



Regime Revisionism: Tehran's War Before the Iran War: Subtitle

Month Day, Year

Featuring Jay Solomon and Negar Mojtahedi

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to *The Iran Breakdown*. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz. As a war with Iran – and now, at least as we record this, the ceasefire – dominates the headlines. You could be forgiven for forgetting how we got here. So, let's rewind. Before the missiles came the narrative. Back in January, the regime carried out what was likely the deadliest crackdown in modern Iranian history, gunning down tens of thousands of Iranian protesters in the streets. But repression did not stop at Iran's borders. As the regime crushed dissent at home, it launched a parallel war abroad. An information campaign designed to turn a domestic uprising into a so-called 'CIA-Mossad conspiracy.' In other words, while the regime was killing its own people, it was rewriting the story, taking control of the narrative, recasting reality, rewriting history in real time. Because for the Islamic Republic, narrative control is not cosmetic, it is strategic survival.

If you can redefine reality, you improve your chances of staying in power. Fast forward to today: even as the ceasefire takes hold for now, that same playbook is still in motion. The regime is working overtime to frame this 40-day war as a victory. Which brings us to the central question: is this simply propaganda? Or has information warfare become one of the regime's core pillars of survival? Jay Solomon and Negar Mojtahedi have been investigating exactly that in a joint project for *Iran International* and *The Free Press*, where they both contribute. They're with us today on *The Iran Breakdown*. So, let's break it down. Jay, Negar, welcome.

SOLOMON: Nice to be here.

DUBOWITZ: Good to have you back, Jay.

SOLOMON: Great to be back.

DUBOWITZ: I just want to note that behind Negar is your book, *The Iran Wars*. A great book.

MOJTAHEDI: It's the best book on Iran, I have to say. As an Iranian who's read a lot of books on Iran, that's probably one of the best books you can read.

DUBOWITZ: I agree. And not just because he mentions me in the book in surprisingly a flattering way, which I'm not used to, but also because it really is. It truly – I've always wanted Jay to write *The Iran Wars* number two.

SOLOMON: Part deux.

DUBOWITZ: Because there's a lot to be said. So, Negar, first time on the show. Thanks for joining. I've been on your show.

MOJTAHEDI: Yes, many times.

DUBOWITZ: And I've really enjoyed our conversations in the past. It's great to finally meet you in person.

MOJTAHEDI: Likewise.

DUBOWITZ: Let's start with a little bit about your background and your history.

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah. So, I was born in Canada, and my family had to flee Iran in 1979. And they lived all over Europe before they settled in Canada and had me. And I've grown up with stories of the revolution from my own family, from neighbors, from this large community that we have in Vancouver, Canada. It's something that I've always wanted to be part of. I've always wanted to help people in my family's homeland. It's always been part of me. So, this is more than just a job. This is actually my life. So, even in my free time, this is not something that I can just switch off. All the books that I read, all the conversations that I have, my friends – everything's always about Iran, and it's always in my heart and, you know, front and center. So, I ended up doing 17 years in Canadian journalism. When the Women Life Freedom Movement happened, I started to really localize and nationalize a lot of what was happening in Iran to Canada.



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And ended up doing a year-long investigation on the Iranian regime's influence in Canada and interference from the regime, which led to eventually the Liberal government of Canada designating the IRGC as a terrorist network. And eventually I made my way to *Iran International*, where I helped with the English department.

DUBOWITZ: Say a few words about *Iran International*. We've actually had some of your colleagues on *The Iran Breakdown* before, but just for new listeners, remind everybody what is *Iran International* and talk a little bit about the incredibly important role it plays?

MOJTAHEDI: Well, we cover Iran news because they can't do it freely in Iran. So, we're trying to do our best to amplify those voices and the real stories that are out there. And unfortunately, it comes at great peril. Many of my colleagues have been under murder-for-hire plots. One of my colleagues was stabbed, although we don't know if there's a definitive connection between the regime. That is in, you know, the courts...

DUBOWITZ: That was in London, right?

MOJTAHEDI: That was in London. But I mean, the likelihood of it is pretty obvious given what we do, and the fact that they did put out a statement inside Iran that we have the right to kill *Iran International* journalists anywhere in the world that they happen to reside. I should note that the individual, Esmail Khatib, who said that on state TV was killed during the recent airstrikes. He was one of the targets. And as of now, they're talking about having what we call in Farsi, *mosadareh khaneh*, to confiscate the homes of people who work for *Iran International* inside Iran, who may still have property or family inside Iran.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, no, *Iran International* – and it's highly relevant for our discussion today – has done a – really remarkable job of news and analysis and providing, I think, a counter to the regime's narrative machine.

MOJTAHEDI: And can I add – not just the regime, but also Western media too.

DUBOWITZ: Yes.

MOJTAHEDI: Because a lot of what I see in Western media is mimicking the voices from inside the regime – like having Mohammad Marandi, who's a propagandist for the regime. Having a lot of people from the Iran Influence Network and the [Iran] Expert Initiative that Jay Solomon and my manager, Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, investigated, I think it was three years ago now. So, a lot of those voices still continue to be in Western media. We do our best to give you an unfiltered, real view of what's happening.

DUBOWITZ: If folks are not watching or reading *Iran International* – and it's available in English as well, if you don't speak Persian – I highly, highly commend it. It is truly superb for understanding what's actually going on in Iran. OK. Well, you jumped right into the topic we want to talk about today, which is narrative control – again, not just through Iranian government-controlled media, but also through Western media. And I want to take you back to the January protests and why they matter for today. So, Jay, maybe start us there, because that's really the beginning of your investigative piece that you and Negar did together. Why are the January protests important today, as we are now in April and we're just are in a ceasefire concluding – or maybe not concluding – the 40-day war that has been ongoing?

SOLOMON: I mean, this crisis really kind of started in January because you had an economic collapse. The currency was almost worthless. You had these protests that started in the bazaar because trade was ground to a halt, and they then spread nationally and became very much calls for the regime to fall. And then – was it the 8th, 9th, 10th?

MOJTAHEDI: It was the 8th and 9th, yeah.



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SOLOMON: Over a two-day period, estimates between 30,000 and 40,000 were killed. And it was at that point where President Trump kind of first said, "Oh, we're coming to help." So, I think the war that happened, in a lot of ways, started in January. But I think historically this was the largest massacre in modern Iranian history, and the numbers were just staggering – that many people killed in such a short amount of time. And I think when it happened at the time, I was like, "Oh my God, this is going to be a massive issue for months, years to come," because just the death toll was so high. But then really quickly, the narratives started to flip. The regime started to activate their narrative, and you really did start to have this – in the West this idea that the regime was just defending itself because this was an uprising that was spawned by the CIA and the Mossad, and it was a Western – essentially a Western coup, almost.

And I know I started to think, "God, how is this narrative taking hold? It sounds so preposterous. It's clearly just an effort by the regime to deflect." And that's when Negar and I started trying to understand: how does this narrative take hold in the West so quickly when there was so much evidence of a massacre? There's an organization called the NCRI, which really focuses on data, and they worked with us to try find – to try to really forensically find where this idea that the Mossad or the CIA was behind it. Like where did it start? Who generated it? When did they do it? And how did it get amplified and then picked up in the West? And we really did see there was a concerted effort. Even before the crackdown, they started to seed stories in Iranian state media that the CIA, the Mossad – in some ways it's not surprising; they do that a lot. But this was clearly – this massacre they were planning for, and the information side of it was really part of it. And as we pieced it together, you could see them starting to seed this idea even before the massacre. Then they shut down all internal communications, and this message gets really amplified internationally, partly by Iranian sources, but also from bots tied to the Russians, we found and tied to other intelligence services.

So, this idea of Mossad and CIA involvement starts to get amplified by – what we would say inauthentic means. But then the Iranians are smart. They know our political discourse. They know whether it was far-left activists or far-right activists for their own political and ideological reasons, were more than happy to start generating this idea that this wasn't really an authentic uprising – this was generated from outside. This wasn't really a massacre – the IRGC defending itself. When we started to see it from Nick Fuentes to the Young Turks – left to right – both converging on whether it's anti-Israel, from the left maybe a pro-Islamic Republic type idea, you see it start to get assimilated into our own discourse. And I found it interesting because, previous investigations I've done, you could see the Iran Experts Initiative – that was a very coordinated operation. In this sense, in some ways, the regime just needs to put out this message, amplify it, and knowing that our own politics will sort of take care of the rest. And so now I think you really have a belief in a pretty large part of this society – in our society that there wasn't – isn't really a massacre. It was the regime defending itself against the CIA and the Mossad.

So, we really tracked it from beginning to end, and you could see how on the one hand it was really coordinated, but on the other hand it didn't need to be coordinated, because they understand our politics and our open system plays to their strengths in a lot of ways.

MOJTAHEDI: It was interesting because it was really the West that helped amplify and spread this. It may have been seeded in Iran, but at the end of the day, it was Western influencers – again, far right, far left. They all share this hatred towards Israel, and they were the ones who really helped expand this. And then it traveled back to Iran, where it sort of gained, quote unquote, "legitimacy." When you would have the foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, on Fox News, on CNN, repeat this narrative as fact or a claim, then it traveled inward and back outward again to the West, where they then used what he said as some sort of factual basis to spread this narrative.



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DUBOWITZ: Well, that's what I find fascinating. Again, it's not that the regime seized on this narrative, because the regime has for decades – I mean, the regime blamed Mossad and CIA for every protest that I can remember, dating back to the student protests of the late 1990s. And again in 2009, the Green Revolution, and all the protests – which I call the Blue Revolution – when blue-collar workers rose up in 2017, '18 to '19; Women Life Freedom in 2022, 2023 – it's always the Mossad and CIA. That's very typical of what the regime says. But it is fascinating to me that over the years, they have become so much more sophisticated in understanding the political fractures and fissures within Western society and leveraging that in order to amplify these narratives. What changed in terms of regime sophistication? Is this a sort of new generation of younger Iranians inside the regime who understand how to leverage social media?

Can we date this back, Jay – you covered this – to Javad Zarif, who was the former foreign minister of Iran during the 2013 to 2015 nuclear negotiations and who set up or supported this Iran Expert Initiative? And maybe you could talk about what that was, what it is, and how that actually formed and how it informs what the regime does today.

SOLOMON: Well, I think social media and the media is changing so fast. If *The Washington Post*, like, collapsing and all then these new media companies emerging – that in itself makes things different. The media landscape has changed so fast. Everyone's still trying to understand it. But because there are so many more voices – a lot of them are not like your traditional media. They're all either biased or they have a very political angle. I think if you're in Iran and you're studying that, you probably understand that you can feed into that environment much more than you could a few years ago. It's hard to get *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Journal* – traditionally – to go with unverified stuff that's just getting pumped out in the social media ether. Now it's not that hard to do that at all. So, I think that's something that's definitely changed.

I definitely think too what's different between this and other sorts of claims of foreign interference – I think we reported, and you probably know it too, that the Iranians seemed to be planning for this massacre for a few months. You had the 12-Day War in June; you had Reza Pahlavi kind of getting more involved. I've talked to people who are really close to the Iranian regime who said this thing had been planned for a while, and part of that is the information side of it. So, I don't think you can look at just what the Basij or the IRGC was doing internally as far as preparing for this kind of nationwide crackdown. They were also putting in place the information side, knowing that if you kill that many people, usually there's a price to pay. And there has been in this war in a lot of ways. But on the information side, you just didn't hear that much. You didn't hear the calls the ICC – the criminal court getting involved or the – within just a few days or weeks, it almost seemed to dissipate. I think part of that was because their information warfare was pretty sophisticated and successful.

DUBOWITZ: But Negar, I want to ask you – in terms of the sophistication of the information operations that the regime runs, who in the regime runs this? Is this out of the foreign ministry? Is this kind of spearheaded by the current foreign minister, Araghchi? In the old days, it was spearheaded by Javad Zarif when he was foreign minister in a different media environment. But I would argue – and I want to go back to this, Jay, because I think Zarif also did a pretty good job in a more traditional media environment of mendacity, and deception, and narrative control. But in the new environment, is this being run out of the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]? Is it being run out of the IRGC, sort of, cyber influence operations command?



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MOJTAHEDI: They're all kind of working hand in hand together on this. But Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who you mentioned, was a big part of this, and he continues to be – as you mentioned – the connection between the January massacre and what we're seeing right now in terms of this narrative switch of "Iran is winning this war." So, having him on major media outlets obviously does a lot to fan the flames, so to speak. And also, traditional state media in Iran as well, right? Because a lot of this, as Jay mentioned, was seeded in state media before the actual massacre happened, because they were anticipating that something – that a bloodbath would occur. And then having Western influencers under your thumb – like the Young Turks, like Max Blumenthal – and then these, Megatron_ron and AdamMedia, who are Russian bots, added to it. So, there was a mix of different things and different factions that all came together.

And at the end of the day, unfortunately, I think a lot of it has to do that it served people's own political grievances. In some ways, they wanted to believe this. And it didn't help that there were amplifiers we found in our investigation. One was former Secretary of State and Head of CIA Mike Pompeo, as well as the Mossad Farsi account. Both before the actual massacre occurred and when the protests were beginning had made comments online that were – you could see – part of the psychological warfare game they were playing with Iran. One was the Mossad Farsi, it was on December 29th, saying, "We are with you on the streets." Obviously, again, going back to psychological warfare. And Mike Pompeo – I'm paraphrasing – had said something along the lines of, "For every Iranian protester, there is a Mossad agent by your side." And then Iranian state media and Abbas Araghchi specifically used that as an example to justify what they were saying. And I had people, non-Iranians, come up to me in Canada and tell me, "Oh, well, look, Mike Pompeo said this. Look, this is the Mossad Farsi account. They said this, therefore it must be true." So, that's another big problem.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, I would hope – and I don't know if it's true – I would hope that CIA and Mossad were helping Iranians, because for decades Iranians have gone to the streets...

MOJTAHEDI: Of course.

DUBOWITZ: ...Defenseless, without any support from America or anybody else in the West.

MOJTAHEDI: But that's very different than what caused the actual uprising, right?

DUBOWITZ: Correct. So that's what I want to get to.

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Right. As I said, I've hoped for many years that we would provide support to Iranians. But what actually precipitated the January uprising – I think, Jay, as you alluded to – was significant economic grievances, political grievances, social grievances. And interestingly, it was the Bazaaris, the merchants in Tehran, who are traditionally part of the support base of the regime, who were the first ones to go on strike, the first ones to protest in January. And from there it proliferated to other Iranian demographic groups who joined into those protests. So, it actually started by an element of the regime's own support base.

MOJTAHEDI: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And then others joined into that. So...



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MOJTAHEDI: It became 47 years of repression and anger and a life that people don't want to live, that was just bottled up, that came out on the streets. And it was because for the first time they felt that they had support. They felt that they had a leader. Women Life Freedom was very decentralized. You didn't have one figurehead. You had the Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi, in this case. You had Donald Trump say, word for word, "If you shoot, we'll shoot you back. We are with you. Take over your institutions." So, to the them, as the Iranians, they felt very emboldened by all of this, and they thought that they had support for the very first time. So, everything just spilled out.

SOLOMON: One other thing I'd like to add is there's an imbalance, in some ways, in this particular instance, where our system is open. We have an open democratic system. People are saying all sorts of stuff. On the Iranian side, which had shut down essentially all communications; there was no sort of internal communication. So, you could see the Iranian side using our open discourse – whether it's a tweet by the Mossad account or something Pompeo says – and weaponizing it against us, while they're keeping their side totally under the thumb. So, in this age of information warfare, in these despotic regimes almost have an advantage, because they can pick and choose and use our own debate, whether it's discourse in Israel – which is very vibrant – or in the US, you know there's – people are always saying crazy stuff that you can certainly weaponize it pretty easily. And that's part of what happened with the January uprising.

DUBOWITZ: So probably not surprising, but I do find interesting because you mentioned Russian bots. To what extent, in your investigation, did you discover that Russia, China, potentially Qatar – three countries that have a long history of running influence operations inside the United States, with different objectives but all with sort of the same playbook, which is: let's identify the fractures and fissures in American society, and then how do we intensify them, because the more we intensify them and wider them, the more we weaken America's democracy, and a weaker democracy means a weaker adversary. To what extent did you find the Russians, the Chinese – Jay, I know you've done a lot of work on the Qataris – specifically involved in this information operation? And to the extent that they weren't, is this very similar to some of the other information operations you've investigated over the years?

SOLOMON: Well, there were definitely – what were the names of those bots again?

MOJTAHEDI: Megatron_ron, AdamMedia – people that I had never heard of. And I looked, and they had half a million followers. I'm thinking, what is this? And at one point his account was disabled, and then two days later he somehow has a million followers.

DUBOWITZ: And this is Russian?

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah, Russian bots.

SOLOMON: In this case it was really the Russian, kind of – maybe there was some Chinese as well, but I guess it's how you look at it. You have just, kind of, like, the bot networks which kind of amplify inauthentic, whatever material. Then you had influencers here in the US, like Max Blumenthal.

MOJTAHEDI: Who did it because it really built up their own followings, at the end of the day, too, as well. A lot of it was all their own self-interest.

SOLOMON: Right. But some of these influencers had been in Iran or had ties with Russia.

DUBOWITZ: Blumenthal was taken to Iran.

MOJTAHEDI: Yes, he was.

DUBOWITZ: On a state-sponsored trip.



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MOJTAHEDI: Where he went to the synagogue and spoke to the Jewish community, having an "authentic" conversation.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Authentic conversations – as someone who has been a vehement opponent – I would say adversary of the Jewish state. But he's got also a huge following. And I think, Negar, to your point, it really does help these people monetize their social media accounts and build followings. And unfortunately, there's a massive audience – as we know from Tucker Carlson, Nick Fuentes, and others who've really moved in a more extreme direction because there's a lot of money to be made and a lot of influence to be leveraged.

But this is – with the exception of some of these social media influencers who are individuals who are there for the money and for ideological affinity, these are really state-sponsored. I mean, these are nation-states that have influence operation arms, as they have cyber arms, as they have militaries. This is really an instrument of warfare. And they just seem so good at it, and we seem so bad at it, Jay.

SOLOMON: I think part of it was – I was saying earlier – if you have an open system, you're at a disadvantage in some ways, because it's harder to penetrate the Iranian system when they've shut down everything. So, in the battlefield of information, particularly related to January, I think you had a totally uneven battlefield. One side could go after the other, while the other side was black. But I do think...

DUBOWITZ: But we're even bad at it in fellow democracies, in our own democracy. I mean, we don't do information operations inside our own country, but there's no reason we shouldn't be doing information campaigns in other Western democracies to support US national security objectives. I don't see much evidence that the US government is particularly effective at this. The Trump administration, I think wrongly, has shut down some of the institutions that were involved in the battle of ideas.

MOJTAHEDI: Well, and also the most recent tweet by President Donald Trump about – that I saw, that you then corrected on X to make it more effective. Why couldn't that come from the US administration? It had to come from you – the corrected version – where President Donald Trump said that he was going to, what was it, take Iran back to the Stone Age and obliterate the civilization. Now, he may have meant the Islamic Republic theocracy – at least that's what I'm hoping – but it wasn't said that way, and it doesn't help. And again, when you do that, you're helping the Iranian regime. They can weaponize that. It's almost like you're giving them a gift. So, why is it that they couldn't put something out like what you had when you corrected his tweet to the Islamic Republic, the civilization that has taken the Iranians hostage for all these years? So, I think a lot of it comes from their own faults as well.

DUBOWITZ: I keep telling President Trump to send his Truth posts to me first for editing and vetting, and he just doesn't.

MOJTAHEDI: And it's not just him. Even Pete Hegseth had tweeted something along the lines of "stone age." And I saw a bunch of other Congressmen the night before the deadline saying – what was it? "It's bridge and end to civilization day tomorrow," or "eve of bridge and end to civilization day." I mean, things like that don't help when you say it. Because when you tell the Iranians that help is on the way and we're here to help you, when you see that kind of narrative come out, well guess what? These types of regimes are going to use it against you.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, in defense of the administration – and I think it's worth putting on the record – is in January, as the regime was slaughtering tens of thousands of Iranians and I believe was the largest two-day massacre not just in modern Iranian...

MOJTAHEDI: World. In world history.



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DUBOWITZ: World history. I think the only thing that comes close – I've said this on the show before – is the Nazi murder of 32,000 Jews in two days at Babi Yar in Ukraine in 1941. Just the scope of the slaughter is incomprehensible. And people were calling for Trump to bomb Iran and go after the regime.

MOJTAHEDI: And he did.

DUBOWITZ: Well...

MOJTAHEDI: Eventually.

DUBOWITZ: That's exactly right. And that was my point. He didn't in January. And a lot of the critics of the president said that was a big mistake, that he chickened out and, "There goes TACO again." Well, in February, he did. As you say, in February he came, and he came with much greater force.

MOJTAHEDI: And he acknowledged the number of people who were killed. That's also a big deal too, right? I mean, he acknowledged it, and that means something to Iranian people. And he had it in his State of the Union address. That's also a very big deal.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I would say President Trump has spoken about the Iranian people more than any other president.

MOJTAHEDI: Of course, 100 percent, and supported them in that sense. Whereas we know with previous administrations – with Barack Obama during the Green Revolution, I heard, "We're watching you," to the Iranian regime. That was it. "We're watching you."

DUBOWITZ: They were silent. I think President Obama, to his credit, admitted years later that that was a big mistake, but he was following the advice of his strategic communications advisor, yeah, guru, Ben Rhodes.

Speaking of Ben Rhodes because actually the Iran echo chamber, the famous expression of what Ben Rhodes created back in 2013, '14, '15 – Jay, you were following at the time for *The Wall Street Journal* what was going on in the Iran nuclear negotiations. Narrative control is not something we only see today in the social media age. We saw it in those nuclear negotiations in a different age, in a different media age. But Ben Rhodes created this Iran echo chamber and Iran Experts Initiative. Talk a little bit about it, because I thought those were interesting antecedents to what we see in maybe an even more amplified form today.

SOLOMON: Well, the selling of the Iran nuclear deal was interesting, because we've learned things recently that inform things in the past. But yeah, back in 2014, 2015, when the nuclear negotiations were ramping up and they were pushing for the deal, Ben Rhodes put together this network involving lots of different NGO and media outlets and individuals to promote the nuclear deal. And at the time, it was pretty amazing, because one of the allies in this was something called the Plowshares Fund, which was right at the center of selling this. It's a grantee organization, very progressive, based in California. But there was – I remember I was at an event where Plowshares was funding the event to sell the nuclear deal. They were funding many of the experts who were there to talk about it, and they were even providing money to some of the media outlets. At the time, they were funding NPR.



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So, it was crazy. Everyone involved is just repeating this narrative. And I remember we wrote about it and it was scandalous, but it wasn't as scandalous as it should have been when you really thought – I mean, it even got to the point where they were like the Plowshares Fund was working with Hollywood media – I think it was *Madam Secretary* – where there was a narrative line that was very pro – it was almost a Zarif character, and it wasn't by happenstance. They'd actually been collaborating on it. So, you had this echo chamber, which at the time I knew about. But then at the same time, as a journalist, I would cover it. I'm like, "God, it's really weird." You have these Iranian diplomats flying into town and they seem to be meeting with some of these academics and experts who were flying to Vienna or Lausanne to be pundits on the sidelines. I'm like, "God, it really felt like this is coordinated," but you couldn't really prove it.

And that's where this Iran Experts Initiative story came out, which we first broke with – at the time I was with Semafor, but we worked with *Iran International* – and there was a leak of emails out of the Iranian foreign ministry. It showed what I had thought but couldn't prove: that yes, the Iranian foreign ministry had created this network of diaspora academics, most of them either Iranian-Americans or Iranian-Europeans, who were very much coordinating messaging to the point where it read like a PR firm, in the sense that the Iranians were monitoring, "OK, this person is being interviewed here, whose op-ed was being placed here." You know what it's like, even think tanks do it – they want to know who's producing what. They were monitoring it. And in one case, one of the academics involved, Ali Vaez, was going back and forth with Zarif for a paper he was putting out. And another woman who eventually was at the Pentagon named Ariane Tabatabai was seeking guidance from Tehran about whether she should testify before Congress or go to Israel.

So, it was like, wow, the stuff I saw it really was coordinated. And I think that infrastructure – obviously the Obama administration's gone, but that infrastructure the Iranian's created – those networks, those people are still out there on TV twenty-four-seven. The only government that really investigated was the Swedish government, because that story came out, one of the persons heavily involved was a guy named Rouzbeh Parsi, who's the brother of Trita Parsi. He was very much involved in the pro-Iran lobby here. And they investigated it because he had a government job and he got fired. That was the only one really – outside of the journalists – who really investigated what the Iran Experts Initiative was, and how it worked, and how it was linked to the government.

So, a lot of what we're seeing now as far as the discourse – some of it is what we just said. Social media influencers are doing it for ideological reasons or for clicks. But you also have this infrastructure that the regime – starting with Zarif, like you said, but Araghchi – the foreign minister now – was his deputy then. These networks continue. They were never shut down, even as the years moved on.

MOJTAHEDI: And those media influencers in the West are retweeting or re-sharing what those folks in that network are saying.

DUBOWITZ: It is fascinating.

SOLOMON: It's insidious.



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DUBOWITZ: I mean, it's fascinating that there is an infrastructure where a foreign government – in this case, a government that has been designated the leading state sponsor of terrorism by multiple administrations, dating back to the Clinton administration, the Bush administration, the Obama administration, clearly the Trump administration. Every president, both parties since the '90s has designated Iran as the leading state sponsor of terrorism, killed and maimed, kidnapped, tortured thousands of Americans. And yet this government – an American enemy – has been running influence operations inside the United States, has built an infrastructure involving, in many cases, Americans, and is now able to shape a narrative and in many cases control a narrative. And we saw that in January during the protests and the massive slaughter of Iranians. And now we're seeing that during this 40-day war. And we're seeing it literally today with the announcement of a ceasefire.

And this entire infrastructure is out there pushing a narrative that this has been a great victory for the Islamic Republic. And their talking points sound a lot like the talking points that are coming out not just from the Iranian foreign ministry, but from the Supreme National Security Council, in language that is delusional, but is certainly being repeated and in some cases refined by this infrastructure here. I mean, is that true? Is that accurate, what I'm saying?

MOJTAHEDI: 100 percent. 100 percent. I mean, before we started taping, I was telling you guys how I get a little infuriated when I'm watching CNN and a lot of the NBC and Western media, because they're just repeating that narrative coming out of Iran. And it sounds like I'm watching state TV and I can't believe it. And a lot of the experts – the national security experts that they bring on, are saying the same thing. Probably the only network that I haven't seen this from so far is Fox News.

DUBOWITZ: And CBS.

MOJTAHEDI: And CBS, of course. And CBS.

DUBOWITZ: CBS.

SOLOMON: But I do think it's a mix. Part of it is infrastructure. We talked about the Iran Experts Initiative, the echo chamber that the Obama people – that's person to person, kind of really – but some of it is just the Iranians understanding our politics, our media ecosystem, and this desire for clicks. If you feed stuff into that, it can self-generate without having to have sort of direct contacts. So, I think both of those play to their strengths.

MOJTAHEDI: But I just don't understand how you can kill somebody's supreme leader, basically knock out their – decimate their military, the IRGC, all of that infrastructure, power plants, the missile stockpile – and still have people in Western media consider that to be a big win.

DUBOWITZ: Look, I think...

MOJTAHEDI: They survived, sure.

DUBOWITZ: Right. There – there – I think there's a fair-minded, honest, analytical case to be made against the war and against the planning before the war and in the execution of the war. And one can make a fair-minded argument.

MOJTAHEDI: Of course.



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DUBOWITZ: Because I think it's always important to be fair-minded. And as we say at FDD, call balls and strikes regardless of the pitcher and regardless of the president. But I think what we're seeing – and we see that in our politics in America, I'm sure you see that looking over the border from Vancouver into the United States – is so much of this is wrapped up in the personality of Trump. And in some respects, the fair-minded criticism of the president and others the Trump Arrangement Syndrome that I think has set in. And I think it's also wrapped up in the issue of Israel that you guys mentioned earlier.

I think that is – it analytically distorts and it makes it very difficult for people to push aside the politics. By the way, push aside the political food fight that...

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: ... Takes place in this town every day.

MOJTAHEDI: And it's so hurtful because at the end of the day, Iranian lives are at stake here. And it's so hurtful to me because when the war started, I had so many people – and this is at the start of the war when Khamenei had been killed and people were still celebrating in Iran and things hadn't intensified the way they have in the past few weeks – people coming up to me saying, "Negar, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for what's happening to your homeland." And I go, "Well, you didn't say anything to me on January 8th and 9th when 40,000-plus people had been killed." Not a word. But suddenly when something is related to Trump, everything's bad. It's just this automatic thing. And I had mentioned that Iranians inside Iran were thanking Trump and Netanyahu and that they were calling for targeted military strikes to basically force the regime to collapse so that there can be regime change.

And they said, "But Trump doesn't care about the Iranian people." And they would just have some sort of response. And it was all about Trump. And I say, "Can you not make this about Trump? Can you make this about the people of Iran?"

DUBOWITZ: Well, it is interesting. You mentioned NPR before, Jay, about NPR receiving funding from Plowshares, which was this quote "non-proliferation foundation" during the height of the debate over the Iran nuclear deal, that was paying off media and outlets to push a certain narrative. I noticed that NPR the first maybe week was in Turkey interviewing Iranian dissidents who had fled – and they're not necessarily dissidents, they were Iranians who had fled the war and had gone to Turkey to seek refuge.

MOJTAHEDI: I've seen that.

DUBOWITZ: And I think the way the story was framed, the expectation was you were going to interview these Iranians, and they were going to tell you how horrible the war was and they had to flee to Turkey in order to find safety. And much to the surprise of NPR, they discovered that the majority of these people were telling them, "Oh no, I mean, we had to flee because of the war, but we're happy that United States and Israel is bombing our regime because we've had to live a miserable life for decades under this brutal repression and this economic deprivation."

Credit to NPR that they didn't censor the story, actually reported on it. But it was an interesting counter-narrative moment where all of a sudden, the mainstream media was faced with this reality that again was counter-narrative. And this gets me to the question I want to ask both of you because you've done excellent analysis on this infrastructure of narrative control. How do you possibly break this stranglehold that these authoritarian countries have in terms of narrative control? And again, not just Iran, but China, but Russia, Qatar. I mean, they are running sophisticated and highly impactful influence operations in our country, by the way, in Canada...

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah, of course.



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DUBOWITZ: ... In Europe, around...

MOJTAHEDI: Oh, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: The world. And they seem to be just miles ahead of us in their ability to shape narratives, to drive narratives using authentic voices and inauthentic bots. How do you counter this? What is the – what can the United States actually do about this? Is there a model for offensive information warfare? Is there a deterrence model where we can counter this? I mean, it's a very complicated question.

MOJTAHEDI: Well, and it would be nice if there could be help to bring the internet back in Iran. I think that would be a big help in general to allow Iranian voices to get their stories out there in the first place.

DUBOWITZ: Right. OK. So, I mean – yeah, exactly. Starlink terminals...

MOJTAHEDI: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Starlink terminals inside Iran, more connectivity, possibility of – can you switch on the internet? I know there's been some discussion and there was some original – initial Israeli action in the first few days of the 40-day war striking at some of the communication and telecommunication nodes...

MOJTAHEDI: Just – they were jamming, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Right, to try and turn it back on. I think there was some limited success there. So yeah, no, I think that's right with respect to Iran. But Jay, even from a Western American journalism perspective why are so many of your colleagues – then let me ask it this way. Why are so many of your colleagues – good-hearted, good-minded, hardworking journalists – falling for this?

SOLOMON: I mean, I think there are a couple elements as far as – I mean, there's two parts. There's the offensive side from us, which you mentioned, and we've got to get our act together. I still don't understand what's happening with – you had VOA [Voices of America], which was – I mean – trying to tip the scale by not allowing Pahlavi. I mean, I'm not taking positions one way or the other, but it seems bizarre that the media arm of the US government was not allowing or trying to suppress the voice of a major player in the opposition, whether you like him or not, or you think he should go back or not as a different question. So, I still don't – I don't even know how good we were in the middle of the Cold War. I guess we were maybe pretty good back in the 50s and 60s, but now whether it's VOA or these other elements, they seem to be totally...

DUBOWITZ: Well, I mean, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, which I think was highly effective during the Cold War and has been pretty good, I think, on Iran-related issues. And certainly, has been very good countering Russia, had its budget slashed and reduced to a shell of itself by the current administration, which I think had questions about efficacy but I think more questions about politics. So yeah, we're sort of neutralizing our own information operation institutions within the US government.



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SOLOMON: So, we've got to sort that out. And to be honest, *Iran International* has filled that void, right? So, there are elements that are filling that void, but from the Western perspective, we've got to get our act together on the – call it offensive, or at least the Western view of things. On safeguarding ourselves from information warfare – disinformation – I think part of it is – I did a long story last year on Qatar, which Qatar runs *Al Jazeera*, they run *Al Jazeera+*, and I think people who really listen to particularly *Al Jazeera* in Arabic and some of these other languages will say, "Wow, they're really pushing an Islamist line or a pro-Hamas line." But the US government – the DOJ – said *Al Jazeera+* needed to register as a foreign agent. That's part of the way to protect your system from these foreign influence operations and they just haven't done it because they broadcast a lot in English.

So, part of it is policing. You want to have an open press, but you also want to know if there's foreign money coming in, if there's foreign essentially information warfare. They decided *AJ+* was part of the Iranian Qatari government sort of information warfare. They were supposed to register, they never did. But that story also showed there was so much money from Qatar sloshing around all sorts of different media companies. And a lot of it's hidden, you don't see it. I think part of it – there's got to be a much better job of sort of identifying what media companies are getting foreign money and exposing it. Because there have even been cases where Press TV, which is a sanctioned entity, has been sending money to people inside of the States to broadcast. I mean, the Chinese have been – they're the ones who have been – CCTV, they have to register under FARA [Foreign Agents Registration Act].

So that has happened, but it's still – I think the policing of money coming in, identifying which – it's got to be much, much better. Because it's – I think particularly in this open media environment, you can't even tell who's behind what. And that's got to be – I think that whether it's using FARA or other tools to try to...

DUBOWITZ: Well, just...

SOLOMON: Yeah?

DUBOWITZ: ...For transparency. Yeah. I mean, just who is funding you? Disclose that so we know. If you're a media outlet and you're taking money from Qatar or from Iran or from China or from Russia, there's a question of whether you should be registering as a foreign agent. There's a question about whether it's illegal to take money from countries that have been designated as state sponsors of terrorism, but there's also a question of just full transparency, like, who actually is funding you if you are a media outlet. We haven't actually said the words TikTok at all, which I find – I'm...

MOJTAHEDI: Too old for that.

DUBOWITZ: You're too old for that. Maybe it shows our age, but it's clear to me that the most influential platform of influence operations in the United States and around the world is TikTok, and it's controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. It's controlled by the Ministry of State Security. And it literally is – I did a lot of work on this issue and FDD did a lot of work on this when we were talking to senators about TikTok and their response was, "What's TikTok?" And we'd explain and then we would sort of say, "Senator, imagine that Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda of the Nazi Party, controlled every radio set in America during World War II." And Americans would sit around after dinner to listen to the news or to get their entertainment and what was being beamed into their radio set – no TVs, no social media, no computers – their radio set, which was the only forum really of communication and apart from newspapers, was controlled by an enemy state and the ministry of propaganda of an enemy state.



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Imagine that. Well, that is exactly what is going on right now, that in a certain demographic – kids, teenagers, people in their 20s who get most of their news about Iran and China and Russia and Gaza and whatever the issue is from TikTok – that algorithm is being controlled by and tampered by the Ministry of State Security and intelligence arm of the Chinese Communist Party. Now, of course, senators would say, "Oh my God, that's insane," which is why Congress passed, on a full bipartisan basis, a bill to ban TikTok or to enforce a divestiture. And there's a whole complicated story about why we haven't done that properly. Maybe we're heading in the right direction. In your investigations, and especially on the Iranian side, do you see TikTok as a major influencer? Is it a major influencer inside Iran? Is it a major influencer of pro-regime propaganda outside Iran?

MOJTAHEDI: Well, it's interesting because inside Iran, Iranians are very tech-savvy with all the latest of TikTok and WhatsApp and this and that. But inside Iran, they're not duped by the Iranian regime. That's the interesting thing that I'm seeing. People are being duped in the West, but it's not working on Iran. And inside Iran, people are not watching state TV or Iran regime-influence folks on Instagram and things like that, because you do see a lot of that on social media. And going back to the algorithm, it's very interesting because when the massacre happened in January, and I would ask people, "Are you not seeing this?" they would go, "No, actually I'm not. I'm still seeing Gaza." So, there's something to be said about that.

DUBOWITZ: Well, I think that's right. I mean, there's been a lot of good work done by a number of groups looking exactly at that – the extent to which social media platforms, but particularly TikTok, have adjusted the algorithm so that the feed you're getting has been specifically influenced to promote a certain issue and a certain point of view. And I recall that in January. I mean, I think that's exactly right. Unless you were very focused on that issue and unless your feed and your algorithm was specifically connected to others who were as well, you were likely getting no news about the massacre, or you were getting a curated perspective on what was happening, and the curated perspective was exactly what you guys revealed – with this was somehow directed by Mossad and CIA.

SOLOMON: Yeah. It would be interesting to look at TikTok with the January massacre because I worked on a story maybe 18 months ago with NCRI looking at TikTok and how they use the algorithm to suppress negative information on Xinjiang or on Tiananmen Square. And basically, the conclusion is the more you watch it, subliminally you become more pro-Chinese. And, like, psychologically, I'm sure they do all sorts of behavioral science stuff on this, but I would be interested if you looked at TikTok – did they suppress that stuff? Because you could show it really clearly, these data scientists could show it really clearly on issues like Xinjiang, Tiananmen Square and others, that it's suppressed by the TikTok algorithm. If you spend more time on TikTok, you're going to be more favorable to China. So, if you ran a similar data model, you could probably figure out if TikTok was suppressing – either suppressing stories or promoting this idea of CIA, Mossad behind the massacre. That would be something interesting to study.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I'm aware of some work that's being done actually right now about narrative control on the current situation in Iran and how social media algorithms have been once again – and again, I think it's more TikTok than the US algorithms – but those two have been some way modified or adjusted to very much promote the view that the Islamic Republic is winning, Donald Trump is losing, and the narrative that is obviously so familiar to all of us – again, just from traditional mainstream media – but it all feeds into itself. Well, guys, very interesting, great work. Any final thoughts on where we are today or where we should be heading?



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MOJTAHEDI: I think it's a really confusing time right now. I think just in speaking with people inside Iran, at this moment their morale is really down and they don't – because they don't know where things are headed. But I wonder if that's part of Trump's – this level of strategic ambiguity – and that it's actually planned and that we shouldn't know what's going to happen next. And that's a good thing because if we don't know, the Iranian regime is not going to know. And I think that there's more in store. Already we see that the Iranian regime is firing at the UAE, Saudi Arabia, sending cluster bombs to directly at Tel Aviv. So clearly this is not going to last. And I think maybe there's a reason behind that. Jay?

SOLOMON: I also think we're about ready to enter another major chapter in this information warfare. You've got this two-week ceasefire. Does it lend to a final deal? We've talked about it a bit, but I think there's going to be a major effort by Iran – whether it's through the networks we saw in January or the infrastructure like the Iran Experts Initiative – to sort of make – really solidify this idea that they won. I think that's going to be a big part of their battle. And they, again, are going to have a lot of allies in the West, which is kind of shocking, but they're going to be mobilized to sell that narrative. And I think it will probably gain more traction than one would think.

MOJTAHEDI: And I just wanted to add to that point. If you guys remember, just before the start of this war, you had the Omani foreign minister on ABC News selling this idea that the Iranians were willing to make a deal. And then I said to myself, "OK, that means that there's going to be war happening and that they're trying to sell this narrative." They're seeding this information ahead of that happening to say, "Look who's to blame." And that's when I knew we were going to enter that phase of war. So, it's interesting that you can start to see the patterns, and you can really anticipate what's going to happen next.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And we saw Araghchi today directly linking the ceasefire to what's going on in Lebanon and effectively saying there is no ceasefire because the Israelis continue to quote "attack Hezbollah." As long as they continue to attack Hezbollah, which of course attacked Israel that started the war, we are not going to agree to a ceasefire. So, they're...

MOJTAHEDI: Narrative again. They're...

DUBOWITZ: Shifting. They want to shift the focus and the blame, put it on Israel, and then justify why they're able to continue to send cluster bombs into Tel Aviv and drones and rockets at Abu Dhabi and Manama. So, they are very good in the information space. I think they're very good at the negotiating table. Seems to be the only two battlegrounds where they can actually defeat the United States, not on the actual military battleground. So, we will see where things go. We will love to have you both back and thank you. Thanks for the work you do.

SOLOMON: Thanks, Mark. That was great.

MOJTAHEDI: Thanks for having us.

DUBOWITZ: My thanks to Jay and Negar for helping us break down the regime's tendency for revisionist history and gaslighting. The Islamic Republic doesn't just rely on force to survive. It relies on confusion, distortion, and rewriting reality fast enough to stay ahead of the truth. Because if the regime can convince the world that it is the victim of foreign agents, then it's not repression, it's defense. If the regime can convince the world that it has won the war, then it is the victor and America is the loser. So, the story becomes the weapon. I'm Mark Dubowitz. This has been *The Iran Breakdown*. Until next time, when we break it down all over again.