Stolen Revolution: Behind Iran's Protest Movements

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Featuring Bozorgmehr Sharafedin
Hosted by Behnam Ben Taleblu

TALEBLU: Greetings. I'm not Mark Dubowitz. I'm Behnam Ben Taleblu, the senior director of the Iran program here at *The Iran Breakdown* podcast. I'm thrilled today to have a friend and a colleague, the one and only Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, the co-author of this brand-new book coming out in early June. We are recording on June 1st. I believe the book comes out on June 2nd, *Stolen Revolution: Betrayal and Hope in Modern Iran*. Bozorgmehr is the co-author of this book. It's written with the one and only Yeganeh Torbati, now with *The New York Times*. Bozorgmehr has had a distinguished journalism career in Iran and outside of Iran, in London as well as in Washington DC, now where he lives and works. It is great to have Bozorgmehr on this episode of *The Iran Breakdown* podcast to break down the past, present and future of the battle between the street and the state in Iran from a very unique perspective.

So, let's break it down. Bozorgmehr, great to have you on the podcast. Great guy, great name.

SHARAFEDIN: Thanks for having me, Benham Ben Taleblu.

TALEBLU: Oh, anytime. I should say to the audience, I had the first pleasure of actually meeting you after reading your work for maybe a little over a decade, in London, where we met through a mutual friend who used to make documentaries for the BBC. And when we first met, I think it was in a really cool pub in Notting Hill. Just because of your work on Iran, I felt like I had known you for ages. You ever have that experience when you meet somebody for the first time, but you feel like you know them?

SHARAFEDIN: Absolutely. It has happened to me that I meet someone and they say this is the first time we meet. I said, it's impossible. Some people are so present in your life because you follow the work every day. It has happened to me sometimes that I'm amazed that I haven't met them.

TALEBLU: It took this long, and I think that especially comes with distance. If you are virtual or in a different city or a different country, you've been watching Iran directly and indirectly, having a seat at the table, and then virtually, and then from a distance in Iran, in London, and now in Washington. Can I just begin with that background? So, this is why the audience should know people like you. Can you tell me a little bit about your background in Iran? You had an illustrious journalism career there before you had to go abroad.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. So, I started my journalism career when I was very young. I was 16 years old when I started publishing my first article. And after that, it was what is known in Iran as the spring of the press freedom. So, I worked with many newspapers. I was 23 years old when I became the editor-in-chief of one of the most popular political and social magazines in Iran, which was called *Chelcheragh*. And then I joined BBC in London. We were the first team that joined BBC to launch BBC Persian TV channel, which became very popular in Iran at that time, 2008, 2009. It was around the Green Movement, if you remember. So, the BBC Persian TV did a lot to report the protest in Iran. At the BBC, I was the editor. I also directed several documentaries about Iran's Supreme Leader. That was the first ever documentary made about the Supreme Leader.

TALEBLU: Was that the one that came out one year after 2009?

SHARAFEDIN: Correct.

TALEBLU: I remember, that was actually a haunting documentary. I think you had a sitar overtone in it and it was about Khamenei's… Who's in France that is related to Khamenei?

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SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, Moradi. I think one of the cousins of Khamenei. You had a lot of interviews with him. Yeah. So, I tried to talk to people who have met Khamenei in person, but in that documentary, I tried to reveal the identity of people behind the scene in the Office of the Supreme Leader and explain the nature of the Office of the Supreme Leader. And my thesis in that documentary was there are ten powerful people in Iran that if they walk on the streets, then nobody will recognize them. So that was the art of Khomeini, how he created a clandestine system to run the country. These people were much more powerful than the presidents. They were much more powerful than the speaker of the parliament, but nobody recognized them. That documentary created a lot of pressure from the Iranian government on me, on my family, on the BBC itself.

But yeah, I kept making more documentaries. I made one about [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad. I made a documentary about Syria. It was the first documentary that –

TALEBLU: In Persian?

SHARAFEDIN: In English. All of these were in English and Persian. And that documentary proved for the first time that Iran has sent soldiers to Syria. We had video evidence that we proved for the first time that Iran's role in Syria was not an "advisory role." We had videos of revolutionary guards commanders fighting, training, and all those things. So that was also a big hit. After that, in 2015, I joined *Reuters* as their Iran correspondent. I covered the nuclear talks. After that, the sanctions, the lifting of sanctions, the reimposition of sanctions. And then I moved to the energy desk, and I was covering oil and gas, OPEC, energy, all those things. And two years ago, I joined *Iran International*. I'm the head of digital at *Iran International*.

By head of digital, we mean everything that is not TV, that includes our website in English, Persian and Arabic, and also our social media.

TALEBLU: So, all the news, all the analysis, all the op-ed stuff filters through Bozorgmehr first if it's on digital, if it's on the website, if it's on social. Wow, that's a heavy lift.

SHARAFEDIN: Thanks.

TALEBLU: How do you make time for us today?

SHARAFEDIN: I'm very proud of what we have built there because our English website now at *Iran International* is a very credible source of news for many people and we are reporting the events very fast, and with our sourcing, with our network, I think we have a reputation for being fast and comprehensive when it comes to reporting on Iran.

TALEBLU: And well sourced inside and outside Iran. I mean, it's always within the top five if it's outside, but when it's inside, it's actually among the first to break news.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. I think we are very proud of… there are scoops. We were the first to announce [Ali] Khamenei was dead. We were the first to announce that Mojtaba [Khamenei] was announced as the successor. We announced these things days before they were officially announced.

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TALEBLU: And even working with your colleague, Mehdi Parpanchi, when the numbers were coming out for the, the January protests, *Iran International* was really punching above its weight in terms of staff and size when it came to the death count, the sourcing. I know there's independent human rights organizations that have slightly different numbers with slightly different methods, but I remember when first *Iran International* went to 12 or 12 and a half thousand killed, and I was talking to Mehdi about this, and he said that we actually had more, but that *Iran International* was being so vigorous in the vetting and making sure that whoever was giving these bigger, somewhat rounded numbers from inside, that that could be somehow, to the best of their ability, independently verified. So, *Iran International* really was one of the few media outlets that could break the barrier. So, I guess everybody here, particularly in DC, the Iranian diaspora who's been following Iran closely, is indebted to you guys for that.

SHARAFEDIN: Thank you. Yeah. For us it's very important. We know we are in a very unique position. We are receiving a lot of information from Iran. A lot of Iranians are sending us videos, voice messages, text messages, information, documents, and we feel this responsibility that we can't ignore that. So many families of those who got killed in the protest are still sending us videos, pictures of their lost ones. And we have dedicated a team of almost 10 people documenting these things even after the war. We were quite short staffed to cover the everyday news, but we feel this responsibility that we need to document this massacre because people, Iranians, have trusted us. For whatever reason, at the moment we are the main receiver of this data. So, we feel this responsibility that we should do something about it. We are quite generous when it comes to data that we receive.

Currently, there are two human rights organizations that are working with us, and we have given them access to the material we have so they can help us in verification and use the data in court filing and human rights activities as well.

TALEBLU: So, it's not just being hoarded onto – where it's... unfortunately in DC, we have this problem where it's an NGO war to be the first to break something, or someone goes up the ladder and then removes the ladder. There's really kind of a much more collaborative environment between media, think tank, advocacy, and other NGOs.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, the way we see it – imagine in 10, 20 years somebody, or the government wants to make a museum for all these victims, the way that you have Holocaust museums. So, somebody should collect this data. Someone should protect them. And I think we not only share this material with other entities, NGOs and human rights organizations, but we welcome this cooperation because, to be honest, it's a very heavy weight and quite a burden of responsibility.

TALEBLU: And even welcoming the scrutiny to check and double-check and...

SHARAFEDIN: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. We have some volunteers coming and helping. And human rights organizations, they're very good at not only verifying these incidents, but also preserving them in a way that they're presentable in a court of justice. So, they understand which parts of these files should be saved for the future if there is a trial.

TALEBLU: Where there's legal weight versus – exactly. By the way, I just wrote down here, exhibition/museum. That's a fantastic idea. I'm sure there's already people in the diaspora and opposition working on it, but this is something, if we ever get to success, that these stories do have to be memorialized, cataloged, and make sure that their voices and their vision and their lives were not in vain.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. I think that's the least that we can do, like preserving this information, the names of the victims, and show what this nation went through to reach that freedom day, which will happen. That's the force of history, that people will find that day they are free, but it's important that in the process, the role of people who sacrifice themselves and their children and their parents, that they should be remembered.

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TALEBLU: Well, I think that's a fantastic transition point to your book, because while the protests in Iran certainly didn't begin in December 2025, January 2026, they had a much earlier, longer load time, and your book with Yeganeh absolutely goes through that. You mentioned, I think in the epilogue, that when you were doing your thanking and Yeganeh was doing her thanking, that the idea initially to tell this story of a "stolen revolution" through the frame of several distinct people, including someone who helped, perhaps you could say, establish the Islamic Republic – or a founding father, a member of the political lead of the Islamic Republic, formerly Mehdi Karroubi, former parliament speaker, former failed presidential contender, I think at least twice – he's but one of those voices, the rest are really people from the street in that longer battle within the state. Can you just tell me a little bit about that idea, like telling this important story, that kind of arc, that political arc that so many Iranians have gone through? Why choose to do it through so many of these types of characters that you have, whether it's the founding father or the young children of a bread baker who can found Iran's version of Amazon, or just your general younger run-of-the-mill activist?

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. So that's a very good question because that's the core of our thesis when it came to this book. We wanted to write a book about the transformation of the Islamic Republic, how a revolution that promised to form an egalitarian society turned to its exact opposite, a mafia state. When did it happen? What were the deviations and turning points that turned this monster into what it is now? For that, we decided to tell the story of the Islamic Republic through six characters. Most of them follow the same arc and they go through the same transformation. So, they are mostly first a believer in the system. They even help to build the system. But then they go through a phase of disillusionment and even fight against the same system they have built. One example is Mehdi Karroubi, who was the student of Khomeini before the revolution, and he fought for the revolution.

He went into jail 10, 11 times, and he went into exile. After the revolution, he became one of the most trusted confidants of Khomeini and he was given this role to collect the wealth from the rich and distribute it among the poor. So, he believed in this revolution, and he went to do that himself. But through his story, we see how this deviation happens. Just an example, for example –

TALEBLU: Just let me interrupt you. Was that kind of Robin Hood-esque thing with Setad?

SHARAFEDIN: Absolutely. So Setad was one of them, which he had a big role in its establishment, but there were other foundations, like Foundation of the Martyrs.

TALEBLU: Bonyad e-Shahid

SHARAFEDIN: Bonyad, the veterans, it was added to it later. At the beginning, it was the Bonyad e-Shahid, or Martyr's Foundation. He also established the Bonyad a-Mostazafan, the oppressed foundation. All these went and collected, and by collecting, we mean confiscating assets of people who were deemed to be close to the previous regime, and they distributed them among the poor.

TALEBLU: And it was a blanket too, right? There's tons of Bahai families, Jewish families, property, assets confiscated. And even just if there was a slur – he's a monarchist, family was close to (inaudible), was close to the court – they all had assets basically seized and...

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SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. And that is one of the first deviations that we see. Something that on paper might sound really good – oh, what's wrong with taking money from the rich and distributing among the poor? – you see that it becomes the core of oppression against the minorities, for example, and it can be used as a political tool to sideline your opponents. We see, for example, how Karroubi tries to bypass bureaucracy so he maintains the revolutionary nature of these foundations. For example, there's a period that he wants to import wheelchairs from Germany for the wounded soldiers, but the government is against the import because of supporting domestic production. Karroubi, at that time, he's an MP, he goes and passes a bill that allows his foundation not to seek permission from the government. It's something very small and with the best intention, but you see how this allowed these foundations later to import things without the supervision of the government. Karroubi becomes the speaker of the parliament 20 years later and he's surprised to see something that is known as invisible ports run by the revolutionary guards, that they are bringing tons and tons of goods to the country through these invisible ports.

There is no custom, there's no tariff, there's no supervision, and they somehow take over the majority of the Iranian economy without paying tax, without any audit or supervision.

TALEBLU: Didn't even his political opponent, former president [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, even critique this? He called the IRGC – with their, not even with the ports, but I learned the word "jehdi" in Persian, which is (inaudible), through translating one of these speeches a long time ago – where he said that the IRGC are the smuggling brothers, the (inaudible). Was this at this exact same time, the mid to late 2000s?

SHARAFEDIN: Yes, but Karroubi was the first to reveal that. I think it should be around 2003, around that time, that Karroubi, for the first time when he was the speaker of parliament, he received that report –

TALEBLU: The end of that reformist parliament.

SHARAFEDIN: Yes. And then he thought that, okay, I can't do anything with this report. The least I can do is to report it, so people are aware of that. So, in a sense, I can say that many books have been written about Iran and have explained the oppression in the Islamic Republic, the totalitarian nature of the Islamic Republic. I would say our book is different in a sense that it explains how this happened. It's like the book that Truman Capote wrote, the nonfiction detective novel *In Cold Blood*. In that novel –

TALEBLU: I'm learning about it as we speak.

SHARAFEDIN: In his book, it doesn't matter who is the murderer. The novel starts when a family is murdered really brutally, and half of the book is to find who was the killer, but Capote's novel doesn't end there. The second half of the book is how he turned into this brutal murderer. So, I think that's how it made his novel *In Cold Blood* different from many other novels. So, this book, I would say something like that. We are not trying to say, "Oh, the Islamic Republic is a mafia state." Everybody knows that,

TALEBLU: It shows you.

SHARAFEDIN: But the transformation of that is important.

TALEBLU: And through – usually when we get the mafia story, I want to stick with this before we go to a few other lenses in the book – but usually we see it not through the state, not through the society, which is what you do. The states, many people say, but the thing folks like us in Washington on think tanks and other organizations focus on is this kind of in the middle, which are these parastatal institutions, these bonyads. And if anyone in the 90s or 2000s worked on Iran, you had to know about the bonyads. But even the bypassing of the bonyads, which in this case bypassed the system, we are now in this hyper rentier state, hyper mafia situation, but no one has really distilled down to the unit level: how these CEOs, how these founding fathers, dealt with this evolution of Iran's mafia state?

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So, in that sense, if you're a little bit of an Iran nerd, it is a fascinating page-turning read. So really, really glad to have that insight. But what about on the flip side? You had a piece today, actually, that was a slice of your book with Yeganeh in *The Atlantic*, for example, that looks at – if that's kind of a political founding father who runs into economic and then later political misfortune – what about somebody who begins with economic misfortune and then evolves into seeing a space that is also like the bonyads, the digital space, not really governed by law? Because clearly the Islamic Republic is not a system of laws, a system of men, but even those limited laws hadn't really evolved to regulate and deal with the digital space, e-commerce and things like that. I believe you did a huge profile in here with Yeganeh about the founder of Digikala.

Could you tell us a little bit about that, and also about your piece in *The Atlantic*, where it seems like a promising e-commerce startup Iranian entrepreneur story? If you've had people who – I was just traveling across America the past two weeks and I met members of the Iranian community, people who even had to leave Iran because they opened up cafes and they were too successful on the economic front. And so, they were an economic migrant, but they weren't an economic migrant because they had economic issues. They chose to politically not deal with the forces that be, because it was like having to pay off the mafia, like having to pay off someone who was trying to extort you. And in this book, you guys talk about not just cash, but shares of these very promising companies, bought well beneath the surface. Could you unpack that economic evolution for us? And did I frame this next? –

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, and you said it beautifully because again, we didn't want to say, "Oh, the revolutionary guards has taken over the Iranian economy. 60 percent, 80 percent by some estimation is taken over by the revolutionary guards." We've heard that. But how? The question is how the revolutionary guards has taken over the Iranian economy. We decided to choose one sector, which was the startup sector, and Saeed Rahmani is one of the six characters in the book that is telling us the story of startup business in Iran and how, again, as someone very hopeful, he went to build this sector, but he was later on, under the pressures from the revolutionary guards and Khomeini's office, he had to give up on that hope. So, Saeed Rahmani, he is someone who has experience in Silicon Valley's startup ecosystem. He left Iran when he was young, so he studied in the West and he had a very successful career in Silicon Valley, but he decided to go back to Iran and help build his own homeland.

And this is very much in line with many other Iranians in the diaspora who had the same idea, especially after the nuclear deal in 2015 and the lifting of sanctions in 2016. They were hopeful that we can go back and use our experience that we gained in Western societies to help build our country, Iran. They were successful. They went and did the Iranian Uber, Iranian Amazon, Iranian Groupon. So that was successful.

TALEBLU: So, it was Snapp, Digikala, and what was the – Takhfifan? –

SHARAFEDIN: Takhfifan. And they were very successful. They became very popular. They created a lot of jobs and employment, but there's a problem: In the Islamic Republic, the real private sector doesn't exist. You can have a shop or a corner shop, that's fine. But when your business grows above a certain threshold, the revolutionary guards will show up, and they want a share of that business. So that's what he faced. At the end, set out other foundations, the revolutionary guards, they wanted a part of this business, and he fought back, he fought back, but at the end we explain in the book how he fails, and at the end he has to leave the country and some parts of those businesses were taken over by the state.

TALEBLU: I don't know who coined this term, but I use it – certainly the CEO of FDD, Mark [Dubowitz], uses it – but the phrase is "Iranians are allowed or able to be successful everywhere but in Iran," because clearly here there's a cap for success. That if you have a certain amount of profitability, that doesn't offer you protection, that begins to put you in a very different kind of danger. It's a very kind of reverse mafia state: the more successful you are, the more you are not necessarily sought after and promoted, but the more you're actually kind of deemed to be a threat and have to be subjected to a kind of hostile takeover from within.

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SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. And especially if you don't want to cooperate with the government and if you want to maintain your independence, it's very difficult. Look, startups, they have a lot of data. If you book a hotel or if you take a ride, if you use any of the services, they have a lot of data from people. And in the book, we say how the government was asking a lot of startups, "Give us the data, we want to know more about people who are using them," or sometimes they would give names and ask for more data. We see that many startups cooperated with them because they thought that we don't have any other choice. In other cases, we also mentioned cases that they decided not to cooperate and they paid the price for that. So that is the part. Unfortunately, it's not just economic, it goes into politics and intelligence.

Revolutionary guards, first of all, it's an army. It has guns and it has its own intelligence service as well, quite independent from the Ministry of Intelligence, and it has money. It has gained money over the years. So, it uses all these three muscles differently to gain what it wants. You might be successful to resist against the economic pressure, but what if they put the gun on the table –

TALEBLU: The security pressure –

SHARAFEDIN: And they put security pressure on you as well.

TALEBLU: Just two little side notes. One is I know a distant – I won't say who on record – but I know a distant, distant, distant colleague of yours who was interviewing an Iranian official many, many years ago, almost pre-JCPOA, definitely well before JCPOA. And the individual was saying that in the interview with the Iranian official, which he got obviously feisty – was again close to nuclear diplomacy, big picture security issues – and our mutual journalist contact, friend, acquaintance is a go-getter and really pushed the line. And obviously the official is an official of the government of the Islamic Republic, thinking, behaving, acting the way they do. And ultimately the story they related was that the official pushed away from the table and said, "If you knew I had a gun in this drawer, would you keep speaking this way?" And just that is exactly – between interviewer and interviewee. Don't worry, there's no gun here, by the way, you're safe – in that dynamic and also in the business dynamic. If you won't sell this 15 percent of shares of Digikala, well, then something else is going to happen.

And in the book, you guys detail what I think many had watched from a distance and assumed – people who were kind of like us at FDD, a bit more skeptic about this e-commerce space – that would happen. Which is that the private data generated would somehow easily be taken or fall prey to kind of deep state intel security services. And in the book, you guys detail what happened with Snapp. I forget around which protest period it was, but you mentioned that the Iranian government was trying to basically get the version of Uber data on the street to see where people were coming, going, where were the big locations where they were gathering, where were the drop-off points. Around which protest period was that?

SHARAFEDIN: I think it was around Aban. I think it would be –

TALEBLU: 2019?

SHARAFEDIN: I think so.

TALEBLU: Okay. And what happened? They cooperated and...

SHARAFEDIN: Many of them had to cooperate. I don't think they had an option. And those who didn't, usually it was that they would come the day after to their office and see that most of the computers had been taken away. So, it's just that you don't have an option. And look, these startups tried to do everything to make the government happy. They said, "Okay, we are happy to bring some people from your circle into the board." They hired some people who had some connections to the conservatives, in a way that the startup scene, it was quite young and different in Iranian culture. Culturally, it was very vibrant. People would come to the office, they would address each other with a first name, which is not common in Iran, but we know it's quite a habit in Western societies. They were drinking coffee with each other, loose hijab.

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But then, these startup people would say that suddenly we felt that our offices are changing. We see suddenly people with beards coming and getting hired and working in the same office. People with the pictures of Khamenei as their desktop screensaver or the wallpaper. So, they tried hard to gain the trust of the system, what they felt. Let me remind everyone that when the lifting of sanctions happened in 2016, Khamenei came and delivered a lecture in that he said that the risk of infiltration in Iran is the biggest threat from now on for the Islamic Republic.

TALEBLU: This is the "Nofooz."

SHARAFEDIN: Nofooz. And then he said the nofooz, or infiltration, can be economic, it can be cultural, it can be political. And that was the starting point of the Intelligence Ministry and the revolutionary guards using that as an excuse to go after these businesses and to see them quite suspiciously and skeptically, as if you are here to do some damage to the foundation of the Islamic Republic and we need to take over this business to be fully in control. The same thing happened in the reform era under [President Mohammad] Khatami. When the government gave the construction of Imam Khomeini airport to a Turkish firm, for example, we saw how the revolutionary guards came and parked –

TALEBLU: Literally on the runway.

SHARAFEDIN: An armored vehicle on the runway and said, "Oh, we won't allow the first flight to land." And then the second flight, they sent a fighter jet, and they warned the pilot that "we will shoot you down if you don't turn." And at that time, the Minister of Roads, he was very anxious and somehow ashamed because they had prepared a big ceremony. But at that time, the revolutionary guards used its military power to gain some economic advantages. That was very crude at that time. But since then, the revolutionary guards has learned how to use more subtle tactics to literally gain the same thing.

TALEBLU: This reminds me of – I think it's a quote they attribute to Sun Tzu – "win without fighting." The fighting is clearly preventing a plane from landing: very crude, crass, what you would expect of a third world military dictatorship. But what evolves, and what really stymies the fate of many characters in your book, is the more sophisticated version, the simply that life will not be tolerable, or you will not find your life palatable, or you may not even have a life after a certain point. That more kind of sophisticated – again, I hate to keep using the word that you said – but the mafia-style state, it's not just leave the gun, take the cannoli, break the guy's car. It's really kind of corporate takeover plus that, plus that little diplomatic veneer of, "It's in your benefit to do this. Why won't you do this?" And sometimes – and this is a criticism from self-styled Iran hawks – sometimes the criticism of this space in Iran, the lack of a genuine private sector, was that this was always going to happen.

I hate to tell you, as I was reading earlier this morning the segment of the book that got published in *The Atlantic*, just seeing even how the founders of Digikala tried to play to the – I forget his name. Sorena Sattari? Rohani's tech minister – or even how they tried to play to the government officially and unofficially with some – I forget who Khamenei's family member was that they tried to placate as well – that this was always going to happen, that there was always going to be a cap and the test was society always had a glass ceiling. Yes, they really got to move that glass ceiling, but they never really broke it. They just got to move it up and up and up. And you never want to say, "I told you so," you never want to say "we were right," but it is a real tragedy that so many of these lives, so many of these people who embarked on this journey because they wanted the best for their country and their fellow countrypeople, ultimately ran up against that same glass ceiling that probably 20 years prior, their family members, their friends – some who came back disaffected from the Iran-Iraq war, some who created the revolution and saw in the early days this wasn't what it was about – they ran into the same glass ceiling.

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And then later in your book, as you get towards the end and you move towards the politics, Women Life Freedom [protests], you find people who deal with that political glass ceiling almost 40 years later, but it's the same thing. How is this still in effect? I mean, throughout the book, *Stolen Revolution*, if you stitch these stories together, don't you feel like it is a weird success story for authoritarianism as much as it is a success story for resilience? Not to be that guy to inject negativity into it, but we are living right now in a period where the Islamic Republic is weak, but it's lethal. It is down, but it is certainly not out. And it has performed strongest, sadly, against the figures in your book, whether they're political, economic, social.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. Interestingly, all characters in our book are quite hopeful for change in future despite all the obstacles they faced. And hope was very important for us in this book, and that's why we called the subtitle *Betrayal and Hope in Modern Iran*. Betrayal – we've been talking, you and me, about the betrayal part until now – but I think what we are trying to show in this book is that this is a story of a constant fight, that you as a nation, you try to get what you have and the system is pushing back, but it's endless. And I think I'm quite amazed how Iranians, they don't give up.

TALEBLU: There will be another. It is very *Star Wars* –

SHARAFEDIN: Absolutely. Yeah. I think it's like saying that when my generation did the reform movement and we voted for President [Mohammad] Khatami, and we see in the story of Hila Sedighi, the poet in this book, we see how those hopes were crushed by the state, but that wasn't the end of it. We know that the democratic movement of Iran reinvented itself over and over, that you saw in Woman Life Freedom, in January protests, and I'm sure it's going to continue. I think the story of the Iranian democratic movement is just the story of a river. You can't block a river. You can put a dam on it, but then the river will go and find its new way, it's more innovative way to go through. And we've seen that. If you look at the social freedoms that Iranians have gained in the last few decades, these are not the ones that the state gave them.

TALEBLU: They had to take them.

SHARAFEDIN: They took them, like satellite dishes, they were always illegal. They are still illegal –

TALEBLU: Still,

SHARAFEDIN: But people – the police would come to your rooftop, they take them away, they would go and put another one. At the end, they gave up. Like the issue of hijab. It was illegal to take your scarf, and it is still, but what happened – people would be arrested without hijab, they go to jail, they come out, they do it again. So, every single right that you see Iranians have gained, they are not the rights that they were given. It's something that they took it by force. And I think that energy still exists in the Iranian society and this is not the end of it, in that sense.

TALEBLU: Just a footnote on that imagery, because I was speaking this weekend with someone who's an exiled activist but still has family in Iran, and they're from Isfahan, a somewhat more conservative social strata, and a younger member, female member of her family, 19, leaves the house every day without even... Many Iranians leave without a hijab, but some of them leave still with a mini hijab in their bag or backpack. And the 19-year-old, obviously Gen Z, just cut from a different social generation, totally born and bred online, leaves even without the emergency hijab. This is the level of the fight post-protest, post-war, amid whatever limbo Iranians find themselves in today. She continues to, like, "This is the new generation of the fight."

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. And that's the story that we say, this Gen Z story. We say that in the last chapter of the book. And again, their defiance is unbelievable, how they defy their families and they defy their state at the same level. My generation, I think we were fighting back against the state, yes. But looking back, I would say that we were not as feisty as this new generation –

TALEBLU: More socially conservative?

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SHARAFEDIN: I think the first generation of the revolution, I think they were the true believers, that they believed in Khomeini, they believed in the war, they fought in the Iraq-Iran war. So, they were the true believers. I think our generation, we were not the believers. We dared to question those beliefs, but we were not brave enough to deny it all. We were just brave enough to question them. But I would say the third generation, they are not believers and they're quite radical. They say, "Okay, I don't buy what you're telling me. I don't want to have a conversation with you. I don't want you to convince me. I don't want myself to convince you." And that's why their approach is unimaginable for someone from my generation, that you would go on the streets without the backup hijab and you are okay to defy them over and over to get what you want.

TALEBLU: This reminds me of two things. One, because you mentioned the character, so I'll bring it up, but I think the same poet, Hila Sedighi, also kind of obviously still a women's rights activist, but parts ways with, circa 2017, '18, '19, what becomes the newer feminist movement, and in direct contrast to activist Masih Alinejad about the debate they have about my stealthy freedom – should you or shouldn't you post a picture, is or isn't your camera your weapon? You can even see the conservativism of different generations of even feminist activists in this space, be they inside or outside. So, I think you hit the nail right on the head about that difference, but let me push you on it because now you see that difference from a different vantage point from being abroad. Can you marry these things together? Because one of the things that ends in your book is the opposition, external Georgetown 2023, after Women Life Freedom 2022, the rise and fall.

There's various reasons. I know readers, particularly Iranian readers, may have qualms or take umbrage to the reasons why I think you and Yeganeh said that the coalition could or could not have succeeded, but certainly there's disparate opposition leaders, but there's also, as the book shows, disparate lives. How can Hila Sedighi make way with the new women's movement today in Iran? You're either sidelined or you're silent or you have to join them. And like you said, the new generation is not going to cut anybody any slack. They don't even cut their families slack. There's real social divides at home on this. So, do you see this kind of mosaic being able to come together, or it's just the next generation goes further and further away from this?

SHARAFEDIN: I think the environment is quite radical and intense because the thirst for freedom is intense. Look, if you look at Iran's history, we had a lot of national heroes. To be honest, Khomeini was very popular. I can say even in his funeral footages that he was still popular when he died, after all those atrocities. And then Khatami, for a while, was the most popular political figure in Iran. And then we see how that popularity faded, the way Khomeini's popularity faded, because people don't wait forever for someone to give. When they give up hope on someone, the Iranians move to the next one. So maybe he is the person, or she is the person, who maybe will give me something that I hope for. But what I've learned from Iran's history, they won't wait for anyone forever. We see that [Mir-Hossein] Mousavi and [Mehdi] Karroubi, as we explain in the book, they were very popular at that time and they paid a high price, and still paying a high price for that, by being under house arrest.

Karroubi is out, but Mousavi is still under house arrest, but the society has moved on from them. They didn't do any compromise, but the society moved on because I say this river is so strong that it can't wait. They will go after the next one and the next one. I think for the political leaders and opposition leaders and activists, they should be aware of that energy in the Iranian society. They need to adapt themselves fast and swiftly to be able to go with this river, to float on this river. If you want to block it, if you want to change it, if you don't understand the nature of it, I think you are doomed to failure. So how I predict it? Yes. I think after the war – that I don't think the war will give the Iranian society what they had hoped for. Many Iranians were hopeful that this will lead to a regime collapse.

I think by the way it's going, I think it's becoming less and less likely. But that's not the end of Iran's opposition movement. I think they will learn a lesson from that, and they will reinvent themselves and go to the next phase of the opposition.

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TALEBLU: Does that mean... I mean, there's so much I want to say here, but does that mean moving in a further... I use the word radical, which I think is very appropriate. It can sound pejorative and not polite in DC, but it is a radical movement. It takes a radical amount of bravery to do the things that Iranians are saying and doing in social media as well as in real life in their own countries, both pre- and post-war. So, to that end, full credit to the Iranians. But if the war didn't do it, do you see some of that willingness to risk at all being pushed back, or no? Or is the direction still very forward leaning in your view?

SHARAFEDIN: I think for me, it's very difficult to predict it, but I feel that the Iranian opposition movement will go to a period of soul searching to see what happened, why it didn't happen, why it didn't go as they had expected, and they come up with a new strategy. So, in a way, for me, it's very difficult to say which direction it will move towards, but overall, I think it's going to be reinventing itself in a way that it can bypass the current obstacles. I would imagine that if the foreign intervention doesn't work, I would say that the next phase might be more homegrown. Maybe they would put more hopes to some form of change within the Iranian society. That can be one of the predictions. But generally, I think it would definitely be strong and moving forward. I don't see the Iranian society falling into that indifference, apolitical type of society.

I think there will be –

TALEBLU: That was always a slander. I was about to say in Persian, (inaudible), which means "sugar amidst your words" if you're interrupting somebody, but that was always a slander that for many, even in the 90s and 2000s in DC, they would say, "Hezbabad," "Iranians are the party of the wind." They just go in some general mass direction. They follow the prevailing norms. This kind of political summary/slander, based on what you're saying, clearly is not the case. Is that correct?

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. I think a system that is fighting back and trying to test different tactics and strategies, and it's like a warrior that is changing its tactics all the time to win this fight at the end. I think the fact that they're not rigid, I think that's a huge advantage. So, in that sense, I would say that yes, they are innovative, not the party of wind as they say in Iran.

TALEBLU: Some may say the intervention now, the second armed US-Israeli intervention, is going to be a critical juncture for the opposition. I like where you went with that with soul searching. I'm waiting to see both internal and external opposition engage in that soul searching a bit more. I think everybody's still kind of riding the momentum and waiting to see what America does. I mean, just even hearing from inside Iran over the weekend, all eyes are still on America, on Washington, and, in particular, on Donald Trump to see what he will do. I mean, is there any words of wisdom after having written this book for US policy in that space moving forward that you have? I mean, it could be as simple as deal or no deal, or war or no war. But, what do you think is the best road ahead for America given what you know now, through these multiple different stories, given what you've shown the audience about these stories, and given what you've kind of intonated about where the direction may move in the country?

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. I think what is usually neglected is the role of Iranians in this scene. And I think that's the case with the Islamic Republic. We know that the Islamic Republic is trying to ignore this silenced majority. That's why we had the internet shutdown, so we don't hear from them, so the Islamic Republic can control the narrative. But unfortunately, when it comes to the outside world, they sometimes – I can say mostly – they ignore the role of Iranian people as well. I would say in the eyes of many Iranians, the war didn't start from February 28th. It started in January, when millions of Iranians came to the streets and President Trump said, "Stay on the streets, occupy the government buildings, the help is on its way." So for them, it was a military campaign to come to their rescue, but gradually, I don't know how and I don't know why, Iranians were sidelined from this scene, and now the negotiations are between the US government and the Islamic Republic over the nuclear issue and the control over the Strait of Hormuz and others.

So, I think that's the case. I think any leader, opposition figure or government, they should put the central focus on the people and all the policies.

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TALEBLU: The streets?

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. And to understand them, to see what they want and to see how we can support them. I think that's the missing part when it comes to a lot of policies dealing with Iran. And well, in this book, that's why – going back to what you mentioned at the beginning – a lot of our characters are ordinary people, and we wanted to show a spectrum of the Iranian society, men, women, businessmen, politicians, Generation Z, to show that this is a very nuanced and complex society.

TALEBLU: And I mean, to that end, there is a real critical juncture, I think, in your book that I feel like for many years now, DC still doesn't get. And in my view, it comes in the December 2017 to present period of protests, which, with respect, closes the door on what you were saying about the generations that supported reform, because when you're talking about that Gen Z and being braver than to just question, but to take the whole system under question, it reminds me of that slogan that we heard just after protests in 2017, which I think we first heard it in 2018, which was (inaudible) – which is: reformist principles, the jig is up or the game is over. I still see that to be the zeitgeist of Iranian protest today, and I still see an ideology. I mean, it perhaps didn't come through in the book because there's lots of, as you've mentioned, normal people, individual people, people just trying to go about their lives, but who have some sort of an inclination or some sort of a capability.

But increasingly, I find this veneer to be there on the street now. Admittedly, it's a selection effect based on what you see on social media, based on what you hear, based on what messages you pass back and forth, but it's nationalism. How does that ideology today provide glue for what may come next for these kind of next generations of Iranian activists, dissidents, or just normal everyday Iranians who are trying to make do with what comes their way?

SHARAFEDIN: Yes. Nationalism is becoming very strong in Iran. It's because all other ideologies have failed. You mentioned when Iranians came to the streets and chanted no to reformism, no to conservatism, that is what we went through. So, we were hopeful that one of these will help us. The first two decades, people were hopeful that Khomeini and that mentality will help them. After that, they invented reformism, that didn't help. And one of the characters we have in the book, Amir Moghadam, he is representing that character, that how he was an adamant believer in Khomeini as a teenager. He had the poster of Khomeini above his bed, and then he later became a believer in the reform movement. He went to work for the government of Hassan Rouhani. He was very proud of himself after the nuclear deal, that he felt that we did something really positive for the Iranian people.

But there he realized that, oh no, this is all a charade. Most of the officials in the government, they're just filling up their pocket. It's not about a deal or no deal, reformism or being a hardliner. It's about filling up your pocket. So many Iranians, in tandem with many of these characters in the book, they were disillusioned about many of these ideologies. So, nationalism is like that pure quota – unadulterated – that you can go and then you can hide there and you can fight for something that you believe. I would say that this nationalism is a reaction against Islam as well. So, because they were hopeful that even Islam, Shiism, that might be a form of their salvation, but now they even have lost hope in religion, and they see religion as something destructive. So, this nationalism, I would say, is mostly rooted in pre-Islamic era.

If you go and talk to Iranians and follow their norms, you see that now they're showing signs of people who are somehow against any form of religion. Like even funerals – we Iranians used to wear black attire, but now you see that they're wearing white –

TALEBLU: The mourning that you guys covered in *Iran International*, where there was dancing and singing.

SHARAFEDIN: All those things. So, you are acting in exact contrast to Islamic norms. So you go to this pre-Islamic identity, and I think that's maybe one of the reasons that monarchy has become a popular form of governance as well, because Iranians are going to those pre-Islamic eras of the Iranian civilization and now, they are glorifying the role of kings in the Iranian civilization. So, this nationalism that you mentioned, it's there. It's unifying many Iranians to each other, but I think we should be aware that this nationalism is also a response to all the ideologies that they tried and they didn't work.

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TALEBLU: Wow, very, very insightful, and actually the word that I missed most in the subtext, hope and hopeful. Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, an honor and a pleasure to have you on *The Iran Breakdown* podcast. Thank you so much for coming on today.

SHARAFEDIN: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

TALEBLU: And thank you very much, viewers and listeners. This was another guest episode of *The Iran Breakdown* with me, FDD Iran program senior director Behnam Ben Taleblu. My guest today was Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, co-author of *Stolen Revolution*: *Betrayal and Hope in Modern Iran*. Thanks for joining us today, and Mark [Dubowitz] will see you next time on the next episode of *The Iran Breakdown*.

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