Babel: Translating the Middle East

Episode Transcript:

Episode Title:
What We Get Wrong About Iran

Guest:
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Jon Alterman:

Jason Rezaian is an American-Iranian journalist. He grew up in northern California and moved to Iran to report in 2009. He joined *The Washington Post* in 2012, and in 2014 he was arrested and held in Evin Prison for 544 days—charged with espionage. When he was released in 2016, some argued his whole imprisonment was intimately tied to U.S.-Iran negotiations. In addition to his work as a journalist, he's executive producer of *Bring Them Home*, a documentary coming out next month based on the case of Emad Shargi, one of five Americans now being held in Iran. Jason, welcome to Babel.

Jason Rezaian:

Thanks, Jon. It's good to be here

Jon Alterman:

When you went to Iran as a journalist in 2009, why did you go?

Jason Rezaian:

That's the question of my life. I had been toiling as a freelance journalist for a few years after college, and in 2001, I was able to visit Iran for the first time. My dad had been born and raised there. He moved to the United States in the late 1950s to go to college, and he maintained a close relationship with the country up until the revolution. In the late 1990s—when Mohammad Khatami, the reformist, became president—the doors were reopened to people like my dad who hadn't felt comfortable traveling there for 20 years. So, when I was 26 years old, I had the opportunity to go there, and I was just struck by what a fascinating, lovable, intense, chaotic, screwed up, and old place this was—that happened to be the home to an incredible young and vibrant population. So, through my travels between 2001 and 2007, I got to know the place. I got to know the language. I wrote a fair number of pieces that were published in various newspapers and magazines.

Then, in 2008, the financial crisis happened. I had been working in my dad's Persian rug shop in northern California between trips to Iran. I opened my own shop—just off of Union Square. That didn't last very long as you can imagine, so when I closed the doors in the spring of 2009, I thought, “okay, I'm 33 years old. I'm facing financial ruin. Really, my only skill—besides sewing Persian rugs—is constructing a sentence and stringing a few of those together. What's the one thing I want to do? Where do I want to be?” And I just thought to myself, "Tehran is it. That's where my head and my heart are. Let's give it a go.”

Jon Alterman:

You're a kid from Marin county, and your dad's Iranian. You go to Iran, and this is your first time really living under an authoritarian government?

Jason Rezaian:

Yes.

Jon Alterman:

As a reporter who suddenly has to engage with a very different kind of government, what did you learn about the government of Iran that you hadn't known before?

Jason Rezaian:

Just trying to get the permission to travel there took several years. When my dad made that first trip in 1998, I applied for a visa and then was told that as the offspring of an Iranian male, you have to get Iranian citizenship. Just going through all the bureaucratic hoops was difficult. Then, you arrive at the airport in Tehran for the first time, and there are pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei looking down at you from every direction. There is

heavy military and police presence everywhere you look. Then, you also quickly realize that the people living in this place have been dealing with this for a long time. That's not saying that they fully accepted or approve of the way they are ruled over, but they know the score, and they know how to navigate it. Very quickly, you realize that behind closed doors, it's a very different place, and I think that has a lot to do with the culture of Iran—dating back centuries. That's part of the reason why this system that is so unrepresentative of the ways of thinking and being of so many Iranians has been able to exist and stay in power for so long. It's a kind of unspoken deal between the regime and the people: we're not going to get involved in your life behind closed doors, and you're not going to get involved in the way we run this country.

Jon Alterman:

When you had to engage with the government, did they seem to wink and nod and acknowledge that they have their game and there's something else going on? Or did they try to maintain the facade that it's all in order?

Jason Rezaian:

Both. It depends on who you're talking to, and it depends on what day you're talking to them. It depends on what setting you're talking to them in. There is this general facade that they've got it all under control and are not facing any existential threats from the inside or the outside, but—as I mentioned to a Biden administration official the other day—sometimes, the more confident these guys sound in public, the more they're trembling in their boots. They're known for overplaying, a bad hand. I've played a lot of poker with, with Iranian guys over the years,

Jon Alterman:

Winning or losing?

Jason Rezaian:

I won a lot when I realized that the guy that goes all in all the time usually doesn't really have much in his hand.

Jon Alterman:

You mentioned that you talked to Biden administration officials. What do you think they're missing about the way the Iranian government is approaching the nuclear talks?

Jason Rezaian:

The people in this administration are the same people who engineered the first Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. My concern is that the internal dynamics of Iran are very different than they were at that moment. There were people who were very hopeful that the JCPOA would signal an opening with the United States and that it would not only create trade opportunities but that it would also lessen tensions. I think it did that temporarily, but—as with other things during the Obama administration—they got to it very late. It was literally the last year that they were in office that the nuclear deal was intact and being enforced.

It's a moot point now, when they get out there and say, "Well, you know, Trump took us out of the deal and that's why we're in the situation we're in." That's true, but that doesn't change the facts on the ground. You have way more protests inside Iran. The economic situation for the average Iranian is terrible right now. The middle class is shrinking very quickly. People are becoming impoverished, and a small class of very well-connected people are getting fabulously wealthy— which is a sign that the sanctions aren't actually working that well. If the people who control the levers of power are getting richer and richer off the books, that means that they're able to sell their oil and control other illicit markets outside the purview of sanctions. I think that our approach to Iran has never really taken into account the Iranian peoples' sentiments of the moment, and I think we'd be wise to invest more in that. We cut off a lot of those pathways during the Trump

administration with the travel ban. The travel ban was officially lifted as soon as President Biden came into office, but—for a variety of reasons—there isn't the flow of Iranians coming back and forth that we had for years and years before the ban. That's where human intelligence and understanding of the circumstances on the ground is very limited, so I think that there are two problems. First, there is the issue of not really knowing how to engage with ordinary Iranians who might actually want to mount opposition. Second, there's a lack of imagination—but I don't think that's a Biden administration problem. I think that's a Washington problem.

Jon Alterman:

Do you think there's a way for the United States to create a circumstance where more Iranians would take action, and it would be effective?

Jason Rezaian:

I think that there was probably an opportunity for many of the last 40 years, but, unfortunately, the excuse that Iranians would make today is that any time they try and make opposition or gather, the regime snuff them out.

Jon Alterman:

There's the Green Movement, where the regime shot at people in the streets.

Jason Rezaian:

Yes, and that's happening still. There are protests over drought, over teachers' wages, or over truckers' unions, and any honest person working in the sanctions cultivation industry will tell you that the whole point of sanctions is to create those circumstances. The point is rarely to get an authoritarian government to change its ways. It's intended to get the little guy to become so upset that he rises up in arms. But they don't have arms. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Basij, the security forces, the police, the government, and the army are the ones that have guns. You don't see the kind of changing sides and defection that everyone looks for as an indicator. There might come a day when people are so hungry and desperate that they are willing to go out in the streets and take a bullet, but what would have been better would have been to maintain communication and a flow of people going back and forth between the United States and Iran.

I honestly believe that if the JCPOA was still in place now, we wouldn't be having a lot of these conversations. The doors of commerce would've opened things up in a lot of ways that the regime couldn't put a lid on, and I don't think that the Islamic Republic is nearly as efficient as the Chinese regime—or even the Soviets were—at keeping the lid on pressure. I also just don't think they have the discipline. They will eat themselves. there is enough internal strife within that regime that these guys will take themselves down. It's a matter of time, and I think we have pretty well established that theocracy in the modern world doesn't work for very long. Iran is the shining example of theocracy—where Islamic governance was born in modern times. It'll probably die there first too. In some ways, it's already dead. As I said, people are living their own lives behind closed doors. Those lives that they're living behind closed doors are getting more and more difficult.

Jon Alterman:

You were living in Iran during the Arab Spring, and I'm sure Iranians were thinking about—talking about—the fall of authoritarian governments. What was that discourse about?

Jon Alterman:

You were living in Iran during the Arab Spring, and I'm sure Iranians were thinking about—talking about—the fall of authoritarian governments. What was that discourse about?

Jason Rezaian:

I think that a lot of people who were looking at the Arab Spring thought of it as a model for them—which is probably precisely why President Ahmadinejad and his government very quickly came out and, said that they were the inspiration for the Arab Spring. On the flip side of that, the people behind the Green Movement would've said, "We were the inspiration for the Arab Spring." I think that they were intimately connected. It was early in the Obama administration that there were moments and messages being send publicly and privately that if you want a new day in your region, the United States is open to that idea. Unfortunately, they didn't really follow through on that. I think the story of the Middle East in this millennium so far—and the story of U.S. relations with the Middle East—is one of missed opportunities, missed signs, and disastrous results.

Jon Alterman:

Let's talk about signs. When Javad Zarif was the foreign minister of Iran, one of the things he always loved talking about was how to use negotiations over prisoner exchange as a way to build confidence and lead toward broader talks and reconciliation between the United States and Iran. Why do you think the Iranian foreign minister kept talking about prisoner exchange and is the current government thinking about prisoner exchange in the same way that the Rouhani government thought about prisoner exchange?

Jason Rezaian:

I think that their proclamations about prisoners and the taking of western citizens—oftentimes dual nationals.

Jon Alterman:

Which they don't recognize.

Jason Rezaian:

They say they don't recognize it. They don't recognize you until it's the day to make a trade. You're Iranian all the way up until the U.S. government says, "okay, we're going to make a deal for Jason, or Siamak, or Morad Tahbaz, or whoever." You are one of theirs until they need you to be on the other side. Going to back to 1979, hostage taking is a key element of Iran's foreign policy. In all of my years of communicating with Iranians—inside the government and outside—no one ever really seemed to understand the mess that the hostage crises of 1979 and 1981 created for Iran. They don't think that their anti-Americanism—burning the stars and stripes and chanting, "death to America," and all this sort of stuff—is not taken as seriously as it is. They say, "these are just words. This is just rhetoric." Well, I'm here to say that words and rhetoric matter, and I think that they've gotten used to using this as a tool. I believe that it's not been that effective for them. It's been effective in specific situations but look at the long-term reputational damage done to Iran by taking the embassy hostage in 1979—and then continuing to do this over and over again. They act as though these are issues of national security. They say that these prisoners are people who have been accused of, and convicted of, crimes against Iranian national security. Nobody takes that seriously. I think that if we were to poll Iranian officials in the current administration—and in the Rouhani administration—you would find that a majority of them wished that elements of their regime, and the IRGC especially, stopped doing this because it gums up the diplomatic process. It makes it harder for them to operate in the international sphere.

Jon Alterman:

How does the United States get the Iranian government to stop playing this game?

Jason Rezaian:

That's the important question to me. I've been talking to people in this administration, people in the previous administration, people in other government—the United Kingdom, Canada, and France. I really believe that it has to be a

multinational approach to the issue, where they say, "Look, you take an American, you take a Canadian, you take an Australian, you take a Brit, a German, a French person hostage, it's like taking one of our people hostage." I think a lot of people believe that you can't make the issue the fate of a single person or a group of people a sticking point in a negotiation. I would argue that you really can. This should be the sort of issue that pauses all action with a government if they take part in this, but you can't get that kind of buy in unless all governments agree on it. You need a convention on it the way we have one on chemical weapons and other issues.

There are currently more than 40 Americans being held as leverage by other governments. There are five in Iran, more than a dozen in China, and several in places like Russia, Venezuela, Cuba, Egypt, and Turkey. That number has been slowly rising over the last decade or so. What happens when it becomes 200 people? What happens when it becomes 500 people? What is the U.S. government going to do when there are hundreds of our citizens being held as leverage against our interests? I will tell you what they're going to do. They're going to tell you that when you travel outside of the United States, you are on your own. You and I grew up with this mentality that "I'm American, you can't do that to me." When we were young guys traveling around the world, that was kind of true. Now it's not, and it's gotten worse and worse, and it will unless we deal with it. I know from private conversations with people in government that they understand this. They take it seriously, but they don't have creative ideas about how to deter it.

Jon Alterman:

There are three levels of U.S. concern about Iran—arguably four. One concern is the nuclear issue, and you can argue that ballistic missiles are part of that or not. The second is the hostage taking piece. The third concern is Iran's regional behavior—which relies on plausible deniability and the use of proxies. That's another set of issues where the Iranians say, "Oh no, it's not us. Let's talk about what we might do. We'll see how we can help you." You could argue that the whole world has an interest in that, but then you have the problem of how prioritize among these issues. Do you bring them all together, and then say, "Well, it's too hard." You've been in the belly of the beast with the bad guys in the Iranian system. What has that told you about how we should think about Iran's regional behavior and its use of proxies and plausible deniability as an offensive set of Iranian behaviors?

Jason Rezaian:

I think that plausible deniability is no longer that plausible in most of these cases. I also don't think that they have the kind of control over their proxies as they did 10 years ago. We saw this a couple of months ago in Iraq, when there was the attempted assassination of the prime minister and the current commander of the Quds force traveled to Baghdad to say, "that wasn't us." To me, that was a great sign of weakness. The former commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, was never going to show up and say, "Hey, you know, we had nothing to do with that"—whether they did or didn't.

He'd like to have that element of surprise.

Jon Alterman:

You have the Houthi attacks on the UAE, which may or may not have Iranian fingerprints.

Jason Rezaian:

The attacks certainty have some Iranian fingerprints. They get the weapons from Iran, but do they order the strikes? I doubt it. The UAE and Iran need each other. This is one of the under discussed situations in that part of the world: the UAE and Iran have a deep and important financial relationship.

Jon Alterman:

They have billions of dollars in trade.

Jason Rezaian:

Yes, going back centuries. The other piece of this, domestically in Iran, is the terrible situation of Iran's economy, so we have to look at the pressure points on Iran. We've found a lot of those—when it comes to financial networks and blocking off access to funds—but what are the incentives that we have to offer them to change course? There was a moment during the Rouhani and Zarif years, when they bought into the idea that Iran's fate—the Islamic Republic's fate—depended on having more open relations with the world. By helping to open those markets, relationships, and pathways, I was betting that the Iranian people would be able to rip the lid off authoritarianism. Now, I'm not so sure. You I think that the situation is much more of a powder keg than it was in 2015. I think that the worse that the regime is internally—the worse their hold on power is—the more they are going to lash out regionally, the more they are going to lash out against individuals, and the more they are going to flout international law and let their thuggery get the best of them. I think we see that happening.

Jon Alterman:

How optimistic are you that we're going to end up in a better place in five years than we are now?

Jason Rezaian:

I am less optimistic than I was five years ago, but I also think that the amount of information that we have from Iran has never been greater than right now because of social media, news channels that focus solely on Iran and have cultivated pretty good access, and a willingness by a lot of people inside Iran to talk more openly and publicly than they would have in the past. The key—going back for years—is whether or not we pay attention to what those people are saying. I don't think we can honestly say that we have. That goes back to 1977 when President Jimmy Carter went to Tehran for New Years and stood up, gave a toast to the Shah, and said that there's no more stable country in the world and no better friend to the United States than Iran. We haven't been paying attention to what the Iran street has been saying at any point in the last 40-something years. If we don't start now, I don't think there's any hope.

Jon Alterman:

Jason Rezaian, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Jason Rezaian:

Thank you, Jon.