to do with Solidarity in Poland is that there is the role of having banners coming up on television that – sort of – that are championing Solidarity. There's also the sense to which, when soccer matches are live on TV, when they hack into Polish state television, you have "Solidarity lives" coming up across the bottom of the screen. And if you look at Iran today, the soccer stadium has played a major role as a – as a – focal point for opposition to the regime that started in the immediate aftermath of the way in which the Iranian regime tried to elevate what they saw as martyrs, whether that was in Lebanon or in Gaza. And Iranians chanting, saying, well, essentially that they can shove their flag in a – yeah, expletive you can put in there, that they can put that where the sun doesn't shine.

DUBOWITZ: In a place where the sun doesn't shine, as they say. Yeah.

(LAUGHTER)

LADERMAN: Yeah. So, there's real opposition within the stadium, and you're getting chants against the regime. You're getting – also the role of women within this as well. They see the fact that soccer stadiums, they're not being allowed into them. There's the Blue Girl protests when that occur. It's based around soccer stadiums, the brutality of the police forces in preventing Iranian women from entering into soccer stadium. So, the thing about soccer stadiums is it's a place where you can gather with large numbers of people, you can chant, and you aren't sort of identified as an individual, and you can really showcase opposition to the regime. And that happened in Poland and it's happening in Iran today. And so, these are really important ways that the regime can be undermined.

And also, when it comes to soccer, it's so important to the nationalist consciousness of Iranians that it's hard for the regime to completely suppress it. And it's no coincidence that many leading figures within the opposition movement are soccer players, like Ali Karimi and others. They have been figureheads of opposition to the regime. So yeah, even if – on the surface there are differences, there are ways in which opposition movements can seize control of these cultural institutions to really put pressure on the regime.

DUBOWITZ: So, I want to ask you both about leadership, because I think your comment about Pahlavi and the Pahlavi dynasty, and certainly it gets to the question of Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah, the figure of Lech Wałęsa in Poland and in Solidarity. And I think one of the things that American policymakers struggle with is they always want to identify who is the opposition leader, and the opposition leader should be in country leading the efforts, because they're always skeptical of opposition leaders on the outside. I mean, I think that's, sort of, a fair characterization of the prevailing assumption in this town.

Let's talk about Poland and Iran. I mean, first Poland. Give us a sense of who is Lech Wałęsa, where does he emerge from? By the way, how does he stay alive throughout the crackdown on Solidarity to emerge as this key historical figure? Maybe Charlie, let's start with you on Lech Wałęsa. And then, Naz, I want to come to you on Reza Pahlavi, and we'll talk a little bit about that, because I always remind my friends here in Washington that Ayatollah Khomeini led the revolution in '79 not from Tehran but from the – the suburbs of Paris. So, he was very successful in leading a revolution from outside the country...

MOINIAN: Outside.

DUBOWITZ: ... and that I think if there was actually an identifiable Iranian opposition leader today inside Iran, they would already be dead or in jail. So, Lech Wałęsa, who is he, Charlie, and how did he stay alive?

LADERMAN: Yeah. When he emerges from the Gdańsk shipyards, and coming in – again, that's something that seems very familiar. In the 1970s, Poland had sunk into this deep economic crisis, there's widespread unrest, and this – sort of – undermines the legitimacy of the regime, the broader system. And Wałęsa helps lead shipyard workers in Gdańsk in going on strike. And initially it's about securing the right to establish an independent trade union, which is where Solidarity comes from. And they get as many as 10 million members, and the regime really feels – they fear for their stability. And as a result, that's when General Jaruzelski – sort of – takes matters into his own hands and replaces the civilian government in Poland with a military junta and declare martial law, and union leaders like Wałęsa are thrown into prison.

So really what we see with the imposition of martial law is a regime – that sort of – they initially are willing to sort of give some semblance that they are reforming, but then they take the time over the next year to 18 months to really, sort of, build up a system of repression. And then they go in and impose martial law, they, sort of, round up thousands and put them into the prisons, and Wałęsa is included. So, it's a severe and brutal crackdown. And Wałęsa is – he has established himself as a prominent figure, so it really puts pressure on the regime. There's a limit to what they can do to him. They try to portray him, as the Iranians do today with opposition leaders, as sort of this puppet of the West and this – sort of being – that he is just a figurehead for Western imperialism. But it doesn't work because Wałęsa has already, sort of, established this really strong hold on the imagination of the people of Poland.

And so Wałęsa is able to sort of – he is in prison for much of this period and then he's under house arrest, but because of his, sort of, hold on the Polish imagination, it's very difficult for the regime to sort of paint him just as this puppet, and really what we see is that there's limits to what he can do. The popularity of – of Solidarity's membership really declines in that period in the early '80s. And so, the regime almost is able to, sort of, underestimate his potential significance. But as we talked about, the role of the intelligence forces, ensuring that Solidarity keeps going, that it's able to communicate with its members, and Wałęsa is able to communicate with those in his wider network, is what, sort of, keeps him in the public eye throughout the 1980s.

DUBOWITZ: So, there's Lech Wałęsa in Poland, there's Reza Pahlavi in the latest round of protests. And so, Naz, let's talk a little bit about Pahlavi.

LADERMAN: Mm-hmm.

DUBOWITZ: I think we both know him and have known him for a number of years. And my sense of him is that over the past number of years, and certainly the past number of months, both his popularity, his prominence, and his influence has only grown. Despite the skepticism, both perhaps in the Iranian diaspora community among certain people, and within the Washington policy community among certain people. He's really emerged as a – as a very influential and potentially unifying voice. Is that a fair characterization?

MOINIAN: Absolutely.

DUBOWITZ: And say a little bit more about the Crown Prince?

MOINIAN: I will and thank you for asking that question. You know, I have to kind of dial back this conversation to a little bit of history so that we can get a sense of why Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi? Why not Ali Daei, Ali Karimi, the two footballers that also are charismatic, also have proven leadership qualities? Why him? So, I'm going to dial it back to a little bit to 2,500 years ago. Where, you know, Iran became this glorious empire that reached from the Balkans all the way to India, and Cyrus the Great emancipated the Jews and allowed for individual liberty and religious liberties and had a whole set of laws that – you know – kind of gave rights, but rights of those times are different than the liberal rights of the Western countries.

A Reagan-Approved Blueprint for Iran

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Featuring Charlie Laderman and Nazee Moinian
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

So, the notion of kingship is revered by the Iranian people because of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, but also because of the Sasanian empire which followed the Achaemenid empire that had its own fabled kings. It had Ardashir and then it had Anushirvan, who was idolized by the shah of Iran, and you know, he always said, "I want to model myself and my leadership, my kingship after two people: Thomas Jefferson and Anushirvan." He had these anecdotes that he had raised with stories of how Anushirvan dispersed justice, and one of the – I'm going to digress a little bit so that I could tell you the story of why the Shah modeled himself after that. He said, "I want to be a just king," and that's what Anushirvan said. And he said, "Anyone who has a grievance against anyone, you can come to my castle, my realm, and just ring the doorbell." And he said the word got so spread out that the next day or in a few days, even the donkeys were ringing the bell at the castle because they had a grievance against their boss.

So again, the notion of kingship is revered. Pahlavi's were the ones that pulled the country from the dark, decrepit Qajar dynasty that had sold off industries and, you know, interests to foreign powers to a modern 20th century Iran where they had railroads and they had different ministries. They had a Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture's task was to delete Arab words from Persian language and substitute it with Persian words. So, there was this real push for nationalism, for creating a kind of a nation whose undergird was the Farsi language. Farsi became this – and the epic poetry of Hafez and Ferdowsi and Saadi. They were – they were the language that the Shah and his ministers really promoted to create a sense of belonging, of different tribes, into the country that's so diverse. It's only 50 percent Persian, and the other 50 percent are Azeris, Balochis, Turks, Arabs.

So why Reza Shah at this point? Why the crown prince? The crown prince is looked upon as the continuity of the glory of Iran, is looked upon as the torch-bearer of what Iran used to be 2,500 years ago, 2,000 years ago, and its traditions and cultures were usurped by the invasion of Islam in 632 and seventh century and became an Islamic country. So, the nationalism that you see on Iran, the protesters that are on the streets are chanting the name of Reza Shah. Why? It's the name of the crown prince, but it's also the name of the father, the grandfather. So, they say, "Reza Shah, *roohat shad,*" it means, "God bless you, Reza Shah."

And also, they're inviting the crown prince back, because those two, and also Mohammad Reza Shah, the late shah, the three – grandfather, father, and son – were the ones that elevated Iran in the eyes of the international community. The shah of Iran would come and, you know, pay state visits in the United States, and Harry Truman would throw him balls at the Waldorf Astoria, Council on Foreign Relations would invite him to speak. He was given an honorary doctorate by Harvard University. He was this figure that understood the nationalism of Iranians and wanted to channel those energies into a modern Iran. But in order to have a modern Iran, he needed secure borders, and oftentimes his appetite for buying military hardware from the American administrations was confused with his being a megalomaniac, very egotistical king who needed glory for himself. He had a whole vision for how to – how to place Iran as part of the community of nations that makes the nations proud but makes Iranians proud.

So that's why. That's why they're chanting the name of crown prince. He had very close ties to his family. He is a fighter pilot, educated in America, and also very close to the Iranians in diaspora. Not often the leaders are there. Sometimes leaders are forged in crisis, and I'm borrowing the name from the book by Nancy Koehn, who talks exactly about that. That leaders don't need to be apparent for them to be efficient. They could be standing on the outside, and then when the moment rises, they can come in and they can lead the nation into a transition, which is, by the way, what he has said.

He said, "I don't want to be your king. You know, you can go to the ballot box. I'll put my name on the ballot box if you want me to. But I want to lead this nation to its old glory, because you're deserving, and I'm willing to give my life for it." Which is – which is the first time I heard him say it actually, Mark, about a month ago on Maria Bartiromo, and I was taken back because that's a big moment. That's a big moment for somebody who's been in exile for such a long time to stand with the Iranians and say, "Here I am, you know, I'm here to lead you and I'm willing to give my life for it." That's why they're chanting his name.

So, you know, as you said, you and I have known the Crown Prince for some time, and I've known him as a friend, and I can't say I was skeptical about his ability to lead, but when you look at someone as a friend you don't see him as a leader. And I have to say, in the past few years he's stepped up to this role beautifully, and I – and I've come around. I have begun to look at him as the leader that he says he is, and I think a lot of people have too. And by the way, he's the only name that's being chanted on the streets in Iran.

DUBOWITZ: So, Charlie, Naz, this has been a great discussion. I want to bring it to a conclusion, maybe just ask you for any final thoughts on this issue?

LADERMAN: Yeah. I mean, it's obviously a very, very challenging situation when you're dealing with such a repressive regime and the challenges of intervening from without. I would just – I always keep in mind Theodore Roosevelt's – I think – classic line that he learned in the Badlands when he was a cowboy, and he says, "Don't draw unless you mean to shoot." And he's talking about this in relation to statements that he'd made with regard to potential intervention for Russian Jews, during the pogroms in the Kishinev and elsewhere in the Tsarist empire. And he basically is making the point that the idea of raising expectations with threats of intervention and then not following through on it can have unintended quite dangerous consequences. We've seen that more recently as well. We saw that in Iraq in 1991, in the aftermath of Saddam's move into Kuwait, when the Kurds and Marsh Arabs were encouraged to rise up and then no intervention was forthcoming.

So, I think it's really important to make sure the rhetoric and actions are aligned, because I think there's dangers not just for the people who obviously are having their expectations raised and then are being crushed, but also dangers for America's – not just credibility, but its interests in the region. The most pro-Western, most pro-American population in the – in one of the most pro-populations in the Middle East, at the moment, is in Iran, and it would be a disaster if their affection for the United States was damaged by any sense that their hopes have been raised.

Now, at the same time I think it's really important, as you pointed out, Mark, to – when you're dealing in negotiations with a regime that's this repressive, that's willing to just crush its population – you need to be very clear that actually, the – for a regime like that, the threat from within is the thing that they're most worried about. In terms of America's strategic interest, putting pressure on that regime is really, really important.

I always return to the English writer Samuel Johnson's line that there's nothing that, sort of, concentrates the mind more than the fear of being hung in the morning. And I think for the leaders of repressive revolutionary regimes – like the Islamic Republic – they wake up every day thinking that they could be hung in the morning by their population. That's a huge leverage that we have over that regime in negotiations, and making sure that that threat is something that they are alive to – both in terms of helping the population and – from that repression – but also making clear that we don't engage in ideological disarmament with a regime that is constantly championing ideological revolutionary slogans against us and our friends. I think that's an important thing to bear in mind as well.

DUBOWITZ: Great. Thank you, Charlie. Naz, any final thoughts?

MOINIAN: No, I agree with what Charlie said. I think that was brilliant. Thank you, Charlie, for bringing that up. Yeah, you know the – Iran has become an enigmatic problem for successive American administrations. And I just want to be able to ask everybody who's an Iran watcher or is creating an Iran strategy in the State Department or the White House, exactly as Charlie said, this is a repressive regime. Don't fall for the myth that the regime puts out. They have an existential angst. They're seeing the phantom axe on top of their head falling down and they know that their days are numbered. So, try to create the posture from the reality. Try to dispel the myths that have surrounded Iran and the Iran-U.S. relations.

One of the myths that – I know you've had my former boss at the Council on Foreign Relations, Ray – on this show – very show talking about the myth of 1953, that CIA and MI6 basically took down the government of a democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddegh. That's not the case, and America should not badger itself over the head with that guilt which Madeleine Albright apologized for. It was in the purview. It was the constitutional right of the Shah to end the power of his prime minister, and the prime minister only had six more months to finish his job. What happened was that he ended it six months earlier.

So don't worry about the myth of 1953. If regime change in Iran right now is a fear of replaying the dynamics of 1953 because we feel the guilt, there should be no guilt. Loy Henderson has written telegrams saying that, "I'm sitting..." – he was the American ambassador during the 1953 showdown – "I'm sitting by my window," to the State Department, to Grady, that Iranians from all walks of life are marching in defense of the monarchy. It's not about what we did. It's about what the Iranians wanted." And he's trying to make that message clear. That message got lost.

Another message that's getting lost is the myth of the Islamic regime being able to reform. They're not capable of reform and they don't want to reform. The doctrine that the Islamic regime is founded upon by Ayatollah Khomeini envisions this regime as a catalyst for other countries around the world, Muslim and non-Muslim, to shackle the yokes of the secularity that has gripped the countries and invite an Islamic caliphate. There is no way that you can hold that line and also want to reform, because reform is the end of this regime.

DUBOWITZ: I think that's a great moment to end on. I think it's also worth reminding our listeners who know this that the so-called president of the Islamic Republic, the so-called reformist president, [Masoud] Pezeshkian, was the one who is fully supportive of the decision by Ali Khamenei to massacre Iranians.

MOINIAN: Yep.

DUBOWITZ: So much for that reformist.

MOINIAN: Yep.

DUBOWITZ: As you said, the myth of '53, it was greatly exaggerated by Kermit Roosevelt [Jr.] who was the CIA agent in Iran at the time, and that it had – bringing down Mosaddegh had massive support from the...

MOINIAN: It did. Grassroots support.

DUBOWITZ: Grassroots support from the bazaaris, from the clerical establishment. In fact, the regime itself, the clerical establishment today, they're not the ones who actually even bring up '53 and Mosaddegh...

MOINIAN: It's not even on their calendar.

DUBOWITZ: Not even on their calendar. And certainly not on their radar. And it's very much a fixation of often leftist academics and...

MOINIAN: To obsess over guilt that we shouldn't have.

DUBOWITZ: ...and obsess over guilt, because we're Americans.

MOINIAN: And by the way, Kermit Roosevelt was not even regarded highly within his own circle. So, you know, every time that he put out a note about the operation of 1953, you know, he was ridiculed within his own circle.

LADERMAN: And I think just as a final thing to point out that's important, from what we're suggesting in our paper is not to subvert the democratic will, or the will of the Iranian population. What we have talked about is empowering the Iranian people against what is an alien, transnational, repressive ideology that's imposed upon them, that is not Iranian but is essentially an alien body in their body politic and empowering them is not about subverting their democratic will.

MOINIAN: And that's exactly what happened in Poland.

DUBOWITZ: And on that note, guys, thank you. Thank you for your great paper and your great contribution.

MOINIAN: Thank you very much. Thank you, Charlie.

LADERMAN: Thank you, Nazee. Pleasure to work with you.

MOINIAN: Same.

DUBOWITZ: Always important to have historical perspectives on contemporary realities. History does not necessarily repeat, but it often echoes and rhymes. So, this kind of historical perspective is always critical, so thank you both.

Nazee, Charlie, thanks so much for both of you joining me today. The paper we discussed argues that America already has a model for confronting ideological dictatorships, one that avoids endless wars while standing firmly with oppressed peoples. Whether Washington is ready to apply that model to Iran is one of the most important foreign policy questions of our time.

I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been The Iran Breakdown. Until next time, when we break it down again.