Episode Transcript:

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Iran's Future

Guest:
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Jon Alterman:
Karim Sadjadpour is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he focuses on Iran and U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. He's a regular contributor to the Atlantic and many leading publications. He appears frequently on radio and television. Karim is also a friend of many years. Karim welcome to Babel.

Karim Sadjadpour:
Thank you, Jon. It's great to be with you.

Jon Alterman:
You had a piece in the Atlantic in June where you said that tipping points in authoritarian regimes are hard to predict. Is there any reason to think that we're at some sort of tipping point in the U.S.-Iranian relationship with the election of Ibrahim Raisi as the new president?

Karim Sadjadpour:
I think tipping points can only really be understood in hindsight. We look back and say, "You know, that was a tipping point." But it's very rare in history that you anticipate something as a tipping point and it actually it happens. The example I oftentimes give to people is that in December of 2010, if an analyst predicted that Ben Ali was going to fall in Tunisia, and that was going to create this domino effect of Mubarak falling—Ghadaffi falling, etc.—no one would have predicted it because there was no sign of it. In Iran, there is—in my view—a mass discontent with the status quo, which is a combination of economic malaise and political and social repression, but the bottom line remains that you have a regime which is united, committed to staying in power, and committed to killing a lot of people to preserve their power, and you have a society with all their discontents. They're disunited. They're not armed. They're not organized. They don't have leaders, and they're not willing to die en masse to take to the streets and change the political reality. My view is that we haven't reached a tipping point inside Iran—that the Islamic Republic is not on the verge of collapse and there's not going to be any near-term transformation in U.S.-Iran relations, but these things are inherently impossible to predict.

Jon Alterman:
Javad Zarif, who both of us know has played a remarkable role as Iran's interlocutor with the world, seems likely to leave his position. Does that matter for the way the world relates to Iran? Does a diplomat like Zarif make a difference or—because all the decisions are actually made by Ayatollah Khamenei—is it largely irrelevant?

Karim Sadjadpour:
I do think that Zarif's presence makes a difference in Iran's foreign relations. He doesn't make a difference in Iran's policies, but it does make a difference in how the world perceives Iran because he's so effective in taking Iranian policies—which to many would appear to be hostile or antagonistic—and making the argument to Western interlocutors that these policies do make sense and that they are a reflection of Iranian national interest and Iran is really the victim, not the aggressor. A lot of Europeans and people on the left in the United States would make the argument that Zarif and Rouhani are natural allies, and that instead of pressuring Iran with sanctions, we need to engage them and empower them. This is an argument which Barack Obama was sympathetic to during the JCPOA negotiations, so with a different

team in Iran—if Ibrahim Raisi brings a different, more hardline figure as foreign minister—I do think it's going to make a difference in how the world perceives Iran. Ayatollah Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards were in charge and will remain in charge. No Iranian policies are really going to meaningfully change, but I think the optic of the nature of the Iranian regime to the world will change if Zarif is removed as foreign minister.

Jon Alterman:
You suggested in this Atlantic article that you thought that looking forward it's more likely that Iran has a leader who comes out of the Revolutionary Guard or the intelligence services, rather than an endless string of aged clerics. If that kind of transformation happens, what does that mean for the kinds of behaviors that the U.S. has found so troubling from Iran? Does that mean that they're easier because there's not an ideology behind it, or does it mean they're harder, because you just have security people who are bent on looking for weaknesses and seeking advantage?

Karim Sadjadpour:
I found the most compelling parallel with Iran's system to be the Soviet Union. Compared to China in the 1970s, when the Soviet Union reached a fork in the road and had to decide whether they put ideology first or economics and national interest first, they were unable to abandon their ideology. Similarly, the Islamic Republic of Iran—which is now in its forty-second year—is really incapable of prioritizing Iran's national and economic interest before revolutionary ideology, so in I think they're going to follow the same fate as the Soviet Union. They're incapable of reforming, so eventually it becomes a system which will likely implode internally.

But the Soviet Union lasted three generations and the Islamic Republic is just entering its second generation of leadership, so this current malaise in Iran can be sustained with repression for perhaps even another generation. For what comes next in Iran, though, I do see parallels with post-Soviet Russia. The country didn't transition from the Soviet Union to a democratic Russia, but it essentially became a new form of authoritarianism which took Communism and replaced it with grievance driven Russia nationalism—led by someone from the ancient regime and a product of the KGB, Vladimir Putin. Likewise, if I had to make a prediction in Iran, I think that the next prominent leader is less likely to be an aging cleric—like an Ayatollah Khamenei or Ibrahim Raisi—and more likely to be someone who is a product of either the Revolutionary Guards or Iran's intelligence services. Instead of espousing Shiite nationalism, they will substitute that with Iranian nationalism—or Persian nationalism. They can summon that same grievance driven nationalism that Vladimir Putin has in Russia.

How does that change U.S.-Iran dynamics? In some ways, Putin's Russia—for all its challenges—is probably easier for the United States to deal with than the Soviet Union was. It's still a country which is perceived as a strong competitor, if not an adversary of the United States, and I think likewise in Iran—even though you do have a lot of Iranians who have a real affinity for the United States and are not supportive of this culture of "death to America" and don't want the country's organizing principle to

be opposition to the United States—summoning those grievances of a country which has been manipulated by rapacious foreign powers is not difficult to do for an Iranian leader.

Jon Alterman:
Would the ties to all of the Shi'a militia and the Shi'a communities across the Middle East diminish the sense of Iranian regional ambitions, or would Iran feel that "we have to fight them there, so we don't have to fight them here?"

Karim Sadjadpour:
If you think about it, if you're a predominantly Persian-Shi'ite nation in a region which is predominantly Sunni-Arab and you want to be the regional power—the regional hegemon—you can attract far more followers waving a pro-Palestine flag or an anti-Israel flag than you can waving a Persian or a Shi'ite flag. You get Sunni-Arabs to become sympathetic to your cause by picking a transnational issue—anti-Israel, anti-America, or pro-Palestine. That had served the Iran well for many years, but Iran's stock—its soft power in the region—began to dissipate when Bashar Assad started to kill Sunni-Arabs en masse and Iran being his chief backer was viewed in a very different light throughout the Sunni Arab world. That's a very good question if what I said comes to fruition in Iran: what does Iran do with Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen and Shi'a militias in Iraq? My argument would be to say that Iran's support for these regional militias hasn't really served the country's economic and national interests. There's no economic benefit to supporting these groups. You probably forgot that you said this once in a meeting that we were in a decade ago, but you said that Iran has forsaken being a global player for being a regional spoiler.

You look at a country like Turkey—which is quite similar to Iran in terms of population and its strong national identity—and it is in many ways global player. There are Turkish products that are sold around the world. There are foreign investments around the world into Turkey, whereas Iran, aside from oil, hasn't really developed its export markets. And a lot of that is because of this revolutionary ethos, which is in both in its domestic politics and its regional politics. I'm not sure that the support for these regional militias has really done anything for Iran's economic interests. It's really been more of charity that they've given, and it probably hasn't heightened the country's security. It's probably heightened its insecurity, given that they've made adversaries of all the neighbors.

Jon Alterman:
I wonder if there weren't a religious layer, whether the perception of Iran as a regional hegemon would diminish and reassure neighbors and allow for more economic engagement than there's been.

Karim Sadjadpour:
When I talk to officials—both from the Gulf countries, the Levant, or North Africa—they all lament the state of relations with Iran. I don't know of any country which wants to be in a permanent state of hostility with Iran, and if you talk to Israelis, they will say the same. They remember a time when there was a constructive relationship between Iran and Israel.

Jon Alterman:
To be fair, hostility to Iran is the single unifying issue in a very, very diverse set of

Israeli domestic politics. The fact that there's an Iranian threat that has to be resisted aggressively is one of the few things that brings Israelis together.

Karim Sadjadpour:
Iran makes that kind of easy when there's a nation state, not that far away, whose official slogan is “Death to Israel,” and it has an ambitious nuclear program and its officials have denied the Holocaust. It’s not difficult for any Israeli politician to evoke the Iranian boogeyman. Also, as we've seen over the last several years, the mutual concerns and fears about Iran have helped midwife normalization relations between Israel and Gulf countries, but in my view, this is all a historic aberration. This isn't the norm as things should be in the Middle East. When you listen to the talking points in the slogans of Iran’s top leadership, it is very rare to hear them say “zandibad Iran,” which means “long live Iran.” They're wishing death to America, death to Israel, and for that reason Iran has one of the world's highest rates of brain drain. It has enormous social, political, and economic discontent. You can sustain that status quo with repression and a steady stream of oil revenue, but at some point, both of those things start to run out.

Khamenei is the last of the first-generation revolutionaries in Iran, and you watch him give sermons, but other videos or photos of his grandchildren show them running around wearing Izod and Tommy Hilfiger shirts and blue jeans. There’s an Instagram feed called Rich Kids of Tehran, and it’s the children of the revolutionary elite partying in Dubai and Europe and elsewhere. I think that eventually this fire-breathing revolutionary ethos is going to peter out, but it could take a while.

Jon Alterman:
Let's go back to the domestic scene. Iran has been really hit hard by Covid, and yet I haven't seen any political impact from Covid. Is that a reflection of Iran? Is it a reflection that Covid is a kind of disease that doesn't create a political backlash, or is there a political backlash that we're just not seeing?

Karim Sadjadpour:
Iran was not only one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, but they've been very slow in responding because of their ideology, which has prohibited them from importing Western vaccines. Yet, as you said, we haven't seen much of a popular backlash with people rising up. I think it's been proven throughout history that popular uprisings don't tend to happen when people feel most destitute. They actually tend to happen when people's quality of life is starting to improve, and their expectations start to rise but then those expectations are unfulfilled. To your question about why we haven't seen any popular backlash or political tumult in some ways: people are just kind of struggling these days in Iran to make ends meet. There is absolutely frustration with the state of the country and the leadership of the pandemic, but at the moment, it feels like people don't have the economic luxury to go and wage political protest.
Parodically, I think that if and when the nuclear deal with Iran is revived—and my expectation is that it will be revived sometime in 2021, even perhaps this summer—it won’t be a get-out-of-jail-free card for the Islamic Republic. What is more likely to happen is that people's lives will start to improve once the sanctions are removed and Iran is exporting its oil again. People will then have heightened

expectations of how the nuclear deal is going to improve their lives economically, but ultimately, the Islamic Republic is never going to be able to deliver on the expectations that Iranians have. I think that is going to cause a backlash.

Jon Alterman:
When you and I first met in the early 2000s you were writing for the International Crisis Group. You were the chief Iran analyst, and you were going back and forth to Iran. It's been years since you've been able to go back to Iran. You and I both have friends who have been in Iranian prisons. You and I both have friends who are currently in Iranian prisons. How do you do your job without being able to go to Iran? What do you have to do—what are you able to do—to keep your finger on the pulse of where the Iranian public is when it's a place where you can't safely travel yourself?

Karim Sadjadpour:
It's a fantastic question and one I really think about every day. You can add to that question what you alluded to, which is "when you have friends who are imprisoned in Iran?" My friend of 20 years, Siamak Namazi, is now approaching his sixth year as a hostage in Iran. How do you not conflate your emotions and your analysis when you see and witness things like this? These are two real challenges for anyone who follows Iran—especially when you're of Iranian origin. How do you have your finger on the pulse of what's going on when you can't go to the country that you work on, and how do you not conflate your emotions and your hopes with your analysis? I would simply say that I don't feel like I have my finger on the pulse. When I was living inside Iran, I was constantly interviewing people and trying to travel throughout the country, and even then, I would get things wrong and miss trends.

For example, I covered the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. I was on the streets every day talking to people about that election, and I didn't anticipate that outcome. In my defense, I could say that in 2016 very few people anticipated the election of Donald Trump, even with all our national opinion polls. You could argue that you never really have your finger on the pulse of a nation, but especially when you're far away. The conclusion I've reached about Iran is that I never make predictions anymore because they're always proven wrong.

Second, studying comparative history is valuable because you realize that in some ways Iran in 2021 is unique, but there have been authoritarian regimes like this throughout history that have come and gone. So, what are the trends that one sees? The way I think about this as an as analysist is to think about these macro trends—rather than micro trends. I can't predict what's going to happen in the next six months, but I can look over the next 10-15 years based on comparative context and historic context.

But just to emphasize—all of us are shooting in the dark and even those who are inside Iran have a real limitation. On the second point about how not to conflate one's hopes and emotions with analysis: I remember this in 2009 when there were popular uprisings happening in Iran—the Green movement was happening. It was black and white. When you see an overwhelmingly youthful, peaceful protest for very basic rights and this aging, violent clerical elite shooting innocent people, it's

very easy to choose sides and reveal what your hopes are. You just have to be mindful to not conflate what you want to see happen with what you think will happen.

One of the things that I've come to appreciate over two decades of following Iran is that you may hear, interview, or talk to 50 or 100 people and every single one of them will complain about the status quo. But that doesn't translate to the idea that there's going to be imminent political change, and I think that's one of the things you learn as an analyst. One of the sons of a very prominent Iranian government official told me years ago that what matters for a regime like Iran is not the breadth of the regime support—meaning what percentage of the population supports it—but the depth of its supporters. If you have only 10 percent of the population which is committed to the Islamic Republic and willing to go out there and kill and die for the Islamic Republic, that's more powerful than the 80 percent who will stay at home and complain about it on Facebook. That's the reality I see in Iran. The Islamic Republic still has the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij which remain committed to preserving the status quo and are willing to use a lot of violence to continue to preserve the status quo. Talking to people about their discontents, obviously you pick stuff up, but I really pay much more attention to any signs of fissures within Iran's security forces than I do the latest articulations of popular discontent. Frankly, it's extremely rare to see concrete fissures within Iran's security establishment—or even any even mild criticisms of the Supreme Leader. I can count on one hand the number of times when a senior Revolutionary Guard or Basij commander has said something even mildly critical of the Supreme Leader over the last decade or two.

Jon Alterman:
I remember talking to a Western ambassador to Iran in the last couple years who said that actually the way to tell that the system feels under pressure is not when there are criticisms that come out, because when the system is really under pressure, everybody comes together and circles the wagons. The normal situation is the backbiting and the politicking and everything else. When the regime really feels under threat, it comes together, and that's the moment to watch for fissures. That's the moment to watch for things really going awry.

Karim Sadjadpour:
If you compare the Islamic Republic to the Shah's regime in the late 1970s, when the protest started to mushroom, a lot of the Shah's political, economic, and military elite had lived abroad—some of them had foreign passport—and they spoke foreign languages. They were educated abroad. They could remake their lives in Los Angeles, London, the south of France, and Bethesda. The Islamic Republic's political and military elite cannot. Essentially, it's a regime which is almost friendless, with the exception of Bashar al-Assad's Syria, which is not a place you would want to retire to. They don't really have any reliable friends anywhere in the world. Most of them studied in the seminaries of Qom, or in the case of the Revolutionary Guards, their formative experience was during the Iran-Iraq war. They don't have a plan B the way that a lot of other authoritarian elites have a plan B if things go wrong, so they've shown themselves willing to kill a lot of people rather than abdicate power. The

thing about revolutionary authoritarian regimes—whether that's Cuba, China, the Soviet Union, or the Islamic Republic—is that there is a powerful organizing principle. There is this revolutionary cause which you inculcate your followers to try to adhere to. It's not just "go out and kill for Hosni Mubarak"—or Ben Ali or Ghadaffi—there is this organizing principle. Even though fewer and fewer people—especially among the younger generation in Iran—believe in that revolutionary ideology, the Islamic Republic doesn't need 80 percent of the population to believe in the ideology, as long as they have a small minority of security forces that continue to believe in it and are willing to go out and kill for it. That's more sustainable than we think. They have repression down to a science and they're very capable of destroying any alternatives to them—whether that's decapitating individuals who are capable of leadership or exiling and imprisoning any alternatives. That's true right now in Iran, with all the discontent in the status quo. People really don't have a concrete alternative to point to.

Jon Alterman:
Karim Sadjadpour, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Karim Sadjadpour:
Thank you, Jon—great to be with you.