War of the Words in Iran

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Featuring Ali Ansari
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: As the war in Iran unfolds, most of the focus has been on the battlefield. Strikes. Escalation. Deterrence. But there's another war underway — a quieter, more consequential one: the battle of narratives. In Iran, it's about who is strong, who has power, who is legitimate, and ultimately who speaks for the country. Because the Islamic Republic doesn't just rely on missiles and militias. It relies on an ethos of resistance, revolution, and inevitability. The question now is: do the Iranian people still buy it? And also important: why does the West, namely Washington, struggle to challenge the regime's narratives effectively? Where do the Iranian people fit into all of this — not as just subjects of the regime, but as actors in their own right?

To help us break it down, I'm honored to be joined by world-renowned historian Professor Ali Ansari. He's a professor of Iranian history and director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, senior associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and president of the British Institute for Persian Studies. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz. This is *The Iran Breakdown*. So, let's break it down. Ali, welcome.

ANSARI: Good to be with you.

DUBOWITZ: Wonderful to have you, Ali. Before beginning, I would certainly recommend to all our listeners and viewers to read an interview of you in *The Wall Street Journal*. It was done a number of weeks ago, which I thought was an excellent analysis of where we are with respect to Iran. Now, I think the interview came out before the current war, correct?

ANSARI: Just after, I think, just after it had started. I mean, I have to say, yes, no, it was in the first week.

DUBOWITZ: The first week. OK. In the first week.

ANSARI: And I mean, I think Elliot did a splendid job at putting my one and a half hours of ranting into a fairly sort of coherent interview, I have to say. So, all credit to him.

DUBOWITZ: Yes. No, no, he did the same for me a couple years ago. And my three and a half hours of rantings, he fit into beautiful prose. I think we're both in debt to him.

ANSARI: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So, Ali, I want to talk about this whole question of narratives and the story the regime is telling it and why it matters. Give us a sense of this and also grounded in the history of Iran, this idea of resistance and inevitability and defiance. I mean, we're seeing this regime under relentless assault.

ANSARI: Yeah. I mean, I find it very interesting because, I mean, you can see it on a number of different levels. You can see it very broadly, you know, if you pull back the lens, the sort of relationship that the West has with this sort of idea of Persia and how Persia becomes sort of quite the – you know, affects people, I think in the West in quite an interesting way. They have a particular image of it. And then when it comes to Iran itself, you know, in terms of the Islamic Revolution as well, from a very early stage, they were able to sort of manipulate, I think, and manage their narratives quite well, in part because they also had a fairly receptive audience, I think, in the West who were willing to see Iran as this sort of plucky underdog fighting against Western hegemony. And, you know, in a sense, they turned a blind eye, I would say, to some of the things that were going on.

But, you know, we see this from a very early stage with Khomeini being described by some people in the United States, for instance, as the Gandhi of Iran, this sort of thing, which most Iranians would have been shocked at this sort of assessment. The one thing they knew about Khomeini is that whatever he was, he was certainly not the Gandhi of Iran. But there were people in the United States who said this, and there were people that we know in fairly celebrated academic positions who were arguing that he was some sort of, like, enlightened and liberal thinker who was going to bring democracy to the country. And I think throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, sometimes the narrative has worked, sometimes it hasn't. I think, really, in the last 20 years, at least, it's struggled to maintain a sort of, coherent narrative with people, certainly in the West, because things have gone downhill so rapidly, and the narrative doesn't really match the reality as well as it would like.

But that still hasn't prevented, I think, a number of people from being able to very, very receptive to the master narrative of its sort of – its plucky outsider trying to push against Western hegemony, American hegemony capitalism, whatever you want to call it. I mean, it's all there and they like it and they buy into it. And in some ways, they externalize themselves. I remember many years ago, I was talking to someone from the European External Action Service, and I said to them at the time, I said, "The situation in Iran is very bad and it looks like internally there's a lot of contradictions and it's fading." And he looked at me slightly aghast and he said, "But if Iran goes, who will stand up to America?" And I said, "Well, why don't you stand up to America if you're very keen to stand up to America? Why do the Iranians have to start – I mean, what is it that you are projecting onto others some sort of fantasy of your own?" And I think it's interesting how that continues.

And we can see that today, by the way, and we see that obviously very well in the current conflict.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting, you mentioned that at the beginning 1979, there were people who compared Ayatollah Khomeini to Gandhi. It seems like as the Islamic Revolution unfolded and the Islamic Republic began to reveal itself in the 80s – maybe through the 90s – there was a sense in Washington and Europe of looking for the great and elusive moderate, right? The elusive pragmatist. I mean, in a sense, if the Islamic Republic was becoming more like Stalin, there was a feeling of where is Gorbachev? We need to find Gorbachev.

ANSARI: Or Khrushchev.

DUBOWITZ: Or Khrushchev, right? And there was a sense that, you know, in the 2000s that well, we had found our Gorbachev and his name was Hassan Rouhani and his deputy Zarif, and they were the moderates. We finally found our Gorbachev, and we could do business with these guys, even though at the end of the day, the regime was controlled more by Stalin and Mao than by a Gorbachev.

Where are we moving in now? I mean, obviously Khamenei – Ali Khamenei is dead, Larijani's dead, and a number of these senior officials who came in that generation have been eliminated. And now we have a new man who supposedly is ruling Iran. On one hand, we have Mojtaba Khamenei, the new Supreme Leader. But by all accounts, he's not really in control. It's the Islamic Revolutionary Guards that's in control and their man is [Mohammad-Bagher] Ghalibaf. So, maybe this is kind of a good opportunity for us to situate Ghalibaf in the context of who all these men are over many, many decades. And is Ghalibaf a ruthless revolutionary or is he a venal crook or is he both?

ANSARI: I think he's an opportunist. I mean, basically we always talk about pragmatists, but I think the pragmatists, by and large, quite a few of them are opportunists. I mean, they sort of change. They're a bit chameleon-like. I mean, to go back to one of the points you were making – I mean, I think what's fascinating really about the relationship is that when you look at it, particularly US-Iran, there was a fairly intimate relationship that goes back way before the revolution. And I think ever since the revolution, American politicians of one color or another have always tried to find the moderate. They've tried to find – they haven't reconciled themselves with the divorce. I mean, it was a very bitter divorce in 1979. They haven't reconciled themselves or they hadn't for a while. And as a consequence, they were looking – they were always looking for the sort of – that we hadn't got it entirely wrong.

There are people there we can work with. And in some cases there were at the time, there were some people who were more interesting than others. I think, as you say, when we get now, and I think ever since 2005, certainly with the rise of [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, and the whole political landscape in Iran has shifted so far into the hardline territory that what we're really talking about now is shades of hardliner. We're not really talking about moderates and pragmatists and reformists. I mean, reformists in Iran are basically treated like some sort of religious minority. They're given a sort of certain rights to have maybe one or two deputies in parliament and to voice their opinions down then. But by and large, it's all run by these hardliners. And Ghalibaf is an interesting character. I mean, I remember watching him on television many, many years ago when I used to be able to go to Iran back in the 1990s.

He was, I think, in charge of the (inaudible) army, the police forces. And in those days, he fancied himself a bit of a, I suppose what we could say, a pragmatist. I mean, the one thing I remember about him is he went on television and he said something like, "We can't stem the flood of alcohol into the country from Azerbaijan because the demand is too high." And by saying the demand is too high, it was the wrong thing to say really. And I mean, I think he was slapped down for saying this. And since the late 1990s, he became more and more hardline and uncompromising his positions. He's a highly vain individual, by the way. He presented himself really as a sort of a Tom Cruise of Iran. He thought he was a fighter pilot and that sort of thing, and also highly corrupt. I mean, extremely corrupt.

And it's partly – one could say the system is corrupting anyway. So, in order to get ahead in the system, you have to join in with all the fun. And yes, I mean, he's vain. He's just the sort of person I think who might welcome a sort of a – an approach by the Americans to say, "We think you might be able to run things." I don't think he has the sort of gravitas or the sort of authority across the regime and the regime system that some people think he has. And certainly, he gives an impression. I mean, in some ways he's very performative, like the system itself. He's quite performative and he presents himself in a particular narrative. He was probably most famous, I have to say, I think 10, 15 years ago when he was running for president, when he said, "I am the Reza Khan – the Reza Khan of the Islamic Republic." Basically, I'm going to be the military hard man who can sort this out because people were getting very fed up at the way in which the system couldn't deliver.

And he was trying to present himself as the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. And I thought that was an interesting take to present himself as. But again, it reflects this fact that he was sort of pandering to a particular image that A, he wanted to present and B, he thought might be receptive with the Iranian audiences at the time.

DUBOWITZ: So, Ali, correct me if I'm wrong, but in terms of his biographical details, I mean, he joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, fought near Iran-Iraq War. He rose up to become the IRGC Air Force commander, I believe.

ANSARI: I think yeah. He's definitely in the Air Force.

DUBOWITZ: And then he was mayor of Tehran and then his current position is speaker of the *Majlis* – of the parliament.

ANSARI: He tried a couple of times to become president, didn't work. He was absolutely hammered in one of the election by [Hassan] Rouhani as it happened, but he was embarrassed. I mean, Rouhani basically said that he was a thug. I mean, Rouhani attacked him and said, "You are the sort of person who feels that students should be beaten on a regular basis." And he didn't do well at all. And basically, being speaker of parliament was the runner up prize for him. I mean, it was basically an attempt to mollify because he wasn't achieving – he didn't achieve the sort of quote popularity even within the context of the Islamic Republic, I have to say. I mean, these things are all relative, right? But he wasn't really able to achieve the sort of high ambitions and goals that he had for the presidency. Not that particularly, Mark, I would want to be president of the Islamic Republic these days.

I mean, I don't think it's a great job, and I think [Masoud] Pezeshkian himself probably regrets ever standing for the post.

DUBOWITZ: Alright. So, Ghalibaf seems to have risen to a position of greater prominence really by the process of elimination, both figuratively and literally, as the Israeli Air Force has been picking off, in a sense, his colleagues, but also some of his internal competitors. How are we as Americans to understand whether Ghalibaf can actually be a reasonable interlocutor for any kind of diplomatic off-ramp or any kind of negotiated off-ramp with the United States? Is that just delusion or is there something of merit there?

ANSARI: I mean all these things are possible. I mean, as you rightly pointed out there, there's a thinning out of the ranks and for one reason or another, he survived. Now, I don't know whether he having survived is actually to his advantage or not. I mean, some people will say, why has he survived? But certainly, he's one of the people left standing. I mean, I think with all these targeted killings that has taken place, I mean, one of the striking things about this all is the level of Israeli intelligence on the ground has to be said. I mean, the way in which they've been able to find the individuals. Ghalibaf in this case has remained untouched. And obviously he's denied everything that Trump – President Trump has said – that he said, "I'm certainly not in any negotiations. We're not in any negotiations." But I wouldn't be surprised if at one stage it turned out that he was the person people were approaching or he'd approached.

I think for his own personal safety, he's got to certainly, in a very public way, say it's not true because it will – unless there's wide agreement in what is left of the leadership, and certainly even with some of the IRGC, it would be highly problematic for him to be seen to be in some form of negotiation with the Americans.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And he's certainly been denying that, but most vociferously on X. So, I want to get back to why the West, we just so struggle to understand and we're so bad at shaping this narrative. I mean, why do we misread the regime? I mean, we think it's a rational actor. I think we don't quite understand that it really is an ideological project. It's obviously a lot of reliance on kind of technical and military analysis, maybe a real failure to understand the inner workings of the regime, a failure to understand the Iranian people. We seem to be just for decades now, as you say, since '79, since we thought that Ayatollah Khomeini was Gandhi, we just continue to fail to be able to push back against the regime. And I think even in this war, while I think the United States and Israel are winning militarily, it seems like the regime is winning from a strategic communications perspective.

ANSARI: Yeah, I think there are several things you've hit on there, and I'd like to unpack some of them. I mean, one is that the West has a tendency to want to deal with people who they think they can get things done. And as a consequence of that, the West has tended to focus on strong men that they think can get things done and often ignoring the wider public sentiment. And I saw that very explicitly at the end of the reform movement back in 2004. It was very striking that the West, because it was very anxious to get on a deal with the nuclear program, and I think this has been part of the problem, by the way. The focus has been on this sort of issue of security and the issue of security in a very particular sense. I mean, they wanted to look at it in a very particular sense, in a sense it could be measured.

So, you looked at it as a legal and a technical matter. And in order to get that done, they tended to focus on people they thought could answer that. So, Rouhani was head of the National Security Council at the time. He was a well-known conservative. He wasn't really a reformist, but people focused in on him and bypassed actually the reformist president at the time. And I think that is one problem. One problem is the policy structure really in the West. The other, as I've sort of hinted at, is this idea that we want things that we can measure and we can see, and we're very good on metrics, but we're not very good actually at the psychology of it. And we don't have enough, really. I mean, I think you're right about the idea. When you talk about the ideology of the regime, for instance, it's very difficult for someone like myself.

I mean, I'm a historian and I would say that history is the queen of the humanities and that we really need to spend a bit more time looking at these rather more vague and rather amorphous ideas. But I think they're important to look at ideas and how they shape things and how we measure them. And that's what I've spent a lifetime trying to do. But of course, I have a huge disadvantage that I don't have this ability to go and measure it in very sort of strict, quantifiable terms. I can qualify it, but I can't quantify it. And because of that, I think for the policy community, it becomes extremely difficult. I mean, they want to have something very firm they can work on. And I think this is also the problem now. When you say to someone, "Well, the Iranian population is not really keen on the Islamic Republic." Well, we're dealing with an authoritarian system, so it's not like I can go out there and do a polling survey and sort of check whatever, particularly now.

I mean, it's very difficult. But what I can say is if the regime has to kill 10, 20,000 people in three days in January, that's not a sign that things are going well. I mean, these are things – Aad so the one side of the argument will say, which shows just how strong they are that they can kill everyone. My argument is actually, if you have to use such sort of brute power in order to keep yourself in place, that doesn't suggest to me that you're feeling very safe. And everything I've heard really about that extraordinary and savage use of violence in January was because the regime panicked. I mean, the regime panicked because they thought they were seriously under existential threat. And I think, again, you see these sort of things going now. It's very difficult, of course, looking in because we've had two months where the internet has basically been shut down.

So, how can I know? And yet what I'm amazed about, and I've written about this in other places, is the number of people who come and say to me, "We know exactly how this is going to pan out, what the Iranians are going to do, how this is." And I say, "Well, how do you know? " I mean, the only way I can make an assessment on that is looking at the history, looking at the ideas that shape it, maybe some concepts, but also, as you quite rightly say, the ideology that's behind what are they doing? And then obviously the experience and the practical engagement you may have with individuals and particularly Iranians – whatever are coming out of Iran – and you've got to try and construct a picture, but it's extremely difficult. I mean, a good example, if I may, of using this in a sense is the whole notion of Mojtaba – that you were talking about Khamenei's successor.

Now, I was suggesting about a decade ago or even 15 years ago, I'm on record in some place saying, I thought Mojtaba was going to succeed his father. And I remember at the time people said, "This is outrageous. It's an Islamic Republic. In a republic, people don't –" And I said, "Well, presidential monarchies are not unusual in the Middle East, but also you're talking about Iran and you're talking about Shiism. And if you know anything about Shiism and you know about the imamate and Shiism, you know it's hereditary. So, if Khamenei is being presented as – and he was, I remember watching this on television at times, presented as the Ali of the age, that he was the Imam Ali of the age. And you are preparing the audience for a certain sort of, you know, a consequence that implies some sort of hereditary succession. And of course, his son was being puffed up all this time.

He became an Ayatollah at a very young age. He started doing all sorts of weird and wonderful juridical duties. But then, of course, there's a very practical point which people say now, and that is that if the IRGC are that venal, corrupt business conglomerate that they have become and they want to maintain their interests and their investments, the best option they have is to continue with the same family with someone slightly junior who will be more dependent on them and they can support him. And this is exactly what's happened. But the idea is you read somewhere that it's all a result of the war and that Trump's attack on Iran has ensured that Iran has somehow taken a hardline turn or something. I mean, these are among the more absurd assessments that you read. And I go, “What? More hard line than killing 20,000 people in January?”

I mean, what does that mean? I mean, and yet people are prepared to make that sort of argument because – to go back to our central theme – is because they dislike in some ways or their criticism of their own government, in this case, obviously the Trump administration, for very obvious reasons. I mean, it's not difficult to understand, but because the loathing in that direction is so strong, they're willing to give the Iranian side, the Islamic Republic, sort of a free pass. And that's basically what you're seeing. And I sort of say to people, “You should look at Iran on its own merits.” The Islamic Republican its own merits, on its own standing, its ideology, what does it want? Where does it want to go? Who are the hardcore people in that system? What do they believe? But also understand that the vast majority of the population, as you know, and I know, don't buy into this.

I mean, they don't buy into this anymore. They’re not interested in being led by Moses through the desert. And the desert seems to be getting so vast now, they never seem to be leaving the desert. And they want basically just to get to the promised land and have a reasonable life. They don't want to go around sacrificing everything for this great sort of, I don't know, fantastical result that may come around the corner at some stage. And the regime's revolutionary strategy is – that's what it's been pursuing. And it sort of believes one more push and we will get to the promised land. Most Iranians don't care anymore. They're not interested. They just want to have a good life.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Well, and this is what I want to get to. I mean, you've really, I think, hit on some interesting points. I mean, it seems to me that there's three resistance movements at play right now in the current narrative, right? Resistance one is the Islamic Republic of Iran and this regime dedicated to resistance against the West. The second resistance movement is the resistance movement against Donald Trump, and to some extent, Benjamin Netanyahu. That is in the United States and the UK and Europe, the resistance. In fact, they were formally announced as the resistance when Trump won his first term. But the third element of the resistance is the resistance of the Iranian people against the Islamic Republic itself, and they seem to be not part of the story. They’ve kind of been lost in the narrative. I mean, they're there, they appear sometimes.

ANSARI: Yeah. I despair at this actually. And one of the things that I've become very frustrated about actually is precisely this, and I mean, you all know as well as anyone. So, during the whole fiasco of January, we were on the airwaves quite regularly talking about the plight of the Iranian people and how bad it was. Then it looked like the protests had been crushed and had all gone, and then suddenly the media interest vanished. You'd get no one would ask you anything. And then the focus shifts, obviously. And what the Iranians did actually – the regime, I should say – quite cleverly, is the next thing they do is they say, "Let's get into negotiations about the nuclear issue." The minute they did that, they shifted the debate and everyone went talking about the nuclear. And for those of us who have followed this for the last 20 years, it was like one big yawn, here we go again.

And even in Iran, people would say to me, "Oh my God, not another nuclear negotiation." I mean, it was like, we can't handle this anymore. Anyway, so that's it. And you go there and people get very – I think there's a whole group of pundits, commentators, journalists, whatever, who have made a living on following nuclear negotiations. I think that's all they've done. They've been in Vienna, Geneva, this and whatever. And the level of detail they have is fascinating. I mean, as long as you're into centrifuges. I mean, that's what they want to get into. So, they go into that, but it sort of misses the point, doesn't it? I mean, for me, I always say to someone, I said, "Well, where are the Iranians in this narrative?" And of course, the problem they have is while it's easy to go to Geneva or Vienna and talk to an official, obviously they can't go to Iran.

You can't go to Iran; you can't talk to people on the ground. It's very difficult to see what's going on. So, there's no story. There's no story there. So, they focus on that and then the focus goes on the war buildup, the great buildup in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and whatever, what the hell is Trump up to? And then of course, the minute you get into the conflict itself, obviously that directs all the attention. And as you say, those sort of three types of resistance that you were mentioning – you know, there's sort of an internal debate almost. I mean, this is what I find quite depressing. It's a very narcissistic debate that takes place either within the Washington Beltway or within London or whatever, and they're basically talking to themselves, and the debate is really about how bad the US administration is or whatever.

And I always say to people, "Fine, you can have that debate. That's entirely your right – democratic society and so on and so forth, but don't forget the other part of the equation." And the other part of the equation is sitting in Iran, anxious, fearful, excited, traumatized. I mean, a welter of emotions. Clearly, a welter of emotions. Nobody likes to have their country bombed. Of course they don't. But at the same time, I think it's fair to say that a number of opinions that are coming out are much more varied and mixed about what's going on. And from their perspective, they're loathing in a sense of, if you want to put it that way, their dislike of war of the West or whatever is not matched – shall we say, is overcome, shall we say, by their loathing for the regime. They're loathing for the regime, trumps everything else. That's probably not the right word to use, but you get my point.

DUBOWITZ: No, exactly. I mean, what's interesting to me, I just saw actually just before this interview that NPR had actually gone to Turkey to interview Iranians…

ANSARI: Yeah, I saw that.

DUBOWITZ: Were fleeing to Turkey, obviously a place they go. Now, obviously Iranian refugees maybe fleeing a war zone, maybe that's a certain self-selection. But what was interesting to me was that the overwhelming response from the people they interviewed, and knowing NPR the way I do, I'm sure they were hoping to meet a whole bunch of Iranians who said, "Yes, war is terrible, but Trump is terrible and America's to blame." And they ended up encountering a whole bunch of Iranians who said, "War is terrible. We had to flee, but the biggest mistake would be if President Trump stops bombing the regime, we hope he will continue and we hope that he will continue to the overthrow of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

ANSARI: No, I think that's absolutely – I mean, let's be honest about it. There will be mixed views. I mean, as people remind us all the time, we've got 92 million people, the regime has its supporters. There are people who are sitting in the middle who don't know what their views are, clearly. I mean, let's not be naive about it. But I think what has astonished me really, I mean, really astonished me, as someone who's a student of Iran for many, many years and a student of Iranian nationalism, by the way. I mean, I studied this at great depth. I've been very struck by the fact of how the mood has shifted over the last two to three years. It's not just the last year, really from the Mahsa Amini protests. I mean, really from the Women Life Freedom protest, people got very, very fed up and they said, "We have tried everything." And it is, for me, even for myself, it's quite shocking to hear these views. But what I'm not going to do, what the critics of Orientalism, the sort of Saidian version of Orientalism say that the West is often speaking for others.

They don't allow the natives to speak. They speak for them. And by the way, Said's book obviously came out '78 just in good timing for the Islamic Revolution. So, I think there's a relationship there, by the way. I mean, I think there's a post-colonial – the Islamic Republic of Iran is in some ways a poster child for the post-colonial movement, which is why I think quite a few academics are very wedded to it. But the interesting thing for me is I say, "Well, what if the Iranians inside Iran say things that you don't like to hear? What if it offends you? What do we do? Do we silence it? Do we ignore it? Do we rewrite it?" I mean, is that my job or is it my job to see why they have come to such a conclusion? What is it that's put them in such a sort of a loathing for their own regime that they would in some ways tolerate?

And again, I wouldn't go so far as saying people are happy about it, but they certainly tolerate the fact that the country is being bombed in that sense. So, it's an extraordinary situation and I would not have even imagined it at the 12-Day War last summer. I mean, I think the critical factor that really changed that dynamic was the slaughter that happened in January. I think from that moment onwards, there was – something clicked in the Iranian body politic that was quite different and people really sort of, had enough. And I don't think you can understand what's been happening if you ignore what happened earlier in the year.

DUBOWITZ: It's funny, Ali, you were talking about this sort of obsession within the Washington Beltway and within London and elsewhere in Europe. So, a colleague of mine, I won't mention his name, but he's a deep, deep expert on Iran and he just came back from Europe, and I just saw him this morning and I said, "How was your trip?" And he said, "Oh," and he gave me some details. And he said, "Mark, what was really interesting is I went to meetings and I focus on Iran. I focus on internally what's happening inside Iran. And I speak Persian, and I really do think I understand the regime and what's happening on the ground. But in fact, instead of sending the Iran watchers to our meetings, these governments send the America watchers – the people whose job it is to watch America and understand America. And they had really no interest in what actually was going on inside Iran and what the Iranian people were thinking," and everything that we've talked about on this episode.

They wanted to know what was going on in America because I think there was a sense in his sense that they were more afraid of the United States of America and President Trump than they were of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the IRGC and Khamenei. And it was just sort of an interesting, in my mind, kind of an interesting expression of it.

ANSARI: I think what I would say there, and I think it has to be said, I mean, is that you have that asymmetry in terms of messaging. So, the Iranians have control over their environment. They're an authoritarian state. They lock it down, they control the images, and the messaging you get is very controlled. The people who turn up on CNN or on American newscasts, whatever, are basically screened. I mean, essentially, those talking heads are screened. You're not going to find people who are – OK. On the other hand, we have this extraordinary cacophony of views in the West. It's a natural consequence. But also, I should say, is I think the messaging, the discipline messaging from the United States in this particular point is not as good as it should be. I mean, I think that has to be said. And this obviously reflects in some ways the eccentricities or the idiosyncrasies that you see in the current White House and…

DUBOWITZ: Are you suggesting President Trump's not a disciplined speaker?

ANSARI: You may say that, yes. I can't possibly comment. But yeah, I mean, this is the thing. I mean, he likes to talk. And I mean, the trouble is for things like this, I think you need to be much more – and I think allies need to be reassured. I mean, I think allies need to be reassured that things are moving to plan. I mean, I know, for instance, you say quite regularly, we have phases one, phase two, phase three, whatever. And anyone who knows anything about the US military knows that that's the way it operates, by the way. I mean, it operates in this very methodical and it's almost quite plodding, actually. It sort of plods in and it does everything. And I don't think that's been conveyed enough really. I mean, unless you sit there and listen to CENTCOM and what CENTCOM are telling you or talked regularly to US military or people in the military, there is less realization what's going on.

And of course, it was always colored, I have to say. This is the problem. I mean, it's colored by the fact when we have social media and the hyperventilating that goes on in social media. So, for example, when we listen to Admiral Cooper at CENTCOM, he's very methodical. He points out exactly what a plan is. He says that he actually is quite honest about it. He says there are difficulties, there are this or that or whatever, but we have plans to deal with it and so on and so forth. And you talk to people in the US military and you know there's this sort of process taking place, but people tend not to listen to that. They tend to go towards what's either coming out of the White House or what's hyperventilating throughout social media. The more egregious commentary that comes out, people will latch onto it because it also reinforces maybe a preconception they may have.

So that's what they're going to repeat. And you don't actually get the measure of what's going on necessarily at a ground level. Now, those who do have a better sense of this will always recognize, by the way, that yes, on a military level, things seem to be going to plan. What they do have an anxiety over, I think, is the political strategy around it. And of course, that part of the messaging, I do think needs to probably from the American side certainly needs to improve.

DUBOWITZ: OK. So yes, improved messaging from the United States is certainly something that has been a longstanding problem here and maybe gotten worse in recent years. I want to move just and maybe to the final part of the conversation, Ali.

ANSARI: Sure.

DUBOWITZ: I want to talk about now inside the regime. I have been long interested in this question of elite cohesion and the kind of hidden fractures within the regime, within the security forces, and within the broader support base of the regime. And it's something that we've been monitoring pretty closely here at FDD. And I would say just as an overall comment, probably starting with the 12-Day War last June, extending into the brutal crackdown of Iranians in January and now moving into day 25 of Operation Epic Fury. It's becoming clearer to me and to our experts that there are the existing fractures and fissures have now been intensified or widening, and that there is actually a pretty robust debate taking place inside the support base of the regime between those who are doubling down on revolutionary defiance and those who are strongly questioning after the 12-Day War, a brutal crackdown, and now 25 days of being pounded by the United States and Israeli Air Forces, whether this is a major catastrophe and we made a massive mistake and we have to politely – I'll put it politely –recalibrate in how we respond to the pressure and where we take the Islamic Republic.

What is your sense of elite cohesion, hidden fractures, and to what extent does that speak to the resilience of the regime or the potential that this regime may not be strong, it's just good at looking strong?

War of the Words in Iran

March 26, 2026
Featuring Ali Ansari
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

ANSARI: So, I mean, clearly it has shown a degree of resilience that in terms of – it's been able to keep up a steady fight back over a couple of weeks. But again, I hesitate to say because it's been able to do it for two, three weeks, so that shows deep resilience at the core. And if you know anything about Iranian society and its culture, you'll know there will be debates. I mean, I think as you've said, there will be debates and arguments. This is not a monolithic system in that sense. There are people who are very, very indoctrinated and very committed to the cause. But I would also suggest to you that one of the reasons they're that committed to the cause is because they know if they lose, they've had it. I mean, there is an existential argument there, which has little to do with ideology and everything to do with just sheer survival.

I mean, these are people during the revolution in 1979 – who had no mercy on their opponents. I mean, they shot a lot of people. And I think there's always been a realization that if another revolution happened, they probably wouldn't, the same fate might happen to them. And if you look at the level of hatred and wider society towards elements like the Basij, for instance, and some of the Revolutionary Guards, certainly, this is what I think is probably enforcing a degree of cohesion at the moment. But I don't think this is something that's as deep or as profound or as solid as people say. And when you look at it, I mean, let's just give the example of the 12-Day War. I mean, people said to me after the 12-Day War, "Oh, this will result in national solidarity and people will rally around the flag and so on and so forth." And the regime puffed out a lot of things with Sasanian monarchs and became highly monarchical all of a sudden.

I remember saying at the time, and I wrote about this and I said, "This is pretty vacuous stuff. I mean, this is pretty shallow. I mean, if you look at it, most Iranians aren't going to buy it. " They might enjoy a little bit of the adrenaline rush and like a little bit of sort of national flag waving, but they're not going to buy it. And then of course, within six months, you have the biggest protests that I think the regime has ever seen and you have to have a massive crackdown. So, where would that national solidarity go? And now, by the way, I don't know if you've noticed, but the most extraordinary thing, and I say this because these are sort of areas that I used to visit quite regularly up in the Caspian, they put up posters with fake quotes from Hitler of all people.

I mean, I don't know why they've decided Hitler is the right person to quote. It's having this quote from Hitler that says, “People who betray their country or fight with the foreigner or the worst type of scum,” or something or other, I mean, basically warning people that this is not the time to be breaking ranks. Well, if you've got to do that, it suggests that all is not good in the body politic.

DUBOWITZ: Well, if you've got to tell people not to break ranks, they clearly are breaking ranks. I mean, that's probably a good indication.

ANSARI: And that's the thing. I mean, there's clearly an issue going on here. And I think the trouble is we can't see in. I mean, there must be intelligence assets on the ground that are picking up details. You may have a better idea. I don't know. But from my reading of the history and the culture and whatever, every society, every culture has this breaking point in some senses. And I think there will be a number of people who will say that us surviving is not a great victory. Us surviving if the country's political infrastructure, at least, not the economic as yet, but the political infrastructure is ripped apart in a fairly dramatic fashion. And I defy anyone to say that the regime is going to come out stronger from this experience. I mean, that would only work to my mind if the regime went into it with some sort of coherence, but it went into it already weak.

It went into it in a situation where the political economy is corrupt, feeble, kleptocracy, but also unable to deliver on various goods. So, it's going to come out of it also in bad shape. And again, for me, this suggests that you're going to have, at the very, very least, a sort of a crippled system, a crippled state. And how they manage that is anyone's guess. I mean, I can't see them doing it without seriously thinking that in a sense, you have some sort of internal regime change taking place. I mean, because you're going to have to change the way you do things and they simply can't continue as they are. And I would agree with you, I think there are sufficient people within even what we might call the political insiders who will be saying, "This is a fiasco. I mean, what on earth are we doing?" It's not actually to our long-term benefit or for the stability of the regime as a whole.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's interesting because they come out of this that badly beaten, that badly weakened, and that they're actually, as you said, sort of an internal resistance within the support base of the regime saying that we have to change the direction of the Islamic Republic or we are heading to collapse. Then you've got the makings of fracturing within the support base. You've got the makings of people who are now willing to set a different course. You've got potentially another massive Iranian uprising brewing where you've got resistance from actually Iranians, the majority of Iranians who despise this regime. And the only question from a narrative perspective, which would be interesting to me, is the combination of a regime that is weakened, fracturing where there's internal resistance inside the support base and external resistance from the opposition is enough to overcome the resistance against President Trump who will claim at the end of no matter what happens, that the United States of America lost the war against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

And it'll be an interesting narrative battle when the major military operations are over about who won and who lost in Operation Epic Fury.

ANSARI: I suspect what you'll find, I mean, we'll see what happens on the ground. I can't predict it, but let's say I suspect what you'll find is that they will find some way of declaring victory because they'll have survived. And I suspect you'll get – as you're already getting, by the way – you already get people who say this has all been a strategic failure, the Americans are useless, so on and so forth. Fine. I mean, you can make that case if you choose to. But the fact is, I think as has been, I mean, I think the Mossad chief himself, I think came out or it was leaked or whatever, said that “Look, when we're talking about regime transition or change or whatever, we're not saying it's going to be immediate. I mean, it could take be several months after the end of hostilities,” or whatever. Now, I would happen to think that these sort of changes one way or another will happen earlier for the simple reason that even after the slaughter in January, Hassan Rouhani, the ex-president, was coming out and saying, "We need serious change. We cannot go on like we are."

If you talk to any economist in Iran, they'll say, "We need serious change. We cannot go on as we are. " I mean, everyone is saying it. And my point is its people within the system are almost – I mean, not the hardcore IRGC, not the ideological hardcore, but certainly those who are still broadly speaking within a sort of an Islamic Republic center are all saying, "We cannot go on in this way." And then at different layers, if the further you go out, you have people like Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who was the Green Movement leader coming out and saying, "We need a referendum. I mean, we need a referendum on a new system. We can't go on like this." So, when people say to me that, "Oh, this change is all wishful thinking." I always say to them, actually, the people in Iran are calling for change and it's not even people on the fringes, it's people within who are saying that we simply cannot go on as we are.

So, I think all this points in one direction at the end of the day. I mean, they might take an early, they might huff and puff and say, "Well, we've done fantastically well." But at the end of the day, they still face the same problems. The currency is collapsing. The economy is not delivering. There's a political legitimacy problem. They run out of water. I mean, all these things are going to stay the same. So, what are you going to do with that? I mean, you've got to deal with them eventually.

DUBOWITZ: Well, and I think that's a great point to end on with a great historian who would probably say things never stay the same. Things do change and that the arc of Iranian history is that just when you thought that regimes were the most stable and that continuity was the biggest assumption, was it exactly at that moment that those governments, those regimes in Iranian history actually fell because I know from an American…

ANSARI: And I think that the trick is, at the end of the day, it's a psychological thing and these things are very difficult to pinpoint. The tipping point is always difficult to pinpoint, but the tipping point invariably comes.

DUBOWITZ: Great, Ali. Well, wonderful to have you. Appreciate it. We'd love to have you back as the tipping point comes closer.

ANSARI: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

DUBOWITZ: Thanks, Ali.

My thanks to Ali for what has been a fascinating conversation, as expected from one of the most preeminent historians on Iran. Because in the end, this isn't just a fight over territory or capabilities. It really is a fight over meaning, over history, over legitimacy, over narratives. It's over who gets to define what Iran is and what it becomes. The regime has spent decades telling one story. The question now is whether that story still holds – and whether the Iranian people or the outside world are ready to challenge it with something stronger. I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been *The Iran Breakdown*. Until next time.