

FDD Media Call: Previewing Talks with Iran

February 04, 2026

Featuring Richard Goldberg, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Edmund Fitton-Brown

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Joe Dougherty. I'm Senior Director of Communications here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. First of all, an apology from me. I shared I think the wrong link with a few of you and my apologies, thank you for hopping on with the correct link that my colleagues, Ellie and/or Beth have shared with you. Been doing these a long time and that is a first. But it's been kind of an unusual day as we're going to get to in a minute, as I'm sure all of you know as you're covering things, but we are grateful that you've joined us for today. As we preview what at least at 4:03 PM is the on-again Iran talks slated for I believe, Friday in Oman, and Behnam, you can confirm that is the case shortly.

I say on-again because those of you that have not been able to track it too closely, the status of the talks, the status has remained, we're going to say fuzzy today as they've gone back and forth -- if they've been on-again, off-again. Behnam will get to that in a moment. There is a lot to unpack here, so let me get started.

We've got three experts for you here today that will address this issue quite well. Richard Goldberg is an FDD Senior Advisor and former Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction for the White House National Security Council. Rich is actually wrapping up a briefing that he is giving and he'll be joining the call a little bit late today, but he is expected to be on it. Behnam Ben Taleblu is an FDD Senior Fellow and Senior Director of FDD's Iran Program, where he oversees the breadth and depth of FDD's work on Iran in addition to serving as a Senior Fellow specializing in Iranian security and political issues.

And lastly, we have Edmund Fitton-Brown. He's an FDD Senior Fellow focused on the Arabian Peninsula. Edmund joined the UK Foreign Service in 1984 and served in Finland, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and the UAE, finishing his career as British ambassador to Yemen in 2015 through 2017.

Some very quick housekeeping: today's conversation is on the record. We will share a video of today's call as soon as it ends and we'll share the transcript. We're hoping within 24 hours of the call's conclusion, hopefully a little bit sooner. We will have a Q&A at the end of the opening remarks. To ask a question, you can type it into the chat feature. You can also raise your hand and we will call on you and you can ask your question directly. Okay, that concludes that intro. Behnam's going to get us started, followed by Edmund and then Richard, and let's get started right away. Behnam, over to you.

BEN TALEBLU: Thanks, Joe. Greetings, ladies and gentlemen. Great to be with you. I know you're all playing Iran nuclear deal whiplash just as I am, so I'll try to set the scene as briefly as possible, make sure we kind of are reading from the same sheet of music. Just offer a few brief highlights as how the Iranians are probably seeing the situation, making sense of things politically, strategically, and morally for us, and then I'll pivot over to Edmund who can help dig a bit deeper, particularly on the GCC side of things, which is quite important this go round.

I just saw a tweet just as I was heading into this call by Chancellor Merz of Germany, and the tone and tenor of his commentary about escalating pressure on Iran, versus the tone and tenor out of the foreign ministries and royal courts of many of our friends and partners in the GCC, remind me of a different kind of whiplash from 2015 to present, when back then it was our European friends who were softer and quite more interested in mediating and engaging in outreach with the Islamic Republic and the Gulf Cooperation Council states looking to escalate pressure, particularly from the end of Obama's second term to Trump's first term, and now we have quite literally a role reversal where the European Union has designated the IRGC where European foreign ministries and chancellors and premiers and prime ministers are condemning the Islamic Republic's violent crackdown at home and talking about escalating more pressure.

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And the GCC is the one who lives on the front line of the Iranian threat and is now keen to mediate and moderate and limp along basically with an Islamic Republic. So one that is a very important contrast that I think cannot be understated. Edmund will pick apart different GCC members and what they're doing, but suffice to say they're not going to be having kuru fasulye in Turkey. They'll be having shuwa in Oman. So those of you who are foodies will know the big difference there.

To the heart of the matter, Iran nuclear talks, some of you who I've may have spoken to before know exactly how I feel about this, that there is no nuclear deal or no nuclear off-ramp to a catastrophe and a humanitarian crisis that did not have a nuclear start or nuclear trigger.

Not once, not twice, but eight or nine times depending on how you count, whether it's on social media, or IRL in real life, or to the press, or aboard Air Force One, or on radio, or on television, President Trump basically drew multiple red lines for the Islamic Republic of Iran, not over its nuclear issue, not over its ballistic missiles, not over transnational terrorism and not over drones, but because of the violent crackdown from the state against society where right now reported 36,000 to 43,000 have been killed during the three-and-a-half week national uprising in Iran that was co-terminous with a 20 plus day internet blackout in that country. These numbers are staggering, not just for the 47-year history of the Islamic Republic, but for the past century and a half of the state-versus-street competition for power in Iran, and when you overlay the speed of that crackdown against other 20th century massacres, you do home in on comparisons to the Holocaust and 1941, Ukraine, Babi Yar.

So this is unprecedented for Iranian society, the crackdown. In Iran, all eyes are on Trump, all eyes are on the skies. Iranians are a highly nationalistic population. You know that, I know that, but there is more talk of foreign intervention and more support of foreign intervention than I've ever seen in my life, than I've ever seen coming out of either the Iranian diaspora or Iranians inside that country. Now, to fast-forward, why the Islamic Republic is keen on talks, one, obviously it is to deter an attack. What we're seeing from the Islamic Republic right now is a strategy that I call a knife and a handshake. They're threatening that if there is an attack, whether it's limited or big, whether it's from the region or outside the region, whether the starts it or Israel starts it, that the Islamic Republic will respond in a massive way compared to its three missile operations against Israel, which it claimed was "restrained," and that instead it would be a regional war.

I have my doubts as to the ability of the Islamic Republic to pull it off, but the Islamic Republic is weak, but it is nonetheless lethal. It still has significant long-range strike capabilities. It still has the ability to threaten maritime shipping, particularly in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and it has nearly intact, precise, short-range ballistic missiles that can reach all bases in the GCC. At the same time, the Islamic Republic is keen to appear not to have quit the talks, and th far is balancing, again, the threat of a region-wide war versus the opportunity of some kind of nuclear off-ramp that would look like the chemical weapons off-ramp the Russians offered Obama and Syria in 2013. I, for one, think it would be wise for President Trump not to replicate President Obama's red line debacle and not to take the off-ramp as offered by an adversary.

Second, and perhaps this is most important and why I mentioned moral, the Islamic Republic is keen to take the wind out of the wings of not just Iranian protestors, but any kind of domestic dissent at home, and therefore engagement with America, be even just limited to the nuclear issue, is designed to signal to an increasingly dissatisfied and an increasingly brutalized Iranian population who is looking to the West, and in particular America, and especially to Donald Trump for support, it is designed to say that that entity, that person that told you that help was on the way, that told you that he was locked and loaded, well, that person is more interested in talking to us, your oppressors, your suppressors, rather than you whom he allegedly promised support to. So that is designed to make Iran's domestic protest movement disheartened and for future protests render the population afraid and apathetic.

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That's the signal that the Iranians are trying to send without right engagement, and the third reason is the reason that you know perhaps well enough and I'll end here, and that is again, the desire for some kind of foreign-based financial stabilization through sanctions relief that can help to again, even out the highly devalued national currency, the rial, relative to the US dollar. Many of you know the protests began in late December when the rial reached 1.43 million, it had crescendoed to 1.56 million recently, and so the Islamic Republic is interested again in foreign financial stabilization, but the question is they don't have much to offer and what are they willing to charge America for? We can explore these and more in future rounds of conversation, but I want to turn it over to my friend and colleague, Edmund.

FITTON-BROWN: Thanks, Behnam. Can you hear me all right? Good. So like Behnam, I'll try to be reasonably concise. I guess what I'll say, I'll just make a few remarks on Iran and the GCC. What do the Gulf states actually want and what could they do to help to achieve that? And that probably is the best way of framing it before we give you the chance to hear from Rich and ask questions. Various partners, of course, most recently, Jordan, have been conspicuously claiming that they will not be involved in any attack on Iran, that they will not allow their territory to be used to launch an attack on Iran, and you can sort of understand why they would do that, even those that are very skeptical about Iran or even hostile to Iran, certainly the Jordanians have no love for the Iranians or for the Islamic Republic, but the Iranians are capable of doing them some harm if they become completely desperate.

And Behnam makes the point that the Iranian capability is in doubt. It's not clear that Iran can do a huge amount because clearly at the time of the June war last year, they were remarkably unable to defend themselves in the face of the Israeli campaign. So I think we shouldn't assume that the Iranians can wreak the kind of havoc that they claim they can, and of course they do talk a big fight because they try to intimidate people by saying that they can wreak destruction. I think they can do some harm though. It's a narrow waterway between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. The Iranians have previously attacked Saudi oil installations. They probably have some proxy capabilities as well, and therefore, I think if they were sufficiently desperate or sufficiently enraged, they might be able to hurt the Gulf states, the Arabian Peninsula states, and so those countries are obviously keen to disassociate themselves from any military action so that they have plausible deniability. I think that's probably what they're aiming for.

The Saudi defense minister, of course, has just visited Washington DC, and Iran will have been either at the top of the agenda or very close to the top of the agenda. He may have had some other points he needed to make in terms of some interpretation of Saudi messaging in recent months, but certainly they will have talked about Iran. I don't think that he will have been telling the US, "You can't do this." Apart from anything, I think the Saudis understand that they can't tell the US what to do or what not to do, but they may have been for example, explaining that they have to maintain plausible deniability.

There is this interesting dynamic though that we should at least factor in here. Most of the GCC countries hate and fear Iran, but they may be ambivalent about the fall of the Islamic Republic, and that seems strange to us because I think for most of us in the West, we look at the potential fall of the Islamic Republic and we just see a likely improvement in regional affairs. We see the likelihood that whatever comes next will be better and possibly a great deal better, and that frankly, the Islamic Republic has done as much harm to Western interests as it has been able to do and will continue to do so for as long as it exists. So the reason it looks different from the Arabian Peninsula is that it's that proximity, and also there's kind of a sclerosis and conservatism about some of the GCC countries.

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They're nervous about change. They get used to whatever they have to deal with in their immediate environment and they've got used to dealing with the Islamic Republic. It's not easy and it often seems hostile, but from their point of view, it is a known quantity, and so there will be some people in the peninsula who say maybe a resurgent Persia is actually more worrying than a weakened and chastened Islamic Republic, and so that may be informing some of the reactions, but that said, they do adapt. They are adaptive. They don't tend to force change in their environment, but when change happens in their environment, they will adapt to it, and I think that if the United States does strike Iran, and particularly if that leads to a regime change in Iran, then I'm pretty sure that there won't be any complaints afterwards from the GCC countries. They'll just get on with trying to figure out how to work with their new neighbor.

That said, there are some exceptions to this, and I want to highlight Turkey, Qatar, and Oman in this. So Turkey obviously is not Arabian Peninsula, but Turkey is a potential mediator, and the Turks are very much against any kind of attempt at regime change in Iran. Why is that? Turkey is a rival of Iran, but of course it sees a weakened Iran a bit like what I was saying earlier, as something that it can relatively easily deal with and factor into its calculations. In many ways, it gives Turkey more strength and more importance that the Islamic Republic is dysfunctional and destructive, and that people therefore often look to Turkey to be more reasonable or to be some form of reassurance, and unfortunately, I think in the case of President Erdoğan, I think he is very hostile to Western values in spite of being a NATO ally.

A lot of what Turkey does these days seems to be aimed at projecting an Islamist message and is fundamentally hostile to our values, and I don't believe he has any ideological objection to the Islamic Republic continuing, and he would worry about a resurgent post-Islamic Republic Iran and what challenges that might present, and of course, the ways in which it might reinforce and strengthen the West and Israel. In the case of Qatar, we don't need to say too much about that because it's not directly involved in this particular dispute, although of course Qatar almost certainly has been advocating as loudly as it can and as persuasively as it can against any attack on Iran. The Qataris are very comfortable with the way things are. They have close relations with the Iranian government, and of course they have the shared hydrocarbon resource, which they're happy with the way that they manage that. And of course, they share Turkey's views on promoting Islam and weakening Israel especially, but also the West if they can.

Oman is worth mentioning specifically, partly because of course it was supposed to be, may be, where these talks are going to be held tomorrow if they go ahead, as perhaps now looks more likely than not. And the Omanis are interesting for a number of reasons, but what the Omanis have managed to do is to present themselves as the Iran whisperers. They did this with John Kerry to great effect. He had an almost touching belief in their ability to deliver Iran, and of course, they were hugely important in the JCPOA.

And they also have served as intermediaries before for the United States with the Houthis when that rather bog ceasefire was reached last May, with the Omani foreign minister announcing it by saying that there would be no further attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. He said that in May. It was manifestly untrue. It was also manifestly illogical, because of course the Houthis started attacking shipping in the Red Sea long before the Americans became involved in trying to stop them. And their reason for doing it, or their claimed reason for doing it, was all about solidarity with the Palestinians, and of course, we didn't have any kind of ceasefire between Israel and Gaza back in May.

So Oman is thoroughly dishonest in this. It doesn't have the aggressive ideological baggage of Qatar, it doesn't have Al Jazeera, but it does benefit a great deal from the current status quo. It's quietly hostile to Saudi interests and has happily supported the Houthis against the Saudis, something which the Saudis have found very difficult to cope with, but they haven't been able to do anything much about it.

The Omanis did not want to see the Houthis battered by the United States, or indeed by Israel, and they would not want to lose their Iran whisperer status to a change of regime in Tehran. They're also a lot more comfortable with the horrors of the Islamic Republic than they should be, given their own relatively gentle domestic record.

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So I look at talks in Oman with a heavy heart, because I know that the Omanis do everything they can to persuade the United States just to kick the can down the road indefinitely and to allow Iranian procrastination to win the day, although I don't think that the US is up for having its intelligence insulted in that way this time, but who knows? We will see.

It's worth mentioning that the Omanis host a very large Houthi office in Muscat. It started off as a small liaison office which would allow the Houthis to engage in peace talks. As is often the way with these things, it has grown exponentially. It is now an espionage hub, a procurement hub, a smuggling coordination hub, and it is something that the West should have paid attention to much sooner. I've been arguing for a long time that we should be telling the Omanis, "We quite like you, but you are doing some bad stuff and you need to stop." And that Houthi office in Muscat should be pared back to its bare essentials, if not closed altogether, and I'll pause there.

DOUGHERTY: Edmund and Benham, thank you very much for your opening remarks. We did have a few journalists arrive on the call a few minutes late, so I just wanted to let you know that we are recording the conversation here. It is on the record. Shortly after the call concludes today, I will share with you the link to the full call so you can catch up on the opening comments from Benham, and if you missed any from Edmund as well, you can do that. If you have any questions, you can submit them, and we do have a couple already in. You can submit them through the chat feature, or you can use the raised hand feature and ask the question directly. Richard Goldberg is slated to join us. He's giving a briefing right now. He's slated to join us a little bit later, so we will incorporate him into the conversation as soon as he arrives.

But I think we can get started with the Q&A, and let me get started with Tom Watkins of The National. He prefaces his question with a quote from Sec State Rubio today. Rubio says, "I think in order for talks to actually lead to something meaningful, they will have to include certain things, and that includes the range of their ballistic missiles. That includes their sponsorship of terrorist organizations across the region. That includes the nuclear program, and that includes the treatment of their own people." So Tom's question is, to the panel here, "Do any of the guests think Iran would ever agree to any of those things beyond nuclear? If not, do you think Rubio's message is essentially a way of forcing the Iranians away from the table on issues that are non-starters for them, thereby giving cover for the US to pull out of planned talks and launch strikes?" Benham, do you mind getting started with that one?

BEN TALEBLU: Yeah. The first thing I would say is that what the Trump administration is doing is acting on where it believes the Iran threat lies, based on their outlining of that threat in NSPM-2 from way back in February 2025. Nuclear, missile, regional, transnational terrorism, those were all mentioned explicitly in that guiding strategy document. So I'm not shocked that only a year into the administration, the administration is looking to act on where it believes the stated threat from the Islamic Republic comes from.

But let me again press this one point before we get into, is this deal desperation from the Trump administration or is this strategic deception from the Trump administration, which is, even if you have all of those issues, I do not believe still, morally, politically or strategically, that that gives America sufficient cover to press away from the region, to remove the military hardware away from the neck of the Islamic Republic and to not act on the red line that it drew, which was again, for humanitarian and domestic reasons pertaining to the most unprecedented crackdown from the state against the street in the 47-year history of the Islamic Republic. I want to stress again how unprecedented the scale of that crackdown is and how fundamentally there is no nuclear off-ramp for it.

So, based on what is being reported about the talks in Oman now, the Iranians have changed location from Turkey to Oman, and allegedly, allegedly, the Iranians have changed the scope. There is no US confirmation of that which Secretary Rubio wanted, that which previously Special Envoy Witkoff talked about needing to be in the negotiations, isn't there. The US still has been relatively silent on this matter. One wonders if there'll be a parallel track or a secondary track or an overt versus a covert track, but nonetheless, these are options the US has.

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I for one think that no deal at the moment is really worth the paper it's written on, but strategically it is possible to get the Islamic Republic to do something that they have always said they won't do. Sometimes it's going to take fits and starts of violence. Sometimes it's going to have to take sustained violence. For nearly eight years, the Islamic Republic at its inception, when it was at the height of its ideational zeal and purity as a fundamentalist theocracy in the heartland of the Muslim Middle East, said, "War, war, war until victory." That was one of the slogans of the longest conventional war in the 20th century, which was the Iran-Iraq war. Despite war, war, war until victory, battlefield defeats, a changing economic situation, social pressure, great power pressure, and of course, accidents that were read in Tehran as intentional targeting of civilians by the West, forced Ayatollah Khomeini to drink from the poisoned chalice.

Now, I actually think, despite being less charismatic and less organizationally or bureaucratically competent than his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei now, the current Supreme Leader, so-called Supreme Leader, is unlikely in the short term to drink from the poisoned chalice, because I think he senses hesitancy pertaining to the use of force in the West, and that's why what Khamenei's strategy is to do right now, is to gamble. It's to double down. It's to triple down. Neither America nor Iran are keen to show that they're walking away from the table, but neither America nor Iran are keen to show that they're afraid of the violence that could come from walking away from the table.

So if past is prologue, you can get Iran to agree to something it said it would never negotiate over. One evidence, the Iran-Iraq war. Another piece of evidence, uranium enrichment. For many years, Iran talked about never restricting any kind of uranium enrichment. But then we had the JCPOA, where certain kinds of enrichment were restricted at certain times for certain purity levels at certain facilities. So I would say never say never with the Islamic Republic. It is costly, but the problem is that right now, I think despite being weak, the Islamic Republic is still lethal. And despite having gone through the wringer in 2025 against Israel, against America and against its own strategic shortcomings, whether that's economic, environmental or social, the Islamic Republic is still lethal, and it is calling the commander-in-chief's bluff.

DOUGHERTY: Edmund, anything to add there?

FITTON-BROWN: I mean, I agree with everything Benham said. I think the only thing that I want to add to that is the way I see this, the Iranians really want to generate talks, which will simply delay things. That's what they would like to do, because that's their modus operandi. It's very difficult to see them conceding enough in talks tomorrow for the US credibly to be able to claim that it's made a breakthrough. And this is where I think that probably military conflict is more likely than not, and that is because I don't think that the US can walk away without having extracted major concessions from Iran without a significant loss, reputational hit to the president.

But equally, because the Islamic Republic is weak in the way that Benham was describing, weaker now than it ever has been, they also cannot afford the reputational hit of making major concessions up front, because if they do that, people are going to say, "What was it all for? All the money you wasted, all of that stuff about the proxies, all of the resistance narrative, and you can't provide with heating or lighting or water supplies? And then when the Americans shake their fist at you, you fall on your knees and give them half of the things you said you'd never give."

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Edmund. We'll move on to the next question, which is, "Does President Trump have a plan for regime change? What will emerge from potential strikes? Would a failed state chaos be desirable for Iranians, the Gulf States, Washington, and Israel?"

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BEN TALEBLU: I'd love to know who asked that question, because I'm also curious about these same exact things myself. In Trump term one, Trump term two, we always read, we played this game of Kremlinology. Who's up, who's down? Is the Trump administration's stated goal actually its preferred end state, and what does its preferred end state look like in practice? Some of you may remember, I think about a few weeks ago now in an interview, I think, where President Trump was somewhere at a factory or on a farm, I forget where. He was asked precisely about this end game, and he alluded to his end game being "to win," and then he said, "I like winning."

Thus far, whether or not we debate the utility of diplomacy or the utility of military force, it is unclear what that larger political end goal is for the Trump administration. If they have a theory of the case for regime change, they have kept it to themselves. If they have a theory of behavior change, you might be able to infer it by taking a very kind of Jeffersonian approach to the text of everything that President Trump has said in the moment, and more importantly, in the printed documents like NSPM-2 that constitute US policy towards Iran.

But I want to hone in on one specific thing the journalist just said, because inherent in that question is a fundamental assumption that many US partners in the region share, particularly many GCC countries. And I want to test out and challenge that assumption here for a second, which is that many GCC countries today are actually at the front lines, as Edmund was saying, of this mediation effort, of this back channel effort. It's not just Oman, but Oman is really key among them. The thinking there is that stasis, despite an Islamic Republic that is odious, despite an Islamic Republic that has had drama with many of these GCC countries before, stasis could equal stability. That's an assumption, but I have to ask you to fundamentally test that assumption, because I believe we have reached the point in time where the quest for stasis outweighs the cost of potential change.

Rightly so, the GCC countries fear conflict, but there has been conflict in the region. Gulf oil has been impeded. Oil installations have been struck. Khamenei, the country's supreme leader, just reiterated what many political elites and military elites in his country said, which is that if they were attacked, there would be a regional war. I believe we have been going through a multifront, multicycle round of regional war since the Iran-backed terrorist attack of Hamas on October 7 against Israelis. We have been witnessing a regional war. We have been witnessing a regional war that led the Iranians to abandon the grayzone and covert and asymmetric elements of its security strategy and move out into open, outright kinetic confrontation.

If the fear, again, is of refugees... some of you may remember there was a story in the press, I think about two weeks ago, of Erdogan trying to position parts of Eastern Turkey, hedging and assuming that there would be refugee flows coming from Iran because even on a good day, there's a heavy amount of Iranians going through the land border into Van in Eastern Turkey and then trying to declare refugee status, working with UNHCR on the way there. The assumption that a strike on the Islamic Republic would beget a refugee crisis in the region omits the fact that the Islamic Republic being at the helm of its power has caused a massive refugee crisis in the region by assisting the Assad regime in Syria, by fostering the millions and millions of Syrians having fled, and then having a negative impact on European domestic politics, which has an adverse impact on American security.

The assumption here that stasis equal stability is not only not begotten by these measures that I just laid out, but hypothetically, let's say you just put your nuclear hat on and these end up just being nuclear talks, and forgive me for going long here. We already have a situation where the Islamic Republic is in power, but we have 400-plus kilograms of undeclared, missing, highly-enriched uranium. So by any measure that you cut it, we are past that equilibrium of stasis equal stability, of stasis equal security.

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FITTON-BROWN: Oh. I mean, really just a masterclass there, Benham. I don't have much to add to that, but I do have a great deal of confidence that if the Islamic Republic falls, that what will follow will eventually be better, and that's partly based on the nature of the protests that we observed and the fact that it rallied around a constructive vision for the future of Iran. So in my view, stasis does not mean stability.

DOUGHERTY: If I could take the prerogative as the moderator, the red lines that the president has laid down, I guess. And what are your thoughts there? I think Behnam, you touched on it in the opening remarks, but I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a little bit.

BEN TALEBLU: Yeah, I think it was absolutely unprecedented. I personally believe, and we can debate this, but that there was a forcing function in President Trump saying what he said first on Truth Social, then on radio, then on TV, then aboard Air Force One, then to the press, and then on Truth Social, and then again into the press. Multiple times in January, by the way. I believe there was a forcing function to that. And the forcing function wasn't just what he saw or heard from the street starting on December 28, 2025, but it actually was the perceived political successes that he had in term one.

If you remember on this supporting Iranian protestor discourse and on this max pressure discourse in term one, President Trump broke two taboos or he slaughtered two sacred cows, whatever analogy you prefer, in term one with his Iran policy. And there's no doubt, politically speaking, both term one and term two, President Trump has been oriented and animated by drawing a sharp contrast with his Democratic successor, particularly when it comes to Iran, Middle East issues, security issues, foreign policy, what have you.

In term one, no doubt, once you had massive nationwide protests beginning in December 2017, looking and feeling fundamentally different like 2009 and 1999 and 1994 and 1991, looking very different than the reform school of protests that we had seen, President Trump actually raced to touch that. So in so doing, he actually slaughtered the first sacred cow of foreign political support if only rhetorical would be a kiss of death.

Second, he reinstated or issued maximum pressure sanctions. And in so doing, tested and fleshed out the thesis and then disproved it, that if you put significant foreign pressure on a country that is anti-American in government and pro-American in society, that you would risk losing that pro-American elements and that you would force the national divorce that Iran has because of the anti-American government and because of the pro-American population, you would force them to come together and you would create a rally around the flag effect. Yet we never saw in all of the anti-regime protests throughout Trump term one this sandwiching effect. And yet we never saw a single protest against President Trump or against maximum pressure sanctions, nor a single economic slogan chanted in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020.

So I think bolstered by the political success that his rhetoric and his economic approach had in term one, I think President Trump leaned in in term two. He saw the protests, he had a playbook, he leaned in. I think the costs of leaning out now are great. Morally, because it risks putting America back in the world it was in 1956 Hungary and 1991 Iraq, where you encourage protests with no plan. That really would be an own goal of strategic proportions.

Two, strategically for US credibility, particularly in an era of great power competition, after the Obama red line of 2013, you had Russia invade Crimea in 2014. After the botched withdrawal of Afghanistan in 2021, you had the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2022. Whether we like it or not, weakness is contagious, particularly when you are playing against America's great power, nuclear armed adversaries like Russia, like China, which are keen to prey on the image of our irresolution. So again, there will be a strategic credibility gap.

And then politically for the president, it'll put him precisely right where he doesn't want to be, which is back in bed with President Obama rather than drawing a sharp contrast on Iran policy with President Obama, and not even beginning to peel back the layers of losing the most pro-American population in the heartland of the Middle East.

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So again, the president, I think, had a track record that led him to lean in. The question is, did he believe the infrastructure, the defense architecture that's in the region now, did he believe that could get there in time? And does he have a larger plan? If past is prologue, he actually might seem to have more of a denial and deception plan than we may believe, particularly if 2025 is any indication, but who knows where this thing could go?

DOUGHERTY: That's a great way to finish that, that is for sure. We do have a few more questions in the queue here. Benny Avni, we're going to get to you in just a moment as well as you, Laura. Thank you for your submission. Aamer Madhani, over to you from AP.

AAMER MADHANI: Sorry, have to unmute myself. Thank you. Really appreciate all three of you. If I could ask you, you both have made arguments of why now, but there's also an argument that limited strikes do nothing to help the protestors at this point. There's arguably, Trump is also facing a bandwidth issue between Venezuela, his trade wars, Gaza, Russia-Ukraine, Greenland, his interest in Cuba. And if you could look more broadly, if he leans in on Iran, does he also have to lean out on some of these other foreign policy ambitions?

BEN TALEBLU: I'd be happy to answer that, but I don't want to monopolize. Edmund if you want to start and then I can fill in some details.

FITTON-BROWN: Let me start, Behnam, and I'll be very brief in response to that. It's a fair point because it's true that the administration is biting off an awful lot at the moment. It's fighting multiple campaigns. You look at the Board of Peace and the fact that it's very ambitious for a future role. So I understand the point that's being made. But I think there's an important prioritization point here is where you think that you can actually make a decisive difference and a positive difference. And I would contend that this is one where you can actually make both.

You're right that we're not at the zenith of the protests anymore. There will have been reasons why the US didn't act at the time when the regime was absolutely on the ropes with hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets. But nevertheless, there is the strong imperative to act because you still have simmering unrest in localized areas, and you also have a large number of people whose lives are at risk if the Islamic Republic is able to delay and reenter some period of negotiations and discussions.

In my view, the Islamic Republic is very weak for a number of reasons, but that was very clear during the protests. It was also clear that the US involvement was actually motivating people to come out. And the , of course, is capable of discerning which targets within the Islamic Republic are the high value targets that would paralyze the ability of the regime to clamp down.

So in my view, it can be done. And in my view, if it were done successfully, it would not lead to a failed state. It would likely lead to a much improved Iran. So I think that may well be the calculation that is being made in DC.

But you're right, there's a bandwidth issue here. There are a lot of mediators engaged in multiple fronts, and those mediators are hearing from their own trusted interlocutors, whether it's Qatar or Turkey or others, that this is a bad idea. So this will be leading to some quite lively conversations, I think, in the Trump inner circle.

BEN TALEBLU: Yeah, just a few brief footnotes, Aamer. Thank you, Edmund. And our friend and colleague, Rich, is also on the line, so I'll try to keep it brief so he can pivot to his remarks and then tackle any remaining questions just to be respectful of your time.

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But Aamer, I agree in principle with what you're saying on both fronts, that be it limited time, limited resources, limited assets, governance is the art of prioritizing. We have to know what President Trump's priorities are. I think the tiff with Greenland, despite whatever you want to say about ballistic missile defense, and I'm with you there 100%, is a tiff of choice. I think Cuba, not now, don't pick that scab. I think if you're interested in learning how to do more with less on Venezuela, we actually just had a great piece today about how you can do less on the military side and more on the economic and tech side by our Center for Economic and Financial Power. I think that Joe can help forward to you there.

But there's no doubt right now that as forces flow into the CENTCOM area responsibilities, the Islamic Republic is going to have to believe that America is serious here and that America is credible here. Otherwise, I think if we withdraw these forces and reposition elsewhere, that Islamic Republic, which was weak but lethal will grow to become stable and then potentially even strong and increasingly more lethal. Consider this the regime's diplomatic gambit to create political space to build back better.

And I think certainly there is a strategic argument to be made here that in an era of great power competition in both the NDS and NSS where President Trump is talking about China and talking about Russia and talking about the need for peace and prosperity and stability in the region, there's no way out but through other than flipping the script on the Ayatollahs. Otherwise, we're going to get stuck back into conflict after conflict after conflict and continue to kick the can down the road and have to engage in a conflict at a time that's least propitious for us.

So here at least, we have some of the moral, political, strategic, and legal stars aligning. And I think to not see that this is about the right moment at the right time, not the right issue at the right time would be a mistake.

DOUGHERTY: Benny and Laura, if I can ask you to be patient for a couple minutes, I'm going to ask Richard to share some of his opening remarks that I know he's worked on. And then we will get straight into the questions from Benny and then Laura and then any others after that. Thank you for your patience. Rich, over to you.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, thanks. Apologize for hopping on a little late. And I don't want to rehash anything you've already heard from my colleagues, so I'll be as brief as possible with just a couple of points.

To state the obvious, the president's red line was obliterated. It remains obliterated. Whether there's a talk that's held in Oman or in Istanbul or anywhere else, or they cover nuclear or ballistic missiles or terrorism or nothing, the Supreme Leader already obliterated the president's red line and tens of thousands of people were murdered, secret executions continue, et cetera. That is a reality.

And for a president who prides himself on not behaving like two predecessors, Barack Obama and Joe Biden, he has in front of him paths forward that could lead to an Obama-Biden reality where you use the Russians, the Omanis, the Qataris for off-ramps to avoid military action and instead have some sort of pretend negotiated settlement that doesn't actually lead to anything.

He criticized, of course, back in 2013, and part of his 2016 speech to the RNC was criticizing Barack Obama for the deal cut through the Russians to avoid having to enforce his red line in Syria. So that is a reality in front of him. It's going to have to be a consequence for the violation of the president's red line.

And number two, the president also has ridiculed both the JCPOA in 2015, negotiated by President Obama and his team, and then also the policies of the Biden administration trying to resurrect the JCPOA. And I would note that the entire policy put forward from day one, in fact, pre-day one during the transition when President Biden in CNN had an op-ed about what his Iran policy would look like, he said that they were going to try to restore the JCPOA, have some sort of a nuclear agreement in place and go immediately to a new JCPOA, JCPOA 2.0, more for more, where they would look at a different construct on missiles and regional concerns.

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That was the construct. Many of us criticized that, thought that was a terrible approach. That is today actually the Iranian position, if you actually read what they're saying, that they want to start with nuclear and then perhaps talk about other issues like missiles and regional activities. So that was the Biden construct that the Iranians actually rejected at the time because they wanted to race forward on the nuclear side. Those races forward have been obliterated by B2 bombers, and so now what they are left with is negotiating off of the Biden framework of saying, "No, let's talk about nuclear first," which by the way, a lot of it's already been destroyed, "and then we'll talk about something about missiles and regional activities." The Trump administration will be smart not to pursue the exact policy framework of the predecessor they criticize.

The last thing I will say is the president did the world a service last year by joining at the end of the 12-day war to take out the number one piece of extortion, the number one apparatus of extortion that the regime presents to the United States and to the rest of the world that allows them to conduct so much of their illicit activities under that cover of extortion. It had deterred us, and so many presidents deterred by their own fear of escalation for so many years that it allowed this regime to get away with murder quite literally.

And what was that? That was the nuclear program, the threat of going to 90% enriched uranium, the threat of going across the nuclear threshold and becoming a nuclear power state. That paralyzed a lot of the world. That piece of the extortion threat, while yes, reconstitution concerns, breakout concerns, crash program concerns, Pickaxe mountain, all legitimate concerns, is not actually what it was one year ago. Okay? That threat is not there. They know that in Tehran, the regime knows that.

What is their primary extortion threat today, that is now driving all of this conversation about fear of escalation, fear of a conflict, et cetera, what the Iranians will do to retaliate? It's their missile program. That means that from a US national interest, knowing that the Iranians are continuing to build an ICBM program to hit the continental United States one day, that this missile program that continues to be used as a weapon of fear and extortion by the regime is one of our top national security interests to degrade or destroy. Already was before people came to the streets and certainly is today as we see what they're doing to wield this extortion threat again.

And I think if the president sees that for what it is and understands that reducing the external threats of the regime weaken the regime internally as well, then the target set is pretty obvious from the outset, mitigate potential retaliatory capabilities of the regime, further take away their extortion capability of their neighbors and the West. And in so doing so, weaken this regime to a point where, combined with other aspects of either military targeting, cyber operations, or economic pressure, allows one day for those millions of people to come back out into the streets and this time take back their country.

Thanks.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Rich. And Laura Rozen's question, which we'll get to in a moment, I think addresses some of those things. We'll be able to flesh that out. But going in order, Benny Avni, over to you. You've had your hand up. Thanks for your patience.

BENNY AVNI: Okay. Can you hear me?

DOUGHERTY: There you go.

BENNY AVNI: Yeah.

DOUGHERTY: Yes, we can.

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BENNY AVNI: Okay, so Witkoff was in Israel yesterday, I think, on the eve of traveling to, at that time, everybody thought he was going to Turkey. It turns out he's going to Oman now. And from what I understand, he met with the military echelon and of course Netanyahu and all those. But the impression in Israel from people I talked to was that it was a very good meeting and that Witkoff really took into account with the Israeli concern, which as Rich was saying, mostly is about the missiles.

What do you think would be the Israeli participation in this round, if there is a round, militarily? Because from what I understand from Israel is that they have a very well-detailed plan of what to do with the missiles.

GOLDBERG: I'm happy to jump in. Obviously, a couple of things. Number one, top level, there's no planet on which the decision-making by the president right now is not fully coordinated with Israel. The intelligence flow, the decision making, the capabilities that the Israelis bring, whether it's cyber, kinetic, Israel is another carrier strike group that we have in the region that we just don't count on our order of battle. And of course, the retaliation that could target Israel as part of this and the defense of Israel that will need to be coordinated as well, all of that means this will be in tight coordination.

Add on to the fact on the missile program itself, Benny, is you're asking about we're not in a vacuum here. Before these protests kicked off, Prime Minister Netanyahu was at Mar-a-Lago speaking with the president and they emerged and talked to the press, and the president said, basically in these words, "In 2026, there will be an attack that he approves by Israel against the missile program of Iran." Now we're in a different spot. Since then, red lines obliterated, force posture obviously restored in the region, a lot of option sets for the president, but if the threat and the coordination on the Iranian missile program was already understood and building on January 1st, it would stand to reason it's still continuing to build here on February 4th. But how the president and the prime minister want to coordinate or synchronize or do certain things is out of our ability to understand, but we certainly would want to have that on the table for additional assets, capabilities and coordination.

DOUGHERTY: Question from-

BEN TALEBLU: Just a quick note to that.

DOUGHERTY: Yeah, Behnam, go ahead.

BEN TALEBLU: Benny, your question links with what Aamer was saying, because Aamer, you were talking about the Western hemisphere. There's no Israel in the Western hemisphere, so when you're talking about resources, assets, balancing priorities, Trump can pursue a certain type of mission - for every kind of use of force, there's ways, means, and ends - and then Israel can pursue a certain type of mission. There might be a division of labor, a differentiation of target sets, different strategies there, but I think it's one worth thinking through. What does Israel bring to the table when it comes to the use of force against the Islamic Republic, both against what's left of the nuclear as well as, again, the remaining pillar of Iranian deterrence, which is its missile program and long range strike capability? And then how do you meaningfully act on the terms by both Prime Minister Netanyahu, and then much more recently and much more forcefully, President Trump to claim to stand with dissenting and protesting Iranians?

So all of that together actually brings us to the current juncture.

DOUGHERTY: Gentlemen, thank you. Laura asks, this is for Behnam, but we'll open it up to the panel as well. "Related, but if you are the Pentagon, aren't you wary of telling POTUS that hitting X, Y, Z is going to be a sure thing to achieving a better situation on the ground? Governance?"

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BEN TALEBLU: I actually think it was NBC, I believe, that broke this a few weeks ago when it looked like President Trump was "locked and loaded," that the president was looking for something decisive but wasn't reassured of the political implications of the aftermath of that decisive operation. I think if there's really anyone who's thinking through ways, means and ends here, it actually is the president. We may have outsized questions as to how does the president choose to nest military force into a larger political strategy against the Islamic Republic? We may have questions about it, we may disagree with it, but I think certainly, I think the president here is looking for a win. And certainly, I think the president is cautious, but if I had to describe the logic behind his use of force, I'm going to reach for The Prince by Machiavelli when they talk about public violence needing to satisfy and stupify. Those are almost direct quotes. When you look at the Venezuela operation, when you look at the strike against Soleimani, when you look at Operation Midnight Hammer, it fills that void.

Now, if Trump goes beyond a certain kind of targeting mission in Iran, that question you asked about governance gets harder and harder and harder, and then that presupposes that he does or doesn't have any view or any interest in regime change. I, for one, believe there is no Venezuela option with Iran, but when we're looking at military options and the political ends they could serve, option one is just bring the assets in theater and keep them there, and that's just military containment. Option two is symbolic strikes, that's parity. You said you would strike, so you would strike to achieve parity. Option three, deterrence by punishment. You promised the Iranians that you would hold those who engage in the crackdown responsible. Well, you just hit the sites that are affiliated with the crackdown and then you back off.

Option four is defanging. Some people talk about this in Israel as resuming the 12-day war, but to go after long-range strike, go after the strategic threats. This is important, and like Rich said, this is almost guaranteed to be coming anyway, but it really raises the X factor of how does this help the average Iranian protestor? Then you can go up a little bit further. Decapitation, is this going to be a Venezuela type of situation? I, for one, again, believe that those deals haven't been made between Iranian elites and American elites, and that the Iranian population didn't come out and protest and lose this many lives for just musical chairs at the top, and that would put Washington in an even more precarious situation. And then finally, it is to think about military force as paving the pathway for regime change. I'm thinking here's something like the Milošević analogy.

There is no clarity as to which one of these military options and political ends the president has chosen or is comfortable with, or to the degree that which he might be responsive to external stimuli and go for one and then change based on battlefield conditions. So I think these are all things that not just the Pentagon is telling him, but the political folks around him are telling him, but that also I think he's quite cognizant of. because I think he is looking for a political win and he's looking how to nest the use of force into that political win, and right there, he has both allies and adversaries guessing, and Rich and Edmund can shed more light on this, but this is just my two cents on it.

DOUGHERTY: And a follow-up question then related to that. "If the administration can get real concessions from a deal, which may not be possible, that might be hard to trade for the uncertainty of a major military intervention."

BEN TALEBLU: I'd have to ask what do you mean by concessions? You might remember that in 2015, FDD was very pro having regional in particular, the terrorism issue nested into talks, because A, the axis of resistance was at its height, B, the theory of military force was not tested against the axis, and C, it was politically not feasible, both Israel post-2014 Gaza War and also American domestic politics with the Obama administration with his last year in the JCPOA being a legacy. So it made sense to us, how best can you deal with the terrorism issue, nested into negotiations.

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Now, we're talking about the exact opposite. So if the Islamic Republic at best, when the military tool has been used considerably by Israel and less so by America against the axis of resistance, to me, it makes no sense to nest in, again, the terrorism issue or any other kind of extraneous issue and think we can get a concession on it. Because at most, what the Islamic Republic can offer in the very, very short term on a lot of these things, at most, what they can offer is a political promise, and that's where we get into very dicey territory in terms of trading away what the Islamic Republic may want from us in exchange for a political promise.

It's actually unclear what the Islamic Republic is asking Witkoff, is asking Kushner, is asking Trump. Is it sanctions relief? Is it just don't strike? Is it a pause? Is it to hold Israel back? What is it? Depending on what it is, we can measure the value of the trade-off. But I, for one, again think at this point in time, there is no trade-off to be had. And if your priority, again, is nuclear non-proliferation, President Trump, nor Witkoff, nor Kushner, nor Secretary Rubio have mentioned the four-letter acronym that has bedeviled so much of Richard's career, which is IAEA. If you are interested in the nuclear issue, you need to get the IAEA back in there, and I, for one, think the president can charge this mission to the E3.

As America is between max pressure and military force on Iran right now, if you're interested in nuclear non-proliferation, farm that mission out to the E3. Why make life harder for you? Aamer again was talking about limited time, limited capital, limited interest. If our goal is right now, HEU extraction and nuclear monitoring and verification, make that the E3 goal. Eyes on the prize right now, the costs and the stakes are too high.

DOUGHERTY: Rich, anything to add there?

GOLDBERG: No, there's nothing that's real, other than destruction, dismantlement from infrastructure's perspective and capabilities. So on the nuclear side, you'd have to have full declaration of all past activities, full verification of all of that, and then destruction of all remaining infrastructure and materials. You'd have to be shown where the weaponization activity went, meet the scientists, all of this stuff. Chain of custody of material that's gone missing. Where is that material today? The type of IAEA investigations that the Iranians have issued for several years now.

On the missile program, you need a full declaration of every single missile they have, where they are, and then verified destruction of all those missiles. Good luck. And then on the terrorism side, you would... Again, how to verify that they have halted all support to every terror proxy of theirs, no money, no arms, no weapons, verifiably. You would essentially be asking the Islamic Republic of Iran, which entire thesis is to export the Islamic Revolution, to cease the export of their product, which would be antithetical to the entire purpose of the regime.

One thing I will note though, which I think is historic and should be applauded, even while there is great angst over the idea of talks amid the slaughter of the civilian population, this is the first time today we've ever heard a Secretary of State or a senior American official actually link human rights or a transition to democracy, however you want to interpret Secretary Rubio's comments, treatment of the people into a negotiation with the regime, into a demand. 12 points from Pompeo didn't have it. That was always a weakness. That's historic. Are we asking for the release of every political prisoner in Iran? Something else? So this will be really interesting.

DOUGHERTY: Excellent. Thanks, Rich and Behnam. I think this will wrap up the call. Thank all of you for being on the call. I know it's been a very by day and there are a lot of places where you can be. I am going to give each of our experts here 30 seconds to wrap up their thoughts, but quick admin stuff. We will be sharing the link to this video as soon as this call is over or shortly thereafter. Tomorrow, I will share with you the transcript of the call. We'll get that printed out and covering things up, including my uhs and ums. Get that to you ASAP tomorrow. You can also find all of the research from Edmund, from Behnam, from Rich at our website at www.fdd.org.

Let wrap up with some final thoughts. We'll begin with Edmund, then we'll go to Behnam and conclude with Rich. Edmund?



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FITTON-BROWN: Okay, thanks, Joe, and thanks all. I think really, just a couple of points, that when Rich was setting out what it would actually require to satisfy what Marco Rubio is asking for, you can see that that is not something that the Iranians can offer. And so essentially, my two points would be, first of all, beware of intermediaries because the intermediaries are just playing the Iranian game of trying to kick the can down the road. And the second point is that unfortunately, I think there has to be a winner and a loser in this particular one. If the United States walks away leaving the Islamic Republic with time to regroup, re-arm, and continue to kill people who were involved in the demonstrations, then the US will be seen and loudly said to be the loser in this. So for the US reputation, I think there has to be a more positive outcome than that. From the Islamic Republic's point of view, they are so weak that they cannot make those concessions that Marco Rubio is asking for.

DOUGHERTY: Behnam?

BEN TALEBLU: Thanks, Joe. Thanks, Edmund, and thanks to everyone for staying on the call. I'll be brief. Style has a substance of its own. Stylistically, the Iranians are practicing a kind of diplomacy we've seen from them before where they tried to play for time, where they tried to wield a knife and a handshake at the exact same time. This classic, and believe it or not, tried-and-true method worked, just like their deterrent strategy worked, until it didn't, until it ran into the realities of Trump 2.0 in 2025. Again, we are all guessing. We have the whiplash when it comes to the headlines as to deal or no deal, conflict or no conflict, jumping from tweet to statement to leak. The only word of caution I would inject is that if past is a prologue with this administration, better to take a camcorder view video approach to this rather than a snapshot, both for the sake of our analysis as well as for the sake of getting the story right, because I think the cost of driving expectations up or down in one direction are too high.

It's a tough nut to crack, but I guess all eyes will be on Oman, Muscat, for this Friday, as well as to how both the state and the street in Iran react to what happens, and how Trump responds. Thank you.

DOUGHERTY: Richard?

BEN TALEBLU: I think he just had to take a call.

DOUGHERTY: Oh, is that right? So right, we lost Richard, so he shared his final thoughts. We'll conclude it there. Thank all of you for being on the call. Gentlemen, thank you. Special thanks to the FDD Comms team for your terrific support and the background that nobody sees, but everybody appreciates. This does conclude today's call.

FITTON-BROWN: Thank you.

BEN TALEBLU: Thanks.