



## The Islamic Republic's Revolutionary DNA

August 14, 2026

Featuring Haviv Rettig Gur

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

**DUBOWITZ:** So welcome to *The Iran Breakdown*. I'm Mark Dubowitz and I am really honored today to have a close friend and really a mentor, intellectual mentor, though he may not admit that because for him to be the intellectual mentor and for me to be the intellectual student, he may not be very proud of how far or not far I've come. But Haviv Rettig Gur, many of our listeners know him. He's one of Israel's really most important public intellectuals, and he does what very few public intellectuals in Israel are able to do, which is really to communicate in perfect English to a foreign audience. So, Haviv, wonderful to have you on the show.

**RETTIG GUR:** Thank you, Mark. People don't know that just before we started filming, I was saying, look, I learned from you what actually is happening in Iran, so if we could talk about the grand things, but sure, I'll take the credit there for teaching you about these things. All right.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, so Haviv has an amazing podcast called *Ask Haviv Anything*, and it's a great title for a podcast because Aviv is exactly the kind of person you literally can ask Haviv anything, and he's always going to give you a very smart, thoughtful, well-informed answer. And Haviv, I'm not going to get into the details of Hormuz or how do we blow up Pickax Mountain or how much damage have we done to Iran's missile shield or what's Trump going to do before midterms and after midterms? Because we have a number of guests who certainly spend a lot of time thinking and talking about that. What I want to do is really zoom out. And the area that I struggle with a lot is really just trying to understand the Islamic Republic's ideology and how it fits into the broader Islamist ideology that is so threatening to the United States, to Israel, and to the West.

So, help our listeners and viewers really understand the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Khamenei. Who are these people? What motivates them and how are they connected to the broader ideological jihad against the West?

**RETTIG GUR:** So, the easy question, thank you so much for having me. The basic way I think to look at this region, the Iranian regime is the most extraordinary representation, the most successful and failed at the same time example of a very powerful, coherent, thought out old, century and a half old doctrine that has been coalescing in certain ideological wings of Islam in the Middle East. This isn't all Muslims; this isn't all Muslim factions. This isn't even all places where there's violent conflict in the Middle East. But there is this doctrine of permanent asymmetric struggle against the forces that these people believe are keeping Islam down, keeping Islam from realizing its great redemptive purpose in the world. The word they use to describe this struggle is *Mukawama*, which means literally just resistance. It's literally in Arabic, the word you would use to describe resistance, electrical resistance and copper wires.

It's just the word resistance. But it means vastly more than the simple English word of resistance, like a resistance movement against a colonial occupation of some kind. It's an entire religious doctrine and vision of history. And what's extraordinary about the Iranian regime specifically, and you can talk a little bit about, there's some elements of this in Erdogan's AKP Party, which is a Sunni version of some of these salafist ideas, and there's all Hamas, certainly the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. But what's extraordinary in the Iranian regime is that they have managed to fuse a whole bunch of traditions, a whole bunch of ideas percolating through the Middle East for 150 years into a single coherent political system where suffering, devastation, failure, military failure, the decapitation of the entire leadership of the regime, strengthen the regime rather than weaken it. This is a system that is amazing, extraordinary.



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It's a true achievement just in political science terms. And when you begin to understand the ideas at the core of this system, you begin to understand, first of all, why Trump is having such a hard time bringing them to heel. You begin to understand why they're so resilient despite causing so much damage to the Iranian economy over so many years. How they survive again and again, Iranian revolts and rebellions by people whose lives they've ruined, millions upon millions of people whose economy they have broken and shattered the people they rule and oppress. Why they're so resilient. And I'm happy to get into it, but just in Hebrew, we have a phrase on the edge of the fork, Al-Qama's leg, just the tiniest little taste of it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is not at its core the kind of normal state that pursues security and prosperity that classical political science talks about. It is a revolutionary project. It is organized around this idea of perpetual mukawama, perpetual resistance. And that functions as a kind of operational engine, ideological engine. You want to understand what the IRGC is, why Iran has a separate military separate to the Iranian state military called the IRGC. You need to understand the Mukawama. You want to understand why they built out this vast proxy system, why they spent so many billions on Hezbollah over the years. You need to understand this idea of the Mukawama. So, if that's okay, can I just get into that? Because once people have a sense of that, a whole lot of, I think also policy prescriptions become clear.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah, Haviv, please continue. I mean, I'll just keep—

**RETTIG GUR:** Going. This is—

**DUBOWITZ:** Exactly where I want to go. Yeah.

**RETTIG GUR:** There were four, maybe five elements that come together to form the Iranian regime. The first one is Maoism. And specifically, there was this idea that Mao had of protracted people's war. That's what he called it. And it's a kind of long-term guerrilla struggle, long-term popular struggle. It takes a long time to bring down the class super structures that Mao saw in the capitalist system. And in the internal Chinese Civil War where the communists then win, he led a kind of long-term popular struggle that slowly wears down, grinds down the stronger opponent, the opponent that controls all the power levers in society at the beginning of this conflict, of this conflict of the proletariat rising up. And so, it's a war of attrition, a war of popular mobilization. Hold that thought in your mind, that example of Mao's popular war. Then you have Frantz Fanon, this brilliant psychiatrist who volunteers as a doctor in the National Liberation Front of Algeria when it is fighting in the late '50s, early '60s when it's fighting the French colonial rule in Algeria.

And he writes a book called *The Wretched of the Earth* that is beautiful, fascinating, and terribly damaging in the history of the world. In this book, Fanon talks about the state of the colonized, the psychological state of specifically Algerian Muslims, but he's referring to a much larger human condition in a period of imperialism and colonialism. And one of his main arguments is that when you are that colonized person, in American terms, because everything is coded racially because of the American historical experience, let's call it brown people colonized by white Europeans, it's not quite how it works everywhere. But when you are that underclass in this large colonial superstructure, Fanon argues that violence, including suicide violence, in other words, martyrdom, is purifying. It restores the human dignity of the oppressed because it humiliates, it brings down a peg, those who had been above the oppressed. And so, violence is healing.



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Violence heals psychological wounds. It heals historical wounds. Hold that thought. And then you have Anu Shia theology. In the year 680, there was a battle in Karbala, which is today in Iraq. And in this battle, two essentially claimants to being the heirs of Muhammad as the religious and political leadership of the new Islam, Imam Hussein and the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid, face off in this battle in Karbala. Yazid kills Hussein. That moment is essentially the moment where Shia and Sunni are born as two distinct paths or branches of Islam. The followers of Hussein who believe Hussein should not have died in that battle; Hussein was the rightful heir of Muhammad. They're the Shia. And the followers who believe that the right people won and the right people carried on the torch, they're essentially the Sunni. And one of the core ideas of the Shia is that Hussein's, for example, the next Imam, his son, goes into occultation, disappears from history, but will return.

And he is the Mahdi, the Messianic figure at the end of days. Now, there's many different kinds of Shia, a lot of discussion about this, but basically there is this mythical, not mythical in the sense that it's not true, but foundational moment in the founding of Shiism. And the moment of the founding of Shiism is a moment in which the proper religious path, the proper religious leader, the Imam, the divine messenger loses. And the evil, powerful, Hussein had a much smaller force. Yazid had a much larger force. The powerful, the arrogant one, and the humble but true, spiritually correct, lost. And Shiism is all about that great sort of framework of the weak, the humble, but the true and correct and faithful. And so, Imam Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala is usually for centuries talked about in Shia Islam by Shia theologians as a kind of quietistic, pietistic kind of a story.

It's a tragedy built into reality. And when the tragedy is overcome by the return of the Mahadi of the true heir to Muhammad, then the tragedy of the world, the brokenness of the world will be overcome. In the 1970s, you have thinkers, Shia thinkers like especially Ali Shariati, but not only. Ali Shariati gives a speech in 1971 called Red Shiism versus Black Shiism. And he says, Black Shiism is everything I just described. It's a Shiism that says Hussein died in this battle, but his descendants will return and history will be set right again. And that's the great redemptive arc of history. And therefore, we await patiently. Shiism is framed for centuries as quietistic suffering and piety, et cetera. And Ali Shariati says, this is a mistake. Imam Hussein is not this call for us to be quiet. In fact, he is the underclass, the revolutionary, the Marxist revolutionary overthrowing or challenging the great powers of the world.

This is exactly the kind of Marxist re-imagining of a religious leader that you have in the very same year, 1971 over in Peru where there's a Catholic priest who writes a book, a famous book called A Theology of Liberation, which is the beginning of South American Liberation Theology within Catholicism, which essentially reframes Jesus as the Marxist, redemptive Messiah figure, revolutionary. Everything that he is religiously, he is also as a class, overlapping the class more and the religious revolution. And so, Ali Shariati fuses Maoist protracted people's war as the mechanism by which the people, the proletariat overcomes the powerful. And Fanon saying violence is redemptive, violence is restorative, violence is important. And Shia eschatology that says, how do we. It isn't just that we await the coming of the Mahadi. Imam Hussein's story is the story of active revolution to bring the Mahadi. And he fuses all these things into a kind of Shia Marxism that is the main intellectual source.

Again, he's not the only guy doing this kind of stuff, but he's one of the main teachers of a gentleman named Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution. In this system that they build, there's a whole lot more I left out, Khomeini and others, but in this system that they build, it's not just name-dropping. People can just drop this into ChatGPT, and it'll lay out for them all the different pieces. It's really fascinating and important. And you can't understand what's happening in the Middle East today without understanding these profound ideas. In this system, weakness, humility become a kind of spiritual purity that draws divine protection, that gives you military success over the long term against the arrogant and powerful. And this is key to understand. I don't know if that was clear. So let me just clarify. Ruhollah Khomeini, student of Shariati, student of all of these people, reader of all of these thinkers, develops a special version of this Shia eschatology.



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And I'm sorry for going into the weeds, we're about to come out of it. And he develops a theory of weakness that's really, really powerful. Islam has been struggling for two centuries to understand what happened to it, why it became weak. With the entry into the Middle East of European empires in the 19th century, Britain and France, et cetera, Muslim theologians began to seriously debate what happened to them. Islam is supposed to be the top, and it's not supposed to be at the bottom with any Christian empire stomping over Islamic territory. Islam is supposed to be a vehicle for grand world redemption. And Islam is backward and Islam is geopolitically weak and Islam is poor. And what does that mean? And what did we do wrong? And how do we get back to our rightful place in history? And they develop all kinds of answers.

We have to turn pietistic. We have to develop a better industrial policy. There's a million answers that Muslims, especially in the Arab world, but not only in the Arab world, turn to, to try and respond to the discovery with European imperialism chopping up the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century that they are in fact profoundly weak and that this is a theological crisis. Because again, Islam shouldn't be in centuries of retreat. Khomeini enters this conversation drawing on all these threads, and he comes with a theory. And his theory is very simple. He says, "The world is divided between the oppressed, the Mustadafin, the humble, the weak, and the Mustakbirin, the powerful, the arrogant." We see that in the Battle of Karbala in 680. There's the weak, the humble, but also the faithful, the holy, the Mustadafin in Imam Hussein, and the powerful and arrogant in the Khalif Yazid.

And says Khomeini, what we know that the arrogant don't know and what Ali Shariati teaches us and what Fanon and Mao, et cetera, show us is that in fact, the weak are secretly the powerful. The weak, because they are weak, cannot trust in their power. They have to trust in God. They have nothing else to trust. And God ultimately will side. It is easier for the weak, for the humble to turn to faith, to be honest in their faith than it is for the powerful who trust in the power they have in this world. And so, the powerful end up losing God's grace, God's support, and the weak end up guaranteeing almost God's support. And then the weak end up winning. And that's the core story of Islam. That's certainly the story of Shiism. The weak win. There's also a battle of Badr with Muhammad.

It's one of the sort of defining battles in Muhammad's career where the Muslim, the earliest Muslims face a battle against more powerful forces, but they emerge victorious and that establishes Muhammad in some sense. And so, there's this recurring theme of weakness, but faithful is the guarantor of eventual victory. Khomeini says a very simple thing. The musta defin, the humble and oppressed. They're not just Shia. They're not just Muslims. They're not just the Iranian proletariat. There's a global revolutionary class and its struggle against the powerful all over the world. What a guy named Kanafani, a Palestinian theoretician in Lebanon calls the great beast, which is sort of the global imperialist construct. The war in Vietnam, he talks about how there's a piece of this great beast. Its head is in East Asia; its arteries go into South America and Africa. Its heart of course is the Middle East, Palestine, Israel.

And this great beast is one single structure. When you carry out a terror attack against Jews in Israel, you are also hurting the Americans in Vietnam. You are also hurting oppressive military dictatorships in Chile. It's all one thing. This is sort of the birth of the intersectional concept in academia is born in Middle Eastern revolutionary thought. Khomeini takes all of these different pieces, and he says there's a global revolution. There's a global class struggle. There's a global religious struggle, which is the same as this class struggle, but it's cosmic. It's not just about this materialistic Marxist sort of class war. And this struggle is theological and political at once. And Israel in his system is the heart of the beast, as Kanafani said. And the purpose of the Iranian revolution that he founds is to be the vanguard of this global revolution. And the first act that will prove that this revolution really is the pivot of history that it's intended to be, the beginning of the coming of the Messianic age that he perceives, is that Islam will finally overcome the historical humiliation, the signal of its retreat and weakness and falling away from God's strength and power and grace in Islam's weakness represented by the weakest thing that ever pushed Islam back, which is the Jews of Israel.



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And so, Iran's revolution will mobilize all the week of the world across, it's a global revolution. He gave speeches against Iranian nationalism. He said nationalism itself is part of how the arrogant divide us and control us. The arrogant, powerful, mainly he's talking about the West. He's against nationalism. He wants a transnational global revolution. It is possible to look at the Iranian regime and say it is essentially sort of Maoism in Shia drag. You could do that, but it's not that simple in the sense that Khomeini brought into this Maoist revolutionary idea the immensely powerful and mobilizing eschatology of Shia Islam. And so, it becomes this cosmic theological thing. Long story short, and it's been a very long story, so let me cut it very short. The result is that the people ruling Iran today are a cult of redemptive martyrdom. The main tool that the weak use to overcome the strong.

It's not enough that you have God on your side in some theoretical sense. You need a specific mechanism for closing the gap in power. And the mechanism, because you are the side that has faith, is martyrdom. And so, what you actually have, and Khomeini writes this and talks about this, and you saw them sending kids to walk across minefields in the Iran-Iraq war and talking about it in terms of martyrdom. And Hezbollah putting out these videos in Hebrew, in bad Hebrew to scare Israelis for decades, talking about how we love death and you love life and therefore we're going to win. What they mean by we love death is we have faith and we know that our martyrdom, like Imam Hussein's martyrdom in the battle of Karbala will trigger generations more of martyrs. And so, our willingness to sacrifice closes the gap in power. And so, the Iranian regime is essentially a cult of redemptive martyrdom.

And what that means is I put out a two-hour exposition on this. On February 25th of this year, the active hostilities between the US and Iran began on February 28th. And my argument was literally the YouTube thumbnail of this episode of the podcast said bombs won't bring them down. The bottom line is when you inflict damage on this regime, when you kill the armies of its proxies, you don't generate fear. You don't generate a calculation of costs like you would for a normal. When you decapitated Venezuela, when Trump arrested Maduro, the number two, the vice president of Maduro's own regime suddenly played ball with America because she doesn't want to be decapitated, right? When you decapitate the Iranian regime, it's the opposite. It doesn't generate that kind of calculation of cost that to a Western thinking would seem to make sense. It gives them the opposite.

It generates a narrative fuel. It legitimizes the core belief, and it allows them to further mobilize. In other words, they closed ranks. Conventional bombing, conventional military pressure, conventional targeting of their assets in the Strait of Hormuz are not enough. I'm a big fan of smashing all the capabilities of this regime. I am a big supporter of the war that then happened. But if that's all you do, and this I said before the war, that's my one credit, it's not going to get the job done. The Iranian regime has a couple of very clear motives, and the motives are totally inexplicable to, I think, from what I've seen, forgive me, to the Trump White House. They want to redeem Islam. They want to redeem Islam from centuries of weakness. And Israel is the biggest symbol of that weakness because it's the weakest thing that ever pushed the Muslim back.

Their mechanism is permanent struggle and a mass martyrdom ethos where they're literally willing to die. And all of their proxies share in this. Now all the Shia proxies, obviously, Hezbollah, the Houthis, but Hamas on the Sunni side, it's not an accident that Hamas calls its military branch the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade. Izz ad-Din al-Qassam was an Imam in Haifa, who in the 1930s was mobilizing the Arabs of Haifa to begin a kind of terror war against British rule and against the Jews. And he dies. He kills a few people, and he's hunted down by the British police and he's killed in 1935. And as he dies, the story goes, he yells, "There's only this jihad or death." In other words, he is exactly the Sunni martyr image where through martyrdom we find redemption and through martyrdom we create new generations of martyrs, which makes us unkillable and ultimately victorious.



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And faith is the engine that drives it and we have faith and the other side doesn't because they're the powerful and arrogant. And so, Hamas's own sense of itself, it's a Sunni, it's different. There's no Imam Hussein there, but it's the same. It's the same strategy and it's the same basic religious idea. So let me stop there.

There are huge consequences to this on how you fight, on who will actually bring down the Iranian regime. And just simple deterrence will never work. Bombing another generation of Iranian leadership out of existence won't work. I'll stop there.

**DUBOWITZ:** Okay. Wow. That was an absolute tour de force. Okay, so I want you to wrestle with this because I think there are at least three fundamental weaknesses in the Islamic Republic's approach to reality. The first is that as Khomeini said at the time of the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Revolution is not about the price of watermelons. So today, all these years later, 47 years later, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country of 92 million people, a huge country, territory more than twice the size of Texas. It's not ISIS, it's not Al-Qaeda. They're ruling a real country with 92 million people. And the price of watermelons has increased sharply because the inflation is running at 80 percent, 90 percent, 110 percent, depending on what you're looking at. The currency's collapsed. They're facing a severe economic crisis. So, Khomeini may not have cared about the price of watermelons, but there are 92 million Iranians who do.

So, argument one is you can have this very elaborate, very sophisticated theological and philosophical construct about self-sacrifice and martyrdom and the wretched of the earth. But when you've got 92 million people who need to be fed, you have to cope with that. Argument two is in 1979, it was an Islamic revolution, not an Iranian revolution. So, I'd push back a little bit on the characterization. I think Khomeini would have called it a Islamic revolution. And certainly, those who were his fellow travelers on the left, the communists, the communist Iranian party, they would've thought of it as more of an Iranian revolution, but he ended up mowing them down, taking over and creating this theological state. The problem with the Islamic Revolution is that 47 years later, his mosques are empty and the majority of his people are secularizing at an extraordinary pace and abandoning the faith.

And the majority of his people despise the regime and want a better life and have been on the streets repeatedly since 1999, 2009, 2017, 18, 19, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2026. And Haviv, I'm going to take a bet for a nice dinner in Tel Aviv, that they will be back on the streets again in the coming months and years. So he's got the second problem, or the Islamic Republic has the second problem that the majority of people don't believe in the Islamic Revolution anymore and want a better life. The third problem he has, and it's very much connected to the second problem and the first problem, is that the majority of Mojtaba Khamenei, his sons who is his successor, the majority of his citizens prefer life over death. They're very similar to Americans, Israelis, and other Westerners. They actually want to live a better life, and they don't want to sacrifice their lives for this cause.

So Mojtaba Khamenei is facing a serious problem to this construct, and that is a collapsing economy, a population, the majority of whom despise his regime, a population that had been on the streets repeatedly to challenge the regime and will be back on the streets, a population that prefers life to martyrdom, and having a more and more difficult time recruiting these true believers who are willing to sacrifice themselves for this messianic cause. And then I would just say the final problem he has is that his ability to mobilize these co-religionists in the Middle East, which had been very successful for decades, both on the Sunni and Shiite sides of the streets, have been dealt quite a blow by the combined forces of the United States and Israel. And in fact, more and more Muslims across the Middle East in countries that have been ravaged by the Islamic Republic or by Islamism in general are turning away from it.



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And you've got obviously the examples of countries that have turned away for it, like the UAE, maybe increasingly like Saudi Arabia and others that are examples of success about how faithful Muslims can live a much better life when they're not dedicated to death, but when they're dedicated to prosperity and peace. With all that in mind. Minds, is that enough to overcome the ferocity and intensity and obsession of the Islamists of Iran? Or do you still remain as skeptical, and I'd say overall negative about the prospects of bringing down this regime?

**RETTIG GUR:** Yeah, you're exactly right on all of that. The title of that episode, the theology lesson before the war began was How to Win Iran's Forever War, which is to say, oh, you absolutely need to win, and you absolutely need to kill the supreme leader who is this religious. And is the engine driving the nuclearization efforts? And you absolutely need to have that military element. It's just not enough. So, if you have this regime, we'll take it piece by piece with all the things you've said. If you have this regime, that's very hard to break from the outside because the mass death of its own ranks, it knows how to absorb that, knows how to metabolize that, so to speak. And in fact, that validates its narrative of the weak and resisting the powerful. It's not vulnerable from the outside in that way, but you can dismantle the capabilities from the outside in order to open up the potential for the place where it is profoundly vulnerable, which is the inside.

The same ideology that the elements of Iranian society that support the regime, which different scholars give different percentages, but it runs the gamut between five and 20 or five and 15 percent. A small minority of Iranians literally actually support the regime. Everyone else hates it. And I don't think there's a nation on earth with the scale of the gap between the economic potential, the easy, obvious, automatic economic potential of that economy and what it actually manages to realize because it's ruled by crazy idiots. And I'm talking about the energy sector. I mean, Iran sits on, you'll know this far better than I, the world's third biggest gas reserve, fourth biggest oil reserve. Iran should have the technological prowess of Israel. The Iranian expat world around the world includes some of the world's top mathematicians in the most important tech companies. It should have Israeli tech prowess with Saudi extraction money.

That should be what Iran's economy actually looks like, except for this regime, which for 47 years has brought them to a place where I read recently their nominal GDP per capita is Haiti. The wealthiest country, one of the wealthiest countries in the world in terms of literally resources can't run a currency. And it's because of the -

**DUBOWITZ:** And the interesting thing is, Haviv, just real quick, I don't remember the exact date, but there was a time at which Iran and Israel had the same GDP per capita. It was around 13, 1400. And in the ensuing years, Israel went to a GDP capita of about 69, 70,000, which puts it at European standards and above. And the Iranian GDP plunged by another 20, 30 percent. So I mean, it's actually incredible to see - It's incredible. These two countries that started basically in the same place economically 30 years ago. And now today, I mean, the absolute gap, it's quite astonishing. And then again, to your point about Iranians, I say this often on the show, the only place where Iranians don't succeed in the world is inside the Islamic Republic.

**RETTIG GUR:** It's in Iran. And people will, by the way, jump to sanctions. Well, of course it's just sanctions. That's not nearly enough to explain the collapse. It has a lot to do with the fact that well over 50 percent of the GDP of the entire country is literally owned. Multiple, some mining sectors and energy sectors, entire industries, and the biggest industries are literally owned by the IRGC. And another 20 percent or whatever it is, there are all these assessments online people can find from all the different think tanks are owned by something called these bonyads, these foundations that are charitable foundations, with air quotes, but in fact are totally controlled by the office of the Supreme Leader and are a patronage system to maintain the regime in place. Here's the thing. This all matters to the regime's own story because the fact that the regime's rank and file believe in the redemption story is both its strength, unbelievable resilience, but also its biggest weakness.



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Because if you switch over from, it's awfully hard for the Iranian regime in Iran in the Persian language today to argue that it is the *Musta de Fin*, the humble, faithful, revolutionary, rather than the exact arrogant, oppressive force that is the evil force of the world. No Iranian outside of that, I think 5 percent, but let's give it to them 15 percent outside that religiously sort of following, literally just agreeing part of the population. No other Iranian even has the time of day to even hear it. They joke, they laugh about it. There's a whole culture of spray-painting graffiti all over Iran against the regime that mocks this stuff, that talks about the Iranian revolution. It's literally in the name of the ideological army, the IRGC, the Revolutionary Guard Corps. That's Taura, which they talk about the new Taura as these young people who are rejecting as a generational cultural shift, this whole ethos of mass martyrdom.

And they talk about how we want life. This is what the word life is doing in the revolution, in the protests for women. How did it go? Women.

**DUBOWITZ:** Woman life freedom.

**RETTIG GUR:** Woman life freedom. So, woman, I get it was literally about women's headwear and the oppressive Islamic modesty patrols, et cetera. And freedom I get. Why is life stuck in there? Life is stuck in there because they're saying, dear regime who thinks that your great engine of power and mobilization and coherence and ultimately closing the gap despite the weakness you impose on us by running this country into the ground, they're essentially the biggest robbery of a nation that has happened in the last century. I mean, it's just unbelievable. And you do all that to tell us that actually if we're all just willing to die, then we will trigger, we will catalyze the great world revolution on which the cosmic redemption of Shia Islam depends. No, actually we want life. We don't want martyrdom. And so, there is these revolutionaries in Iran today. They're the real humble revolutionaries and they're rejecting the whole thing.

What my problem, my concern about the war effort, I think President Trump's decision to go to this war was a tremendous gift to the Iranian people. Obviously, a gift to the Israeli people, even if that's not how it was intended. The average Emirate believed it was a gift to the Emirates until Iran started bombing them. And that only clarifies to them that over the long term, we still need to get this done, get this regime the hell out of the region, get this regime to fall. It's not like people don't understand what they're looking at. I do think that this was a tremendously important step, but it was not accompanied and no Westerner really knows. My main critique, of course, is to my own leadership, to the Israeli leadership. Where's the story? Where's the story? People live in stories. The power of this regime, even in the minority of Iranians who support it, they're enough to go into the streets and beat up or beat to death protesters who rise up against the regime.

So, there's still enough of them that we have to have this story. We have to talk to them. This Iranian regime survives to some significant degree on this grand and frankly, incredible, just beautiful, redemptive, and it's powerful as most Marxist movements have always been. They talked a good game, and we have to be able to challenge their story. You've seen the story—

**DUBOWITZ:** Collapse. I would say, just to jump in, I mean, I think there's a few things, and again, it's terminology. I think it always really matters. The same way that it's not an Iranian revolution, it's an Islamic revolution, that it's the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it's that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I always push back against the idea that it's an Iranian regime. I think that this wonderful country of Iran with an incredible history and culture and art and food and music and really an ancient civilization. This was not a country drawn up by British and French colonialists with a stroke of a pen on the map. This goes back millennia in the same way that the Jewish state goes back, millennia, and Jewish civilization and the Israeli kingdom goes back, millennia. That this is a country that is being illegally occupied by a clerical military dictatorship.



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And we need to help liberate the Iranian people from this illegal occupation by this group of suicidal jihadis.

**RETTIG GUR:** There's so many specific things we can be doing that'll be more powerful than any single round of airstrikes. The leaders of Iran control all the economy of Iran. And their children live, and you've talked about this a lot, and FDD as I think I learned about it, I believe, from an FDD report the first time. Their children live these wealthy Western or in the Gulf Emirates lives of non-piety. The same regime that has modesty patrols killing women in the streets of Iran for their headwear not being precisely where it should be, have their daughters marrying with almost transparent wedding dresses in opulent mansions and opulent hotels either in Dubai or in California.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, the great irony, Haviv, is that—

Yes, but actually in North Tehran, I mean the great untold story is that in North Tehran, in the suburbs of North Iran behind high walls are lavish mansions where the sons and daughters of the revolutionary elite are throwing amazing parties and raves and weddings and women in bikinis and guys flexing their muscles. And I mean, if you've watched the great series Tehran, there's a few episodes that really depict this, and it's true. I mean, the absolute hypocrisy inside Iran, and Iranians know this, and they see it, and they see it, and they know not about just the corruption, but just about the absolute flagrant hypocrisy between these revolutionaries preaching martyrdom and their sons and daughters who are enjoying the pleasures of the flesh and drinking alcohol in these lavish mansions in raves is infuriating to the vast majority of Iranians.

**RETTIG GUR:** Right. And this is not simple hypocrisy. Very few political elites are not hypocritical anywhere, including the well-best run democracy. This is a hypocrisy precisely on the very things with which they oppress brutally millions and millions of their countrymen. And so yes, this actually is something that needs to be a vast public propaganda information war effort. There's a lot of other things. For example, the brand of the Mukawama of the resistance reached a peak. We have polling on this in the Arab world. And when you would poll ordinary Saudis and Egyptians and Algerians and Lebanese about Hezbollah, for example, as the vanguard of the Mukawama against the Zionist interloper, and Arab posters pulled the popularity of Hezbollah over the years. Immediately after 2006 when the Israeli Second Lebanon War started by Hezbollah when it attacked and killed and kidnapped Israeli soldiers in July of 2006, and that begins the second Lebanon war, Israel fought fiercely against Hezbollah, but Hezbollah was still standing and still shooting rockets by the time of the ceasefire of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, et cetera.

And that moment where Hezbollah is still standing, having borne the brunt of this massive Israeli assault, that moment made Hezbollah one of the great heroes of the Arab world. And its leader Nasrallah was, I think they gave 15 leaders in a poll. They asked ordinary Arabs not in Lebanon, not Shia, Sunni, to poll their hero. The leaders that had highest favorability, Nasrallah was consistently at the top. The Mukawama brand, the resistance hero was this grand story that Hezbollah had acquired from the 2006 war. In 2011, the revolution against Assad in Syria begins. And Iran gives Hezbollah the order to deploy as one of the major fighting forces in the vanguard in Syria to defend this regime against, frankly, the Sunni majority of Syria. The Alawite Assad regime, which is an offshoot of Shiism and is allied with Iran against the Sunnis of Syria. There are three or four cases where Hezbollah surrounded a city, surrounds a town, blockades the town until people are dying from mass starvation in that town.



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Hezbollah mass murdered its way. It cut this bloody sway through the Syrian countryside villages cities. It was the vanguard of Assad's forces in places where Assad's own military was almost unable to fight. It was massively upgraded by the Iranians. It gained a tremendous amount of military experience, and it was horrifically brutal. And the entire and very quickly, within two years, or it wasn't in 2011, literally, I think the main fighting of Hezbollah begins in 2013. Within two years of it entering that war, its popularity in the Arab world, Nasrallah's position in those lists of which Arab leader do you fancy, do you think is a good leader, do you think is a heroic Arab revolutionary, collapses. And the Mukawama brand becomes something disgusting. And most Arabs and most Sunnis in the world come to see Hezbollah as an arm of oppression, of Persian oppression of Arabs, or of Shia brutality against Sunni, of sectarian brutality and violence.

And all of that is to say, and by the way, Hezbollah never recovered from that. And Hezbollah was dramatically weakened by it and became seen even in Lebanon. A lot of the story of Lebanon having new pockets of ability to talk about how Hezbollah is not something that even comes before the Israeli attack and Hezbollah after October seven, after the Israeli response to Hezbollah's months and months of shelling the north. Hezbollah is suddenly weakened by the Israelis and suddenly the Lebanese can talk about how Hezbollah's a terrible force in their world. Some of that began before October seven, and it comes from this collapse of Hezbollah's popularity in the Arab world because of the Syrian war. The more you show that the Iranian regime is not Iranian, and it's not even Islamic, it's a specific kind of. You can be a very different kind of Muslim.

It's a specific Maoization of Shia eschatology to build a grand, glorious world revolution through the sacrifice of Iranians and Arabs living in the proxy areas that Iran has built its proxies. It is all death, all war, a martyrdom cult that has nothing else to offer. I don't mean this as polemic. It literally builds nothing. It produces nothing. It innovates nowhere. There's nothing happening in Iran worth buying. There's no technological advancement. It has built a nuclear program slower and more painfully and with more mistakes and more infiltrated by foreign intelligence services than anyone else who ever built a nuclear program. It's an incredibly incompetent regime that has achieved one great thing, one thing at which it has proven phenomenally competent. And that's the oppression of its own people, the dividing of its own people, the destruction of other power centers in Iranian society. As you mentioned, the communists of Iran looked at these revolutionary Islamists and said, "Hey, they're basically communists." I mean, they talk the same talk, they read the same Mao, and they went with them in this revolution.

And then of course, Khomeini kills them all. So, they went with him and then Khomeini purged them all and just stayed on top, stayed in that purge where the communists helped get him there. But he then systematically went to student groups. He went to all kinds of different elites, and he systematically either replaced, oppressed, started tracking, imprisoned, all of these different power centers in Iranian society. The only achievement this government ever has, by the way, it tracks Iranians with all of these AI tools of internal intelligence using pretty sophisticated Chinese systems to track their populations. The internet goes down, and then they kill 40,000 Iranians. And then the BBC, which in Gaza believed every single statement by Hamas about every death toll of every airstrike, whether the airstrike happened or not, won't report what's coming out of the reports of tens of thousands of dead in Iran.

And it says, "I have no evidence. Why do I have no evidence?" The internet's down. The control of that population is literally its only achievement. And so, the more that you can tell a story loud and proud, President Trump keeps talking, and this frustrates me. I don't know why he would know this. I don't know why he would understand this. Who would've told him? But I wish he did understand this. President Trump keeps talking about the Iranians. The vocabulary that accompanies the negotiation, his vocabulary that basically talks of, it's a kind of saber rattling, the standoff, the sort of high noon kind of draw your gun. They're saying you have to pay us reparations. So, he says, "Well, you have to pay more reparations." That kind of ego battle. I get it. I get why he does that. I get why they do it.



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He shouldn't do that. He should say every time they say you owe us reparations, he should say, "You have murdered X number of women for modesty laws. You kill regime opponents for wanting the price of watermelon to go down. You believe that you don't owe your people prosperity and happiness." If he says that out loud now when the internet works in Iran, that will have more of an effect on this regime because it will exactly undermine them in that place where they are terrified, which is internally. Do everything you can at every turn and every moment to show the hypocrisy because it is foundational and fundamental. The story that allows them to have the resilience, military resilience. An enemy that is willing to die is undeterrable. And that's the basic military problem, but that's also exactly what's destroyed Iran. And so highlight that. Go for that. Go for that jugular, which will actually bring down that regime, not immediately, not in three years, maybe in 10 years.

The CIA was convinced that the Soviet Union would last forever until it fell. And then we learned just how fragile it was internally, even as it looked powerful enough to fight wars all over the world. That's the situation of the Iranian regime. It is fillible from within and within needs to be the great strategy of the West. And I'm not even talking about intelligence stuff, which you'll know better than I, what the possibilities are there, but go into that society. That is their strategic Achilles heel. Most Iranians want it. And that I think is the grand strategy. And also, obviously decapitate them, bomb, pick ax mountain, do whatever you can at that level. That is not the decisive level because of this ideology at the core of the regime.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, it's exactly right. And you mentioned the Soviet Union. I mean, I think President Reagan was a president, I think surprisingly for many who understood the war of ideas. He understood that you had to de-legitimize the Soviet Union, that every time you got up, you had to say it is inevitable that Marxism Leninism will end up on the ashleep of history. As he said in his famous Westminster speech in 1982 to the British Parliament, would get up and he would talk about these courageous anti-Soviet dissidents behind the Iron Curtain, and he would say their names and he would meet them. And Reagan understood that.

**RETTIG GUR:** There haven't been famous Iranian dissidents in the White House in this war, and that's a tremendous loss. And when you understand the regime, you understand that that's a third aircraft carrier task force in terms of probably it's three more aircraft carriers. Of the two working in that region, this would be the three, four, and five in terms of the power it would have in the narrative inside Iran. And yes, the Iranian regime is better at keeping the internet off in Iran than it is at deploying an Air Force. The Air Force never flew. It does not know how to build an Air Force. It does know how to control the people. So that's where you have to fight the big and the great fight. And it begins by controlling the narrative around the world.

**DUBOWITZ:** Okay, Haviv, I think we're getting to the end of the episode but wondering if you have any final thoughts or insights on this problem.

**RETTIG GUR:** I hate to bring it home, but one of the interesting things to see in this Israeli government and this American administration is that they have an excellent sense of the nature of the enemy, of the danger of the enemy. I have some friends in the Democratic Party I've talked to in the US, whether activists or even members of Congress I've interviewed who really understand the nature of the Iranian regime and what's bad about it and why it's a force of terrible instability and unsustainable and all of that. They might not agree with a particular war or Trump or whatever, but they get the nature of the enemy. But the people who mainly get the nature of the enemy the best are Netanyahu, not literally Netanyahu alone. The Israeli political. There's not fundamental difference on Iran between Netanyahu and Eisenkot, for example, just so I don't step into the Israeli election here.



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But the Israeli leadership really gets the nature of this regime, and the Trump administration seems to really get the nature of this regime. And if JD Vance in his negotiations doesn't understand, the Iranians are running him through a very fast school on the nature of the regime. And I think he'll understand. I don't know if politically he'll admit it, but I think he gets the nature of this regime at this point.

But they're bad at telling the story. They're astonishingly bad at telling the story. Trump didn't do the thing that American presidents generally do before going to war, which is build the coalition, tell the story, tell the nature of this regime. Explain why actually this regime is not something that can be contained because it literally its only story is that revolutionary ethos Netanyahu needs to tell not just on Iran, but also in Lebanon. And of course, in Gaza, tell the story, open your mouth and tell a story that is destabilizing to the enemy. That has always, I mean, that's in sun too. I mean, this is not a new idea. It's been remarkable to me to watch how people who get the point don't understand that they need to or don't know how to fight the war of narratives. And that in this war to me has been a bigger Achilles heel, a bigger problem, a bigger mistake.

It has set back the war effort more than the discovery of the extent to which Iranians close her mouth. In other words, that's the big strategic problem. That's not the big strategic problem. This, not telling the story in ways that destabilize the enemy is the big strategic problem. And this enemy really is destabilizable and is very tolerant of other mechanisms that we need but are not going to be decisive because they're very tolerant of it for all the reasons we've mentioned. So it's time to get up, to wake up, and to tell that story, what this regime is, why it has to fall, why it's going to fall, why it's hypocrisy, why it's brutal, why it's destructive of Iran, nevermind of all the rest of the region, and the whole story of why the Mukawama is one big fat lie is going to do more damage to the Mukawama than any particular airstrike or any hundred airstrikes.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. Amen to that, Haviv. And listen, thank you. Thanks for being on this episode. Thank you for telling the story. And I would strongly encourage all listeners and viewers to tune into *Ask Haviv Anything* where Haviv every week tells the story on different topics in a way that as you can tell from Haviv's episode today, grounded incredible facts, history, and understanding of intellectual history and ideas, which is really something that is often missing in how we understand our enemy. So, Haviv, thank you. And thanks for everything.

**RETTIG GUR:** Thank you, Mark. Thanks for having me. Thanks for having me.