Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change 20 Years On

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Dr Sanam Vakil

Thank you for joining us this evening. It is a real pleasure to have a colleague but also a friend, Dr Ali Ansari, here to discuss his – one of his first books, right? Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change, this is 20 years on from the first publication. I don’t want to date you, Ali, or anything, but it’s a really timely opportunity to have a deeper dive and historical conversation about Iran, where it has been, where it is going, and for those of you who don’t know Ali, he is a Professor in Modern History at the University of St Andrews, where he’s also the founding Director of the Institute for Iranian Studies. He is widely published, and many books that you should buy and read, but this book is on sale here tonight, just in the room next door. It is being sold for £25, so you are welcome to buy it, it’s at a discount here. We are also selling a second book, completely unrelated, but still very relevant, Ali’s book, These Islands: A Letter to Britain. I haven’t read it, so I don’t know if it’s a love story or a tragedy, but it is also on sale for £5 next door. Ali is going to give us some introductory comments, and then we look forward to having a bit of discussion and Q&A. So, I’ll leave it to you, Ali.

Ali Ansari

Thank you very much, thank you. Thank you very much for all coming out on this very, very sunny day to listen to me rabbit on a little bit about this book, which was originally published in 2000, at this institute, actually, at Chatham House, under the auspices, then, of Dr Rosemary Hollis, who was – headed the Middle East Research Group then. And I had just finished my PhD, and I was asked, then, to come and run or come and be the, sort of, fellow relating to Iran, and to produce a volume, basically, on, you know, where is Iran now and where is Iran going?

It seems to be, as Sanam was saying, that we’ve been continuously asking this question for the last 20 years, and, you know, I don’t know if we’re coming any closer to a solution as to where we’re going, but I like to think that the book itself, I suppose, tried to, sort of, shed some light, I suppose, into the way in which politics in Iran worked. I had, at the time, in the 1990s, been doing extensive fieldwork, in the days when extensive fieldwork was possible in Iran for students and other Researchers, really to do with my PhD, which, my PhD, was quite separate to this, but I was fascinated in a way about what was happening in the country in the 1990s, this was the time of Rafsanjani, of course, and in the lead up to the reform movement under Khatami.

So, the book was really written at a time of, sort of, when I was on the crest of this wave. There was a lot of enthusiasm at the time at the end of the 1990s, something akin to, you know, the triumph of New Labour in Britain in 1997, you know, and there we had Khatami. I mean, they, sort of, both won within months of each other, I think, and, you know, there was a huge amount of enthusiasm and, sort of, a real, sort of, interest in whether this possibility of Islam and democracy, whether this merger between these, sort of, two quite distinct ideas would work, and whether Iran would be capable and able of basically taking a Western idea, merging it, in a sense, with a more traditional, indigenous ideas, and making it work. And I think under, sort of, Khatami, certainly, there was this sort of belief that it could do it, and he articulated quite a positive vision for it.

Of course, as we know, unfortunately, the story, I mean, the first edition was published in 2000, so it was all very, sort of, optimistic. Of course, the minute I published it, of course, the situation started to turn south very quickly. So, it was good timing. It seems to be that whenever I publish something, and it’s very optimistic, suddenly, on publication, you know, they imprison all cohorts of people. So, there were problems emerging in 2000. I remember, very vividly with the Majlis elections at the time, there was a landslide, but then the reaction set in. So, there was a second, and as I say, the second edition came out in
2006, when we really had the fall of the reform movement, you know, Khatami moving out and entering into the Ahmadinejad era, which was quite a different, sort of, set up, and then, of course, this edition now is really, if I dare say, a, sort of, a compilation of best hits, if I can put it that way. I brought in all the, sort of, various pieces that I had done really here, as well as in other subsequent positions with the LSC and others, plus, you’ll be pleased to know, for those of you who have had a go at the first volume, first edition, that there are additional pieces in there, so don’t feel that you’re being cheated. It’s basically an additional essay on the politics of the JCPOA, which I’ll say a couple of words about now, and I’m sure we’ll discuss with Sanam, as well as some ideas about reform in Iran and the role, interestingly enough, of Britain.

So, I’ve wanted, really, to have in one volume a, sort of, a one-stop, sort of, wizard of, you know, the politics of Iran, really since the 1990s to the present. Obviously, my interpretation of that, by no means, certainly, the only one, but one that I think in many ways works and has held up over the past few decades, and it really goes down to the line of, you know, what that central thesis of the book is, and that is what the structure of the Iranian state is. I wanted to move beyond, in this book, certainly, these ideas of, sort of, describing the Iranian state as some sort of proto-French Revolutionary model, where we’re going to end up, you know. We’ve had our, you know, the Thermidors coming, and so on and so forth, and the moderates are here, and this didn’t seem to me to work, necessarily, and what I really wanted to look at was, you know, what it was that drove the Islamic Republic, the various dimensions to it? And the idea I settle on there, which I have to say, Ervand Abrahamian has been extremely kind and, sort of, endorsing on the back, is this idea of mercantile capital, and the difference between what we might call mercantile capitalism and industrial capitalism. And it went to the heart of this notion that one of the things that you – one of the differences in Iran, when we’re dealing with Iran, and I think it’s very clear when we’ve been going through the nuclear negotiations and beyond, is that what people say and what people mean can be quite different things. And that in Iran, what we were finding is people talk the language of capitalism and making money and being rather good about it, but actually what they meant by it was something different to what we understood by it necessarily, and that what they were operating under was quite a different system, in some ways.

It was driven by mercantile interests, very short-term, very volatile, interested in, basically, rapid change, and that rapid change and volatility infected everything, by the way. I mean, it infected everything, and not just the domestic policy situation, not just in terms of instability. It was one that also thrived in the shadows on opaqueness. The last thing you want is transparency and the rule of law, when you’re out to make a quick buck, and a lot of them were very interested in making a quick buck. I mean, this was the way it is. I mean, we get these in all countries, by the way, it’s just that, obviously, in Iran, it seemed to be the dominant motif. So, that’s one of the things I wanted to really try and introduce, and, again, I suppose the second point was to really also look at it from the inside out.

I think far too much, when we’re looking at Iran, to be perfectly honest, we look at it from the perspective of the outside in. It’s always what Washington is doing, you know, which President has said what and what the reactions are in Iran. Actually, for me, what was much more interesting to see is the dynamic on its own terms, and what they were doing there, and, actually, you know, what the American President does or what the British Prime Minister does is incidental. Of course, it has an effect, but it wasn’t actually the driving force. So, for me, and this is one of the central aspects of this edition that you’ll see, because I’ve collected all this stuff, for me, the pivotal date in recent Iranian history is 2009. Not 2015, not 2013, but 2009, ‘cause 2009 was the massive election crisis that we had, which, actually, for me, at my time at Chatham House, was almost a period of intense activity, I have to say. I think it was such intense activity that I was probably burnt out afterwards, and it was at a time when, during that election crisis, that I had – we had the opportunity then, and it always remains with me as one of the great, sort of,
moments in my research go, ‘cause I had a couple of very good – I’m going to say very good, but I might even say brilliant, graduate students, one of whom is here, sitting over there, and we were sitting there, they were doing the postgraduate degree with me, and I – we were discussing, you know, what had happened in this election, whether fraud had happened or not or how we could discuss.

And my two graduate students, Tom Rintel and Dan Birman, both of them who were much better with statistics than I could ever be, I have to say, sort of, said that it looks as if there’ll be something strange in these figures. And, of course, we didn’t know, and, of course, Journalists at the time, it was very interesting, Journalists at the time were, sort of, mad with, sort of, intent. You know, “Give us the proof, give us the proof, show us the evidence,” and we all, sort of, had these ideas that something wasn’t adding up, and I have to say, the person who actually stepped up to the plate, he’s sadly not here, but I’m going to thank him in his absence, was Robin Niblett, who actually came, and he was Director, as you know then, as he is now, and I said to him, you know, “I can get this done. We can do this, but we need a bit of support, if you understand what I mean. You know, even students don’t work for free.” So, basically, he was very good. He stumped it up, not only in terms of that, but to be able to get it published, and I think the report, which we included in here, I included in there, which is a short report, actually, and when I look back on it, I do wonder, actually, just, the impact it made was really quite astonishing for something that was, what, five pages? But I think, at the time, it was the highest downloaded report of any Chatham House report at the time, and I’m pleased to say, thanks to Wikileaks, I have discovered that Hillary Clinton actually got a copy, and she liked it. So, I’ve used that, obviously, on the back. You know, Hillary Clinton said, “Marvellous.”

Anyway, on the basis of that, and I then went on and wrote a further, sort of, study there and, for me, 2009 was the moment when Iran really became – moved towards what we might term the security state, or the paranoid state, and where the ideology of the revolution really overcame the ideology of the republic. And, you can only really understand, for me, the nuclear negotiations can only really be understood in the context of that. That’s my view. I know a lot of people will say, you know, “The nuclear negotiations were absolutely central.” For me, the nuclear negotiations were important, but they were an aspect of Khamenei, as Supreme Leader, trying to rebuild trust in the state after 2009.

He had a terrible situation on his hands, absolute disaster domestically, plus, you know, a UN, sort of, led sanctions against him, with a coalition against him. He had a coalition willing abroad, he had massive distrust at home, he had to deal with it, and one of the things he had to deal with was to shatter the international coalition abroad, which was why I think we got into this heroic flexibility, and heroic flexibility was exactly what it said on the tin, by the way, not what some people like to think it was. It was a tactical concession for strategic gain, okay? So, you’ve got to bear that in mind. The analogy he uses, Khamenei, is restless, and it’s not about, you know, having a draw, yeah? It’s about winning, but it’s knowing how to win, and winning by making tactical decisions if you have to.

So, those, I think, were, for me, quite, you know, important aspects, and as for the JCPOA, which I’m sure we’ll talk about in a minute, I just want to, sort of, address this thing. People say, “Is it all Trump?” I would like to move us away from the notion of, “Is it all Trump?” It isn’t. If Trump fell down under a bus tomorrow, there would still be problems between the United States and Iran, and I think our obsession with single-issue problems or turning it into a single issue, means that we often don’t see some of the other issues going on and underlying it. You know, the issue with the JCPOA and the failure of the Obama administration to get it ratified as a treaty in congress was one of its major weaknesses, because it was dependent, subsequently, on waivers by US Presidents, and the assumption was, of course, is that all US Presidents will be nice. You know, I mean, that was the problem, you know, there were several problems there, and I think you need to move away from that notion, again, of seeing this as a) driven by,
you know, the United States, b) driven by sort of, single-issue problems, eliminate this and everything will be fine. It won’t.

Having gone through this, and I have to say, you know, Sanam and I have discussed at some length on these things, you know, you spend long enough looking at Iran, by the way, boy, you know, you will get jaded after a while, and it does wear you down sometimes, because the problems seem to persist, and I do think, ultimately, you know, one of the problems we have is we haven’t dealt with this issue with the sort of seriousness it deserves, which I think, you know, looking at certain people in this room, we have discussed before one of the things I think is, and I’ve always argued, is we need a much more multilateral approach to the region in Iran, not this – and I know Sanam and I have discussed about it, and Sanam says it’s a minority view, but hell, who cares if it’s a minority view? One day it will become majority, won’t it, Sanam?

You know, I mean, the idea is to move towards a broader regional piece, which I think would work to bring all the parties that have problems in, because, for me, to be honest, I think, you know, when we’re looking at the future, Khamenei and the group around him now, I suppose, are more embedded, more established, and more driven by a particular ideology than I think at any time, since I’ve been looking at the Islamic Republic, and all the major reform people that did exist, Rafsanjani, obviously, has died, Khatami is basically under house arrest, and other individuals are not really getting a voice in this political landscape.

So, the prognosis is not one that’s, sorry to say, terribly optimistic, in some ways. I don’t think it’s that pessimistic, in the sense that I think if we can actually, and I think, for me, the great lesson of the book is you’ve got to know how to diagnose the problem. If you don’t diagnose the problem, you’ll never find a solution, and I think the problem with our policymaking in many cases, obviously, not in the United Kingdom, which is superb, but – there’s a nod and a wink to colleagues over there, but in the United States, I will say this, to some extent, I wouldn’t want to generalise either, but to some extent, there is a tendency, I fear, to read into the evidence what you want to see. And I think the key is, if I’ve hopefully done anything in this book, is to try and look at the evidence, from an Iranian perspective, as it is. So, thank you very much for your time [applause]. Was I on time?

Dr Sanam Vakil

On the dot. Not very...

Ali Ansari

I have to say, I hope you all acknowledge, I was on the dot, Persian academic on time.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Not very Iranian. Thank you, Ali. I think you have kicked us off with some great remarks. I actually practically quoted a lot of the things on my piece of paper here, so I don’t want to be redundant. But Ali’s book is filled with so many beautiful one liners that capture the challenge, the conundrum, and, sort of, the, if I want to be very positive, the beauty of studying Iranian politics that we have been engaged in for a very long time. And one of the things you say, early on in the book, and I think it’s really relevant, and I wanted to ask you to discuss this a bit, rather than just focus on the present, ‘cause the present is very important, but all Iranians will always say that their present is very much located in the past, and you say,
“History in Iran is contested.” So, if we’re looking at present history, or, you know, recent history, how is the – this history going to be contested inside Iran, or is it already being contested?

Ali Ansari

Well, I mean, I’ll give you an example, which I quite – from the nuclear negotiations themselves. So, I mean, the chief one that’s very interesting, of course, that everyone knows about, is the coup in 1953, okay? Now, the coup in 1953, quite rightly, I have to say, you know, people will say, you know, “This is absolutely shocking behaviour by the British and the Americans.” I mean, they, sort of, tend to ignore the local involvement, but absolutely true. You know, there are, you know, in terms of historical relations, it’s not something you want to be overly proud about. You can study it historically, of course, separately, but in terms of its role as a myth, as a narrative, as a way in which people might, you can see in Iran different groups will interpret that single narrative in different ways. It’s also quite distinct from the way that Americans will describe it, or we would describe it. I mean, actually, the beauty of Britain is we tend to ignore it. So, it happened, but, you know, who cares? But, in America, there’s, sort of, like, an over, sort of, like, a terrible sense of guilt. I mean, it’s a sort of guilt. The Americans had this extraordinary sense of guilt about it, but also, partly by saying, “But the British forced us into it. You know, look what you did, you destabilised our democracy,” whatever. That narrative, by the way, would work much better if Iran was a functioning democracy today, you know, I mean, it wouldn’t – or actually tried to be a functioning democracy today. But the fact is, you know, they – what I always say to people, I say I think it’s only in the last year, by the way, correct me if I’m wrong, that they’ve actually named a street after Mossad Dagan in Iran. I mean, it’s only – and it’s a Khja, actually, I don’t think it’s a street. So, it’s not, you know – they didn’t even bother to, sort of, you know. So, they would go on and on, and the Americans would, “Oh, you know, absolutely terrible people, we are,” or whatever. “We owe you, you know, how much enriched uranium would you like?” And, interestingly, if you looked at what Khamenei and his side interpreted it, it was quite interesting. I mean, they would look at it in a different way. They would say, and if you look at the narratives that the hardliners pushed, they say, “Well, what is the moral tale of Mossad? What is it? Is it that, you know, we’re a democracy waiting to happen and develop?” No, it’s really that Mossad there was a weak man who was naïve and who trusted the Americans, and look what happens when you trust the Americans.

So, in all this time, while the West was following a particular narrative of, sort of, trying to build and understand the other, which is very good, you know, whatever, there was other people in Iran who were basically using this very same story, this very same contested history for radically different aims, and actually to use it to beat Rouhani with. You know, so, the minute the whole JCPOA stutters, and, by the way, it was stalling well before Trump pulled out of it. I mean, we know that, we know that from, you know, Kerry coming to London urging businesses to invest in Iran, swiftly followed by the US Treasury telling them, “Don’t do it.” You know, I mean, it was – that was the absurdity of it. So, what Khamenei was saying was, that’s what it shows. You know, it doesn’t show anything else. I mean, actually, the person of importance in Iran at the time was Ayatollah Kashani, it had nothing to do with Mossad. So, these are the things. I mean, I think people use these things and we use – I mean, there are numerous. I mean, politics is alive in Iran in a way that we, in Britain, are only now beginning to, sort of, like, appreciate again. You know, there
are different narratives, things are contested, we think things in the past are settled and we all agree on a particular interpretation, but, of course, in Iran, it isn't, you know, and, you know, we can go recent history and more distant history, even medieval history, God help us. You know, people will be debating whether these things are – this poor student, that's been arrested in Iran, this Princetonian, who's – I mean, what was he studying? 19th Century [inaudible – 19:26] Government management. That was very dangerous, obviously. Yeah, yeah.

Dr Sanam Vakil

I'm going to ask one more, and take my liberties here, because you do have a wonderful sentence that says, “The JCPOA is a confidence-building exercise in revolutionary conviction.” I really like that. I think that captured…

Ali Ansari

Well, I don't know what I said, what does it mean?

Dr Sanam Vakil

...the dichotomy of Iranian domestic politics. What does that mean for today? Is the revolution still alive, or have we moved into a more pragmatic climate? I know, in your comments there, you did say that the ideology still remains very resilient.

Ali Ansari

I think the ideology – yeah, I think the ideology – now, the difference is, of course, is that the ideology remains resilient within a core. You know, I think the vast majority of people are probably not particularly interested, and we can see that, you know, but I think within the core it's become, you know, the elect, if you want to put it in a, sort of, a Calvinist learned. You know, there's an elect and they feel they really know, and what I meant by, I suppose, if I get the context, if I remember the context of where I said that, is that, really, what it did, precisely on this Mossad narrative, is that, essentially, the inevitable betrayal by the United States simply reinforced that revolutionary narrative. So, in terms of confidence building, it didn't build confidence between East and West.

I mean, one of the absurdities of the JCPOA, to be honest, is we spent two years negotiating, and both sides came away, certainly, I think, on the West, thinking, “God, I hope I don't get into a room again,” do you know what I mean? It wasn't as if we were enthusiastically going, “Let's get onto the next bit,” even though, I mean, that's really what should have happened, that was the plan. If you actually talk to people, they go, “Oh, you know, oh, you know, it's too much, like, hard work,” and there were elements where, yes, confidence building was basically being generated, but I think, as we know, it needed momentum, going forward, in order to get that consolidated. Instead what you had, actually, is hardliners and hawks, maybe on both sides, but certainly in Iran, sort of, being convinced that their worldview was right, you know? So, that revolutionary conviction was reinforced, unfortunately.

Dr Sanam Vakil

But hasn't that conviction somewhat evolved away from holding fast to the idea of exporting the revolution and the ideology of 1979, and could it potentially be evolving to more of a nationalist-resistance minded conviction?
Ali Ansari

Well, I think there is a point in that. I think there is a point to that. I mean, the question of evolution, of course, is how quickly it’s going to – how fast or slow it’s going to be. I think, you know, since Ahmadinejad’s period, what you’ve had is a, you know, what you could broadly call, and I have to say, for the core idea, what would be described as a Millenarian Movement, and by Millenarian Movement, I don’t mean Apocalypse Now, or things like that. You know, that’s not what we mean by that. What we mean is a, sort of, a rather eclectic mix of religious and nationalist ideas, all towards a utopia, yeah, and a vision of a utopia, and you can see that. I mean, you can see that in religion. Again, it goes to the sources. If you go to their sources, although I have to say, rather depressingly, because of sanctions, I think some of these websites are unavailable to us now, but, I mean, you could read the stuff very clearly that what they were looking for, what they’re arguing, is not classic export the revolution stuff, but it is, you know, it’s certainly not the revolution in one state, if I can put it that way. I mean, they do have ambitions, they do, and, recently, if you look at it, I mean, fascinatingly, when they put sanctions on Ayatollah Khamenei, which is an interesting move, of course, I think Rouhani came out and he said, you know, “This is a great insult. You know, Khamenei is not just the leader of Iran, he’s the leader of the Islamic Revolution, and not just the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Islamic Revolution in the world,” and I thought, “Where is this Islamic Revolution in the world that Khamenei is leader of?” But, of course, if you look at the literature, you know, when Occupy Wall Street was happening, the Iranians leap in and claim leadership of this stuff, even though we know it’s complete nonsense. But the fact is, they have, unfortunately, for us, particularly those of us who really want to, sort of, try and see a, as you say, a moderating influence, they retain this, sort of, global ambition. I mean, unrealistic as it may be.

Dr Sanam Vakil

We’re going – I’m going to stop, because we can do this forever.

Ali Ansari

Yeah, and we’ve got dinner.

Dr Sanam Vakil

And we have dinner, to continue this. I will open the floor to questions. We are on the record, and there will be microphones roaming around. So, when you do get a microphone, I would really appreciate it if you could introduce yourself, beyond being a Chatham House Member. We’re very glad you’re members of Chatham House, but we want to know your affiliation beyond that. So, the floor is open. Please, sir.

Hasan Nassif

And my name is Hasan Nassif and I’m a Member and a Journalist and Academic, as such. Anyway, I attended one of your lectures a few years ago, where you emphasise so much nationalism in Iran, the element of nationalism. I want to ask you about what you’ve just said about nationalism being mixed with religious identification. How does that, sort of, go along with the Muslim Brotherhood and the version of Erdogan in Turkey? Is that, sort of like, what’s happening in Iran now, a mixture of ideology, of nationalism and religious identification together? Explain why Iran and Turkey are on good terms, politically. I mean, how would you?
Ali Ansari

I mean, and probably, for the same reason that Iran and Russia are on good terms, politically. I mean, I don’t think they – you know, the ideologies are quite – they have, obviously, distinct facets, in terms of substance, but, you know, the nationalism is clearly there, and the nationalism is much more engrained among the population at large, and they use it very effectively, and they use it very effectively on the nuclear aspect, for instance. I mean, I’ve often argued that there are people keener on Iran’s right to enriched uranium in California than there are in Iran, you know what I mean? It’s – you know, the diaspora has often been much, much more vociferous, and they played very well on that card. The – but, you know, the mixture of the nationalism is interesting.

I mean, for us, you know, as Academics, it’s always fascinating to see the way they mix and match. You know, so, Cyrus the Great becomes, you know, the Founder of monotheism and, you know, one of the leading Muslims in the world. I mean, how does that work? I mean, where does that work? You know, he becomes a member of the Basij. How does that work? I mean, but they will play on it. I mean, they play on it to try and incorporate both national symbols into – to make them religiously acceptable. Some of it’s very clever. I mean, some of it is very well done, I have to say, it’s marvellous, and others of it is very clunky. If you want to see the sort of videos that they produce, some of the, you know, very delightful videos about them sinking the fifth fleet in the Gulf, and this sort of thing, Persian Gulf, forgive me before I get completely torn apart, you know, the – there is a mix and match of that, sort of, religious zeal with flag waving and, you know, aspirations of [inaudible – 26:44], in particular.

So, the [inaudible – 26:45] features very heavily in that. It’s a way of mixing and ma – and it’s there. I think the regime itself, at the core, I would say, obviously holds fast, I think, to a much more – what it feels is a much more, sort of, authentic religious voice. But as, you know, we discovered in 2009, you know, when we were looking at this stuff, some of their ideas on religion are also so far out, as far as Orthodox Shi’ism is concerned that many, you know, Shias would have considered some of the comments being made by them to be blasphemous. I mean, it’s very simple, and even a number of Ayatollahs complained about some of the things that were being said in the name of religion, to be, you know, beyond what would be considered orthodox. So, they have this capacity for, you know, ideological production, if I can put it that way, and developing things and pushing things, which is fascinating for us. Not great for policymakers, in some ways, and probably less good for some of the people living under it, but it’s, you know, it’s a wonderful, sort of, menagerie of ideas.

Hasan Nassif

You spoke of accommodating the Muslim Brotherhood, going back to what Khomeini thought of the Muslim Brotherhood, and nowadays, with Hamas and with Turkey and so on, is this something that you will...?

Ali Ansari

Well, no, I wouldn’t consider it, no, not at all. I mean, I don’t know if you – I don’t think it’s – I mean, if you look at their relations, also, with a number of even Sunni Muslim states, over the last 20 years, I mean, when the first edition of this came out, I think Khatami was about to become an honorary citizen of Saudi Arabia. You know, I mean, they didn’t – you know, there was no problem with it in that sense. These relations, I think, have, you know, the sectarian aspects of these relations and how they fracture have to be overlaid or underlaid, whichever, by the geopolitics of the region, also the ethnic complex. You know, Iran’s relations with Turkey have always been quite interesting, in the sense that they’re very
historic. There’s a huge amount of, you know, ethnic overlay. Many Iranians obviously speak dialects of
Turkish, many Iranians travel to Turkey. So, it’s not as, you know, it’s not necessarily seen through a
sectarian prism.

Dr Sanam Vakil
But there’s pragmatism to Iran’s foreign policy, right?

Ali Ansari
Yes, no, absolutely, yeah. I mean, there is. I mean, they – you know, that geopolitical nature is, you
know, I think the key is, is that you need to look at it in terms of these layers, of these, sort of, reinforced
layers. So, I mean, you know, the classic one, in terms of pragmatism, is the Caucasus. I mean, Iran’s
relations in the Caucasus and so on has been, you know, over vast periods, has been very, very, much
more sympathetic to the Armenians than it has been to the Azerbaijanis. So, there’s no, you know,
religious element there, but, of course, the Armenians played the nationalist card quite well.

Dr Sanam Vakil
Please, right there.

Peter Watkins
So, Peter Watkins, Associate Fellow and one of those poor benighted policymakers in the past. Towards
the end of your talk, you said that the security state now seems even more entrenched than ever, but what
about the economy? I mean, if the economy continues to sink, are they just going to ride it out? How will
they keep a grip?

Ali Ansari
I think the economy is always going to be the – I think, in my view, certainly, what, you know, one of the
critical factors, the difficulty with this, and, again, I think Sanam and I were talking about this maybe a
couple of weeks ago, is that there is also a, you know, there’s a black economy. So, there’s a whole aspect
of the economy where you have those revolutionary institutions that have access to a lot of capital, which
they can use, essentially, to oil the wheels, if I can put it that way.

Now, obviously, I think one of the most serious problems they’re facing now, and I was looking, actually,
today at some of the oil figures. In fact, oil exports now are even lower than they were at the height of the
2011/2012, you know, sanctions. I mean, it is quite extraordinary, and a reminder, by the way, that the
United States has and always will be the elephant in the room. I mean, it’s, you know, if it puts its mind to
it, it can be quite aggressive on it. So, I think this is a serious problem for them, and I do agree with you
that sooner or later, you know, the economy will force a rethink. The problem for any Analyst of this and
any policymaker, as we look at it as we have discussed it, is that because so much of the economy is in the
shadows, if you can put it that way, it’s not going to be out in front, in terms of our assessment of what the
statistics are. It’s always difficult to assess how much reserves of, you know, that they have. You know,
it’s difficult to know when they’ll break.

Now, having said that, these things are not zero-sum games. I mean, the problem is, if you get to a
situation where the population is finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet, you know, that, in
itself, will be a catalyst for some sort of change or reaction. I mean, that will be it. Although, as we’ve said and I’ve said before, I don’t think that means that we’re going to see a Hong Kong style, you know, velvet, you know, uprising, or whatever. I don’t see that at the moment. I mean, I see more that the security state and the IRGC would consolidate their position as far as they can, because they’re playing a waiting game at the moment. So – but on the fundamentals, I agree with you, I think the economy is going to – is really their Achille’s heel, in that sense.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Please, yeah.

Olivia

Hi, my name’s Olivia, I’m doing a masters at King’s. Thank you for your talk. I just wanted to ask, which follows on from that question, given the current and increasing sanctions being placed on Iran, to what degree is its financial and military support to different militias and groups across the region, and I’m thinking of Iraq and Yemen in particular, sustainable?

Ali Ansari

Well, I mean, first of all, it depends how much they’re paying, I suppose. I mean, other people in this room will know better than me, but I think it’s – the evidence is that there is a squeeze. I mean, there’s definitely a squeeze going on, in terms of restricting some of the funds going through, but at the end of the day, also, you know, what are – you know, some people have argued this. I don’t buy the fact that it’s purely ideological that somehow Iran has made all these friends in Iraq and Syria and other places, and they’ll all just fight for free. You know, I mean, I don’t buy that. I think there is – but, you know, to see it purely as a financial relationship is probably too simplistic. So, you know, things will continue. I mean, Iran, you know, in the guise of the ubiquitous Mr Soleimani, has been cultivating relations in the area for some time, and I think there’s a degree of loyalty and a belief that, you know, at the end of the day, you know, what the Iranians have, over the others, is the fact that they will say that we will be here. You know, when everyone else is gone, we will be here. So, you need to be – keep friends of the right people, but on the other hand, yes. I mean, I do think, I mean, the sense is, and I don’t know, I mean, I couldn’t say with divinity, because I don’t – I really don’t – you know, I don’t know enough about how much is being sent. I don’t know enough about how it’s sent and, you know, what the cost of these things are. What we have, I think, as a, sort of, an indication that, clearly, you know, the noose, in that sense, and the financial constraints are tightening and that things are becoming a bit tight, you know, and they’re having to do a bit of austerity, or whatever, but, I mean, I don’t know how. What the consequences of that will be.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Can you prioritise Iran’s – let me ask you a hard question. If we look around the region and, you know, Iran is being accused of controlling four capitals, right? Can we prioritise those relationships? Which of those relationships is the most important? Is it Hezbollah, is it some of the Hashi Shabi?

Ali Ansari

I’ve always found – actually, I’ve never thought it was a difficult question, actually. For me, I’ve never thought that was a – for me, Iran’s near abroad is where it has legitimate concerns for its security, and I
would always pin that as, you know, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus, you know, bits of Central Asia, Obviously Afghanistan, very clearly. I mean, these are part of what we would traditionally see as aspects of, I know my Iraqi friends will kill me, but, you know, basically, the Persianate world, and it’s, you know, as I always jokes with friends, you know, the Euphrates, the Indus, the Oxus, but, I mean, that’s, you know, a slightly medieval take on it. But, for me, Syria is a complete waste. I mean, Syria is a stretch too far. I think they’re only in Yemen because people told them they’re in the Yemen, you know, and they’ve decided to get more involved, because they like it and, you know, they’re trying to irritate the Saudis. I mean, that’s fine. I mean, you’re trying to irri – the Saudis have been irritating them and they want to – and this is geopolitics, you know, but there’s no, in any longer-term settlement or any longer-term thing, if you were looking. If you were to say to us, “What are Iran’s legitimate security concerns?” Its legitimate security concerns, I think, you could make a legitimate case for saying, has a – you would say, and even in the place, you know, that we will – we do not want to see a threat emerging from Iraq again. I mean, I think that’s a legitimate security concern. I mean, if you’ve been invaded by a country and you’ve had an eight year war, what’s wrong with saying that? You know, I mean, that makes sense. Do we, in the interests of our security, feel that we need to get into Syria? That’s – you know, that, for me, is a debateable question, and if you want priorities, that’s lower down the priority chain. I don’t think Iran needs a base on the Mediterranean, let me put it that way.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Okay. Please, sir. Wait, the microphone is coming.

Andrew Marshall

And Andrew Marshall, I’m an individual Member at Cognito, and I know very little about Iran, but my question is about Western policymakers, and with your perspective, how informed and how big do you – how do you think the knowledge level in Western policymakers is today, compared with the mid-70s, where it turned out not to be very good, or the mid-90s? How has that developed, through this long period of isolation? Obviously, it’s led to a diaspora.

Ali Ansari

Yeah, you asked me – yeah, you’re asking me a very, yeah, a very – well, let me look at the historical perspective, I think that’s the easy. I mean, yes, I’m going to say something that will not be surprising. I mean, I think things are underfunded, let’s put it – let’s be blunt about it. I think regional expertise, I mean, even in the 70s, there was a fairly substantive Iran cohort. They didn’t actually get it as wrong as people think they did. I mean, I know colleagues of mine here, and, you know, if you go through the documents from the 70s onwards, the question is not so much whether they got it wrong, it’s whether the information, as it gets through, is filtered up to the top. That’s really the problem, and it’s less to do, in some ways, with the expertise at hand. It’s to do with the way the bureaucracy deals with that information. So – but also the way you think about it. So, Sir Anthony Parsons says in his, you know, a response to the, sort of, when the lessons of the Islamic Revolution, you know, why, he says, you know, “It wasn’t a lack of information, it was a lack of imagination,” and I think that’s an absolute key term. That essentially, people got stuck into groupthink in some ways, although I’d have to say, he’s probably, in some ways, being too harsh.

Now, obviously, since the 80s, since the revolution, since the fact that you don’t have a major embassy, functioning embassy in Tehran, on the scale that they had, obviously, in the previous period, since, you know, being a Persian language specialist is not quite the career boon that you might have thought, you
know, it was going to be in the 70s, you know, there is obviously going to be a gradual reduction in the number of experts, whatever, you’re going to have. Now, the Americans have done something quite interesting, of course, and they have a, sort of, a virtual embassy, where they have all these Iranists who basically sit around in European capitals and other places, and – but they’re part of this virtual embassy, and they, you know, they do their Persian and, you know, they’re pretty good, but, of course, they don’t have access. Britain at least has access. I mean, Britain, at least, has an embassy there and it has various other things that it can – and it has some people on the ground, although I suspect it’s fairly constrained, I mean, in terms of what you can and cannot do. But I think, principally, as a, sort of, a critical mass, yes. I mean, there are – there were issues. I mean, I think it’s certainly better now, but there was a wonderful moment, and I don’t think I’m giving away any secrets here, you know, in 2003, you know, when the Iraq War was just about to get started, where almost everyone, with any Middle Eastern expertise, was dragged into the Iraq Department, and everywhere else was denuded. So, there was actually no-one really dealing with any, sort of, seniority dealing with aspects of Iran, or actually, anywhere else for that matter. So, you suddenly found that you were, sort of, short of personnel to deal with these issues.

And I think, principally, if I have one plea, actually, is not so much the policy establishment, it’s actually the educational establishment, where we don’t have a scheme in this country, that the Americans do, which is the strata – which is to pinpoint strategic languages, and there should be funding for the learning of strategic languages, which should include all the ones, you know, that we did, including Persian, and we don’t have it. So, you know, we need to maintain. Thankfully, at universities such as St Andrews, if I may say so, it’s flourishing. However, the thing is, you know, we would be better if there was actually a programme that – and, you know, I can blame the Treasury for this, and we can all blame the Treasury, so it’s fine, but it’s, you know, I think a scheme like that would be very, very useful and very good and beneficial for Britain in the long-term.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Please, thank you.

Stephen Porter

Thank you, and my name’s Stephen Porter. I’m an independent Member of Chatham House. You’ve downplayed the influence of Western Politicians on Iran quite plainly, but is it not true that Khatami and Rafsanjani were considerably undermined in their reformist tendencies by very negative responses, both in America and in Britain, particularly, particularly in America? And surely that, had they had, for instance, things like most favoured nation status in trade and a much more, and a rather, sort of, Nixon-like approach of ping-pong diplomacy towards Iran that was expressed towards China, had that happened under George W Bush, for instance, wouldn’t, actually, things in Iran have – wouldn’t the reformists have been in a much stronger position, and wouldn’t that have probably benefitted world peace in general?

Ali Ansari

Well, no, I mean, I certainly would agree. I mean, I suppose what I’m trying to say is to rebalance the, sort of, analysis, in a sense that, you know, we look at the domestic situation first, analyse that and then see. And it’s precisely because we didn’t look at the domestic situation properly that the Western response was so poor. I mean, do you see what I mean? I mean, my point is, it’s not a question of Obama goes to Cairo and gives a speech and suddenly the Arab Spring starts. I mean, you know, that’s vanity. You know, it’s really a question of saying, you know, how do we properly assess the situation going on in Iran?
Rafsanjani was an interesting character, by the way, and he certainly could’ve been encouraged. I don’t think he was a reformist, in that sense, but he’s certainly better than some of the lot that we have at the moment. Khatami, I think, was probably pretty genuine. I mean, I have a certain soft spot, I freely admit, and the book was really about that, because I saw some of the things he was trying to do, and I agree with you that I think the response in the West was poor, initially at least, but my point is, is that the people who buried Khatami were the hardliners in Iran. They were not Bush, at the end of the day, and this is what you have to bear in mind.

I mean, there are various things here, and we see similar things here with, you know, various candidates for high office, you know, where we, sort of, like, blame them for various things. Actually, the problem is Iranian. I mean, the problem is local. What you’re quite right in saying is that sometimes, maybe too frequently, you know, the West, you know, goes two feet first and blunders and then says, you know, does silly things, but – and sometimes, you know, as in historically, they’ve done very bad things, but my point is, is that, you know, even if you look at Mossad, even if you look at the Mossad crisis and the coup, the coup would not have occurred had there not been substantive support within the country to see it through. I mean, that – you know, if you’re bribing people to go into crowds, there has to be someone who’s going to accept the bribe, yeah? So, it’s not to diminish that side, but it’s not to ignore the other side, I think, and I agree with you that I found it very frustrating, for instance, with the Axis of Evil speech. I thought the Axis of Evil speech was probably one of the worst speeches. I said at the time, it’s probably on a recording somewhere, where I was interviewed at the time, and I thought it was the biggest disaster, you know, because I knew what the reaction for that would be. I mean, there were hardliners, just absolutely trembling with excitement, you know, when they heard this, do you know what I mean? But the fact is the hardliners were there waiting for their opportunity. If it wasn’t Bush saying that, it would’ve been something else, you know, and they’re waiting for their opportunity. So, it’s simply balanced. I wouldn’t want to get – give the – I wouldn’t want to exonerate the West by any chance, but I don’t think they’re principally responsible.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Please.

Tom Rintel

Tom Rintel, I’m a former student of Ali’s.

Dr Sanam Vakil

And currently?

Ali Ansari

No, not currently, no.

Tom Rintel

And currently in possession of a marvellous book. In your introduction you mentioned Trump, and you said, “Look, you know, if Trump moves on, make no mistake, you know, there will still be problems between the United States and Iran.” The flipside of that coin is Khamenei. How important do you think
Khamenei is to the power and the ideological discipline of the hardliners in Iran, and if his, sort of, long foretold death finally comes, what might that mean for politics between Iran and the West?

Ali Ansari

Yeah, this is the interesting thing, and it’s a very, if I may say so, very good question from a former student, the – but it’s very true. You know, people, sort of, say, and it’s true, exactly the same thing happened, absolutely true, they say, “Well, you know, Khamenei’s dying, and, you know, we’re planning for his replacement.” Now, first of all, is you’re quite right, you know, he’s been dying for some time, you know, and people will say, you know, and I’m sure he’s ill, by the way, I think he’s ill, but the point is, I don’t think it’s a way to plan policy, but even if he dies tomorrow, what does that mean? You know, is it going to be better? Do we know it’s going to be better? Do we know that, you know – the one big bee in my bonnet, I have to say, is this idea that Rouhani was going to be Supreme Leader, which, frankly, if he was going to be Supreme Leader, he wouldn’t announce it beforehand, you know, ‘cause, I mean, I’m sure his card is numbered. But the fact is, it’s entirely possible that whoever succeeds Khamenei is going to be a Revolutionary Guard nominee, who’s going to be supportive of the Revolutionary Guard and their interests, who may pursue even more hard line, you know, policy than Khamenei. I mean, it’s a bit hard to believe in some ways, but, nonetheless, you know, it could happen. I mean, it could. I mean, bear in mind, of course, when Khamenei became Supreme Leader in, when was it, 1989, or whatever it was, everyone thought he was pretty moderate. I mean, this was a man who said that if Rushdie apologises, we’ll forgive him, you know?

Dr Sanam Vakil

But Khamenei took a long time to become Khamenei.

Ali Ansari

He did. He did.

Dr Sanam Vakil

And I think that that is important to remember.

Ali Ansari

Yeah, of course it was. Yeah, but of course.

Dr Sanam Vakil

1989 to 1994, before he became a Marja, and then he slowly built his base, it was incremental. So, there is space between...

Ali Ansari

There is space.
Dr Sanam Vakil

...the next Khamenei and what that person becomes.

Ali Ansari

But it depends, also, I suppose, where I would say it depends, you know, I think the power of the Revolutionary Guard now is more embedded than it was in 1994, that’s the difference in some way, and I think they’re the kingmakers, but you’re absolutely right. I mean, I remember, you know, in the 1990s, I mean, nobody used to take Khamenei seriously. I mean, they used to be – they could be on the loop on television, you know, he’d often go on some provincial visit, be a loop, and you could actually see the link in the film where they just re-looped it, ‘cause, you know, people were running after his motorcade, and it was the same people over and over again, and they would show this repeatedly on television to try and, obviously, big him up and puff him up. And, really, it’s only, interesting enough in 2000, where Khamenei came into his own, where he intervened in the Majlis elections, basically, and he intervened in that and stopped them passing that very liberal press law. And I remember, I think it was Karroubi who was speaker of the Majlis. I mean, he sort of read – he read out a letter from Khamenei, which was very unprecedented, actually, in the sense that even Khomeini would not have been so blunt about it, would not have actually issued a letter to the Majlis.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Khomeini’s funeral is one of the biggest scenes, biggest funerals in the Middle East. What do you think Khamenei’s funeral is going to look like?

Ali Ansari

Crikey and that’s interesting. Sort of, North Korea readouts. No, I – God, you know, I don’t know.

Dr Sanam Vakil

That’s okay.

Ali Ansari

And I’m sure they’ll ship people out.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Are we going to see lots of crying and wailing?

Ali Ansari

I don’t think so, actually. It’s interesting, it’s an interesting question, though. I mean, I’m sure some people, you know, and I think people will have an emotional moment, ‘cause, I mean, it will be a significant moment for many people, and there are people who really believe that he is the Lord’s anointed, in a very serious way, but yeah, it’ll be interesting. I don’t think it would be quite the same as – it’d probably be more ordered. More ordered.
Dr Sanam Vakil

Definitely more ordered, but it could surprise us, and we should be prepared for a surprise...

Ali Ansari

Yeah, absolutely.

Dr Sanam Vakil

...whenever that day comes.

Ali Ansari

Yeah, whenever that day comes. Yeah, heaven forbid.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Could we have the mic here, please? Thank you.

Anita Lowenstein Dent

Anita Lowenstein Dent, I’m a former Television Producer at the BBC, now working in international development. So, I was sitting in approximately this chair approximately a year ago, and Benjamin Netanyahu was on stage, and engaged in huge theatricals, as he stood up, went to the map and talked about the major existential crisis of Iranian ambition to reach the Mediterranean. You have just reversed that narrative and said, you don’t see that as being as important as he was making out. So, would you like to speak to how he sees Iran and how Iran...?

Ali Ansari

No, I don’t think it’s important. I think some of them think it’s important. I mean, the point is, is that I don’t think there’s any reason for the Iranians to have a base in the Mediterranean. I think there are some members of the IRGC who do think it’s quite nice to have a base in Syria. I don’t think the Russians actually think they’re very good being there. You know, the Russians aren’t very happy. I think, you know, the Is – I mean, Netanyahu’s a showman, you know, let’s be honest about it, and he’s not a – I mean, he keeps winning elections, I suppose, but he does – you know, I don’t think his performances are not necessarily, I think, as productive as they could be. I think the one thing – actually, I quite – that was quite entertaining was his attempt to show how he would help Iran with water. You know, he drank some water and said, “We can help give you with water filtering,” and so on, which I thought was quite interesting, but other than that, he does – I think he does, obviously, overdo it now.

There is an element. I mean, let’s not have any illusions about it, there is. I mean, one of the problems with Iran’s revolutionary ideology, and it is a revolutionary ideology, is its difficulties with the existence of the state of Israel. I mean, we can’t negate that. I mean, the fact is, you know, we have problems with what Netanyahu says and the way he says it, but, at the end of the day, there is a problem, and I think, you know, my idea is that, ultimately, as I said, any, sort of, broad multilateral approach to a, sort of, regional peace, in some ways, will need – well, however it’s conceived, will have to include Israel in that in some way or form. It will have to include Israel, it will have to include all the major issues, and it will, you
know, the Iranians, at some stage, sooner or later, will have to come to terms with the fact that if they want their strategic concerns to be respected and to be adhered to, then they have to respect that other people have strategic concerns. You know, and this idea that you’re going to sit on the other side of the Golan Heights or in Syria and lob missiles or fly drones and this, that and the other, or, you know, in their view, as a deterrent, but it’s a bit of a circular argument, and I’ve had this debate with the Iranians. I say, “Well, what sort of deterrent is it?” They say, “Well, the Israelis might attack.” I said, “Well, why would the Israelis attack you?” “Well, because, you know, they keep” – I said, “That’s because you’re sitting in Lebanon, or you’re sitting in this.” “No, no, but we need them in Lebanon to stop them attacking,” but I said, “Well, if you” – you know, and it then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for them. And, I think, ultimately, there is no geopolitical, shall we say, although I mean, at the end of the day – I mean, let me put it this way, and let me do it very simply, I think Iran and Israel are the only two countries in the world with a Cyrus the Great streak, yeah? I mean, there is a cultural thing there, which I think, at the end of the day, could build something a bit more meaningful. But we’re talking about sometime in the future, obviously, you know, but we had perfectly good relations prior to the revolution, and they seemed to have perfectly good relations, when they were trying to shift missiles during the Iran-Contra crisis. So, I mean, it doesn’t – you know, I mean, the possibilities are there, the ideology needs to, obviously, shift.

Dr Sanam Vakil

Please, right there. I’m going to take a few questions.

Chris Bird

Thank you. Chris Bird, I work for Gatehouse Advisory Partners. Thank you very much for your comments so far, it’s been a fascinating discussion. Given your comments on Iraq being a, sort of, a strategic priority for Iran, and we saw the announcement this morning, or was it late last night, that the popular mobilisation forces, the militias in the South of Iraq are going to be incorporated into the armed forces. Given your comments so far, how do you see Iran responding to that, and are they likely to try and disrupt that process at all, or how do you see them responding? Thank you.

Dr Sanam Vakil

I’m going to take two more questions, as well, here.

Darius Bazargan

I’m Darius Bazargan, I’m a Journalist. I’ve been looking at stories going back to about 2015, when a gentleman was assassinated in Holland, and people seemed to think that he was the Haftar tear bomber, and then an Abkhazia activist was assassinated in Holland, with an Iranian Diplomat in prison, awaiting trial in Belgium. We have Iranians of Scandinavian origin, also awaiting trial, and the suggestion seems to be that Iran has started to run hit squads in Europe again, to rub out people that it dislikes, especially linked to separatist movements. What is Iran playing at if it’s trying to build good relations with Europe?

Dr Sanam Vakil

Thank you, and final question here, thank you.
Hi, Alex Wilson. I work for Baker Hughes, which is an oilfield services company, and I was wondering what your views are on further closures of the Straits of Hormuz, and whether there are any triggers that might lead us to think another closure was more imminent, or perhaps less imminent, if, indeed, you believe it was anything to do with the Iranians in the first place?

I mean, I’ve never thought it’s actually in their interests to close the Straits of Hormuz. I mean, they could obviously cause quite significant disruption, but I – and they’ve clearly put the frighteners on the UAE at the moment. The recent tanker, you know, which I think the evidence leads very heavily towards them having done it, you know, was essentially a signal to indicate that they could react, they could, you know, cause disruption, if their own oil sales are going to be restricted more and more, and to try and, obviously, encourage some signal to the Europeans and others to do things.

I think it would be – to be blunt about it, I think it would be a very, very reckless move for them to actually move in that direction, because the minute you do that, you know, you escalate on a pretty enormous scale, I mean, for them. I mean, it would require them, you know, it would provide the justification, really, for the Americans and others to intervene much, much more directly in the Persian Gulf itself. So, I mean, anything’s possible in that sense. I mean, it is certainly possible that they will want to act in a, sort of, a much more aggressive manner. All I can say is that, historically speaking, they’ve talked the talk, but they haven’t walked the walk when it comes to that. They won’t go that far. It’s much too counterproductive for them. I mean, ultimately, they want to be able to sell their oil. So, that wouldn’t work for them.

In terms of hit squads? Well, you know, yes. There’s all sorts of things that are going on in Iran that don’t make sense, in some ways, when you’re talking about the building of relations and the cultivating of relations. I think, in some ways, the more interesting aspect is why the Europeans kept so quiet about it, to be honest, and didn’t highlight it, but, you know, there’s this issue with the dual nationals and the others who were arrested in Iran, and other people. I mean, there’s all sorts of things going on, which frankly aren’t helpful, and, you know, that’s, sort of, understatement of the year, but it’s, you know, there are all sorts of contradictions in that.

On the one hand, you have the face of, you know, engagement that comes out of Zarif and others. On the other hand, there are things going on that are clearly counterproductive to any form of relationship building. I mean, there was, you know, to be perfectly honest with you, and I’ve said this myself, you know, if you were to release some of the dual nationals, and all the dual nationals, to be honest, it would dramatically alter the mood. And I remember saying to friends, I said, “During the whole Khashoggi fiasco, that would’ve been the moment to release, you know.” Just think how you could’ve seized that narrative. Instead, I think they convicted the Environmental Scientists of corruption on earth, you know, which, sort of, elevated the chances of the death penalty, but, I mean, you know, they took the opportunity to bury bad news, rather than actually seize it as an avenue.

I mean, it does make you think that the Iranians on one level, like everyone, I suppose, but to some extent, they have been – they’re absolutely wonderful with certain narratives and controlling narratives, but they’re also a complete disaster on other ones, complete disaster. And in some ways, by the way, the shutting of – you know, the attacks on the tankers was also a mistake, actually, in terms of the signalling. Yes, they were sending a signal, but it wasn’t, probably, the right signal, if I can put it that way, yeah? I
mean, it created certain – and we can judge Trump's reaction, whatever, and what went on there, but the fact is, it's they're not always in control of the narrative, and you're quite right about, you know, targeting, obviously, dissidents or people they want to have revenge attacks on, or whatever. I think the issue with that, in some cases, of what the Europeans were doing, in terms of keeping the information or the news fairly quiet, if I may say so.

In terms of Iraq, I think the Iranians, they certainly do have very strategic interests, obviously, in Iran. I mean, it will be interesting to see. I mean, it depends whether you think these militias being absorbed into the Iraqi Army are suddenly going to divest themselves of any association with Iran. I mean, this is the problem, of course, you could absorb these militias into the Iraqi Army, but they could just be, actually, fifth columnists with the Iranians. I mean, you know, it depends. There are people who work on Iraq who are much, much more au fait on this, about the level of Iranian penetration in Iraq than I would be. But I think, you know, from what I – certainly when I was looking at it in the post-Iraq invasion in 2003/4/5, and that sort of area, I mean, they're fairly well embedded, in terms of their networks, and, you know, the links run deep, obviously, through clerical family, obviously, military, IRGC links and others. I think it will be quite difficult to disengage in that. So, that would be my take on it, really. I don’t think, actually – I don’t think, necessarily, they need to disrupt it, if you get my meaning.

**Dr Sanam Vakil**

That was great. I want to thank you, because I think in the world of Twitter, and where we live, and the 24-hour news cycle, we just don’t get enough context.

**Ali Ansari**

Well, that’s – yeah, that’s right. Thank you.

**Dr Sanam Vakil**

So, thank you for giving us that context, that history.

**Ali Ansari**

Thank you.

**Dr Sanam Vakil**

Thank you for bringing this back out again, 20 years later, ever more relevant. Please buy it next door, £25, on sale, and please joining me in thanking Ali. Thank you for coming tonight [applause].