



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: This war didn't start last week. It didn't start last year. It started in 1979. But for the first time since then, the question isn't just how to contain the Islamic Republic – it's whether it can survive. After weeks of strikes, decapitations, and internal strain, the regime in Iran looks weaker than it has in decades. But as today's guests argue: weaker doesn't mean finished. So what actually is regime collapse? What are the markers? Are we anywhere close? And if we're not, what does it take to close that gap? To help us think through this, I'm joined by two of the sharpest minds on Iran. Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Reuel Marc Gerecht is a resident scholar at FDD and former CIA Iran targets officer. They recently argued in *The Wall Street Journal* that Iran's regime is down but not out, and that the key variable isn't just external pressure – it's whether the regime's own security forces hold.

I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this is *The Iran Breakdown*. So... let's break it down.

Welcome. Ray, Reuel, good to have you back.

GERECHT: Pleasure.

TAKEYH: Thanks.

DUBOWITZ: So, gentlemen, I always go to you two because you are glass half empty analysts. And I enjoy that about you all. Every time I'm in exuberant optimism about the fall of the Islamic Republic, or that we're winning, not losing. I'll come to both of you, Debbie Downers, to actually get the glass half empty assessment of how we are doing. So, let's start with that. Reuel, how are we doing?

GERECHT: Well, I think militarily, as far as we can tell, I think we're doing pretty well. I mean, it's still, I would argue, too soon to have a definitive answer to that because obviously the American military campaign is weeks away from being finished. I mean, the earliest I ever heard that the campaign would be more or less done would be the end of March, and I suspect that's not true. It's probably going to go into April. So, it's difficult to answer that with a confidence one would like. And we certainly don't know about the Strait of Hormuz, which is politically the most important issue because if the Strait remains blocked – if they don't free it, if they don't get the convoys up soon enough – the turmoil in the markets could spell political defeat for the administration. But so far as blowing things up – for so far as damaging, I think probably permanently, the military capacity, the nuclear capacity of the Islamic Republic, things have gone quite well.

DUBOWITZ: Alright, Ray. So, that actually didn't sound like Debbie Downer from a military perspective. And I think all of the metrics that you see – you hear briefed by General Caine and Admiral Bradley Cooper, certainly by the Israelis – we've seen a decimation of Iran's ballistic missile capability. I saw a statistic just a few days ago that they're not capable of producing one more ballistic missile. They were producing up to a hundred a month. And we've obviously seen the elimination of their Navy. Their defense industrial base is taking heavy blows. We can talk about the nuclear issue. There's still much to do, but much has been done. But I want to ask you about the internal repression apparatus, because this is sort of the Israeli side of the campaign, Operation Roaring Lion, as opposed to Epic Thunder. And we've seen the Israelis engage in a pretty systematic and quite effective degradation of the leadership and the repression operators.

Say a few more words about that, and then we can get into the glass half empty.

TAKEYH: Well, first of all, I don't think we're glass half empty guys. We were for regime change before it became cool. So, that to me is not an indication of lack of optimism, but we do bring some rare life into the picture.

GERECHT: We were belittled as the “regime change guys.” That was the phrase. Yes.

TAKEYH: Boys. “Regime changed boys.”

GERECHT: It was as boys. That's right.



Cracking the Regime

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DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I must say you both turned me into that. I mean, I was a sanctions guy looking for diplomacy – and maybe even coercive diplomacy. And you turned me into a regime change guy. So...

TAKEYH: I believe the phrase was called, “Mend it, not break it.” Sorry to bring that up.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: It's actually, “Fix it – fix it, not nix it.” But anyway, thank you for that clarification. Alright, Ray, back over to you.

TAKEYH: Where we are now – I think Reuel painted the military picture rather clearly, and there are other people more qualified to talk about the military dimensions of this. I think from the beginning, the Israeli idea was that if you systematically get (inaudible) the security forces, then if there is an uprising – I think we all agree that there (inaudible) be one – it is – it has greater chance of success. Not that anybody can guarantee its success, but it would have better chance of success than all previous uprise over a 47-year period. I think the Israeli (inaudible) is correct. When the next uprising pops, because the Islamic Republicans are capable of dealing with numerous problems, and its problems have been quite aggravated by its military war, infrastructure, depletion of pressure, cost of outbreak, morale is lowering, and an absence of any form of global legitimacy, then I think that particular uprising is in the best position to succeed than it has ever been.

Whether it succeeds or not is a big question. And I think it's a dynamic question that has to be assessed every day. How much more security services are going to disintegrate? How powerful will be the protests open? How convulsive it will be? And that's sort of a thing. That – that question is almost impossible to prevent ahead of time, the answer to it, but the idea that the Islamic Republic has never been buried and its ability to domestically repress has never been weaker, that actually is completely true.

DUBOWITZ: So – alright, Reuel, what Ray is alluding to is really, I think, what I'd call the three pillars of regime survival. What's actually keeping the regime alive right now. And obviously the security services, big part of that. The IRGC, the Basij, the Ministry of Intelligence – their loyalty, their capability. I guess the great unknown there is, are they going to crack under pressure? The second is elite cohesion. The 12-Day War, it seemed that the clerical military and political class were aligned. And the question is, are they still? And even after leadership losses, these men are being replaced. So, the system seems to be regenerating. And then there's a fear and repression infrastructure. It's the surveillance, the arrests, the executions, the willingness, as we saw in January, to kill tens of thousands of Iranians. So bottom line, if these three pillars hold, the regime survives. Walk us through an analysis of the three pillars, and where are we today, and is it different from what we saw during the 12-Day War?

And do the Iranian opposition – are they going to have more of a fighting chance if they come back to the streets?

GERECHT: I mean, first I have to say, because the internet is down in Iran and because we cannot access all of the Persian material – which is quite voluminous in the Islamic Republic – that it's extremely difficult to see certain things that before we could see them. For example, internal regime dissent, that's very difficult to tell from a distance unless you're actually looking at the newspapers for the guard corps, for the clergy, et cetera, where you can actually see difference of opinions floated, sometimes quite, you know, harshly. So, we have to hesitate. And I think it's impossible to know whether the security services are as solid, say, as they were on January 8th and January 9th where they started, you know, quite the killing spree.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

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I think it's fair to say on the one issue that they're probably having difficulty replacing people, that the decapitation strategy the Israelis have adopted means that the better people are dying. The older people, the more experienced people, the ones who have had a lot of practice in one, putting down demonstrations and also keeping the government running. There's a degradation of quality. I would disagree with those who say the Islamic Republic has a deep bench. I don't think that's true. So, you know, there aren't that – I can't think of a soul that who could replace Ali Larijani, who just died, who was the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Ray and I were going back and forth, maybe [Mohammad-Bagher] Qalibaf, who's the head of the speaker of the parliament. Maybe he could come close, but I don't know if he wants to take the job, but you really have to work very hard before you start devolving into personalities who are supremely incompetent and have proved it in the past.

I mean, *Al Jazeera*, you know, floated the idea that a fellow by the name of [Saeed] Jalili, whom we know is a former nuclear negotiator, might actually be the next Supreme National – secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. I mean, that man was too fruity even for Khamenei times. So –

TAKEYH: But Khamenei did love him.

GERECHT: Yes. No, he did. He did. But I'm just saying that his tendency to see God in everything and to want to reify God's will on earth didn't exactly make him a competent administrator.

TAKEYH: He was too nuts for the Raisi administration.

GERECHT: Right, right. So, I think that factor is probably increasing. So, just because a hardline people are taking over these positions doesn't mean that the longevity of the regime has extended. I think just the opposite. Most of them are incompetent or that they're certainly not as competent as their predecessors, so it's going to be much more difficult for the regime. And then you have to get into the economics question, which could be just – effectively, the Islamic Republic is going to be bankrupt.

DUBOWITZ: Before we go to the economic question, I was just checking to see if this is right, that Hossein Dehghan?

GERECHT: Yes. Dehghan.

TAKEYH: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: May have been appointed as the...

TAKEYH: Reuel and I were talking about this this morning. Three Iranian newspapers have denied it – *Etemad*, *Shargh*, and there was one more. To me, whether it's that denials, that may be true then.

DUBOWITZ: So, what they're denying, just to be clear to our listeners, is that he's been appointed as the new head of the Supreme National Security Council?

GERECHT: Correct. I mean, if that's true. I mean, we just simply – we simply don't know.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

TAKEYH: We'll, it's been denied fairly strenuously.

DUBOWITZ: But I mean, he's a serious guy. I mean, he was a senior former IRGC commander, former defense minister. He was a longtime advisor to Khamenei.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

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TAKEYH: All of the broadcasting propaganda. Yes, yes. He's a serious guy. But the difference when Reuel says Larijani isn't replaceable, he's right about one sense. Larijani was particularly skilled at beguiling Westerners. Jalili can't do that. Dehghan can't do that, but Qalibaf can and has.

GERECHT: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, has he really? He's certainly better than Jalili, he's certainly better than those who wear their Islamism on their sleeves. So...

TAKEYH: Well, Reuel, Qalibaf is corrupt. He likes shopping sprees in the West. A lot of places in Washington, that's considered pragmatism.

GERECHT: Yes. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I would just note just if it's true that Hossein Dehghan is now the new head of the Supreme National Security Council, he was one of the regime figures long linked by the US to the '83 Beirut bombings that killed 241 American Marines. So, hopefully with that in his resume, he's not going to be able to beguile naive Westerners into thinking that he is some kind of moderate or pragmatist. But again, we've seen over 20 years on this.

GERECHT: Well, I mean, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was involved in that bombing and...

TAKEYH: And many other bombings.

GERECHT: Yes, and many other bombings. And he was beloved by certain folks in Washington.

DUBOWITZ: But get back to your original point, Reuel, which I'd like, Ray, you also to comment on, is this whole idea that you can regenerate the regime as the Israelis are moving systematically daily to eliminate the most senior figures and the most experienced figures. You're skeptical that this is going to leave serious experienced people behind who have the ability to take control of the regime's security apparatus, be able to run a state, run an economy, and deal with what is probably the worst moment in the Islamic Republic history.

GERECHT: Well, they may be able to run it. They may run it right into the ground.

TAKEYH: Mhm.

GERECHT: They're just going to do it less well. And the issue is, given how awful things are surely inside of the Islamic Republic now, mistakes always matter. Some mistakes you don't recover from. So, if the regime is making evermore mistakes, it could get itself in a situation. It's entirely conceivable that you do see once again, substantial demonstrations and the regime is tested and the regime fails. I mean, right now, I think Ray and I would both agree that the odds are in favor of the regime, that we have to assume that what we saw in January can be repeated, but we don't know that. And it is certainly possible that given the degradation that has occurred, that the regime won't handle it as well, and that you could have, you know, some places in the country, the regime could fall.

You could have cities where the regime no longer has controls. These type of things could spark the type of unrest that the regime simply doesn't have the manpower to handle.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

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DUBOWITZ: Well, Ray, let me ask you about that because there's been some discussion about arming the opposition. I think our position at FDD – at least my position has been longstanding has been number one; we need to commit to the territorial integrity of Iran. It's important to keep Iran together as a nation state. Number two is we need to arm the opposition. We need to provide the opposition with what they need in order to face down a brutal security service. And that means weapons. It means communication devices. It means labor strike funds. It means many of the things an opposition needs. Number three is we shouldn't be doing this just for one ethnic group over another ethnic group. This should be the entire opposition, and that would include Arabs and Balochs and Kurds and Azeris and Persians. So, I want you to talk a little bit about that thesis.

Do you believe that we should arm the opposition? If so, should we be arming all of the opposition, assuming that this is operationally and logistically possible? And talk a little bit – and maybe you too Reuel – I'm particularly fascinated by the Azeris, who represent about 20 percent of the population, are very well integrated into the regime, have serious positions within the security apparatus within the government, have not been excluded like the Kurds and the Arabs and the Balochs and others from the spoils of the Islamic Republic. Do you think there's a possibility of the Azeris turning? And if so, what would it take and what are the implications of that for elite cohesion and for elite control over Islamic Republic?

TAKEYH: Well, I would say a couple of things. First of all, during this war, which is still unfolding, Islamic Republic has been uniquely demystified, and it began with killing of Ali Khamenei. And Ali Larijani was trying to do something quite interesting. He was trying to be resolute and grave in the time of uncertainty. He was going out there giving speeches about how Trump should be killed, that Iranians are strong and in defiant, he pointed (inaudible) last Friday in a public demonstration. So, the fact that he was two days killed, it was a heavy blow to the image that he was trying to project – and other decapitations that have happened. There more needs to be done, frankly, because there has not – isn't very capable. But what the Israelis have done is they have removed a lot of seasoned leaders that served for decades. These people, we know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two.

Well, they're not there now. In terms of arming people, I always tend to be rather skeptical of that. Particularly, I think possibility of ethnic uprising that are part – what I worry about whether that would unify the Basij Corps, not behind the regime, but behind the territorial integrity of Iran, because the possibility of ethnic uprising usually leads them to think about dismemberment of the country. And that may be down to the advantage of the regime in some way, but I do worry about that. The question of Azeris, I think Azeris are well integrated into the system. Khamenei was an Azeri. He came from Mashhad.

So, I'm not quite sure I see that as I am going forward. There's a lot of hazards in that, but I mean, Reuel may have different ideas on it. I still sort of had to remain skeptical. Can the revolutionaries without arms? Actually, even the (inaudible) of the Revolution, which I know a little bit about, at the end of the day, there was a lot of violence coming from the opposition. There were urban guerrillas – (inaudible) – and eventually became the nucleus of the revolutionary guards. So, the idea that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 succeeded entirely peacefully is not true. In February – between the 9th to the 11th – 1979, the Battle of Tehran was lost by the military. Not because the military was – that's a different story. Violence was part of – violence from the opposition was part of the 1979 Revolution.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: So Reuel, I want to talk a little bit. I want to dig a bit deeper into this question because certainly, again, I just want to reiterate, I mean, I think it's incredibly important the president of the United States publicly commits to the territorial integrity of Iran. But practically and operationally, I mean, I guess if you start to go down the road of arming various ethnic groups, all ethnic groups, including the Azeris and the Persians, you never know where that's going to end. And that maybe that does end in the fragmentation – balkanization of Iran. But talk a little bit about the importance of each of these ethnic groups. Where are they within the Islamic Republic? And if you're going to, for example, get the Artesh on your side, which I assume is the one that represents the greatest scope of ethnic groups, right? You've got pretty much everybody in the Artesh, whereas in the Guard Corps, in the Ministry of Intelligence, in the IRGC intelligence organization, they're very carefully vetting, and they're probably not letting in ethnic minorities beyond Persians and Azeris.

GERECHT: Yeah. Azeris are certainly in there.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

GERECHT: Well, I mean, one, since the ethnic minorities are at the periphery, you know, obviously if there was some strategy the Israelis adopt to arm the opposition, just de facto, it's so much easier to arm the people at the periphery of the country than it is in the interior. I mean, operationally, logistically, arming Persians, trying to figure all that out is just a hell of a lot harder than arming those at the periphery, particularly for groups like the Kurds and the Baloch who already have organized groups that – I wouldn't – might even go so far as say routinely shoot members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

DUBOWITZ: So, they have weapons already.

GERECHT: They already have weapons.

DUBOWITZ: They're trained, right?

GERECHT: Yeah, they already have weapons. So, I'm not sure that if you add more weaponry to the Baloch or the Kurdish equation, that it makes a significant difference because they have a lot already. The Azeris are a special category. I would argue they're the only ethnic group that could conceivably crack the Islamic Republic – could crack Iran. But I tend to agree with Ray. I mean, these things are very, very hard to gauge accurately because – just because someone expresses ethnic pride as many Azeris do, just because they endure certain ethnic discrimination as Azeris do, it doesn't necessarily mean they want to break with the larger, what you might call Persian *oikumene*, the Persian civilization. I actually think the centripetal eminence of that does work on the Azeris, and they do see themselves as part of that great Iranian experiment. Also, you have the factor, which is not decisive, but it's important, and that's just the intermarriage rate, which is quite large amongst the Azeris and the Persians.

Now, we've seen instances where that doesn't matter. When things ethnically become hot, intermarriage doesn't necessarily stop civil strife. But in the case of the Azeris, you know, their overall position in the Islamic Republic is certainly better than it was under the Shah. That doesn't mean they like the Islamic Republic more, but I mean, there are more people who have more power. So, I'm skeptical that you can – that avenue's going to work. You could try it. I mean, the whole thing about – I don't think it's actually the United States role to tell people, you know, what their own self-determination is. So, if we discover that the ethnic minorities of Iran really don't like being in Iran, then that's going to be, you know, for them and the Persians to decide. My gut reaction, and certainly my historical judgment would be that the Persians will win, and they will win decisively. Now, that process of doing that may, you know, cause internal turmoil for a long time, but I think if the Persians put their mind to it as they have in the past, they will put down the minorities.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerech and Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: I will say one thing. Mark suggested that president can talk about the territorial integrity of Iran. Well, so can the Kurdish factions who are obviously also rebellious. The Kurdish opposition that I have heard have talked about the fact that they want greater cultural autonomy, but they haven't announced the fact that they want their own *peshmerga*. So, it's important for them to commit themselves to territorial cohesion of their country, not president of the United States.

GERECHT: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, that's fair. I want to push a little bit deeper into this because this is all about regime resilience. It's all about – this episode about what it takes to crack the regime, what it does to undermine elite cohesion, and what is it going to take that when Iranians come back to the streets – and I think we all agree they're coming back – they come back under different conditions than they came back – they came in January, and that means two sides of a coin. One side of the coin is there's been enough damage done to the repression apparatus that they're facing a less competent, less ruthless security apparatus than they faced in January. And that has to do now with the weakening of that regime apparatus by Israel.

GERECHT: They're not less ruthless.

DUBOWITZ: Well, less effective. Less ruthlessly effective, if I could put it that way. And the second part of that is that the opposition is coming out stronger. And stronger may mean unarmed, but more Iranians, not hundreds of thousands, but millions, or it can mean hundreds of thousands of Iranians, but this time armed and with more of a fighting chance against a weakened security apparatus. So, if that's sort of the proposition on the table, the question is how do you get there? And I want to push a little bit, Reuel, into this question of the Azeris. If it's fair to say that 80 percent of the country today opposes the regime and 20 percent supports it, and maybe that number is – of opposition is even higher because of the slaughter in January, then it probably is a safe assumption to assume that a high percentage of Azeris oppose the regime.

Maybe it's not 80, maybe it's 70, maybe it's 50.

GERECHT: No, I think that's entirely fair. It's probably a very large number.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So if it's a large number of Azeris who oppose the regime and those Azeris actually are more integrated than the other ethnic groups in the regime, if you were in the CIA today or in Mossad and you were running a strategy to try and fracture the regime, then you would want to target the very people who oppose the regime who are part of the regime. And that would yield the Azeris as probably your low-hanging fruit. Then if you were going to run this out, you would want to actually focus on Tabriz, right, which is a major Azeri city. And you would want to see if you could actually flood weapons and support over the border between Azerbaijan and Iran, where we know the Israelis have been operating for years using Azerbaijan as a base of operations. And then you could start imagining what an operational plan would look like with the support of the Azerbaijani government – maybe the Azerbaijani military – or just at least their green light for you to flood weapons and other support into the Azeri population in the north.

And then you can start building an Azeri force that actually has the ability to fracture the support base. That's my thesis, and now I want to throw it back out to the two of you to assess why or why not that would work.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

GERECHT: Well, I mean, I don't know. I mean, I don't think I can answer that question. It's these things you never know until you try them. And, you know, there were folks who thought that the integration of Yugoslavia was such – where you had Croats marrying Serbs, et cetera, et cetera, that integration was sufficient to keep the country from falling apart, turned out to be false. It's possible that the, you know, bubbling distaste that you see sometimes in Azerbaijan for the central government and for Persians might, you know, reify itself into a substantial armed opposition. I don't know. I suspect if you try, you'll find out fairly quickly whether it has any traction or not. It's – I think this is one of those questions that unless you try it, you simply won't know. We know that in the case of the Baloch, yes, it's there because they routinely shoot revolutionary guardsmen late at night if they happen to go off their bases.

We know that the Kurds do the same thing at times – less often. So yes, we know that. So far, it hasn't mattered at all. Now, I suppose if you've got a larger number to do it, then maybe it could have some effect on the periphery, but the Azeris are the only ones that could conceivably break it. I mean, the population of south Tehran is substantially Azeri, maybe even more than live in Tabriz.

I just have no idea – but – whether that would work there, for example. I mean, for these things to work, there does, I think, have to be some sort of territorial integrity. That's why the Arabs, I don't think, would work anymore because there's been intentional, substantial Persian immigration into the Arab zone of Iran where they – the Persians may now be a majority.

TAKEYH: I'll just say one thing – it's not to interrupt Reuel. (Inaudible) interrupt Reuel. He appropriates three names for himself in every piece.

GERECHT: Blame your mother. Blame your mother.

TAKEYH: I would say in Mark's question that we want hundreds and millions of people in the street. My experience on this – I look at everything to the prism of the '79 Revolution, which may not be the right prism, but you don't need millions of people on the streets. During the Iranian revolt, in a year and a half, the numbers were 1,000, 5,000. Occasionally, the numbers were quite higher when you get to the latter pictures of revolution. What you need is resilience. It's 5,000 people to the street in every city for a long period of time. That's what breaks the regime. The regime has dealt with millions of people in the street. They have not dealt with a protracted opposition movement. They have dealt with large opposition protest movements. And I think that's what gradually erodes the security base. The psychological battering that they take day after day for a long period of time, months, maybe year or so, of dealing with oppositions.

I think if they have (inaudible) like 2009, they're (inaudible) suppressing that. If the regime is capable of repressing opposition that is sporadic. In my opinion, it's not capable of repressing opposition that is systematic.

DUBOWITZ: Well, let me throw out another scenario, because this is where I love having you both on the show. It's not just for analysis and for history, though that's always interesting, but it's also for action plans. So, let me give you an action plan scenario. And to describe this, phase one is major military operations. Reuel, you said maybe another few weeks, there's still a lot to hit, and Battle of Hormuz is obviously a very important part of phase one. Phase two, which is already underway, is the Israeli targeting of regime security forces and leadership. This is kind of the decapitation campaign, which also hopefully is leading to some fracturing within the security apparatus. And that is – let's assume that's ongoing after major military operations conclude. And phase three would be when Iranians come back to the streets in whatever numbers they come back and wherever they do come back in Iran, that they're coming back with support from the United States and Israel. Not only support for them on the ground, but maybe the Israeli Air Force continues to fly over the Iranian skies.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

And while the people are in the streets, if this can be coordinated properly, the Israelis are still striking at the repression apparatus. And maybe from the air, maybe using cyber, maybe from the ground with Mossad operating and Mossad agents operating, that what you see is a confluence...

TAKEYH: Or at military bases.

DUBOWITZ: Or on military bases. Right. Can you assess the effectiveness of that kind of three-phased approach where what we're actually envisioning is Israeli air power, Mossad ground power, in combination with Iranians on the streets, targeting the regime and overthrowing it and continuing it to decapitate it and fracture it, and ultimately leading to what we three have dreamed about for a long time, which is the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

(CROSSTALK)

GERECHT: I mean, I'd probably start with the last one at the very end. It's hard for me to foresee how air power could help protestors given the close proximity of the security forces and those protestors to do...

DUBOWITZ: Well, let me stop you there.

GERECHT: ... to do that with jets.

DUBOWITZ: Well, I knew you were going to talk about jets.

GERECHT: Yeah, I was going to give you...

DUBOWITZ: What about drones?

GERECHT: Yeah. I mean, no, it's possible, but even with drones, I think, you know, what do the drones have roughly – say they have a 250-pound warhead on them – or I don't know if they've got those that they can use at rapid automatic fire accurately. It's still pretty bloody close. I mean, friendly fire kills a lot of American soldiers all the time. I mean, one of the highest casualty rates in World War II was our friendly fire. So, you know, it's tough to imagine a scenario like...

TAKEYH: I actually think I have a slight disagreement with Reuel because I think the strategy has more plausibility. Again, I go back to 1979. I live in the 70s.

GERECHT: No, you live between 1978 and 1980. You live there.

TAKEYH: A little earlier, maybe it's right. When – during a revolution, the royalist forces, royalist forces were stretched across Iran, when they tried to get reinforcement from other places. That reinforcement broke down, it faced opposition, and so forth. So, I think – you have to know where all the garrisons are, and some of them are on the periphery of Tehran. If there is a protest, you can actually target garrisons and police precincts that are not necessarily openly located, and that essentially prevents the regime from bringing in reinforcements. If this strategy is carefully calibrated and nuanced, I think it will help the protests – help at least attenuate the ability of the regime to bring in cadre and reinforcement. So, I think there is room for that. Not necessarily attacking protestors in proximity of the security forces but attacking the location where the security forces are originating from.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

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GERECHT: Yeah. I mean, I assume they've already done that for the most part. I mean, I would guess now that certainly the Basij, if not the Guard Corps, are operating out of homes, that they've decided to dispense with bases because the bases keep getting blown up. So, I think they've dispersed. Now, whether they will operate effectively in that manner over a long period of time is a different issue. And I could certainly see situations that if they're dispersed, that they could actually lose unit cohesion and forces at play – psychological forces could work against the regime. But I don't know. I mean, obviously if they get intelligence to say the Guard Corps and the Basij are gathering in large numbers and they're away from people, then go ahead and shoot them.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's what we're seeing now reported. I mean, *The Wall Street Journal* just a couple days ago, a very good, interesting and quite detailed report on what's happening on the ground. And the upshot of it is that because they've been striking, for example, at Basij bases, the Basij are leaving their bases and then they're dispersing. And once they're dispersed, Iranians are recognizing them and calling in to their contacts somewhere abroad and providing information about where they've been dispersed. And then either airstrikes or drone strikes are eliminating these Basij members.

GERECHT: Yeah. I mean, tents in the woods or out in the desert, I mean, that's a bad idea, but have at it. My only concern would be if they're dispersed inside of cities. That's a little – that's a little bit more challenging.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it sounds like just from the reporting – again, I don't want to be too optimistic here – but it's just interesting to me from the reporting that because the Iranian population is now seeing these Basij out there, in fact. And a number of them are manning checkpoints. The information is then being relayed, and then the Israelis are striking Basij who are manning checkpoints and actually taking out dozens of Basij militia inside Tehran manning checkpoints based on information provided by the Iranian opposition. And so, you could imagine that strategy on steroids where we move past phase one and major military operations; Israel continues to degrade the security apparatus. And at some point, when the Iranians are ready to come back to the streets, Israel is able either through jets or drones to strike at, as Ray said, military bases, the movement of large numbers of Basij militiamen across roads and highways, and then with precise information provided by Iranians actually target Basij at checkpoints.

And therefore, when Iranians are now moving through the streets, whereas in January, they would encounter at that checkpoint hundreds of Basij who would mow them down. Maybe that checkpoint now has far fewer militia manning it.

GERECHT: I mean, it's possible. I mean, I think that the primary calculation you'd have to look at would be the American political one of whether the Americans are in this for that period of time. The operations that you're describing sound to me like operations over months. I don't know whether the – President Trump thinks that way and would support the Israelis doing that. I don't know. It's why – it's an open question. I don't think the Israelis would be able to operate like that if Washington said no. So, that's really a question of the president's commitment, of how he wants to approach this, and is he prepared to take months? In my mind, that seems doubtful, but I don't know. I mean, wars always elongate.

DUBOWITZ: Alright. So, I want to just move to the final phase of this and maybe Ray, you could weigh in here. So, you gentlemen are writing another piece and – you're always writing pieces together, you're a great partnership. I feel a little bit...

GERECHT: Now, now.

DUBOWITZ: What's the word? For – now, now.

(LAUGHTER)

TAKEYH: He's grateful to me for putting Reuel to work.



Cracking the Regime

March 19, 2026

Featuring Reuel Marc Gerech and Ray Takeyh

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DUBOWITZ: Grateful to you for putting Reuel to work. A little jealous because I used to be Reuel's writing partner and then he wisely selected you as my replacement.

TAKEYH: I don't think that's...

DUBOWITZ: A, because I think you're better writer. B, you know more about Iran, so I don't blame him.

TAKEYH: I'm sure both of Reuel and I have at some point been told, "Why are you writing with that guy?"

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I'm not sure it's great for either of your reputations. But let's get to the piece you're writing. Tell us about that piece, Ray, and what the main thesis of that piece is.

TAKEYH: The main thesis of the piece – we start with a historical analogy. 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the United States decimated the Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, yet this incredible military success was translated to a total defeat at home. And we thought this is potentially something that Donald Trump faces because it is a consensus in the national press corps and established commentary everywhere else that this war is lost, it's losing, it's a bad idea. And there's a gap between military success and public political perception. And we essentially argue, first of all, that the United States is winning this war and Iran is losing this war. If it stops right now, the United States won the war – the United States and Israel. And then we go into some of the ramifications of this war for the Islamic Republic that comes out of this conflict along the lines that we have talked about – radicalized, but less nimble. Militant, but incapable of ruling the country. And therefore, it may actually not be able to forestall an opposition movement from succeeding.

So, essentially it goes into all those arguments. I think Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has to be (inaudible) today, is an extraordinary visionary leader. A lot of beating up in America, and I know a lot of us don't like him, but on this issue, he has stretched the boundaries of our imagination in a manner that should cause everybody to reconsider their assumptions happily – practical assumptions. The questions that we ask that Mark raises – can the Islamic Republic people be withdrawn without (inaudible), those are legitimate questions, and actually that's what everybody should be thinking about. So, Israelis and President Trump have defied our imagination. However, the Trump administration has been uniquely maladroit in trying to salvage political victory after military success. The president has offered a variety of objectives for this war, some of them legitimate, like containing Iran, some absurd, like getting rid of the ex-supreme leader. Now, the Iranian people will get there (inaudible). So, in that sense, its messages and the sort of establishmentarian opposition to Donald Trump is costing this war.

It is a legitimate observation that most American people, based on the polling I have seen, tend to (inaudible) this war, and they shouldn't.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, Reuel, I want to go to you to wrap us up. I mean, it's interesting with just the comment about polls. I mean, I think from President Trump's perspective, he's got overwhelming support for this war from the Republican base and from the MAGA base. I mean, it's like high 80s, low 90s. I've seen various polls of where independents are and they're increasingly supportive, and Democrats are completely opposed. I mean, with the exception of John Fetterman and three other people in Pennsylvania, it seems like the Democratic Party has made its business to completely oppose this war in Iran. But just building on what Ray said in terms of absolute military success, still much more to do, but heading in that direction, but the potential for political defeat. Any final comments on that?



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GERECHT: Well, I think the president has probably poorly prepared the ground for the likely future of the United States and the Persian Gulf. I mean, the United States is going to be, again, more than I would say in the past, it's going to be the guardian of the Gulf. We are going to have to stand sentry. The president's rhetoric certainly in the past prepared the American people to go the other way. And I don't think Americans fully probably appreciate the extent to which the United States is now reengaged in the Middle East. Now, you can have a long war, and you can have, you know, long pauses, and I suspect that's what we may see unless the Islamic Republic collapses. That we're not going to have an end to this war where we go back to normalcy. I think we're – we could easily have an extended shooting war where the Americans are running convoys and the Iranians are attempting to intervene in any malicious way they possibly can, but not effectively. Not enough to roil the oil markets, but certainly enough to cause the Emiratis pain with their desire to have the UAE be a tourist base.

And I mean, you can always see scenarios where the occasional cruise missile and drone gets through air defenses. I mean, I think this may be a fact of life for the future, and it's certainly one the Saudis and Emiratis don't like, but I think that's where we're probably going. And is the President of the United States going to make arguments for Americans that we need to stand guard in the Persian Gulf now and for as long as the Islamic Republic lasts? I don't know. That would be a challenge for him.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting, and to conclude to this – and I'll be speaking to a lot of our Gulf allies – my impression, and it's been heartening, to say the least, after many years of trying to convince them that playing nice with Islamic Republic would only end in tears and that it was inevitable that the Islamic Republic would attack them. They finally have been attacked, all of them. Obviously, the Emirates are top of the list. I think over 2,000 missiles and drones have been fired at the UAE. But what we're discovering is that to varying degrees, some of them are stepping up in some pretty interesting ways. I mean, I think the Emirates are showing pretty incredible capabilities with our help and Israeli help to defeat the firing of missiles and drones at their cities. I think things will emerge after this war that will underscore that their commitment to this campaign was much greater than people suspected.

We've even seen the Qataris, shockingly, running like pro-Trump, pro-war pieces in *Al Jazeera*, and that only happens when the al-Thani family...

GERECHT: Some of them are quite good, actually.

DUBOWITZ: And quite some good pieces, but that only happens when the family calls the editor of *Al Jazeera* and says, "Please shift the narrative from bashing Israel and bashing America to bashing the Islamic Republic of Iran and praising America and Israel." We've seen the Kuwaitis with very strong statements. We've seen the Saudis doing some things that are interesting that I think will also be revealed after this war is over. So, what we've seen is the Islamic Republic, in some respects, uniting the Gulf with us and with Israel, which portends potentially some pretty remarkable military integration in the future and maybe greater political normalization. I'm actually optimistic that coming out of this war, even though America may have to stand guard in the Gulf, I think we're going to see a number of countries normalizing their relations with Israel in ways that will surprise many people. So, I'd like to end on that positive note with you usual Debbie Downers, you weren't as – you weren't as depressing as usual.

TAKEYH: We like to rebuttal that point.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: I'm not even going to give you that opportunity because we're going to end on a positive note. I'll have you back to talk about the consequences for the Gulf and your skepticism that they may actually be there. But again, thank you guys. I appreciate your time and all the great work that you've done and go forth and multiply as they say in Genesis.



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GERECHT: Thank you.

DUBOWITZ: The Islamic Republic today is weaker than it was months ago. Leadership has been hit, military degraded, legitimacy eroded. Regimes like this don't fall just because they're under pressure. They fall, and they lose control. The question isn't just how hard we hit the regime from the outside, it's where something breaks on the inside. Because until it does, the regime isn't out. I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been *The Iran Breakdown*. Until next time when we break it down all over again.

END