

RETARGETING IRAN

Nader Hashemi & Trita Parsi

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PHYLLIS BENNIS: *Trita, We're seeing in the broader Middle East region, largely from the vantage point of the impact of U.S. policy, however it is or is not strategic, a reshaping underway. The old dual containment approach that lasted about 20 years—you write about this in your piece in the book—was that the U.S. goal was to keep Iran and Iraq, the two key regional powerhouses, under control, to keep them from challenging the U.S. role as a global power in the region.*

Of course, that dual containment theory ended with the overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003. Since that time, and particularly, I would say under Trump, the U.S. strategy has been focused, such as it is, on this question of building a coalition against Iran centered by Israel but with Saudi Arabia as the other key partner in the region, the key opponent of Iran. What is your sense of how that shift is seen inside Iran, both at the state level, at the government level, and at the level of civil society? How do people perceive that divergence of what the U.S. tries to do in the region?

TRITA PARSI: Let me start off by saying that I am not as convinced that the actual motivating factor for this is Iran. I'm not trying to say that is Iran is not a motivating factor, but I don't think it is the driving factor. I think it is the most convenient pretext. Because what the real common interest is between Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE is not necessarily this opposition to Iran, although they all have their own problems with Iran, but rather the fear that the U.S. is reducing its commitments to the Middle East, leaving the region militarily, which would shift the balance of power until the region to their detriment. This is particularly problematic for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, less so for Israel because of its own actual capabilities, whereas the Saudis and the UAE are in, of course, a completely different category, Saudis more than any of them.

It is important for them to maintain, prolong the American security umbrella that has been extended to them for the last 20 to 30 years, that has been so tremendously beneficial to them. The balance of power that the Saudis

and the UAE currently are enjoying as a result of America's military presence they could not in any way, shape, or form achieve on their own. Their own power does not justify it. So keeping the U.S. locked in there is critical. They are seeing the sentiments in the U.S. and they are worried that the U.S. is actually shifting. Getting an arrangement that allows the U.S. to stay in the region and continue what it's been doing for the last two decades is what I think is really motivating them for this.

For that, Iran is a very useful instrument. Exaggerating the threat of Iran, claiming that Iran is about to establish hegemony throughout the region, that if the U.S. leaves, chaos will take over and the Persian Empire will be reestablished are arguments that are being used in order to ensure that the U.S. stays militarily in the region.

I would put the recent accord between Israel and the UAE in that category as well. We know now that of course it has far less to do, if anything at all, with peace between Israel and Palestine but much more with an arms transfer. Why would the UAE need F-35s? What is it going to do with them? You don't buy F-35s because you actually think that you're going to be needing them right away. But if you buy F-35s, you have secured America's commitment to your security. That's what it means to buy the amount and the quality of weapons that the GCC states tend to buy from the U.S. None of them have a formal security arrangement with the U.S., but by buying billions of dollars of weapons, they calculate, quite correctly, that this will bind the U.S. to their security. So when the Saudis go on a rampage in Yemen and start bombing that country, who is there supporting them, providing them with refueling, providing them with replenishment of ammunition, etc., etc.? The United States. So in order to be able to continue to keep the U.S. there, which I think is the real issue, Iran, arms sales, etc., are going to be quite valuable.

But if you take a look at UAE's foreign policy, if it truly is such that it is so concerned about Iran, one would wonder, why is it then expending so much of its political and military capital in Libya fighting the Turks or elsewhere in

the region, in which its main opposition actually seems to be Erdoğan, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Qatar, not Iran.

So this is a frame that I think is very effective to use in Washington to convince people to continue what we've always been doing for the last 30 years. I think it has less reality on the ground. Again, I want to emphasize, this does not mean that there isn't a real perception of threat from Iran or there aren't real problems. But my argument is it is wildly exaggerated in order to justify something completely different, which is the U.S.'s continued military domination of the region.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *We've been talking just now mostly about the state actions. You've written significantly about civil society in Iran, in your piece in the book as well. You write about the flowering of civil society at various points in post-revolutionary Iran in various movements for democracy that have happened. You wrote about the class differences between the 2009 and 2019 protest movements and how those two both are distinct and what might occur if they were to come together. How are those class differences emerging and how do you think civil society's impact on the Iranian state and the Iranian government may take shape in a different way as a result of COVID and its responses?*

NADER HASHEMI: The situation in Iran today with respect to civil society is probably the darkest moment in post-revolutionary Iran's history. You can't have a civil society unless you have somewhat a civil state that's willing to recognize autonomy for civil society to organize and to exist.

You have a repressive state that has become increasingly repressive with every passing year, and you have multiple crises. The COVID crisis is just the latest blow to Iranian society that has devastated large numbers of people. The official figures with respect to COVID in Iran are 27,000 dead, about half a million cases. No one takes those figures at face value. The numbers are much higher. The regime is trying to hide it. But, of course, the people who are paying the big price with respect to all of these crises, not just the COVID crisis, but the U.S.-imposed sanctions, are not members of the ruling elite, not the Revolutionary Guard Corps, not the political establishment in Iran, but the average citizen.

It's important to point out that there was this brief moment of optimism in Iran in 2015. What I'm about to say has been completely, I think, ignored in the commentary, in the debate on the Iranian nuclear agreement, the JCPOA. Iranian civil society, Iran's pro-democracy movement, Iran's human rights movement overwhelmingly supported the Iran nuclear agreement, largely because they saw it as a way out of an existing dilemma where society was suffering under sanctions, where there was a repressive state that did

not want to engage with the international community. People celebrated when the agreement took place. Every significant human rights and pro-democracy figure in Iran officially endorsed the agreement, largely because they saw that there would be perhaps a path forward where civil society could start to reconstitute itself, where they could start to organize and make demands from the state, where the economy would improve, where the middle class, that had been severely punished under previous sanctions, would be able to thrive again. So there was this door that was opened. It was a door that didn't guarantee sort of an immediate democratic transition, but I think it held the prospects for better internal social conditions and, critically, better international conditions.

When we talk about the right conditions for democracy, for democratization, we often focus on the internal nationalist perspective. But in the case of the Middle East, in the case of Iran in particular, you cannot ignore the regional and international environment that imposes a set of conditions that often inhibit democratization. In the case of Iran, with the constant threat of war, with the potential of a military attack, that effectively meant that the state could play the national security card, use the threat of an external attack to suffocate civil society. So with the JCPOA there was a lot of optimism that perhaps things would get better.

Of course, that all came to a crashing end when Donald Trump got elected and he pulled out of the agreement and imposed these crippling sanctions on Iran that, I want to emphasize again, have really devastated the average citizen, have devastated civil society. There is no civil society, if you want to be accurate and honest about it. The biggest adversary that civil society in Iran is facing is the regime itself, which is brutal, which has become increasingly brutal. Now you have a situation where you post something on social media, you can get arrested. It's a dark moment. And it's a dark moment because of a constellation and convergence of factors, not just the regime's oppression but also devastating economic sanctions, a COVID crisis on top of all of that, and very little hope or clarity over what might come next.

Let's say, in the best-case scenario, Joe Biden gets elected and the U.S. signs back on to the nuclear agreement and the economy starts to get better. It's going to take a very long time for civil society to reconstitute itself to be able to take advantage of the political openings, because it's been so brutalized and suppressed by some of the factors that I've just listed.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *Let me follow up on that for a moment. Iran has a history of collaborating with the U.S. at various points, most notably, perhaps, to the detriment of Afghanistan, I would say, in the post-invasion period in late 2001, when Iran was a partner of the U.S., essentially, in*

creating this artificial government that was planted in Kabul after the overthrow of the Taliban government there. And the relationship, from reports on both sides, was quite a collaborative one. It ended rather suddenly when Bush went ahead with his “axis of evil” speech, essentially promising regime change against Iran at that time.

If there is a Biden victory, for instance, and if Biden were to reclaim the Obama credential of having orchestrated the Iran nuclear deal and he returns to support that and goes back to a version of it, what is the potential you see for going beyond the nuclear deal to what used to be called a “grand bargain” with Iran, something that was talked about but never was quite close enough, that would involve more than just the nuclear arrangements but would involve serious negotiations about normalization of relations between the two countries? Do you think that’s a possibility in a future post-Trump government in this country? Would it be that different?

NADER HASHEMI: That’s a good question. Let me just say, on the question of normalization of relations, that’s not going to happen, largely because of domestic Iranian politics. The nature of the regime is such that it cannot have normalized relations with the U.S. because it undermines the unity that ties hardliners together. So that’s not going to happen as long as the current structure of power in Iran is in place.

But there could be something along the lines of what you suggested in terms of a “grand bargain.” I think that theoretically is there. And I think it’s largely dependent on to what extent the advisers that Joe Biden is going to rely on are interested in pursuing those conversations.

It just so happened that yesterday I caught an interview between Christian Amanpour on CNN and Elliott Abrams. He’s basically the Trump administration’s point of contact with respect to Iran policy. If you listen to what he was saying—and I think he was very much saying things with the intention of trying to convince the Biden administration about future Iran policy—he was making an argument that unfortunately I think is going to sound somewhat convincing to many people in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, that leans towards Joe Biden. He was arguing that, Look, these sanctions over the last several years have hurt Iran. Iran is significantly weakened. Let’s not relent at this moment. We can get a much better bargain. We can bring Iran to its knees. Now is not the time to sort of sign back on to the JCPOA. We are in a good bargaining position, so there’s no reason for us to think about diplomacy or compromise with Iran. Let’s try to use our strengthened position as a result of Trump’s sanctions to get a better deal, to get greater concessions from Iran.

To the extent that that argument has weight in Joe Biden’s foreign policy team, it suggests that there is not going to be any appetite or interest in a “grand bargain” in trying to resolve some of these broader regional issues. It suggests that it’s going to be a lot of very tough negotiations and strong reluctance on the part of the Biden administration to do anything beyond a discussion of the terms of the JCPOA. So I don’t see that happening. That’s my reading. But, of course, Trita knows the Washington scene much better than I do, and I’d be interested in hearing what he has to say on the topic.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *Let me turn to you, Trita, on a related question. We know that there are political forces throughout Washington in the arms manufacturing lobby and the pro-Israel lobby and in other components, the Saudi and UAE lobbies, that are pushing hard consistently for a military response to Iran, for escalating the tensions with Iran. But you also wrote, including in your piece in the book, in Retargeting Iran, about the role of mass mobilization in the U.S. as a way of neutralizing the influence of those lobbies. Could you talk a little bit about that and how the mass antiwar mobilization emerges and how that comes up against these lobby pressures from the arms manufacturers and others and how that could play out in this situation.*

TRITA PARSI: Sure. I think if we actually take a look at some of the big instances in the last 10 or 15 years, to me it’s become quite clear that these special interests, whether it’s the arms manufacturers or those that are very close or sympathetic to the Likud Party, etc., do have a tremendous amount of influence. But their influence really is only decisive when the American public is absent. When the American public is actually mobilized and present, you have a rather different scenario, whether it is over the JCPOA, where a big coalition of civil society groups showed a tremendous amount of support for the efforts of the Obama administration and managed to win a tremendous amount of votes in Congress and really out-flooded the other side in many different ways, or whether you take a look at the proposed move to authorize war with Syria.

Over a short period of time there was a window for the public to make its voice heard. And they did. The phone calls against going into Syria, according to lawmakers we spoke to, were roughly 9 to 1. And that’s a scenario in which you had AIPAC lobbying in favor of it, you had the defense industry lobbying in favor of it, you had the administration lobbying in favor of it. But when the public was mobilized—and in this case they were strongly opposed to that idea—it was overwhelming.

The difficulty and challenge, of course, is that the public is too distracted under normal circumstances by the Kardashians and whatever else is happening in the country. They're not paying attention to these things. They only tend to pay attention when we're just a couple of seconds before midnight, when there is a crisis about to happen. That's when they mobilize. If measures can be taken to make sure that at a minimum their participation level under normal circumstances is higher, not just at the crisis level, I think the landscape could look quite different in Washington when it comes to these different issues. We would not be in a scenario in which under normal circumstances these various lobbies are essentially driving the bus, but when it is about to crash, the public comes in and tries to steer the wheel in a better direction. It would be much better if it was rather different proportions on this. I think it's absolutely achievable, but it's going to be extremely difficult, mindful of the very, very long list of potential distractions and other issues that they will be concerned about.

One way, however, in which this will increasingly happen, not just necessarily in the case of Iran but much more so in the case of China, where we will have the potential of seeing a much higher level of public engagement at an earlier stage, is because of how a potential Cold War with China will affect another issue that more and more Americans are heavily concerned about in a much more intense and prolonged manner. And that is climate change. Under those circumstances you can see a very different scenario.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: I want to come back to what I think is such an important component, looking at this combined role of the states, the government, and civil society in something that you mentioned earlier, Trita, about climate change. This is something that you touch on in your piece in the book, that Iran's national security agency recognized climate change as the second-most important threat that it faced in the world. I don't think our national security agencies are quite at that stage yet, although they're getting closer. But I'm curious what you think about the role of civil society both in the U.S. and Iran in changing some of those policies that are looking at the question of the impact of climate change in Iran, the impact of climate refugees both to and from Iran potentially, any of that. This issue that is mobilizing more people around the world right now than any other, climate change, how is that playing out in the relationship between Washington and Tehran?

TRITA PARSI: I think it's an extremely important question. Unfortunately, it has a rather sad answer to it. The citation I made there is actually from a period prior to the JCPOA, when the Iranian national security adviser identified sectarianism as the number one threat because of the manner in which it could rip the country apart

internally; second was climate change; and third was the U.S.

Things have gotten much worse since then, both on the climate dimension but also in the manner in which the deep state in Iran has started to criminalize involvement in environmental work. We've seen the case of several environmentalists who have been imprisoned. Some of them have been killed in prison. Fifteen to 20 years ago that was seen as a rather safe space when it came to Iranian NGO engagement. If you were in an NGO and you were a working on women's issues then, you were a bit on the front line, you were taking risks, you were pushing the envelope. The environment was seen as a very, very safe area. That is, unfortunately, not the case any longer. You have a scenario in which both countries right now are doing far too little and are not allowing the societies to move in the right direction on this issue.

That is highly problematic. It is particularly problematic for the Iranians, mindful of the fact that Iran is going to be one of the countries that will be hit the earliest and the hardest from climate change. We've already seen that. So much of where Iran's food is being grown internally is already being affected by this. So Iran is going to face a massive crisis in this area going forward. Again, here is another area where the sanctions and the denial of technology is going to be an unfortunate factor in how things evolve.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: I'm curious what any of you think about the potential for the climate crisis to help ease or at least support the climate activists in all the countries in the region, to potentially ease some of the tensions between the governments in the region that face this enormous challenge of climate change and have to be recognizing that they cannot deal with it with borders, that the climate crisis doesn't recognize borders, and as long as they continue to refuse to deal with each other, they're not going to be able to deal with shared waterways. We know the history of that in the Shatt al-Arab and other parts of the region where the crisis was less about oil than it was about water. And that's only going to continue. Is that likely to change the dynamics at all?

NADER HASHEMI: No. A quick comment. The fundamental security challenge that many governments, at least in the Middle East, including Iran, face and that is at the top of the priority list in terms of the ruling regimes is not the question of climate change and environmental degradation. It's regime survival. That's where all the energy, investments, the focus of national attention is. And that applies also to the question of Iran. The question of climate change and dealing with environmental degradation implies an ability to think long term, to put in place policies and plans that will reap benefits down the road.

Authoritarian regimes are fundamentally motivated by their short-term calculations. In the case of Iran, the regime suffers from a crisis of legitimacy, a restless population that aspires to political change, and it's facing immense pressure from abroad in the case of the U.S. attempt to bring the regime to its knees and to collapse the economy, as is happening as we speak.

The question of planning and organizing and meeting with other countries to deal with climate change is just nowhere on the horizon in terms of the list of priorities.

TRITA PARI: I largely agree with Nader on this issue. And to add to his point, just take a look at how the reaction to COVID has been. Rather than seeing it as a common threat that necessitates collaboration, several of the states view it, rather, as how can this be used to advance their already confrontational objectives. The U.S., for instance, saw COVID as an amplifier of maximum pressure. We saw some collaboration between UAE and Iran but, but it doesn't seem to have really reached the level that it should, of course.

But I would differ a little bit. There is differentiation between democracies and authoritarian states. I do agree with him that authoritarian states do tend to be much more focused on their own survival. But I don't think we should give democratic states a pass here. It's not as if the democratic states necessarily are doing as well as they should be in this realm. Climate change is being neglected, unfortunately, by everyone. Some are doing worse than others. Fixing it with democracy is, I fear, unfortunately not enough.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *I'm a bit curious how you all see the question of climate refugees in the region. Iran historically has been a country of refuge for particularly refugees from Afghanistan but from elsewhere as well. It has for many years been a country which hosted large numbers of refugees. The possibility remains, I suppose, of both internally displaced people in Iran and significant numbers of Iranians at some point being forced out of the country to look for work who become climate refugees themselves. This may be the sort of thing that forces governments, whatever their preferential approach, to treat the issue of climate in a very different way, in a far more serious way than they have in the past, no?*

NADER HASHEMI: I think you're absolutely right. The problem of global climate change does have devastating effects, precisely in the ways that we've sort of outlined, Phyllis. People no longer can make a living in traditional ways, particularly in farming and in agriculture, because the conditions are just not there. They have to move to different areas, they have to try and flee the country if they can. So there are these sort of second- and third-order effects that

result from climate change in many developing countries around the world that produce destabilization, that produce migration, that produce refugee crises.

There is a lot of good scholarship on the question of Syria. The origins of the uprising and destabilization take place as a result of climate-change issues in some of the rural areas in Syria that produce discontent, unemployment, anger at the central government, which created social conditions for an uprising. This also applies in the case of Iran. There are a lot of smaller demonstrations that take place among farmers and workers routinely, in many ways responding to these climate-change issues.

In the case of Iran, climate change hasn't produced massive waves of refugees, but they have produced sort of economic conditions that have made unemployment much more difficult, have added to societal discontent. In many ways the protests that we've seen in recent years in Iran, primarily by young people in smaller towns and villages protesting their economic condition, are indirectly related to the overall economic conditions in the country that are exacerbated by climate-change issues. So I think that this is an issue that's not going to go away. It's going to get worse, and it's going to make governing the societies much more difficult. It is an indirect contributor to why people choose to migrate and leave when they can no longer make a living as their parents or as their extended family are used to making a living, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *There is an aspect of that that, Trita, you touched on in your piece when you compared the level of scientific unanimity on the value of the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal, with the scientific unanimity on climate change. I'm curious how that reality might play out in both. There was another reference I was curious about that you mentioned directly, and I think, Nader, you spoke of it in a more general sense. There was a reference to two of the people who were participating in the negotiations over the JCPOA, one on the Iranian side, one on the U.S. side, both of whom had nuclear science majors at MIT at the same time. And we know that there have been huge numbers of Iranians who have gone to school in the U.S., going back decades.*

Is that connection, both around those who have studied climate, those who have studied nuclear science, those whose have studied petroleum science—all the Iranian students I used to work with back in the anti-Shah days seemed to be engineers of one sort or another, I'm wondering if you think that unanimity around climate that scientists around the world share is the kind of potential that could lead to new approaches, new breakthroughs in civil society and governmental decision making.

TRITA PARSI: If one were to be quite optimistic, yes, it would be quite excellent if that was the case. I remain skeptical, however. Even if that unanimity were to exist, it is not sufficient to be able to overturn the pathologies that already exist of the security states and how they deal with each other. It could become, at best, I believe, a factor that would help facilitate an already existing shift in those security centers of the two countries rather than being the driving force of it. That doesn't mean that it's not a positive thing, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't invest in it. But I'm skeptical about solutions in which too much emphasis is put on that as a way of steering the security establishment rather than focusing directly on the security establishment.

NADER HASHEMI: Just a brief interjection. If you're interested in this story in the context of Iran, look at the case of a young man by the name of Kaveh Madani. He was a very prominent environmental expert, particularly in questions of water resource management. He was brought back to Iran from England by the Rouhani administration and given a very prestigious position to deal with Iran's climate-change problems.

Long story short, because he was politically independent, because he was very good at what he was doing, he was basically harassed and put under surveillance by the Iranian hardline establishment, by the security forces. He was forced to flee the country. Not for doing anything wrong but simply because he was an effective environmental expert in his field and he was independent-minded and he was working with the Rouhani administration and, by all reports, was doing very good work. But the reigning security establishment in Iran, particularly the hardline establishment, just didn't like him and didn't like the fact that Rouhani brought this expert from England and were very fearful of this being a trend.

So the expertise exists. There are a lot of talented Iranians who know a lot about environmental politics. But as long as the structure of power in Iran remains as it is, with deep factional rivalry and deep political interests, where hardliners do not want to bring back competent, knowledgeable people who can deal with some of these issues, you're not going to get any progress. So you can have the best minds—you're absolutely right, Phyllis, there are a lot of bright, talented Iranians around the world—but they're not going to be able to come back and work in Iran and make a contribution to political or economic development as long as the current structure of power remains in place and as long as the current ruling elites are in place.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *Let's move over to some of the questions that have come from our audience today. This is from one of the questioners asking, What do you all think about the fact that Iran is being forced by U.S. Maximum*

Pressure to get closer to China? What would be the effect of an alignment of Iran's foreign policy becoming closer to the East and to Asia than to the West? What effect would the panelists see on civil society under this situation?

TRITA PARSI: First of all, we have to look at this issue of Iran's so-called realignment with China. It seems to me to be rather exaggerated at this point. I think it's primarily exaggerated by the Iranians because they want to signal that they have another option, not so much if the U.S. rejects them but if the Europeans don't do anything to be more helpful in practical terms when it comes to saving the JCPOA.

The agreement that is currently being negotiated or considered we don't know the full details of. There are some drafts circulating around. But it does not seem to be particularly different from agreements that the Chinese already have signed, with the Saudis, for instance. The Chinese approach to the Middle East is not to take Iran's side in the internal rivalries of the Middle East. The Chinese position is to stay out of those to the extent that they can, benefit from trade, explore new markets. But unlike the U.S., that seems to have an instinct of getting itself involved in everyone else's business and thinking that it is the solution to other countries' problems, the Chinese have almost the exact opposite approach: they just want to stay out of these. The idea that they would now suddenly get themselves involved on Iran's side vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia I find highly unconvincing.

Will they support Iran vis-à-vis the U.S.? Yes, to a certain extent, but only as long as it doesn't complicate their own relationship with the U.S. further. And right now, of course, that relationship is in a very bad state. But if it were to actually progress beyond what we have seen, it will further move the Middle East towards some form of not so much multipolarity but rather some form of bipolarity. So it will be a factor.

Another thing that can happen in all of this is if the Chinese interest in the region grows significantly, whether it's because the Iranians are pushing them in or whatever, the Persian Gulf, rather than just being an area of security competition between Iran and Saudi and an American angle here, can also become an arena of Chinese and Indian security collaboration down the road.

So there is a significant amount of risk and too many variables to be able to make any easy predictions about this. The only thing I think we can say with some degree of certainty is that this is still not in any way, shape, or form as advanced as some of the news reporting and the talking points give the impression that it is.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *I am curious, though, coming off after that question, what you just pointed to, Trita—and either one of you may have an idea on this—on the relationship*

between Iran and Turkey, which right now is becoming more and more complex. Do either of you want to jump in on that one?

TRITA PARSI: I will say that once the era of Pax Americana is over, we're going to be entering an era of great confusion and a messy process of trying to find alignments. In Syria, the Iranians and the Turks are clearly on the opposite side, but because of the depth of their relationship and the tradition of their relationship, that stretches back centuries, and the maturity of these two states, however problematic both of them are, there has been a rather successful way of being able to compartmentalize the areas where they compete and the areas where they collaborate. Few other relations in the Middle East can claim to have that degree of the maturity and compartmentalization.

On the issue of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE forming an alliance, they're much closer to each other. Both of them are fearing what this could mean for the region. The Turks have a deep animosity and a competition with the UAE, and tensions between Israel and Turkey have been growing for quite some time. Then you have the Greek dimension of it coming in. We're entering an era in which a lot of unresolved conflicts are coming up to the surface now. I suspect that it's going to continue to be very, very complex, very messy, and it's going to take quite some time before you see any type of clean alignments here.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *One of the other questions reflected a similar question. What are the Iranian objectives behind its involvement in Yemen? We've touched on that briefly, but I think it is a complex one, again, that's being described in the U.S. press as being primarily to back up the Houthis rebels against Saudi Arabia, and it's putting Yemen into this category of being a proxy war between Iran and the Saudis, as if the internal contradictions that have existed within Yemen for so long have no role to play here. How do you both see that objective for Iran?*

NADER HASHEMI: Iran's role in Yemen, most independent observers realize, is grossly exaggerated in terms of the discourse and the attention that it gets in terms of the U.S. foreign policy position. Iran's investment in Yemen is actually quite minimal compared to what the Saudis are investing on a monthly basis. And they've been able to bleed the Saudis sort of dry, and they've been largely successful at doing that. It's basically a quagmire for the Saudis. It's just been a way, I think, of advancing Iranian interests with respect to Saudi Arabia by sticking it to them where the Saudis are very sensitive, effectively in their backyard.

I don't think it's anything more than that. If you listen to some of these ridiculous comments that you hear by

people in the mainstream who claim to be wise commentators on foreign policy—I'm thinking of Thomas Friedman—he famously commented on the war in Yemen that it's fundamentally about Sunni versus Shi'a and who will succeed the prophet Muhammad, that that's the core of the conflict. I think that has nothing to do with what's going on in Yemen. I think the Iranians have exploited an opportunity to provide support to the Houthis as a way of putting pressure on the Saudis, and the Saudis basically fell into the trap. And they're paying, I think, a big price for it.

TRITA PARSI: An even greater sin, I would say, of Tom Friedman's description here is that he described the Houthis at one point as pro-Iran, which essentially would mean that the Houthis are doing what they are doing because of their allegiance to Iran, which is just absolutely nonsensical. This is a long-standing Yemeni conflict; it has existed there for some time. Unfortunately, both the Iranians and the Saudis have used it for their own purposes. And it shows again the significant danger that exists for a state to become weak under these circumstances. If a state becomes weak under these circumstances, it will become, its territory runs the risk of becoming the arena of the security competition of the other bigger states. In the region right now that is primarily UAE, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and the U.S. itself, of course. In that sense both the Iranians and the Saudis have aggravated the situation in Yemen tremendously and prolonged that war and the suffering of the people of Yemen. Again, this is part of the reason why I'm somewhat skeptical that an issue such as the environment will be some sort of a magical card that will resolve these issues. There are profound security challenges in the region that need to be addressed for what they are.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *One of the other countries in the region facing that same challenge as Yemen, where it's being used by outside powers in all kinds of ways, is, of course, Syria. And a question has come in, How do we the fight back against U.S. escalation towards Iran in ways that don't ignore or even openly whitewash the Iranian regime's war crimes against the people of Syria in the context of a Syrian war in which all of the outside powers—the U.S., Russia, Saudi—are all responsible, as is Iran, for war crimes of all kinds against Syrians? It's always a challenge in the U.S. You both have touched on that in your pieces in the book about what it means to oppose the U.S. escalation towards Iran while not being uncritical of Iran's own role both domestically and in the region.*

NADER HASHEMI: That's a great question. I just want to state at the outset that while a lot of participants in the war in Syria have committed war crimes, overwhelmingly and comprehensively, if you look at the human rights record, it's the Assad regime and its Iranian and Russian allies that

are responsible for the vast majority of those war crimes and crimes against humanity. That's not to say that other parties are not guilty, but it's not a level playing field.

In terms of how do you respond to multiple sorts of moral causes happening at the same time, I think you have to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time; in other words, you have to be able to both be concerned about what's happening in Iran and what's happening in Syria at the same time. You also have to be cognizant of the fact that we're living in the U.S., and the U.S. has a particular role that it's playing, more so in some countries and not so much in others. So I think we have to ask ourselves, What can we actually do to effect change? To what extent can we make a difference in some of these conflicts? I think to the extent that the U.S. is a participant and is contributing to human suffering, that places a greater moral burden on American citizens to take responsibility for the policies of their own government and what's being done with their tax dollars. I think that's something that has always guided me when it comes to thinking about these issues.

The other thing that guides me in terms of sort of a rule of thumb is, be a little bit humble and be a little bit circumspect before offering grandiose plans and policies for solving some of these issues. My rule of thumb is, before you get involved and want to help any particular cause or group of people who are suffering, listen to what those people are telling us, listen to organically connected, grass-roots leaders with democratic credentials and listen to what they have to say about their own situation and what they want from the international community and what they want from the U.S. These formulaic sort of responses that you sometimes see from many of our friends and comrades on the left sometimes can be very detrimental in terms of advocating solutions and policies. They really don't help solve conflict; they actually advance it. So that's my rule of thumb. I listen very closely to, of course, Iranian civil society, activists, human rights activists. I also do the same in the context of Syria. I think those are sort of broad rules that I try to subscribe to when it comes to dealing with these issues.

TRITA PARSI: I agree with a lot of what has been said, and I think a good rule of thumb as well is to not look at these conflicts as if there's good guys and bad guys. Usually there's only bad guys when it comes to these things. Instead of romanticizing these struggles and thinking that the U.S. needs to do X, Y, Z, militarily to involve, all of them have a tremendous amount of blood on their hands.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *Let's come back to Iran. We have time for maybe two more questions. One has to do with the impact of U.S. sanctions, that have recently been escalating in Iran, on Iran's policies relating to environmental issues, such as water shortages. I think part of what that must refer*

to is the question of how U.S. sanctions are impacting the Iranian ability to access equipment and repair facilities, etc., for dealing with these environmental challenges.

NADER HASHEMI: I think there's a wrong assumption here that somehow prior to U.S. punitive sanctions on Iran that Iran did have a serious environmental policy to deal with some of these issues related to climate change, and now as a result of American sanctions those policies have been somehow substantively upended and changed. I don't think that's the case. Clearly, Iran under sanctions can't import anything of a serious nature that can improve the overall economy of the country. But even if it could, even if tomorrow, let's say, I could wave a magic wand and sanctions would be lifted, I don't see anyone in Tehran prioritizing the question of the environment and climate change. From everything that we know, as Trita rightly pointed out, those environmental activists in civil society who seemed and thought that they were safe and were doing good work on questions of climate change, have all been rounded up and put in prison and some of them have been killed.

I think on these questions one can't ignore the structure of power in Iran, the very misguided policies of the regime, which have to be laid at the doorstep of those decision makers in Tehran. You can't blame this particular problem on Washington, D.C. You can blame a lot of other problems on them, but not this one.

TRITA PARSI: I think Nader is absolutely right on this, the Iranian state's own failure. As I mentioned earlier on, a lot of the things that it's done have actually made matters worse—it's not just neglect, it's actually made matters worse—is the primary problem here. At the same time, I think we do have to remember one thing. I have not seen any particular concrete evidence on which I can say that these particular technologies were about to be imported but because of the sanctions they couldn't be.

But we should also recognize this when you have this degree of an embargo, under which nothing, really, can be sold to the country—the sanctions are on the financial sector, which means that it sanctions transactions—then everything in the country is affected by this. And when you reduce the GDP by 25%, as the sanctions have done, then a lot of different priorities that could have been there have not been there. As Nader said, these were not necessarily priorities prior to that. But there are a lot of other priorities that have been slashed and sacrificed as a result of this.

I think that context is still very important to keep in mind, and it shows how devastating sanctions tend to be when it comes to destroying the very fabric of society, particularly if they continue over a prolonged period of time.

PHYLLIS BENNIS: *I think the question of sanctions is perhaps, a good one for us to end on. But I think the question of U.S. sanctions is the fundamental component of what is at the root of the challenge that we face in this country, that we need to take responsibility for changing, in terms of what the relationship between the U.S. and Iran is and what the crisis between the two countries is, what the danger is of a regional, potentially even global, war that could emerge out of these tensions. So the question of sanctions is very much at the heart of that. Let me ask each of you. Maybe we'll come back to you, David, to start with a few closing words for people, remembering that we're in this country and the question of what are our obligations, our capacity here, what should we be thinking about, watching for, and doing.*

NADER HASHEMI: I think, while we have a deeply problematic U.S. foreign policy toward Iran currently, and under Joe Biden arguably it might be better, I think the bigger question, the bigger long-term focus, is really the crisis of democracy in this country. And I don't think we can really think constructively over the long term about a better U.S. foreign policy toward Iran or toward any other country in the world unless we fix our own internal democracy, or what's left of it, in this country. I think that's what the biggest focus needs to be for those of us who are seriously interested in creating a better world.

And I think we need to build a vibrant movement to fix our own democracy here in the U.S., with the hope that once we do, and if we can do it, and if there is a possibility of changing the direction of this country, then possibly we might be able to have a serious conversation of what a just U.S. foreign policy toward Iran might look like. That's where I think the priority should be, and that's what I'd like to see people focus their attention on.

TRITA PARSI: I'd like to associate myself with those two comments, and I will just add a smaller point. I don't think that there will be a fix to the relationship between the U.S. and Iran unless there is first a reassessment and a redesign of America's own foreign policy in the Middle East as a whole. If the U.S. continues to seek hegemony in the region, if it continues to believe that its military posture there is necessary in order to protect the U.S. itself, I suspect that the tensions between the two countries will remain. There may be moments in which it will reduce a little bit, but that is going to be a fundamental problem.

Moreover, it's really difficult to see the Iranians and the U.S. being able to collaborate on a whole set of different issues or come to terms—forget about collaborating—come to some sort of compromise if the U.S. continues to have that ambition. Because that ambition keeps the U.S. in the region, it keeps the U.S. supporting the Saudis, etc.

So, particularly in a democratic rebirth of the country, a much more profound review of the U.S.'s own interests in the region is needed. Because in my assessment the region is not at all that important to the U.S. to warrant this degree of involvement and this degree of military presence in the region. If you take that away, I'm not saying the region is going to be in fantastic shape, but I do believe that some of the obstacles that have prevented countries from seeking diplomacy, seeking regional solutions will be removed. It will still be a tricky scenario. But right now, if you were in Saudi Arabia, why would you pursue a security arrangement with Tehran and try to reduce those tensions when it is so much easier for you to just spend some lobbying dollars in Washington in order to be able to use America's power in order to settle your own rivalry with Iran? As long as that option remains available, you're not going to see the desire or the incentive for some of these countries to actually pursue genuine regional diplomacy.

Outro music – Mohammad Reza Shajarian: *Morgh-e Sahar* (The Bird of Dawn)

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