

A Turning Point for Tehran?

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Speakers

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 - Rachel Bronson, Senior Advisor, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
 - Vali Nasr, Majid Khadduri Professor of Middle East Studies and International Affairs, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University
 - David Sanger, White House and National Security Correspondent, The New York Times
 - **Moderator:** Dafna Linzer, U.S. News and World Report
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Linzer

Thank you Nick [Burns]. Thank you great panelists for being here. This panel is a reminder that it has been this year. It's about testing assumptions, and that is exactly what is happening right now in Iran. So buckle up. Brett McGurk yesterday described the joint us, Israel attack on Iran as a turning point for the Middle East. David, there's so much happening. There's a new intelligence estimate out today. Can you just set the stage for us a little bit? What do we know coming out of the strike right now? What has been damaged, what has been destroyed, what remains?

Sanger

Thanks, Dafna. And it's great to be here, and great to be on the panel with all these How many hours did I sit in your office, Steve, or yours, Nick, when you were there, as we were like, trying to think through earlier days in the in the Iran nuclear program. So to think that we're at the point where Fordow and Natanz are out of business, I would not say obliterated, but out of business for probably a couple of years is quite remarkable. So what do we know? The bulk of the American attack was focused on Fordow, that's the deepest underground site. It's been known about since, really, I guess, the end of the Bush administration, the beginning of the Obama administration. I know we were tracking, you know, parts of the construction on satellite photographs and the like that turned out to be critical. Because if you looked at those satellite photographs in 2009 as they were building it, you saw these big ventilator shafts that were being built to bring air down to the centrifuge halls and the control room. And the other day, that was exactly where Central Command dropped those weapons through those ventilator shafts in order to get into the mountain plan that had been around for many, many years. It looks like that facility is pretty much completely out of it, from what the latest intelligence assessment indicates, which is that even if the bombs didn't get into the hall itself, the pressure wave, the explosions of those 12 were so great that the centrifuges are destroyed. And my guess is, if the Iranians decide to rebuild, they will do it in one of the new facilities that they have been digging, not in that Natanz, the centrifuges were also destroyed, but it was not it was only hit by two of the

bunker busters and the Israelis had struck it. My guess is they could put that back together. The most interesting of the strikes were really Isfahan, which is the lab, also had the laboratories where you actually convert the enriched uranium to a form and metalize it that can actually be used in a warhead. Those were up above ground and pretty well wiped out, but I think they could be rebuilt fairly quickly. It was interesting that when the Israelis were in town seeing President Trump last week, they assessed, as we wrote, that almost none of the fuel was destroyed itself, which means that deep down, if they can dig that deep in Isfahan, in casks that are about the size that you could fit into the trunk of a car, is the 60% enriched uranium. Now I don't think they can actually turn that into a bomb anytime soon, but that's why I don't think anybody can say whether or not this is really gone for good. My guess is you're going to need a political agreement with them that gets the inspectors back in to make sure that it stays out of circulation, because otherwise the history of these is program comes back.

Linzer

Right, and for those of you who were in the Israel panel yesterday, General Amos Yadlin actually talked about that and said that, you know that the uranium itself was not the goal here, and the goal here is about intent, it sounds like and Vali, that is sort of the big question now. And the Israelis said this yesterday, also, the ball is for the moment in Tehran court when it comes to intention. Do they go with what President Trump claimed that they no longer have a nuclear ambition? Do they decide they're going to go for a different kind of economic relationship with the West and the United States? Do they go underground? We're all waiting and trying to understand. Help us.

Nasr

Thank you very much to you, and also to the Aspen Institute for having us here. It's great to be on this panel with this group, in a way we're too close to the war to have a clear sense of decision making in Tehran, and generally, their decision making is meandering and is prolonged before they arrive at a point going forward, but at least looking back at the record, if they listen to David and accepted what he said is, their experience is that whenever the United States thinks Iran doesn't have a nuclear program, or its nuclear program is small, he doesn't want to negotiate with them, and the only times he wants to negotiate with them is when it's actually afraid of the size of their nuclear program. So one conclusion might be that if Washington actually believes in this intelligence result, the US is not the one who wants to come back to the table, irrespective of where Iran is. And so for Iranians, it makes sense to maintain what you would call nuclear ambiguity. In other words, you can assess what you want, but you don't know 400% and unless you get the IAEA back on the ground, you won't know. And to get IA back on the ground, you need to actually negotiate serious right? So that would be the short run. But I think largely the larger conversations in Iran are not about the nuclear issue. This is something that us and maybe Israel Europeans are very focused on as a cause for war and going forward. But for the Iranians, the way they look at it is that this is a long war. It started before the 12 day war, and it's going to go on. Israel's objectives have not been fully realized. US objectives have not been fully realized. This was a loss. This was clearly a loss, but the war was not decisive enough to finish this. And so for them this, they lost the battle. But the war is ongoing. And if you listen to comments by the Supreme Leader two days ago that Iran's top priority is to rebuild this

deterrence and defense so that so the larger conversation is not, what do we do at the Nuclear table? The larger conversation is, what do we do? These are the upper hand that Israel has got on deterrence issue and on defense, and if they come back to the nuclear table or nuclear conversation for them, it's not the end goal, it's subservient to this goal. So it has to fit into this but as I said, the key question is, actually, does the United States want to go back to the table, given what it has found?

Linzer

Steve, nuclear ambiguity, not, not a stranger, I think, for us, for you, can you walk us through a little bit? You know, Valley was good on, sort of where the Iranians are, sort of positioning themselves with obvious Israeli air power, clear American will to get involved. What are the post conflict scenarios, if they can get there at this moment, do you think if you're back in the White House, or imagining, sort of from a US perspective, what? What do we want next?

Hadley

Well, I think first, it's great to be here at the Security Forum. Great to be with this panel. I was trying to think the other night. I think there's sort of three options going forward. The first one is probably Bibi Netanyahu favor. This is the one where the Israelis would try to maintain their air superiority over Iran. They would try and keep their Israeli intelligence penetration of the Iranians, so they can detect if the Iranians actually try to start a covert program for getting a nuclear weapon, and then they can strike that program.

Linzer

Some refer to as "mow the lawn."

Hadley

This is... Bibi Netanyahu is "mow the lawn." This is not a negotiation. The Iranian responses, as Valley would say, will be to try to rebuild their air defenses so they can protect against an Israeli air strike and find a way to threaten Israel in some way with ballistic missiles, or otherwise to re-establish deterrence. So that's sort of option one that's probably Bibi Netanyahu, favorite, I think the Trump administration does want to get into a negotiation with Iran it will be tricky. They will want an agreement with the Iranians that is more ambitious than the 2015 agreement the Obama administration did this would be no sunset provisions, more provisions about weaponization. They want no enrichment in Iran they're going to want to have a discussion about ballistic missile program and about Iranian support for proxies. Difficult negotiation. I think one of the questions is, the current impasse seems to be, the Americans want no enrichment in Iran. The Iranians want some enrichment in Iran, even if they get a lot of enrichment material from an off site, offshore facility may be maintained by the United States and regional partners. I would think that the objective, really of a negotiated agreement for the United States is the kind of intrusive inspections that would make it risky for the Iranians to have a covert weapons program, and make it easier for us to detect it. So working with the Israelis, we can eliminate it, and I think that, and then if you get that kind of agreement, then you have a third option, and Valley may probably take this option off the table, but there is a question whether the Iranians will decide that the cost of pursuing a nuclear program was just too high. It was billions of

dollars. It alienated their regional, hopefully, friends and allies. It was supposed to safeguard them from getting attacked by the Israelis in the United States, and it resulted in them getting attacked, and whether actually having nuclear weapons deters attack. It's an interesting proposition, since the Iranians have attacked Israel that does have nuclear weapons, and the Ukrainians are attacking targets, and Russians and Russia have nuclear weapons. So there's a question whether the Iranians would actually decide, is this nuclear program worth it, or should they look at what the UAE and the Saudis are doing in terms of revising their economies, raising the technologies of the 21st Century, encouraging regional cooperation, to say, maybe that's a better road for us to go. That's a long way down the road. It's probably a low likelihood probability, but it would certainly remake the Middle East.

Linzer

Rachel, can you talk a little bit about that, because, you know, when President Trump addressed the country right after the strike and let everyone know from inside the White House, what had happened, he didn't say we're at war with Iran, did he it was a very limited, targeted, specific. He made it sound like we were at war with a nuclear program. Talk a little bit about that because Steve, Steve makes a really important point about the price the idea that a nuclear program is going to protect you might, might not be the case anymore.

Bronson

That's a big question. Obviously, you know, I do hear a lot of kind of chatter out there about the lesson that the Iranians are going to learn is that they need to have a nuclear weapon, because nobody's attacking North Korea's program the way they attacked Iran's, and that begs the question whether the Iranians want to live like North Koreans and want to live in a sanctioned regime in such isolation, which the Iranians have demonstrated that they don't want to live that way. Don't expect to as a civilization that spans back, you know, 1000s of years, that as a people, they belong in the region, not isolated from it. And I think we have to kind of remember that when we just take up so easily, that that's the lesson to be learned. In fact, that comes from the negotiations around the JCPOA. When I was talking to some of the negotiators of the JCPOA, I did have some questions about why the Iranians were giving up some some pretty specific things that were pretty important to them, and the answer was because they viewed themselves as a regional player, and at least those negotiating at the time believe that they could secure their interests in the regions to a greater extent than if then without that nuclear program to put it off another day. And it's that collapse of the JCPOA, I believe, that leads us straight to a military response to today, that once, that once the United States pulled out of that agreement, which we all would say was flawed in parts, but for those who knew arms control agreement, that was a very sophisticated agreement. In pulling out from it, there was almost no other choice if the Iranians wanted to continue to pursue their program, which they demonstrated that they wanted to do. So, you know, in terms of what we learned from this is it's very expensive to pursue a nuclear program, a covert one, and the response from the Israelis and then the Americans who joined in was so considerable, you know, the David laid it out. And, you know, we got a lot of our information from David, so he's the right person to speak on it. But the fact of the matter is that we were that the Israelis were able to to, you know, to get rid of their air cover to target where they were, their refineries, the centrifuges, where they were able to

then begin to study how to get you know, how to actually weaponize it. Took out their delivery systems, the silos where these delivery systems were going to emerge from, and the scientists involved in it, we keep hearing about the 12 to 15 scientists, but everyone who was then promoted militarily, they were told they were going to be eliminated, and they were, and the last piece of that is and how penetrated their intel, their their systems were, I think that's where the Iranians Have all back on their heels significantly, it's that penetration that that they don't even know what they don't know.

Linzer

Billy the Iranians have to contend with this, the fact that it is public, obvious, the way the Israelis were able to penetrate, the way the United States was able to go into Florida, collapse, whole tunnels. I mean they, as, as you know, as Nick very, very wisely said at the open they, they went from a sign of immense strength 600 days ago to the absolute opposite, very proud nation. How are they managing that?

Nasr

I mean, these are that's a very important point. And actually what I said restoring deterrence and defense has this intelligent component. In other words, when they say we need to have air defenses, we need to have intelligence defense, it's recognizing exactly the reasons why they are where they are. But I would say, you know, the there's no doubt that Iran is at a very weak point, but there's also sort of asking to give up the nuclear program very openly, and doing so on truth social and Twitter in a very public language. It's more of a political problem inside Iran, because you basically are asking for surrender. This is not a compromise anymore, especially if you looked at these five rounds of negotiations, it was not real negotiations. The US was not ready to negotiate the first two rounds, and then they never actually sat down and went through the paces of negotiations, and the President publicly put out that this is the end result that I want, which, in some ways interpreted over there I'm looking, for instance, the view is from Tehran was that you basically were asking for surrender. So then the question becomes, what is the acceptable cost for surrender? Would the Supreme Leader think that Iran is back to the wall sufficiently for him to be like to go and sign a surrender treaty, I could envision that it could be given up. But there are asks that the United that probably will be on the table if Iran's biggest problem now is that he's exposed to Israel in the way it is. Its first demand would be that if there is a deal, there will be no mowing the law, there will be no attack from Iran, there's no more humiliation. That the idea that Iran's skies are open, et cetera, would be off the table. That I think would be a very first thing that they would ask as part of, okay, if we give this up, then we don't want to be Damascus two days ago, or we don't want the rules of South Beirut to apply to Iran. The second, I think, would be that we need to make sure that a deal actually stays. You don't leave again, once bitten twice shy, in other words, and that actually was the reason why I think the Vienna talks with the Biden administration didn't in the end result, because the Biden administration would not give that third guarantee. And the third is actually that that if we gave up billions of dollars of investment, there is actually dividend. On the other hand, again, there is enough been written inside Iran since JCPOA that their view is that even when the deal was in effect, they didn't get anything out of it. And so the asks is very clear of them right now. I mean, if we are having this conversation, it is, this is what they need to do, but it's not very clear about

what is it that they're going to get at the table, even within this the weekend position that they're in, what is it that the United States is actually offering and that will decide whether or not they would seriously consider this issue of going to zero enrichment.

Linzer

So David, take us back eight weeks ago. Steve just talked about, you know, no enrichment. The Israelis made that clear yesterday as well, no enrichment. Secretary Rubio, I read it. He gave an interview eight weeks ago. You know, enrichment was on the table, limited enrichment. You know, I think Steve would call discussed this as well. Can you, can you talk about sort of where we were eight weeks ago and how we got here?

Sanger

So eight weeks ago, I don't think the administration had really thought through, or maybe at least 12 weeks ago, what their negotiating position was going to be. And there was a lot of loose talk out there. And I was struck as well by the limited enrichment description. In fact, at one point, Steve Witkoff came out and said, you might be able to enrich to 3.67% which sounded wonky to almost everybody, except the people in this room who knew that that was exactly what was in the Obama era. And we wrote a bunch of stories others did as well, saying the administration is considering an accord that looks a lot like the old Obama-era JCPOA. That didn't go over well with the President, as it turns out, he doesn't want to be compared to Obama-era agreements. Who knew? And almost within a week, Witkoff was made, maybe even days to come out and eat those words, put out a Twitter announcement that no, it's no enrichment. And so they kind of locked themselves into that position, at which point, Foreign Minister Araghchi who we knew well from the JCPOA days, he had been the number two negotiator in 2015 he was the one who briefed all of us most frequently. He was in a stuck position because he couldn't give that up. And I think when we look back at the history of that moment, while Rachel is exactly right that the 2018 decision sort of made this inevitable at some point, at the moment that the White House said it's got to be no enrichment, and the Iranians dug in their heels, we were headed this way. What strikes me as amazing out of this is the Iranians sort of missed the turn they didn't recognize now that without Hezbollah, without Assad, without Hamas, the Israelis felt as if they could do this attack with no consequences, and so that first night, the IRGC commanders were asleep in their beds at home when the missiles came into their bedroom walls. That night, the 12 took a few days to get them, the 12 nuclear scientists who really were at the leading edge, if you followed the names of these of the weaponization program, were killed off one by one. It was very much the approach that Netanyahu had taken to wiping out Hezbollah. It was just the same play all over again. And the Iranians, I don't think, saw that coming. And the result is, I think it's going to be a long time before they get themselves to a position where they can go negotiate. I do worry about the fact that we don't have inspectors there now, because I think if we get into another confrontation with them, they will leave the NPT. And if that happens, I think we could see a second cycle of this.

Linzer

Steve?

Hadley

Let me just sort of think outside the...

Linzer

I don't need a questions, just "Steve."

Hadley

Let me try to think outside the box a little bit on valleys point, certainly probably around one assurance they won't be struck. The question for the Israelis is, could they give an assurance that says we won't strike you if you don't try to reconstitute your nuclear program and don't have a covert enrichment program, covert nuclear weapons program, if you don't do those things, if you comply with an agreement, there will be no need to strike I don't know, something for the Israelis to think about. For the Iranians on the enrichment point, there's a question of whether, diplomatically, you could finesse it by saying You of course, have the sovereign right to enrich, but you also, in the exercise of that sovereignty, can elect to give it up for other purposes. And thirdly, another issue for the Israelis to think about is if they are accorded limited enrichment capability within the country to 3.67% that entities under IAE inspections, that's probably not how Iran mount a covert nuclear program. They mount a covert nuclear program by digging up that highly enriched uranium, taking those remaining Iranian nuclear scientists and the centrifuges that we know they still have, and park them in number locations, and pursue a covert program. So, you know, there's a lot of questions, if we get into a negotiation, I think there's some creative thinking that needs to be done, because it may be that if you had a kind of anytime, any, anywhere, anytime inspection regime to help deter and detect a covert program, you could actually accept a limited enrichment within Iran.

Linzer

Rachel, technically, should any deal be written with the idea that there's a covert program, no matter what.

Bronson

I think just picking up on Steve's point that the challenge of digging in to find those canisters is that everyone's intelligence is all over that spot. I mean, the Europeans are saying zero enrichment right now. They're watching that very closely. Putin just said zero enrichment. He's on as saying that after, you know, arachi has just come back from from Moscow, so at the moment, I don't see why the Americans would be kind of weaving leading with that where, where you have now. The Russians have their own interests. They have their own way of moving back and forth enrich uranium for like nuclear power plants and everything like that. But they're not proliferators and they they're worried about proliferation, so at this moment, I mean, maybe, and this is why, good thing we have Steve, who can, like, look so far ahead. I don't think that's on the table right now. And I think the Iranians are trying to, you know, figure out who they can trust, and, you know, who's alive to do anything, and what their options are. And I think for the Europeans, the Russians and the Trump administration, now, there's no interest in that. And I do think one of the things that we saw, one of the questions that we saw in that, and I think for many Americans watching, is a reminder that the United States can go in with very precise

plans and strikes and get out, which we have not seen the United States do in quite a long time, and then pull the Israelis back as well. Because, from my understanding, the Israelis were experienced a bit of mission creep amongst some quarters that now that they had full control of the skies, they might start looking for a decapitation strategy, which happens in wartime, and planners who are doing well, and the Americans helped hold them back to stay on mission, and the US was able to stay up for now, to step back a bit. So the covert is always out there, but there's a long way to go for them to get back in that game.

Linzer

Is this, is this new Trump doctrine, this kind of action, as Secretary Rice reminded us, Chinese, the Russians have been silent. There's been almost no opposition, even politically at home, maybe a little bit to sort of the process or war powers, but to the strike itself, and to Rachel's good point of kind of in and out with our allies.

Sanger

Certainly, I think for President Trump, he would like that to be, you know, a big part of the Trump doctrine. And I'm sort of surprised they haven't been out crowing about that more even here on, you know, the stage, because it would be their moment to say, everybody's been trying to deal with this problem for 20 years, and said that if we did this, it would still work. And instead, we did it, and there's no regional war, and we did get in. Now, the main restraint on President Trump was his own base, which you can remember just a few weeks ago, was saying, Oh no, they're getting us into another war in the Mideast and so forth. And that's why he did not choose the more prolonged options that he was given by General Carilla and others, which would have taken out other facilities and aimed at these yet unfinished facilities and so forth, because President Trump was determined to do this sort of in one night and show that it could be a one and done. Now, I think what we've heard from all of us here is, if they don't have the diplomacy right to this, it won't be one and done right that this will be back in some form. I don't think this White House has sort of fought this one out that far. I think they were really focused on doing the strike. They did it with great precision. I think they feel that parts of it could be done again, especially what they did at Isfahan, where they struck from offshore from a submarine. I think their message to the Iranians is, we can come back and help mow the lawn as well if you can't negotiate something. I am a little surprised that we have not heard the White House or Secretary Rubio come out and make a sort of public proposal to the Iranians, it might create a little bit of pressure on them at home to strike a deal.

Bronson

Dafna, can I just pick up on something? Because Secretary Rice made a point on the previous panel, which I think is so important, which is, as someone's looked at the Middle East for a really long time, it is shocking to see how weak Russia is in the Middle East right now that is a changed reality and expectation that they weren't able to come to Assad's rescue, that they weren't able to come to do anything when when Araghchi goes up, they say, like, thanks for coming. They are really not present in this because they're tied in Ukraine, because they're tied in Ukraine, that is the cost of the Ukraine war for Russia that I think should be on the table. It's their absence, not they're around and they're in a meeting this just this past week with the

Iranians, but they are really on their back foot in the region in a way we have not seen since the Cold War.

Linzer

Vali? That's isolationism for Iran. There's a lot of talk about yesterday about sort of, is Israel, sort of being isolated in the community? But the fact is, Iran is being isolated. Are they? How are they dealing with that? How do they see that, and where do they imagine they will get support now?

Nasr

Well, it's part of the whole debate. And goes to the points that was raised is that, how do they assess this moment and going forward, I would say, you know, the disappointment in Russia, actually with Iran goes a little further back when Russia refused to give him s4 100 missile defense system, didn't deliver on jet fighters that it had promised, and in the middle of the war, it was the Russians couldn't give him anything that would actually be viable, given America and Israel were attacking Iran, and Also the Iranians know, and this is again publicly debated in Iran, that Russia is always willing to bargain with the West over Iran, and it has bargaining to do in the coming weeks over Ukraine, etc, so it's might hold to that shit. And China's support for Iran has always been economic. It has not been involved in Iran militarily at all. Now, whether it will become in the future is open to question. But none of these options for Iran are actually short run. And so, you know, we're in a sort of a period where there is, there's going to be intense debate in Iran about which way do they go? And I think one way for Washington to think about it is not just about the nuclear issue, but is there, is there a way to actually influence that debate in a way that they would calculate differently? I agree with David that all the signals are that Iran doesn't see much point in coming back to the table. But there is also a very powerful voice that says that at this moment in time, some kind of a cease fire de escalation with the United States is absolutely necessary just to catch our breath, so that so there is that element there that they might be interested to come now, whether they use the nuclear deal, nuclear negotiations to Keep building weapons, whether they want weapons, it also greatly depends on what the deal the United States makes. What is in it for Iran and, you know, what is the give and take? What is the barter? Does it create ongoing interest that they would do exactly what Steve said, not to, you know, violate the deal not to have covert sites, etc. If the policy for Iran is to turn it into Iraq 1991 then that's a very different calculation than if the deal is, is a way of trying to think about not just isolate Iran, but try to push it, push it in another direction, and let's see whether that actually has traction. I think, you know, it's a bit bigger, both for Israel and the United States, to think that, you know whether mowing the lawn is really a long term strategy. I would not say that if this war resumes, it's not a given that it would play out the same way for the US. So that's also a risk the Trump administration takes by not doing this. And I will finally say that it is extremely counter-productive to do diplomacy on truth, social and on, on via, via the media, because you keep constraining the political space of the other side to make compromises. I mean, if you keep, you know, tweeting that, why don't you know to the Supreme Leader, old man, you should be wiser to accept that you were absolutely defeated. You're almost saying that I'm going to close the door for you to come to the table instead of giving political space to see whether he takes the bike and actually comes and so, you know, I do think there's problems on this side. I

don't want to say that. You know, the Trump administration, on the diplomatic side, from the get go, has actually shown competence, or has shown appreciation, is actually right now, is even following this in a way that would get them to anything other than the resumption of the war.

Linzer

Steve, can you? Can you just jump in here a little bit? Because two things Bally raises, one, the fear of regime change is real, and it is a question, it sounds like for the leadership that that is the number one thing they're thinking about, especially sort of in light of tweets like that. The other thing to address, too is, sort of, where are the other regional players here? You know, the Middle East is changing dramatically, possibly Israel and Saudi we're on the verge of a deal when we got to October 7, related, of course, where are they now and what will happen with Iran?

Hadley

Well, I think there, as much as the regional states felt obliged to condemn the Israeli strikes. In their heart of hearts, they're cheering. None of them wanted a nuclear Iran. I think secondly, if we were to get to that optimistic third option we talked about, to answer Valerie's point, to put something really attractive to the Iranians on the table, they would have an important role to play, because they would have to basically offer to Iran the possibility of participating in that regional economic integration that could lead to a different Iran that is not backward, but is actually part of moving into the 21st Century. So, I think they have an important role to play on the regime change issue. It's not that I think there was a comment earlier in one of the panels that said the Iranian people have not rallied around the regime. They have felt that their country was under attack, and they've rallied around their country. And that's probably right, that will fade over time, as time passes, if they're not further strikes, whether there would be a regime change. I think you vote, and I'm quoting my friend Condi Rice on this. It's not that millions of people are going to turn out in the streets, and that's going to change the regime. The question is, what is happening and the dynamics within the regime and valley could talk about this. Are there folks within the IRGC that think it's time that the mullahs take more of a back seat, that Iran be policy be dictated more by their national interests than some kind of revolutionary fervor, and if folks come out in the streets, it may be because one of those factions has called them to the streets to give them an excuse for making some kind of change in his regime, but that's going to take a long, I think, considerable time, to play out, but Vali is the expert on this.

Linzer

And I asked David to weigh in too, because when we first started writing about Iran's nuclear program and intelligence estimates, one of the big issues was you would sit down with briefers, and they would, they would do this. One was what was going to happen? First, would Iran have a nuclear weapon, or would the regime fall? And where was that sort of moment of decision?

Sanger

So that you know, what strikes me about that. I think Steve had this exactly right. If you think about the 2015 deal, the larger bet that President Obama was taking at that time was that the deal would buy them 10-15 years. That's when the clock started going off. And in that time, the supreme leader would die, or there would be some other event, and they would have a chance

to go build up, and they would have resumed the lifted a good deal of the sanctions, shown the Iranians a way to join the world economy and so forth. And it seemed like a pretty good bet. I remember writing that on the day of the deal in 2015 and from Vienna. And the fact of the matter is, the bet failed. Now, you can argue that it failed because President Trump pulled out of the deal in 2018 you could argue it was never going to work. I don't think they expected the supreme leader to still be running the country in 2025 but here he is. So you know, betting on regime change is a risky business. It's pretty clear from talking to the Israelis who were in Washington last week, that is their bet. Now they are just pushing for time, and they think a regime change will happen, but I'm not sure where they get that confidence.

Nasr

So I mean, regime change is one possibility, regime collapse is another, which is that actually worries the region, I think significantly, because maybe for Israel, Iran is too far away, it doesn't matter. But for Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia, sitting across from a huge chaos is a different proposition. I agree. I mean, I think the momentous impact of this war on Iran is something big. I mean, the loss of Hezbollah proxies has weakened the very powerful segment of Iran's establishment, basically taken away their tools, and it has weakened them even in a discussion of who defends Iran. How do you defend Iran? They don't have, actually, anything to offer right now, compared to the civilians, I think until so long as Ayatollah Khomeini is alive, you're not going to see radical shifts, just like so long as Mao was alive, or Brezhnev was alive, you're not likely to see it. But he's 86 years old. Maybe he lives 10 more years. Maybe he dies in five months or a year. I think you know the within the regime, if there is serious discussion, even within the IRGC, they're not going to react to a blank slate or to a theoretical assumption. It depends on what's on the table. In other words, if there is an attractive enough deal on the table or path on the table, then you will see, potentially, the opening of fissures in Iran. And that's what I'm saying. That, you know, the bigger thing for the United States is not just to get it think of the nuclear deal as just sort of doing the check marks on enrichment, enriched uranium, et cetera. But if he truly thinks that this is a historical opening, it has to think a lot bigger. It has to think the way, you know, Secretary Rice was thinking at the end of the, you know, Soviet period about, how do you, how do you force this shift in Iran? Have you caused a debate at the top that, you know, people seriously consider that this is a dead end and there's some other path on the table. I seriously don't think it's important. Iranian leaders, hard line moderates, cannot react to what is theoretically possible, but is not actually solidly in front of them as an option.

Linzer

I must let all of you ask questions, because I'm sure there are going to be great ones. I will just wrap up just with, like, I think one quick one. Who can we go to?

Audience Member 1

Hi, I'd like to pick up on something that Rachel said about the depth of Israeli intelligence penetration in Iran, and this would be for you Valley. Is there any way to assess the abilities of Iranian counter intelligence? In other words, their ability to root out these spies and put an end to that penetration.

Nasr

If I were the supreme leader, I would ask the head of Iran's counter intelligence, what the hell were you doing the past three, four years? I mean, it's clear that the depth in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iran, is extremely great, and essentially more than bombs or rockets, or F-35 this was an intelligence victory by Israel, starting in Lebanon, and then in Iran, whatever theories they may have about plugging the holes is not a short run solution. I mean, between when, for instance, Israel assassinated Iran's top nuclear scientists, I think maybe was two years ago, they weren't able to plug these holes until now. And so counter intelligence counterintelligence is not a short term fix for them it's a must but it's not going to address the short term.

Linzer

Thank you. Please help me thank the panel.