

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again, our first conversation was about a year ago, by Ray Takeyh, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, very distinguished historian, history PhD from Oxford, author of several books on Iran and the Middle East more broadly but focusing on Iran. Must-reading: you should go Google them and buy them and help him out here. But no, really terrific stuff, and I think one of the geopolitical analysts who really puts things at a deeper historical perspective. So, Ray, thanks for joining me again.

RAY TAKEYH:

Thanks very much for having me again.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, it's good. A year ago we discussed domestic developments in Iran. We'll get to those at the end of this conversation, they're still interesting and maybe under covered now a little bit, but let's talk about the war in the Middle East in which Iran is sort of a participant, which has all kinds of implications for our broader Middle East policy and our policy towards Iran. So October 7th, I guess the obvious question to begin with is, how much was Iran involved in the Hamas attack on Israel?

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, to begin with, we have to start with this point that Iran would have no objections whatsoever to Hamas attacking Israel, and it would have no objections to Hamas attacking Israel in the daring and reckless manner that it did so and inflicting the casualties that it did so. So, it would have no problem with this scenario as it played out.

Now, here are the couple of things that we know: in summertime, there was a lot of traffic between Hamas leadership and Iran in a sense that they would go to Iran for discussions, even with the top leadership, that was covered in the press, and after one such meeting, Hamas' political director said that Iran is providing them \$70 million in military assistance, particularly he mentioned missiles. Then, there was reporting in the Wall Street Journal that Iran is trying to bring together its various militia actors, Hezbollah, Hamas in a sort of an operational coordination. So, those are the things that we know that are on the facts: number one, Iranians have no problems with the attack on Israel, number two, there was a lot of consultations with Hamas over the summer, number three, there were a lot of coordinations at operational level between Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Incidentally, just on that, that strikes me as someone who went through all the debates over Iraq obviously, and one of the key parts of that debate was the Sunnis and Shia could never work together, there was this horrible war between Iraq and Iran obviously. And so, those of us who thought there might be connections of terror groups that would transcend the Shia-Sunni divide were totally wrong, and Hezbollah is Iran, and Hamas is Sunni, and whatever, was backed by the Sunni powers. But that seems here they've been pretty public—Iran—in hosting Hamas and in praising Hamas, right?

RAY TAKEYH:

The relationship between the two sides has deepened in recent years. Iran has tried to put together what is called an "axis of resistance," which is the core aspect of its grand strategy. Namely, put together non-state actors, militias that are often multinational, multi-ethnic, and transcend the sectarian boundaries: Pakistanis, Afghans, Balochis, and obviously Arabs of a variety of hues. Its core anchor is still the Shia groups, but nevertheless, Hamas has emerged as an important aspect of Iran's grand strategy, partly because of the war in Syria where Iran and Hezbollah were implicated in killing hundreds of thousands of Sunnis. So, Hamas becomes an important pathway for Iran into the Sunni Arab street. Because it has, given what it did in Syria, has somewhat of a tarnished reputation for killing Sunnis. And of course, Hamas and Iran share opposition to Israel, and beyond the sectarian divide, what brings them together is antisemitism. That's the glue that brings these people together, irrespective of some of the sectarian cleavages.

Now, did Iran tell Hamas to conduct this war in October 7th? I kind of don't believe they were that operationally involved, and this is pure speculation on my part. They seemed to know something was happening and they had an idea, but the specific operational date about when to start, I suspect that was Hamas' own initiative. And I suspect that the Iranians may not have wanted to know exactly what day it starts, even though they knew it was happening. That gives them some area of saying, "Well, we don't know exactly when it happened." The Iranians always suggested by many in the press that they were not in the room where Hamas planned the attack on October 7th. They may have been in the building, but they were not technically in the room.

And for those who don't wish for this war to be expanded, Iran gives you some sort of a convenient way of exempting them from operational responsibility, even though they were clearly the ones who enabled this attack. Finally, I would say on this issue, Hamas didn't need motivation, it didn't need direction. It's not like they didn't want to do it. So, there was that sort of a coordination I suspect take place at the very detailed level. And then, the operational aspects of it were probably Hamas' own responsibility and its own ingenuity. And also, we have to know this operation was planned for over a year. So, a lot of these details were worked out as far as we know over a span of probably a year at least.

BILL KRISTOL:

And so we're now six weeks into the war or after the terrorist attack on Israel, what have we learned about Iran's strategy sort of, or tactics maybe more than the strategy almost in the war? There's been so much talk, would they unleash Hezbollah, would they not? They certainly have been unabashed, have they not, in their support of Hamas? There's no issue of, "Oh, we deplore some of the massacre of 1,200 people, but we support the anti-Zionist part," they're not really into that subtlety, are they?

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, actually, Bill-

BILL KRISTOL:

Or are they? I don't know.

RAY TAKEYH:

... they're far more brazen. They do condemn civilian casualties— by the IDF. They actually have gone to various international forums and suggest this is a violation of international law. Their foreign minister has been very active at meeting with the UN, at meeting with other organizations, he was in Europe recently. They actually suggest that this is a gross violation of the laws of war.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, by Israel? Yeah.

RAY TAKEYH:

Precisely, yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, we should get back to that because I do think the degree to which they're diplomatically engaged in a way that may be totally disingenuous and dishonest obviously, but nonetheless, not entirely ineffective perhaps, and does show something about their complicated strategy. But maybe to begin with, I'd like very much like to hear you on that, but on the narrower question of just six weeks in, Hezbollah doing some stuff in the north, and Iranian proxies poking us a little bit, but somewhat restrained, what's the right way to understand that?

RAY TAKEYH:

I think the overall Iran strategy as far as we can decipher it, once the war began, was that they wanted Hamas to survive this conflict because Hamas is an important aspect of the "axis of resistance," it is an important public relations... So, the narrative of success in this operation would be that Hamas engaged in a very daring attack, it absorbed Israel's strike and it survived. And for Hamas to survive, they could not change the facts on the ground in Gaza in terms of what Israeli military will and will not do. So, what they tried to do is mobilize the international community and the United States in order to pressure Israel into some kind of a ceasefire, restraint, and essentially an inconclusive secession of the conflict, similar to 2006 and Hezbollah when Israelis went into Lebanon for, I believe, 33 days.

At this particular point, six weeks into it, with the Israelis demonstrating, at least as we speak, a determination to destroy Hamas, there is a lot of head-scratching in Iran, and you see it in the press saying, "Okay, the strategy of mobilizing the international community and frightening the United States with the possibility of expansion of the war is not working," so when that strategy isn't working, they have one of two options, just to wring their hands. The option is that they seem to be going forward, first of all, a very active diplomacy. Their foreign minister and other members are everywhere. President Raisi was in Saudi Arabia for the Organization of Islamic [Cooperation] Conference, trying to mobilize regional and global opinion.

Second of all is inflaming conflict on all of Israel's frontier, including the Syrian frontier in order to suggest that the longer this war goes on, there's a possibility of its expansion and regional conflagration. That's aimed at the United States in particular to try to essentially impose some kind of a restraint on Israel. The attack on American forces by Iranian proxies, I believe about 100 attacks or so, is aimed at America to restrain Israel. So the question is, how much does the war have to expand before American diplomacy becomes more energetic? Right now, the level of expansion seems to be manageable. They do brag that a considerable portion of the Israeli army is locked up on the northern frontier that otherwise would be more committed to the Southern frontier. So, they're already taking some pride in the diversion of Israeli military forces for obvious reasonable reasons to protect this other frontier from a possibility of expansion.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's against Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria?

RAY TAKEYH:

Primarily, yes, but the question is, does the expansion of the war means actually targeting [inaudible] missiles? They want to calibrate expansion of the war while also immunizing their

own territory from a possibility of retaliation. Now, that's a very hard balance to achieve in a military terrain which is inflamed and uncertain. But that's essentially what they're trying to calibrate, and at this point, their calibration seems not to affect Israelis. I suspect it'll be some greater degree of intensification, but they have to figure out what that red line is, that line where there's enough escalations for the United States and perhaps elements within the Israeli political establishment to say, "Okay, we've got to concede to a ceasefire of some sort," or the type of escalation that could provoke Israeli retaliation against Iran itself. That's what they're trying to figure out. It's a very murky and hazy calculation.

It would be difficult by the way for any nation to try to calibrate military conflict with that level of specificity. They have to ask themselves 20 questions a day and they have to get them all right because they cannot afford this war coming to their territory, given, in my opinion, the tenuous nature of the regime's relationship with the Iranian people who are not interested in this war, they're not interested in being implicated in it, they're not interested in suffering the consequences of it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. I always think Iran's interesting because it just shows you can have what I would consider a somewhat fanatical or theocratic regime that wants to genuinely destroy Israel and kill Jews and so forth, but they can be fairly, I don't know if prudent is the right word, but somewhat cautious in their foreign policy at times, they can pull back, they're very interested as you say more than people realize I think in using diplomacy, if that's the right word, again, to advance their interests or to check Israel or to check us. But clearly, they're also somewhat restrained and deterred by both Israel and by us, do you think? You mentioned Israel a deterrence, but surely... they're nervous about getting into an actual confrontation with us as well?

RAY TAKEYH:

Absolutely. And if I may, they are deterred primarily by the level of domestic discontent in the country because in that sense-

BILL KRISTOL:

Talk about that some, because that's under-reported, I think. Yeah.

RAY TAKEYH:

Yeah. Well, in contrast to the Shah's regime that will collapse in the 1979 revolution, they are self-aware, they know their public hates them. But that's a very important insight because that actually causes some measure of restraint because they understand that if they get into a war or even a limited conflict with the United States and or Israel, this will inflame domestic opposition to the regime at a time when the regime still struggles with controlling its population.

So, that self-awareness has not dented their ideological opposition to Israel and the United States, but has made them somewhat restrained in expression of that ideological opposition. And I have to say, that's very clever. So, I think it's a combination of internal discontent with external deterrence, the projection of American force, and of course the possibility of confrontation with Israel, which today is very concerned about existential threats. That has to be kept in mind.

BILL KRISTOL:

In other words, you think Israel might be a little less deterred and a little more willing to err on the side of activism against Iran if they see a real threat from the north, or-

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, that remains the question to which smarter people [than] me, a category that's not hard to find, can better respond to, because what I don't know, maybe I just don't know enough of Israeli politics and Israeli strategic decision-making is, is an Israel that is entangled in Gaza and will be for some time less inclined to expand the zone of conflict? Or is an Israel that is traumatized, that is now seriously concerned about existential threats, more likely to respond?

The United States, as you remember in Iraq, when the Iranians were slaughtering American forces, our military officers said, "We don't want to expand the conflict." So we were restrained by our involvement in Iraq and we did not take any measurable response when the Iranians lacerated the American forces. By some estimation, about 1,000 American dead in Iraq is attributed to Iranian munitions. We did not take response because everybody said, "Well, we got so many problems in Iraq, sort this out. We can't."

So, are Israelis going to be George Bush 2006 or Richard Nixon when he went into Cambodia? I don't know the answer. I don't know if the Israeli leadership at this point knows the answer to that and how they're going to sort the situation out in light of all the other international considerations that they have to take into account. I don't know the answer to that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it's interesting though because you do have a situation with the war where you have an Israeli government that was unpopular, I'd say, and rickety at home and has extremist elements in it, et cetera, and it's a weird coalition now, so you have that government running the war. And in Iran, you have a government that, as you say, is a very different way, but uncertain about its own domestic standing, and also has its own, I'm sure, cleavages within it, if we knew more about it, you do know more about it, but between whatever, the IRGC and Khomeini and all these different actors, it does seem to me to make things much more uncertain than if one had reasonably stable, you might say, governments and societies playing a chess match, even then it turns out never to be as predictable and as stable as people think. But this seems like a particularly unstable situation.

RAY TAKEYH:

It seems to me the Israeli public does not reject the Israeli democratic system. They have some concern about what this prime minister is doing, what that prime minister is doing, and maybe they're excessive. The Iranian people reject the system. They're not asking for this personality to take over or this politician to be removed. By every indication, they are determined, at least aspirationally, to be rid of this regime. I don't think that's true about the Israeli public. Now, what the Iranians are hoping to provoke by having this kind of a conflict in Israel is that the brightest and the best in Israel say, "I can run my chip company from Paris, from Sydney, Australia."

The brightest and the best in Israel will try to relocate their companies, their ingenuity if they're not their own presence. When Ali Khamenei talks about extinction of Israel, which he has a timeline of 25 years, he talks about it as gradually withering away. Its politics constantly divided, its military divided, its population divided, the best and the brightest leaving the country. Paradoxically, he makes this statement at the time when the Iranian best and the brightest are leaving the country. So he has a first view front row seat to what happens when the best and the brightest leave.

BILL KRISTOL:

I suppose it's true that dictatorships of a certain type, when they lose credibility at home, thinking of the Soviet Union in the latter couple of decades, they can become, well I think even earlier on, they can become pretty cautious. I mean, they can be brutal and cautious at

the same time. So if the Warsaw Pact looks like it's dissolving, they go into Hungary, they go into Czechoslovakia. Obviously, they can't afford that, but they weren't actually that adventuresome and they did some stuff and obviously in Africa and Afghanistan...

RAY TAKEYH:

But at the height of their stagnation, they militarily invaded a country outside Eastern Europe, Afghanistan. And they couldn't sort it out.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, right. I mean, in a way, they should have stuck with a more cautious '60s, early '70s strategy of undermining the West, waiting for the West's decadence to catch up with us, funding peace movements in the West. I mean, that's not that unanalogous to what Iran does, I suppose. But not really putting themselves at risk, which they did eventually.

RAY TAKEYH:

And they miscalculated, it was a miscalculation by Andropov and others. Brezhnev was brain dead by then. So dictatorships are also curious in one sense, is they're capable of gross miscalculations, ideological regimes are capable of gross— That does not say necessarily that democracies are not... But ideological regimes that kind of become trapped in their own insularity, I think. But in this particular case, the Iranian leadership is determined not to be directly, physically implicated. That gives international community some leverage over its conduct. Although I don't know if we're exercising that leverage.

Recently, Secretary of State Blinken went to Baghdad, and a day later, the Iraqi Prime Minister went to Iran. So that was obviously a message. He met with Ali Khomeini, he met with everybody. What the Iranian foreign minister says, and I'm not suggesting anybody believes that because he lies so much, is that the Americans told them that they're not seeking expansion of the conflict, that I believe. But they're also seeking a ceasefire in the Gaza War, which I don't believe. But there certainly was some kind of a message passed on to them by the Americans, which I think would be saying, "Well, we say publicly we're not interested in expanding the conflict, but we want everybody to be restrained."

BILL KRISTOL:

So it sounds though, while it's possible that the following scenario is true, it may be a little less likely than some of our friends think, which is that the Iran is just waiting for the optimal moment to unleash Hezbollah and a massive attack on the north of Israel when Israel's most tied up in Gaza and so forth. But it sounds like you think there are some real restraints on Iran doing that. Not restraints of goodwill, but just prudential restraints on their part.

RAY TAKEYH:

Right. I do believe that they want Hezbollah to put enough pressure on Israel to provoke an international mediated ceasefire, but nobody knows what that level of violence is. They don't want Hezbollah to be in full war with Israel. I don't think Hezbollah wants to be in full war with Israel. But this thing can get out of hand. Just because you have certain plans, that doesn't mean those plans will go the same way.

And the other aspect of Hezbollah, and its 150,000 missiles, which are of a variety of ranges and much more precise projectiles, is that's a deterrent against Iran's nuclear file and protecting Iranian nuclear installations. So there is that nuclear angle to this, namely that Hezbollah serves as a deterrent in Israel's northern frontier, should there be some sort of an action against Iranian nuclear installations? In this war if suddenly there is some kind of a direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, which may happen, if I was advising the

Israelis—and I'm not!—I would say to them, if you guys going to militarily molest the territory of Iran, you got to take out Natanz [nuclear facilities]

BILL KRISTOL:

That's military...that's the nuclear...

RAY TAKEYH:

If you're going to go through the tribulation of a direct military conflict with Iran, you can't come back with those nuclear installations in existence. So Hezbollah does play that deterrent role as well. Whether it'll deter Israel, I don't know, because Hezbollah is capable with his missiles. And some of the deficiencies we have learned with Iron Dome, which hopefully will be once again more robust with the American assistance and others, is that they could turn Haifa into a rubble. That's a real experience for an Israeli prime minister thinking about these issues. And he has to think about these issues or whatever coalition governs the state.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. But Iran presumably does also want to become a nuclear power and finish, as it were, its nuclear strategy or whatever, project. And that in a funny way, might keep them a little more cautious in the near term or not—

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, it's the Saddam experience. You want to go to war when you have nuclear weapons.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

RAY TAKEYH:

If Saddam had invaded Kuwait in 1995 after he... it would be a different equation.

BILL KRISTOL:

We've signaled this with respect to Putin in a probably unfortunate way, but when we've said publicly, we're deterred from doing certain things and helping Ukraine because Russia has— is a nuclear power and we don't want to risk World War III.

RAY TAKEYH:

And just imagine if you're going through this crisis in Gaza with a nuclear weapon Iran's saber rattling.

BILL KRISTOL:

So talk about that some. Yeah, that's important.

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, I mean, nuclear weapons are an unusual category of weapons because their use is so impermissible and so absolute. If you use it, the other side uses it, and there's a real mutual extinction possibility. But we could have gotten in a position of a Cuban Crisis where suddenly Iran starts activating its nuclear missiles, putting them on planes, just doing that sort of a conduct, nuclear diplomacy, reckless, dangerous. I suspect under those circumstances, the international community would be much more inclined to impose a ceasefire on Israel. I suspect the United States would be much more involved because then the conflict is not, "we don't want a war," it's "we don't want a nuclear war in the Middle East."

So in that sense, nuclear weapons enhance Iran's diplomatic leverage. Since 1945, nuclear weapons have not been used. That doesn't mean they will not be used. So that's the other aspect of Iran with the nuclear weapons capability, how that affects the crisis and how that makes Israel more vulnerable in situations like that, where I think the international community led by the United States—whatever party, Republicans or Democrats—would be much more aggressive in trying to have some kind of a ceasefire in order for the conflict not to be a nuclear exchange. And I think that's when Iranians would understand, the kind of strategic leverage you can get from possession of nuclear weapons, even if you have no intention of using them, although you could get into a conflict where the use becomes more real or more viable. The history of nuclear weapons from 1945 to today is history of near misses. So far, the optimistic case is, they all missed.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, India-Pakistan, US-Soviet. Yeah.

RAY TAKEYH:

India-Pakistan, US-Soviet, United States-China, just all these conflicts. It is a history of near misses. Some people, political scientists and strategists take comfort in that. I don't. Particularly as nuclear weapons become in the hand of a deeply ideological regime, I am not saying that Iranians will like to have nuclear weapons in order to destroy Israel immediately upon possession of those weapons. I don't think that's true. But I do think there are a lot of situations like this where we could have mini Cuban missile crises not infrequently in that region.

BILL KRISTOL:

And do you think that Iran, over the last 10 years, I guess with the combination of dovish attitudes in the US and then the Trump administration, and then Biden, somewhere in between Obama and Trump, I suppose, wanting maybe to be a little more like Obama, but not really able to be in a funny way, their program has moved ahead, right? I mean, at the end, do they think they're doing well on the nuclear side, or do they think, "ach, the Israelis disrupted us with covert things and the US maybe did too, and then there was Trump, and maybe this whole nuclear thing isn't working out so well for us?"

RAY TAKEYH:

No, actually, throughout this period, they are aggressively building up their nuclear program. Their head of the Atomic Energy Organization the other day announced more breakthroughs. What they framed a nuclear program when they're discussing it at home in terms of the fact that we're expanding on nuclear infrastructure, therefore, we were capable of producing more energy and power for domestic use. So, there's electricity. So they make an announcement like, "Now we can provide electricity for this many people with this capacity." So they frame it in the question of expansion of a civilian nuclear program in order for it to provide indigenous energy for Iranian domestic consumption.

But the expansion of the nuclear program is the part that should be disconcerting. The IEA will soon issue another report since the time of Obama administration, I think even in Trump administration, those reports are watered down or at least a public expression of them. But I think you'll see an alarming increase in the expansion of the nuclear facilities. The Western reporting always focuses on the amount of accumulated enrichment, 60% and all that. What I think people should focus on is the instruments that produce that that enriched uranium, the centrifuges, they're becoming more sophisticated. The IR-5, IR-6, IR-7, these are what the Iranian centrifuge machinery are called.

The first generation was IR-1, IR-2's, IR-1 in particular had a high breakage problem. They would keep breaking when you run them. The new machines are capable of operating with efficiency at high velocity, which means they're more effective and speedy in producing enriched uranium at whatever gradation. But also, you don't need as many of them to produce enrich uranium. So a small facility, perhaps a surreptitious facility can harbor them.

The other thing I will say, finally, Iran today has 60% enriched uranium. It is very important for everyone to understand, 60% enriched uranium is weapons grade uranium. You can produce a nuclear weapon with 60% enrich uranium. Ideally, you want to get to 95, 96, 97, as the South African bomb, I believe was enriched at 80%. The American bomb, the enriched one, was not up to 90%, the one that was deployed in Japan. Above 90 is ideal, but 60% enriched uranium is weapons grade uranium. Today, Islamic Republic is in possession of weapon grade uranium.

BILL KRISTOL:

So that's a very important fact thinking about the world over the next and the Middle East [inaudible] the whole world over the next years—

RAY TAKEYH:

But we're denying that fact. We're saying they're not at 98%. 60% is enriched uranium that can be used for a nuclear weapon. It's not ideal.

BILL KRISTOL:

And are we denying that fact publicly or do we actually kid ourselves, do you think, about this? I mean, surely the intelligence community knows how these things work. I don't know.

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, I only know what's in front of me. I only know what we say, and we take comfort in the fact that they're not at 95%. As I understand it from public reporting, we have warned them not to go to 90%. Okay, so they can go to 88. This is the problem with drawing a red line at that level of proficiency. So what if they do 80% enrich uranium tomorrow? They're not at 90.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. I want to come back to the domestic situation in Iran, and this is very interesting on the nuclear thing I've always been struck that the discussion is there's nuclear discussions over here, and then there's an Iranian regime discussion over here, and then there's a Middle East geopolitics discussion over here. Understandably, it's hard to have all these discussions at once, but they, of course, are very related to one another, right?

RAY TAKEYH:

Yes, yes, yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Are you surprised by the degree to which Iran seems to have been pretty aggressive or at least pretty willing to be unembarrassedly a big supplier to Russia drones and a big trade partner with, I guess, Russia and to some degree China? I mean, there's the sort of axis of evil. You'd think maybe they would not want to be with Putin entirely in a war where Europe and the US are pretty much entirely on the other side. What is one to make of that?

RAY TAKEYH:

No. Actually, my dear friend Reuel Gerecht and I wrote a piece about this. The Iranian regime, really since the advent of the nuclear crisis in 2003, has been looking for great power

patronage. The rhetoric they have is self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and we don't depend on anybody. That's the rhetoric. And that rhetoric was largely true and also convenient because they had no great power patronage. During the first, when the nuclear crisis broke, and this is indicated in former President Hassan Rouhani's memoir-

BILL KRISTOL:

Say a word about what the nuclear crisis was from their point of view.

RAY TAKEYH:

In 2003, a dissident group revealed the fact that Iran had a much more advanced enrichment program than has been known, and that essentially generated diplomacy by the Europeans, later joined by the United States to try to impose some kind of an international solution, some kind of an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program. It came into public view in 2003, although I believe the intelligence services knew what was happening, they knew that Iran was active. And if you recall, at that time Iran was also one of the countries that was implicated in the Pakistani rogue nuclear scientist, AQ Khan, and they were getting equipment from him as well, particularly in terms of centrifuge designs and even parts and so forth.

Since then, once this crisis went to the international tribunals, United Nations, International Atomic Energy Organization, IAEA Board of Directors, once it became implicated in the international structure, the Iranians wanted the Chinese and the Russians to help them out in those forums, veto resolutions, prevent IAEA from censuring Iran. And the Chinese and the Russians at that time rejected that offer, including, by the way, President Putin. Hassan Rouhani recounts his experience of going to the Russia Federation in 2003, and Putin said, "We're not going to do this." The Chinese foreign minister very specifically told them that our relationship with the United States is more important than this.

So, at that time, they could not get international support. A number of things have changed since then. The rise of President Xi, who seems to have no problem with revisionist powers attacking international order, even though China was benefiting from international order. And of course, Putin and his serial invasion of his neighbors, but the big one was Ukraine. No, the Iranians are very comfortable about the great power patronage they're getting. There is no ideological, strategic reason for why they should be involved in a war in Central Europe, the Ukraine war, what national or ideological interest is redeemed in that?

And of course, the Chinese are very flagrant in violation of sanctions in purchasing Iranian oil, and they have a greater degree of commercial intercourse between the two states. So the Chinese give them some kind of a economic cushion in a prospective confrontation with the West, and the sanctions regime being diluted. It's not really being enforced by the Biden administration rigorously. So, an unrigorous sanctions regime is being diluted by trade that is permitted. And of course, with the Russians they're getting military hardware and all that.

What I don't know, and by the way, this is a question of oversight for the Congress, is asking the intelligence community whether the Russians in particular are helping Iran with its nuclear program, whether Iranians still have some technological problems that the Russian scientists can help them overcome, and the Russian technology can help them overcome. I don't know the answer to that question. I am kind of certain, almost certain, that Iranians would ask for that, given the deepening military to military relationship between the two states, that actually goes back to the Syrian Civil War where they cooperated. They were instrumental in saving the Assad regime. I do believe, other people disagree with this, the Assad regime would not have survived without Iranian manpower and Russian air power. There are people, by the way, to be fair, who disagree with that. They suggest the Assad regime had greater domestic resources and sources of power that should not be discounted. I take that point.

BILL KRISTOL:

But it certainly helped, right?

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, it didn't hurt.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, yeah. It killed a lot of people, that's for sure.

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, yes, so the intelligence community in both the House and Senate should ask the administration for a public accounting of this, because President Zelensky says there's nuclear cooperation between these two states, and that should be probed. The administration should be asked to comment on that publicly for the record, but they're too busy beating each other up in Congress. So, they're no longer dealing with questions of oversight.

BILL KRISTOL:

A serious oversight, right, yeah.

RAY TAKEYH:

There are bigger things to do, like beat people up. They have higher priorities at the moment.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. So it appears, yeah. So, it is interesting. I mean, how much, just thinking about this, stepping back about the world in the 21st century. It started off obviously in a way with 9/11 and War on Terror, and there's a Middle East problem to say the least. There's Putin's rise led to its own problems. China's rise and the change in the character perhaps of Chinese power, even of the Chinese regime with Xi, it does feel like, and I don't want to overstate this and become kind of conspiratorial or try to recreate the Cold War, but these different threats and problems are not merging, but are more allied with one another. More of a web of anti-liberal, anti-Western, anti-US states and groups than one might've thought. Sunnis and Shia. Terrorists working to get Iran working with Hamas. Iran working with Russia. Russia and China. Russia, helping destabilize other countries as well.

TAY TAKEYH:

There are other actors in this, Iran and Venezuela. This is not new by the way, I don't think... the idea of liberal order being contested by reactionary despotic ideological regimes is not a new thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess the question of how. Maybe there was always more coordination than one realized or thought, but it feels like it's a little more intentionally coordinated, I guess now than maybe it was.

RAY TAKEYH:

As far as I can tell, they tend to all have a very conspiratorial view of international system, all three powers...I think that's certainly true about Iran; that's true about China, I think; that's true about Russia...believe that the United States is seeking to undermine the regime. The United States is seeking to dilute their young people. So, they do have the same sort of an approach to United States as a strategic threat and a cultural threat.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which even if we're not really intending it, we are sort of, right? I mean, this is sort of Bob Kagan's point. By existing, we are almost a threat to undermine them.

RAY TAKEYH:

Right. But I'm not sure, maybe you have a better perspective: Did the Soviets really... were that concerned about American cultural subversion? Because the Iranians, the Chinese and the Russians really are.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think the Soviets weren't, but the lesson they draw from the collapse of the Soviet Union is that the Soviets should have been, right?

RAY TAKEYH:

Yeah. So they all seem to, I don't want to be conspiratorial, but their public comments regarding American power is the same. And there's all of them have one thing in common. They all see America as a declining power. I can tell you from the Iranian press and commentary, they forever talk about, "your president denies the election." There's January 6th. "Your democratic system, as you call it, is hollow." With Israel, there were a lot of comments over the year that the judicial reform exposes divisions within Israel. They would highly publicize when Israeli reservist pilots would issue a statement saying, "we're not going to participate in this conflict," whatever that was. They were essentially highlighting the fact that America, and the Soviets said this too, is a decadent power. It's a declining power. It is a hesitant power. All the rhetoric that you see, economic inequality, poverty, rust belt, which is kind of paradoxical given the fact that economic equality in Iran is provocative. The class cleavages are provocative. In a paradoxical way, they critique that they issue of America, if you remove America from it and put Iran, a lot of those things apply to themselves as well. So in some way, their anti-American propaganda undermines their own credibility at home and their own legitimacy at home.

Because why do you talk about corruption in American society and American political class given what's going on here? Why do you talk about the fact that American foreign policy is imperialistic and costly and ineffective when you're giving billion dollars a year to Hezbollah? So the critique that they issue is similar, and as I said, particularly concentrated on the notion of America as a declining power. And I think at some level they believe that. I don't know if Brezhnev and Andropov believed that. I just don't know.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I don't know either. That's interesting though. Yeah, but they do. And they do. And they're not embarrassed about being in a semi alliance with Russia and China.

RAY TAKEYH:

Not at all. Not at all. They celebrate it. They acknowledge it. They celebrate it. It is something they had sought for at least a decade and rebuffed, to be fair, rebuffed. But now that has come about. And by the way, in my opinion, that actually damages the Islamic Republic at home. Because when they sign a 25-year agreement where China gets to penetrate every aspect of Iran's economy, from telecommunication to construction, to energy industry, to banking, to agriculture, joint ownership companies. Chinese, in the agreement is said, will have access to Iranian energy resources at discount rates. These are the kind of agreements that the Islamic Republic denounced. It said these are capitulation agreements imposed on Europeans, on Persian monarchs. We are a country, our revolution is first and foremost a national liberation movement.

Well, how's it a national liberation movement when you're selling off your entire economy to the Chinese commerce? That is actually a subject of some degree of resentment from a population that is highly nationalistic. The Iranians deeply resent using Chinese products. The public's actually Western-oriented. The regime is Eastern-oriented, and that's another clash between state and society in Iran. There are many. There are many. But being a subsidiary of China is something that also results...and that pops up is some political commentary. And Iran is a very strange autocratic country. It permits some degree of public criticism, a safety valve, but still. The Ukraine war has been very unpopular in some commentary. Like, really? Why are we involved in the war against NATO? What does that do for us?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. Since we've now touched on it quite a bit, say a bit more about just the actual domestic situation compared to where it was a year ago, where we thought it might be and how, well, just the whole question of the regime's solidity, stability, ability to beat back these threats, et cetera.

RAY TAKEYH:

What we have in Iran today is a stalemate, and it's a curious stalemate. The opposition to the regime is pronounced. It encompasses also socioeconomic classes, the poor, the middle class. It's urban and countryside. And what you have is periods of intense oppositional activity burst into the streets as we saw last year with the death of Ms. Amini. From September through January, we had very serious disturbances.

And during that period of disturbances, the regime's power becomes taxed. The security services become divided, its elite becomes divided. But then when the demonstrations peter out, and they peter put through a combination of relentless repression. When they peter out, then both sides get to regroup and regenerate their resources, right?... for the next round. One of the things that the Iranian regime did during the last uprising, which was women-led, Women-Life-Freedom uprising, is at some point it began to poison school kids if you recall, across the country. And in Iran, schools are segregated by sex. So most of the pupils that were poisoned were young women, 14, 12. It was middle school and high school. In Iran, they have three years of middle school and four years of high school.

And what the regime did, cynically and cruelly, is it essentially conscripted parents in its apparatus of repression. Because one of the complaints was that when they arrested a 14-year-old young female, they don't know what to do with her. She's confrontational. She talks back to them. What do you do with her? It was a real security dilemma. They were arresting 15-, 16-year-olds that were saying to them, "in your hat." And so that's a real problem. Your security services, you ask to deal with 14-year-old teenage adolescents who are confrontational and not easily cowed like old people like me would be. So they came up with a strategy of getting the parents to restrain them by poisoning them.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you think the poisoning is unquestionable, that that was a regime thing?

RAY TAKEYH:

School kids being poisoned in every province in the country. If the opposition was that strong...

BILL KRISTOL:

Or just chance chemical. But no, it seems impossible.

RAY TAKEYH:

In schools in every province from Azerbaijan to Hamadan to Kermansha. I mean everywhere? And the thing about that gesture of unspeakable cruelty is it worked. At least it worked for now. I have always believed that the opposition is energized by regime provocation. And when this happened, I thought this was a serious mistake. That at the tail end of the Ms. Amini protests, they were offering opposition a provocation that would re-energize it. But at least at the moment, it worked. And I have to say, we're not paying attention to this because there is Gaza war, there's American domestic debates. There's people being executed every day in Iran.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It's amazing it gets so much less coverage than it did.

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, it doesn't get less coverage. It gets no coverage.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Fair enough.

RAY TAKEYH:

People are being arrested. People are being executed. The level of repression in the country has gone way up. Now it is my opinion we'll have another outburst of protests. And each outburst of protests, even when it ends, there are casualties beyond the obvious. Beyond the young people and the civilians in Iran, the average citizens that are killed and imprisoned and tortured, is a segment of the elite dies. Because usually when these protests come, some members of the elite say, "Hey, I don't know about this." Last time it was somebody, a member of the elite, one of the most storied families in the Islamic Republic. Longest parliamentary speaker in the history of Iran, Ali Larijani, he's now excised from body politic. Hassan Rouhani, nobody was more implicated in the security culture of Iran than Hassan Rouhani. He's now a dissident. A dissident in a sense that he's been kicked out of the corridors of power. His website [inaudible] News, Sunni News, is actually the most trenchant critique of the regime. So a segment of the elite dies, now that has implications for the regime, because at every level of the Islamic Republic's political structure, the people who hold power today are less capable than their predecessors. President Raisi is less capable than President Rouhani. General Salami, the head of the Revolutionary Guards is less capable Jafari, his predecessor. So what you're seeing is what you saw in Europe, Eastern Europe and early 1970s. The moronization of Iranian body politic. And at the top is still Ali Khomeini. And when he's on your team, you always have a chance. But right now, throughout the system, they're second tier mediocrities. The economic team is a mediocrity.

The inflation rate is 50%. And they contest that. They said, "No, it's 45%. We reduced it to 45%." So the regime is weakening itself by essentially getting rid of its elite. Now if you're Ali Larijani, you're excised from politics and political participation. You're not quite a dissident. You're not in the street. You're not with the regime. You're in this hazy zone. And when the political system becomes contested, you got to go one way or the other. So you're going to be wavering. So the system actually is damaging itself through its repression, not beyond the fact that this is disillusioning its public, but also it is becoming less capable in various levers of government. And that argues poorly, given the fact that public protest is not gone in Iran. The grievances against the regime are too deeply rooted. The regime is incapable of reforming itself. It no longer even talks about reforming. Corruption is more pronounced. Class cleavages are as provocative as they were on the last days of the monarchy.

In any given year, more BMWs are sold in Iran than in Berlin. Well, who's buying them? And the offsprings of the wealthy, of those connected... The only way to get ahead in the regime in

Iran today is be connected with the regime. And the regime's elite is narrowing. So the Islamic Republic is in deep trouble. It persists, it survives. But as I said, it is the regime that is, in my opinion at this point, is not capable of managing a succession to Ali Khomeini. It'd be very difficult. He's the glue that holds the system together, to some extent. And the system is falling apart under his rather uncanny supervision.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's so interesting. Because yes, you say it's so out of the news now that people have stopped thinking about it and therefore assumed that, I guess, it's stable and chugging along. And I suppose one question is, if they're really in this kind of situation, it can lead to... I guess it can cut both ways in foreign policy. It can lead to risk taking and it can lead to risk aversion or some weird combination of both, actually, at the same time.

RAY TAKEYH:

But we also have to talk about this as a risk taking, risk aversion in the context of a deeply ideological regime.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, so talk about that. Let's close on that. Because that's something people do tend to forget. It is the Islamic Republican in Iran, right?

RAY TAKEYH:

The Islamic Republic is a profoundly ideological regime. And it is in some way a commendable revolutionary regime. Because unlike other revolutionary regime, it has never abandoned its revolutionary values. It never entered a Brezhnev era. Although, I think the Brezhnev era was more ideological than we think. And this is a tribute to Ali Khomeini, who has made his central mission is preserving the revolutionary values of the system, even when those values become impractical and obviously unsustainable over a long time. He has scoffed and undermined efforts to reform the system. Like the reform movement that we saw rise in the late 1990s. Preserving the revolutionary regime and revolutionary character of the regime. And the core values of that revolutionary regime is anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism.

So Iran is in confrontations that is not in its interest, as we talked about. Ukraine. Europeans were its most pliable commercial relationships. Europeans wanted to violate our sanctions. And so the Europeans are in a position where it is difficult for them to do so. So, an ideological regime that is dealing with domestic situation that's contested. But there's that pull of ideology that I think is detrimental to Islamic Republic's existence and longevity because the Iranian people are not interested in Arab civil wars and Arab conflict. They don't share the same animosity toward Israel that their public, that their regime does.

The regime's foreign policy actually undermines its legitimacy and stability at home, but they just can't let it go. Because they're ideologues. We don't understand ideologues in this country. If you look at the way we talk about... I'll be very brief on this. If you look at the way we talk about Iranian calculations. The Iranians were looking forward to Gaza war in order to disrupt strategic alignments in the Middle East that were going against them. Israeli Saudi rapprochement. there's some truth to that. They never talk about it in terms of regional alignments. They talk about the fact that Hamas is killing Jews. And that's how they talk about it. It is contributing to the project of extinction of Israel. Their language on this is never strategic. They're not Kissingerians.

They don't talk about equilibrium of power. They're talking about it in purely ideological lexicon. And I actually think they mean it. That doesn't mean they're not happy about the Saudi Israeli rapprochement being undermined, potentially discarded. But they relish the idea

that Hamas did this daring operation and inflicted the kind of damage on Israel, which as has been said, hasn't been done since the Holocaust, an event which they deny.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's amazing. That's so interesting. Of course, there can be people in the regime who are a little more, if you want to use this term, Kissingerian, geopolitical, and we've got to help the Houthis to make sure that the Saudis are... have Problems and so forth. But it does operate in a context, and this is one we do tend to forget, that's so much of an ideological. But it's interesting what you said about, I think if you have a secular... I'm just making, this is something political theorists and political scientists, historians really have, I'm sure, written much more deeply about. If you have a secular ideological regime, it feels like it's easier to degenerate into, "we're producing wealth for our citizens," kind of China type situation or Brezhnev, sort of, which just hanging on and the apparatchiks are hanging on. And we sort of don't believe that world communism stuff anymore. Maybe religious authoritarian regimes, ideological regimes have a little more, it's a little harder to kind of make that transition to just being a regime of apparatchiks, right? The religious stuff has a certain power.

RAY TAKEYH:

Yeah. It's called apostasy. [inaudible]. Being a former Marxist is an indication of maturity. One of the things we don't understand, many of the people in the Shah's government were former Marxists, which is why they don't understand the rise of religion. They were a member of the Tudeh Communist Party. They were arrested. They were rehabilitated. They came in, many of them into the Pahlavi state. So, when the 1970s outbreak of opposition was coming, they didn't see the salience of religion. They thought it was a conspiracy by the left. The Islamic... Look, when the ideology of state is God, and this is a government of God, and actually, the clerical community has been very clear about this. Many clerical intellectuals have been very clear about this. They suggest that the legitimacy of the regime is not contingent on popular support. It's contingent on divine approbation. And they claim that the regime is still divinely favored. I can't disprove that.

So religion, I should say, a politicized and distorted religion, Islam has many tenets within it which call for coexistence and some measure of tolerance. But a politicized version of religion is very difficult to discard. Ideology in Iran, as I always say, is like water in a flowerpot: It permeates everything. It cannot be compartmentalized, and it cannot be isolated. It just sweeps through everything. And that's how the Islamic Republic is structured. And after 45 years, it has not gone through the, you're a political theorist, the usual trajectory of the revolutionary state that we think about. Extreme at the beginning and moderating over time.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Because history with a capital H can be, you make your claim based on history. At some point, people look up, including the people running the country and think, say, "History is not quite going the way Marx told us it was going to go." And then you still keep quiet about that and you try to find other ways of legitimating the regime and so forth, and you just use brute force and hope for prosperity. But it's just not quite the same. Whereas as you say, whatever the politicized and distorted version of the appeal to God, it's a little hard to be mugged by reality if there's not, the reality is that God has ordered you to do this, and there'll be salvation for doing this in the afterlife. And it is, I guess there's the depth of the religious-

RAY TAKEYH

By the way, the rejection of this religious ideology by vast swaths of the Iranian public actually reinforces your fidelity to it. Because you say you've got to work harder to persuade these people that their God is on our side, and we work harder to eliminate Western cultural

penetration and Western cultural subversion. Paradoxically, as the public has abandoned the Islamic ideology, the regime is more reinforced in its mission to impose the rule of God.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. And also, I'm now just speculating, but the fact that it's in Iran, which would not have been the place one would've predicted. It's not like Saudi Arabia or something.

RAY TAKEYH:

Right, right, right. Right, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

That should be a home for this kind of religious ideology, if you want to call it that. Probably and again, makes it both weaker with the public, presumably.

RAY TAKEYH:

Yes. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

It strengthens the determination of the ruling class, right? This is-

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, if you believe you're operating on God's ordinance and you're trying to bring God to the masses, and if the masses reject it, you've got to work harder and you've got to be more repressive in your attitude. I don't think that's unusual. I'm [inaudible] there are Jesuits who relish that sort of activity.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Yeah. The religion is more extreme where the public isn't naturally supportive of it, in a funny way.

RAY TAKEYH:

Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

If the public's naturally supportive of it, you can be a little more relaxed because the public's still going to be kind of on the same path.

RAY TAKEYH:

Right. And you tie that to anti-Americanism when you attribute this sense of irreligiosity to American cultural penetration. An aspect of American strategy which they call the soft war.

BILL KRISTOL:

So maybe finally just, since we got back to the US and we're here in the US, if there's short-term and medium-term or long-term issues of Iran's strategy, if Congress... Well, you do speak to members of Congress, you speak to members of the administration. But core-

RAY TAKEYH:

Well, not so much the latter.

BILL KRISTOL:

...core lessons or messages for them in terms of our own both policy, but broader way of thinking about the strategic challenge?

RAY TAKEYH:

I would say in this particular crisis, the war in Gaza, it is very important, if not essential, that the Islamic Republic not come out of this with a narrative of success. And that essentially means destruction of Hamas. Destruction of Hamas for just the stability of the Israeli state. But also for a setback to the revisionist power in the Middle East that is looking for survival of Hamas and then taking that survival to the larger public in the Islamic, Arab Middle East and having a pathway to the Sunni publics as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

So that's the immediate important challenge as well. Hezbollah, there are many other challenges, but that could be sort of contained for now, so to speak.

RAY TAKEYH:

Yeah. And that would require a very considerable American support for Israel. Because I suspect as this war goes on, the Europeans are going to go more wobbly. They already are. The United Nation is going to have... The international community, as we know, it is likely to be more pressuring on secession of this conflict before the destruction of Hamas. And they may even have greater degree of divisions within the American society. If you're the Biden administration running for reelection, you have to consider how the young people think about this. Because at the time, as we've spoken, at the time when you're losing to Donald Trump, young people being energized is an important... Now, I don't know which segment of young people actually engage in this activity. I only know what I see in universities and whatever is happening, which may or may not be barometer of how young people think about this issue. But would this issue cause some fracturing in our own domestic politics? On issue of Israel, as we are divided on the issue of Ukraine. We should not be divided on the issue of Ukraine.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, believe me, I agree. And it is worrisome. But it's interesting. So the point of view of Hamas cannot come out of this in any way winning is not just a matter of importance to Hamas and to Gaza and to Israel and to the narrower, you might say, anti-terrorism policy towards groups like Hamas.

RAY TAKEYH:

Yeah. Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's really a key to our Iran policy as well. That's what you're saying.

RAY TAKEYH:

Certainly, at this point, it is the most essential aspect of our Iran policy for Hamas to be cleansed from Gaza. Categorically. I think.

BILL KRISTOL:

Very interesting. No, that's really... Ray, anything else we haven't covered that we should have?

RAY TAKEYH:

No, I think we've covered the waterfront.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think we have. And I think we've done it in a very insightful way. So I really thank you for that.

RAY TAKEYH:

Oh, I'm happy to do it. Anytime.

BILL KRISTOL:

Great.

RAY TAKEYH:

And we'll meet again when Trump is president.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh, god.

RAY TAKEYH:

And we'll talk about what Trump's policies are, whether-

BILL KRISTOL:

That'll be great. We'll have that conversation. Zoom will work fine from our, when we're living in Portugal and you're living in, I don't know, Canada in exile, it'll be wonderful.

RAY TAKEYH:

As we deal with IRS audits.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, exactly, right. Anyway, that's another set of conversations we need to have. But Ray Takeyh, thank you very much for joining me today.

RAY TAKEYH:

Thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on conversations.