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ELECTIONS IN IRAN:  
PROSPECTS FOR ROUHANI, REFORM,  
AND THE NUCLEAR DEAL

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. CROWLEY: Okay. I think we're all set. Let's dive in. Thank you all for coming this morning to what is going to be a really interesting and important panel about an event of huge consequences. Washington is a little distracted right now by Russia, but I think the lens is going to swing back very quickly to Iran at the end of this week.

As you all know, we have the Iranian presidential election on Friday. On that same day, Donald Trump will depart for Saudi Arabia and Israel, where we can be certain that Iran is going to be high on the agenda.

On Thursday, to complete the picture and build the drama, Trump has to decide whether he will issue waivers for certain sanctions that were lifted as part of President Obama's nuclear deal.

I know Obama officials, former Secretary of State, John Kerry, and people who have worked for him are very nervous about what Trump might do. In fact, they have sort of formed an official sounding group to try to lobby, to make sure that Trump honors the nuclear deal and does waive the sanctions. I don't know how much of a difference it will make, but I think it reflects this quiet on the part of the Obama team about what he might do.

Obviously, we know Iran looms very large in Donald Trump's foreign policy. One of the first major events we saw from this administration was national security adviser, Michael Flynn, now dearly departed, putting Iran on notice personally from the White House briefing room podium in sort of a dramatic statement, although we will talk about Trump and the nuclear deal.

Interestingly, there actually hasn't been a lot of follow through on the part of the Trump Administration, and certainly no great effort to dismantle the nuclear deal.

I should have started by introducing myself. I'm Michael Crowley. I write about foreign affairs for Politico, and I'm honored to be hosting this panel. I am now going to introduce the panelists very quickly. We are going to dive in. They are going to give some brief opening statements and we are going to have a conversation, and then take a lot of your questions, so be thinking about what you want to ask.

To the far left here is Mehdi Khalaji. He is the Libitsky family fellow at The Washington Institute focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. There are longer bio's that I

won't read in the programs you were given.

To my left is Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings, senior fellow in the Brookings Center for Middle East Policy and Energy Security and Climate Initiative, where her research focuses on Iran and Persian Gulf energy.

Karim Sadjadpour, who is a senior fellow next door at the Carnegie Endowment.

Mehdi, I think we are going to give the floor to you for some opening remarks, then we will hear from the others, and then we will have a conversation before questions.

MR. KHALAJI: Thank you. Hello, everyone. The Iranian regime is by nature a democratic government. Some people like (Inaudible) once said that the Islamic Republic is neither Islamic nor republic.

This kind of government is described by political scientists by a different name, totalitarian regime, totalitarian electoral system, and so on.

Therefore, it is very difficult to find someone, an independent observer, who believes that the election runs fair and free. More importantly, the majority of reformists, supporters of Rouhani, they believe the election in Iran is not fair and it's not free.

So, why people are so enthusiastic about participating in the election? One reason might be the traumatizing experience of 2009 uprisings or so-called "Green movement." Green movement was successfully suppressed by the government, but its impact still remains and plays an important role in political psychology of Iranian people.

Not only the Green movement, the movement experience, but also having unprecedented economic sanctions in addition to economic mismanagement and corruption, all make people's lives so bad.

When Rouhani came, many people had the experience of reforming the regime, changing the regime. Some people wanted to change the regime. Some people wanted to somehow modify or affect the hard core of the government. This item has failed.

On the other hand, out of this failed item, very populist and delusional precedent -- when Rouhani became the president four years ago, he symbolized -- the urban middle class who tried to change the regime and failed with the government. Rouhani was the point that most of those people who

participated in the Green movement would agree upon him, shared the same feeling with the government, government and people, they agreed upon Rouhani.

This time, we have the same thing. People think the regime change is not an option at all. Why? For different reasons. Because the government is so skillful in suppressing civil society and social network and so on. On the other hand, the experience of Arab Spring. We have a region which is chaotic for people, Iranian people who are suffering from a very critical economic situation.

Therefore, if in 2009, the urban middle class were looking for ideals like democracy, human rights, women's rights, now it has totally changed.

They are so happy that this government is not democratic, this government is very intolerant, but at least it's strong enough to protect the stability and integrity of Iran, and on the other hand, you have someone like Rouhani, who comes from within the government and decreases the economic pressure on Iran.

So, election became the only window, although small, to make life a little bit easier, but with zero costs. Other options are unaffordable because of the costs and in practice may lead to undesired results, as happened in 1979 when they overthrew Shah. They thought when Shah leaves the country, they are going to have a dramatically democratic government, but that experience also is quite large.

I will stop here.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thank you all very much for coming. Maybe I'll start off broad. I think what is unique about Iranian elections globally is this combination of being unfree, unfair, and unpredictable. For not many elections you can say that.

I think Iranian elections are always designed to produce maximum drama and minimum change, and that certainly has been the case over the last few decades. The presidential elections have often times been quite dramatic, especially in 2009.

I would say the long-standing strategic principles of the Islamic Republic have changed very little over the last three or four decades.

As Mehdi alluded to, these regimes don't have Democratic elections, so these elections are rigged ahead of time, and the question will be to what extent will they be rigged after the vote and the

ballot counting.

I would say it is essentially a two-man race. You don't have to be gender neutral when it comes to politics. It is only men who are allowed to run, so it's a two-man race between the incumbent, Hassan Rouhani, and his chief competitor, Mr. Ibrahim Raisi.

I would say in some ways it's an election between the status quo, which is Rouhani, and status quo ante, Ibrahim Raisi, who is really kind of a mini me of the Iranian Supreme Leader. He not only resembles very much the Supreme Leader and is from the same home town as the Supreme Leader, but his talking points, both in terms of domestic politics and foreign policy, are nearly identical to that of the Supreme Leader.

I think one of the challenges that all Iranian presidential contenders have is that there are two diametrically opposed audiences. On the one hand, you have a very young vibrant Iranian population which wants to be part of the outside world, so presidential candidates have to appeal to that constituency. Then you have at the same time the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards that you in some ways have to reassure.

It's very difficult to kind of reconcile your messages because the things these two constituencies want to hear are very different.

I would say from the perspective of the Iranian population, the Iranian population wants to be South Korea, not North Korea. They want to be economically prosperous and integrated with the outside world.

In that context, Hassan Rouhani's message is more appealing. The nuclear deal was something he delivered on, obviously people are upset that the economic deliverance of the nuclear deal hasn't been what they expected, but at least they see in Rouhani someone who by and large kind of shares their vision for Iran as opposed to Raisi.

I would say the popular level, as many polls, and there are few independent polls in Iran, but certainly the polls that have been conducted up until now show Rouhani has a pretty comfortable lead, double digit lead, over Mr. Raisi.

There is a strategic case, if you're the Supreme Leader, to keep Hassan Rouhani and his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, in place, because it's much more difficult for the United States to isolate Iran

internationally when you have a more moderate foreign minister and president.

There is a strategic case for the Supreme Leader keeping Rouhani and Zarif in place. At the same time, I am having flashbacks to our elections here last November. I remember a lot of the Obama folks and Hillary folks, some expressed concern or even the possibility that Trump might win, they called them "bedwetters." I don't know if you guys remember that.

I do think despite what some of these polls say, there is a possibility that he will win, not necessarily because he will receive more votes, but they will rig the election in his favor.

As I mentioned, this for the Supreme Leader, having a president who is totally obsequious to him may be an attractive option. At the same time, the regime may feel that there is an opportune environment in which to rig elections.

Number one, in 2009, there was a popular uprising, so they may feel the population is not about to react by rising up if they feel the vote was rigged. Number two, the Iranians look at what's going on in the region, in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, and the regime may feel the population wants stability and security and they're not going to rise up.

Number three, the Europeans and much of the outside world sees ISIS as the main problem in today's Middle East, not sheer radicalism, so there is not a European or international appetite to isolate Iran. Number four, the United States is so focused internally, and the Trump administration has articulated a policy of putting U.S. interests before U.S. values.

The final point I will make has to do with U.S. policy and what is likely to happen in the event of both a Rouhani and Raisi victory. In the event of a Rouhani victory, I don't think it really changes the thinking of the Trump administration that much vis-à-vis Iran.

I think one of the notable differences between the Trump administration and the Obama administration is the fact that whereas the Obama administration made interactions with Iran or with the Iranian foreign ministry, it was John Kerry texting on a frequent basis with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, and meeting with foreign ministry officials, the Trump administration's views about Iran have been very much shaped by their interactions with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, people like General Mattis, General McMaster.

Almost all of them served in Iraq and they hold the Iran Revolutionary Guards directly

responsible for over 1,000 U.S. casualties, so I think they start from a position of enormous cynicism vis-à-vis Iran, and that isn't likely to change even if Hassan Rouhani is reelected.

If Raisi wins, I think the U.S. will feel even more justified in its cynicism towards Iran. I think it will make it easier for Washington to make the case to Beijing, Brussels, and to some extent Moscow that Iran is a malign actor, and lastly what I will say is if Ibrahim Raisi wins, I think on the nuclear deal, the main architects of the nuclear deal, Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani, will have left the scene, and I think the survivability of the nuclear deal will be even less than what it currently is.

I will stop there.

MR. CROWLEY: Thanks, Karim. Suzanne?

MS. MALONEY: Thanks so much, Michael, and thanks to you especially on this busy and exciting morning in Washington politics and international affairs for joining us, and thanks to all of you. It is a kind of unpredictable exciting time in Washington.

Iranian elections have a way of being both unpredictable, as Karim said, and surprisingly exciting, despite the fact this is not a fully unfettered or anything close to free and fair competition. It's rigged from the start, and the only question is to what extent it may be rigged in the outcome.

Nevertheless, I think it's important to sort of start with a kind of bedrock, which is that elections matter in Iran. They matter as both kind of critical junctures to the regime in terms of policy changes, but also mobilizing opportunities for the population.

Iranians value political voice. They don't have an opportunity to make any kind of realistic impact on the selection of the Supreme Leader in most cases, but this election actually offers them, at least de facto, the possibility of doing so.

One of the candidates in the face, the individual who is now the primary challenger to the incumbent, Hassan Rouhani, is in fact touted as someone who could be a successor to the Supreme Leader, and that of course, is the position that holds ultimate authority in Iran, the position that controls the levers of power, particularly the judiciary use of force, and these are the things that really have constrained Iran's evolutions from its inception as a revolutionary bureaucracy to something that might in fact meet the demands and expectations of a disproportionately young population that very much believes that they have some right to accountability in their own government.

Rouhani, as I said, is the incumbent. He ought to be well positioned for a second term. I think if you had asked any of us a few months ago, we would have said it was a cake walk -- in fact, I think Karim and I both did on the stage a few months ago -- simply because every Iranian president has in fact won his reelection if he survived his first term in office. That has happened even when the regime had to engage in sort of exquisite and unambiguous manipulation of the results, as in the 2009 reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

That precedent alone should situate Rouhani reasonably well, but also the fact that he has a track record, a track record which should endear him both to the system as well as to the population. Most Iranian presidents because of the limitations on the authority of the office, come away from their first term in a position of some frustration. They don't have a lot of tangible achievements to point to.

Rouhani campaigned in 2013 on changing Iran's approach to the nuclear crisis at that time, and in fact, producing a relief of sanctions. He has in fact achieved that.

Now, of course, the criticism that he has faced from the population is that the trickle-down effects, the peace dividend that Iranians anticipated from that diplomatic breakthrough, has not really shown up on their dinner tables yet, and that has been the sort of focus of the campaign debate that we have seen so far to date, why is it that the nuclear deal hasn't produced the grandiose benefits that Rouhani himself promised. We can talk about that in a little bit more detail.

I would say fundamentally Rouhani over promised in what I think was a vision of Iran's unfettered rehabilitation, when in fact the deal was very much a transactional relief from specific measures and never intended to be a wholesale get out of jail free card.

Rouhani ought to have some value for the establishment, the political establishment, within Iran. Iranian presidents tend to come into conflict with the system. We have seen this happen in almost every prior case, whether it is Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, they all by the end of their first term have run up against the constraints on their authority or chomping at the bit, and often in conflict with elements of the establishment.

Rouhani has navigated his course really carefully, and it comes from a career as an insider, a revolutionary functionary who also had experience in parliamentary politics, so he knows how to



campaign pretty cleverly.

He has avoided a lot of the mistakes of his predecessors in terms of fully alienating either the security bureaucracy or the Office of the Supreme Leader. He's wholly disregarded the sorts of promises he made on the campaign trail, and in very vague terms deliberately in 2013, about political reform and significant changes to the kind of social restrictions within Iran.

He has focused on economic reform, which I think was in fact the mandate he had from the establishment, and while hasn't fully succeeded, he can claim some significant achievements, particularly reduction of the inflation rate by very dramatic levels.

The fact that Rouhani has faced the competition that he has, that this has not been a cake walk, that in fact the outcome remains very much uncertain as we now sit 72 or 96 hours before the actual outcome of the ballots, I think leads to this sort of question about what this election is about.

That comes back to the candidate who is now his sole remaining serious competitor, Ibrahim Raisi. Raisi's place in the pecking order for future succession is really not known with any certainty by anyone.

It's been intuitive by the fact that he suddenly emerged from the bowels of the Iranian judiciary, having intercepted with some of the bloodiest moments in Iran's repression of its own citizenry, to circulate in the Iranian press over the course of the past two years as a potential contender, to receive a plum position a little over a year ago as the Administrator of the most wealthy and longest standing and important Iranian religious shrine in Mashhad, a position that is important within the clerical hierarchy.

Of course, the other factor that leads to this sort of expectation around Raisi, not simply his name, the Persian word for "president," but in fact that the conservatives and principlists really coalesce to try to muscle any kind of serious competition out of the race.

It was clear that Raisi was the chosen candidate. They had learned the mistakes of 2013. They were going to back a single horse, and Raisi was that individual.

Now, there was a kind of wrinkle to this entire narrative, which was the continuing presence until yesterday of a third serious contender, the mayor of Tehran, who was making his third run for Office of the Presidency.

Mohammad Qalibaf was someone, I think, who had no prospects of actually being

elected, but his presence in the race would have driven the election itself almost certainly into a run off ballot between Rouhani and either Qalibaf or Raisi.

My own interpretation on Sunday would have been this was a sure thing, and it was going to be a kind of orchestration of the scenario that we saw in 2005, where a little known hard liner finished second in the initial first round balloting, and in fact, was able to mobilize that position to defeat a well-known and well financed incumbent of sorts at that time, a former president. That was the election that brought us Ahmadinejad, and I would have said a second round would have easily produced or naturally or at least plausibly produced Raisi as president.

Instead, we now face a head to head ballot on Friday, a stark choice for Iranians, and a stark choice really for the system, as to what outcome it favors, because as we know, there are infinite ways for this election to be manipulated on the day and the days of the counting of the ballot.

I think what we're going to see over the course of the next few days is a clear indication of how Iran intends to engage with the world, whether the sort of strategic option of friendly, smiling duo, Rouhani and Zarif, engaging with the world, trying to head off pressure from the Trump administration, is the preferred strategy, or whether in fact Iran is truly thinking inward, regressing to a much more repressive time.

If Ibrahim Raisi is elected, I think as Karim said, we have not only the prospect of greater traction for the Trump administration's efforts to put pressure on Iran, but we have the open question of how Iranians react, if in fact the outcome is perceived as legitimate, as it inevitably will be by some corners of the population.

I think what we are going to watch over the course of the next few days is going to be very interesting, unpredictable, and very much important to shaping how Iran evolves and how the U.S./Iranian dynamic evolves.

Thanks.

MR. CROWLEY: Thank you. Thank you, all three, for setting the table so well. Let me follow up with a very Washington-centric question. I didn't hear too much about it when you talked about the issues at play in the election.

I wonder to what degree Donald Trump and his presidency and the rhetoric coming from

the White House and the State Department -- Karim, I noted you mentioned quite accurately that Trump has put U.S. interests before U.S. values.

What we have heard repeatedly from this Administration both explicitly and implicitly is that human rights have assumed a lower priority in American foreign policy. The one exception actually has been Iran, when Rex Tillerson came out and gave a statement, I think, a week or two weeks ago.

I think they sustained some sanctions that were waived under the nuclear deal. They certified Iran's compliance, and then Rex Tillerson came out and gave this very hawkish statement about Iranian aggression in the region and behavior that was very tough on the question of human rights in Iran. It was sort of the one time we have heard the administration raise that issue.

That's a digression from my question, which is to what degree has Donald Trump been a factor in this election, and more broadly, United States foreign policy?

Do you think the race might look different -- any of you can jump in -- if we had a President Hillary Clinton right now, who was no softy on Iran but would have given a different context to all this, I think.

MR. KHALAJI: I didn't see any clear evidence that the new administration under President Trump had any significant impact on both the government officials and decision makers with regard to the election, or on the people's decision to participate in the election or vote for any of the candidates.

Because now if you look at, for example, the three televised presidential debates, the whole debate was focusing on economy, and there were two issues, corruption and mismanagement. Each had people accusing each other of being corrupt more than anyone else.

Interestingly, you couldn't find any trace of Islamic ideological promises in this campaign. They wouldn't tell people that if you come and vote for me, you are certainly going to heaven, or you are going to prove that you are a committed Shiite practitioner, practicing Muslim, you know, no religious regard or ideological regard is promised to people.

A very dear friend, Fouad Ajami, has written a book, and the title is "Vanishing Imam." I could say in Iran, you have vanishing Islam. Islam, especially Islamic ideology, is not attractive any more. Also, there is nothing given about nuclear policy. Nobody talks about it. It's like everyone assumes,

okay, this is a deal made by the Iranian government, and --

MR. CROWLEY: Can I jump in there? That is a nice set up for the next question I was going to ask. Karim, I will come to you because you had a nice phrase about the nuclear deal being orphaned if Raisi wins.

What is the implication of that? If we wake up to a Raisi victory, presumably, this is the Supreme Leader's decision at the end of the day, but to some extent is this a referendum? Is he waiting to see how the vote comes out before making decisions about the nuclear deal?

Do you assume the strong default is that Iran abides by the deal and unless Trump blows it up, and you might tell us, anyone here, if you expect Trump to blow it up, that it will continue in this sort of tense way?

MR. SADJADPOUR: I want to be clear in saying that I don't think either side, Washington or Tehran, is going to gratuitously tear up the deal, even if Raisi wins. I think the scenario I see more likely is the deal unravels, it will be kind of death by 1,000 cuts, particularly because of very contentious regional differences with Iran.

So, one of the fundamental disputes about the nuclear deal is whether additional sanctions against Iran constitute a violation of the deal. The U.S. understanding is that we can sanction Iran, we can introduce previous sanctions that were lifted, and harshen sanctions against Iran for other reasons, whether that is regional issues, human rights abuses, missile testing. Iran's understanding is that any additional sanctions would constitute a violation.

You can easily see a scenario whereby Iran does something, continues to do provocative things in the region. Especially notable, the fact that President Trump's first overseas visits are to Saudi Arabia and Israel, so Iran does something provocative vis-a--vis Saudi Arabia or Israel, we respond with additional sanctions. Iran responds by saying you have just abrogated your end of the nuclear deal, and therefore we are going to reconstitute our activities.

The Iranians are always shrewd enough not to go from 0 to 100, so they will go from 0 to 20 in a way that will create riffs in the P5+1. The United States will say you have just violated your end of the agreement, the Chinese and Russians will say no. South Korea, let's continue talking.

That's the scenario where I see the deal unraveling. The difference is in a Clinton

administration and the Rouhani administration, you would have presidents in both capitals who thought they were stakeholders in the deal, right? Both Hillary Clinton and Hassan Rouhani.

If you have Raisi and Trump, you will have two individuals who are not stakeholders in the deal, in many ways, their campaign platform was criticism of the deal.

I don't think they would feel a huge desire to uphold the deal. I want to be clear that I don't think either side will want to be blamed for the deal's unraveling.

MR. CROWLEY: So, we wake up Saturday and Raisi has won, it's not we are on the path to war. It will be a more slower process, if the deal unravels at all.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Yes.

MR. CROWLEY: Suzanne, maybe you can talk a little more on this. Rouhani is a fairly known quantity, so maybe let's talk just a little more about the implications of a Raisi win.

I just want to set you up by citing an article that Elliott Abrams, who was a former official in the Reagan, I think H.W. and J. Bush administrations, who has done a lot of work on the Middle East, and was very nearly deputy secretary of state before, if you believe the reporting, Steve Bannon found out some things he had said about Donald Trump during the campaign and vetoed Rex Tillerson's preference to have Elliott be his deputy.

Elliott wrote a piece for Politico that appeared this morning, which reminded me -- I think it boiled down to the phrase used, I think, of the United Nations, and possibly many times, which is "Ahmadinejad was a wolf in wolf's clothing, and Rouhani is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and the world was better off being able to see the wolf for what he is.

Abrams was essentially making this argument. He said he is indeed rooting for Raisi, that he will reveal the true face of the Iranian regime, that Rouhani is a phony moderate.

I guess my question to you is should we expect Raisi if he wins to kind of let it rip? Is it going to be Ahmadinejad all over again? Are we going to be hearing about holocaust denial? Are we going to be hearing the most anti-Semitic rhetoric that we recall from the mid-2000s?

One other point that he made that I would be interested in hearing you respond to is his prediction was a Raisi win would inevitably spark a new round of protests because the Iranian public, at least the metropolitan public, would perceive it to have been a phony rigged outcome.

What is your reaction to that, and again, on this question of how Raisi will sort of perform on the public stage if he does win and suddenly there is a huge amount of focus on his every word?

MS. MALONEY: I think the latter half of your question is the harder part to answer. We don't really have a good sense of how Raisi will present himself to the world. This campaign has really been his first opportunity to present himself to the Iranian Nation, and he has done so in a way, as Karim said, that is almost in a sort of marionette like fashion to the themes and words and speeches of the Supreme Leader. He's directly in line with everything that is sort of official mantra for the clerics within the system.

How that translates into him behaving independently as president, I think, is very difficult to predict, much in the same way that no one anticipated in 2005 that Ahmadinejad would sort of become this manic figure on the international stage, kind of Saturday Night Live, kind of cartoonish caricature of a madman leader.

I would suspect that the Iranian leadership has learned its lesson from that experience, and Raisi would be far more disciplined, but I think all bets are off, when and if he were to get into office.

In terms of Elliott, and why it is that some in Washington and elsewhere might actually prefer a Raisi victory, it's perfectly understandable. Ahmadinejad was the gift that keeps on giving. This came as a surprise to the Bush administration, to be quite honest.

They didn't really know what they were getting in part because in what may be a parallel to the current moment, there was just this presumption that he's slick, he's good with the Europeans, of course, they are going to put him back in place, at that time. He had been out of the presidency for eight years at that point.

The idea that Ahmadinejad was going to be this sort of unknown figure, it wasn't until he came on his first visit to the United Nations in September of 2005, went back to Iran, talked about seeing a bright light and feeling the spirit of Imam speaking directly to him and to those assembled in the audience, in a way that discredited him at home, his speech at the U.N. discredited him or helped generate the case for referral of the Iranian nuclear issue to the U.N. Security Council.

After that point, every visit that Ahmadinejad wanted to make to the United Nations was quickly green lighted by the Bush administration because it was quite clear that every time he was outside

of his element, he had a tendency to galvanize opposition to Iran in a way that no other party could do.

Raisi has this incredibly bloody record, and really in a way that is deeply shameful, that he is in fact a plausible figure to lead the Iranian executive branch at this stage in time.

MR. CROWLEY: He oversaw mass executions, people hung from cranes, half a dozen at a time, all day long.

MS. MALONEY: He was one of four judges. I want to emphasize it is not just this 1988 episode which resulted in the deaths of thousands of political prisoners, but also later episodes of repression, student protests in 1999, some of the response to the Green movement, and some of the worse torture and abuse of Iranian dissidents in Iranian prisons.

This is the sort of frame of reference that he brings to the Iranian presidency. He's not been sort of part and parcel of broader debates about how to run the country. He's not been in a way, in any significant fashion, confronted with serious economic decisions.

He comes with a frame of reference of a hanging prosecutor, and it is deeply worrisome.

MR. CROWLEY: Mehdi, do you want to give us a quick thought on that? I have a question for you on a different subject.

MR. KHALAJI: I think today the position of the president is very important to look at. No matter who is the president, the apparatus, meaning radio, TV, judiciary, intelligence, armed forces, all these gigantic organizations can weaken him, or anyone.

Now, don't think that if Rouhani wins, he got this victory easily. According to the polls, I thought they are very close, less than 50 persons, both of them. Yes, we think Rouhani was successful because he participated in the negotiation, but Iran is suffering from a serious economic crisis, with unemployment and many other things.

If you want to become a popular candidate, you have to stand against Khamenei. This confrontation would weaken Rouhani more than anyone else. If you believe his record in the first term was good, don't think he can have the same kind of achievement and record in the second term. The second term is typically when presidents are much weaker.

MR. CROWLEY: You mentioned the Supreme Leader, and that's what I wanted to ask you about. Let me ask you about it, and Karim, I want to hear from you on this also because I know you

have looked closely at it as well.

The context here is we have an election that is not fundamentally free and fair, the candidates are essentially vetted. We don't trust that the vote itself will be on the level because it's the Supreme Leader who runs the country.

So, the Supreme Leader is 78 years old. I think there is some ambiguity about his exact date of birth, correct me if I'm wrong.

MR. KHALAJI: He himself mentioned the exact time. I live with him every day.

MR. CROWLEY: He did? Okay. I'm wrong about that. I'm going to defer to you on that. He is no spring chicken. He is not skiing and hiking and going for runs. I think he had some health issues a few years ago. You can get what I'm driving at.

Talk about what happens if we wake up tomorrow or in a couple of months and the Supreme Leader is no more, what do the next days and weeks look like?

MR. KHALAJI: I'm writing his political biography, and now it's been many years, and everybody is frustrated about it, including a famous journalist in this town. Recently, she told me hurry up, let's get this finished before Khamenei dies or you die. (Laughter)

MR. CROWLEY: By the way, people waited for Castro to die for a very long time, and he disappointed them.

MR. KHALAJI: Yes. That's exactly the point. We don't know exactly how is his health condition because that's a security matter. As we didn't know about Khomeini.

The point is we don't know what happens after Khamenei because deliberately he didn't want to mention or suggest or allude to someone as his successor, because we had this experience under Khomeini and it turned disastrous. Ayatollah Montazeri was appointed by the Assembly of Experts as Khomeini's successor, and he started to build up his own empire and compete with Khomeini. Especially because he's much weaker than Khomeini, he doesn't want to see somebody, to create someone as his rival.

On the other hand, Khamenei doesn't have the same legitimacy as Khomeini had, and at the time of Khomeini, still people were living in their ideological atmosphere. It was eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, and many people were lured to Islamic ideology, and the government was not that corrupt



that we see today.

Now, especially the new generation, they believe almost nothing, and they are just rebels, and that's why from one perspective Iran is going toward a social situation.

Don't forget that Khamenei owns an economic empire, which is not accountable before the government. It's the largest religious endowment in Muslim world. It's a big asset. On the other hand, Khamenei is commander-in-chief of armed forces. So, when he dies, naturally the senior commander, to appoint the boss. They want to have a role in the process of the decisionmaking.

There are several scenarios that could be imagined, none of them are good. I think one scenario is that Khamenei dies and the decision makers, which are different organizations, entities, like IRGC, clerics, judiciary. They fail to reach an agreement and make consensus rapidly, so in this case, there will be a committee consisting of three people. One is president. One is chief of judiciary. Another one is a member of the Guardian Council.

But the constitution doesn't say when this committee expires. It can go on and on and on.

For example, Rouhani belongs to one political camp. The chief of judiciary is the opposite. They wouldn't be able to make any significant decision on key issues. You would see that especially on foreign policy, on nuclear policy, on military policy, the government becomes paralyzed, unable to change the course.

This is one scenario, which is very dangerous, because for example, if it takes more than four years, there will be a presidential election, the president could be changed.

MR. CROWLEY: Just one other scenario, and then we are going to go to questions. Maybe I'll interrupt you there, I'm sorry. Karim, do you see another scenario that he didn't mention before we go to the audience?

MR. SADJADPOUR: He's 77, but when I watch his speeches, he seems in good health. A southern gentleman once suggested to me that maybe Khamenei has a diet to complement his wardrobe.

I think Mehdi is right, the Revolutionary Guards will play a role, and what often times happens, both in Iran and the Middle East, is when looking for leadership or succession, it's the lowest

common denominator individual with the least amount of enemies. That was the case of Khamenei himself. Karzai in Afghanistan. Maliki in Iraq. So, it may well be someone who is not on any of our radars just because they have the least amount of adversaries.

MR. CROWLEY: I think we are about at the time for questions. Let us know if you have one. There is a mic coming.

QUESTIONER: What are some modest but nevertheless substantive steps that the Trump administration could take to engage with the Iranian government? It seems like the administration doesn't have any diplomatic vision whatsoever. I'm curious about that.

MR. CROWLEY: Suzanne, any appetite to engage with the Iranian government? Do you see the possibility of some back-channel hands to accompany the public fist?

MS. MALONEY: I don't think that's the natural instinct of the team that has been put in place. I see in fact the opposite. At least at the very senior level, Trump has put in place a national security leadership that is united around one singular idea, perhaps disparate ideas on other major challenges and issues, but united around the idea that Iran is the root of the problems in the Middle East, and Iran's regional expansion over the course of the nuclear diplomacy is in fact the greatest threat to U.S. interests and allies in the region.

So, this is very much a kind of change in the narrative that the Obama administration had, obviously, and also I think it's a change in the frame of reference. For the Obama administration necessarily, Iran was approached as a nuclear crisis.

This often times created backlash. I often heard from Iranians and Americans who said that shouldn't be the primary concern, that should be somewhere behind human rights issues and other concerns.

The nuclear issue was necessarily the primary frame of reference for Obama administration policy toward Iran. Any successor to the Obama administration, once the deal was done, was going to have a different frame of reference.

For this administration, it is very clearly Iran's regional activities. That is to some extent the function of the fact that so much of the senior national security team in the Trump administration come from a military background and has direct exposure, as Karim said, to Iran's activities and Afghanistan.

It is also, I think, a function of the rising tide of concern that paralleled the nuclear diplomacy in the region about what Iran was doing, not simply in its financial and material support to the al-Assad regime, but in creating kind of expeditionary army to help wage that war in stepping up the lethality and the intensity of its support to other proxies and militias around the region.

These were not policies that were in fact provoked by the nuclear diplomacy. They were opportunistic reactions to carry outs of violence in the region, but the fact that they were largely relegated to secondary or even lower concern during the Obama administration because of the nuclear diplomacy meant they were going to rise to the top level.

I don't see a sort of inclination to engage, but I do think we are in a different era as a result of the nuclear diplomacy. It has become routinized to have direct diplomatic contact from the Iranian side, and that was always the hold up. Every prior American president, Republican and Democrat, sought to engage with Iran, and for the most part, had difficulty in persuading the Iranians to do so in a public and authoritative way.

That was broken as a result of the nuclear diplomacy by Rouhani and Zarif, and I think it would be very hard for the Iranians to put back in place. We may toy with it from our side briefly, as the Bush administration briefly toyed, the George W. Bush administration briefly toyed with trying to cut off any direct engagement with Iran.

Ultimately, the circumstances in the region will force us to come face to face with the Iranians. I just tend to think it will be in a more confrontational fashion.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I would agree with everything Suzanne said, and just add a couple points. One is I think an important or interesting first test for the Trump administration will be this Boeing airplane deal, because in some ways it's a clash of his domestic policy vision and the foreign policy views of his administration, in that the Boeing deal is part of the nuclear deal.

Boeing is supposed to be allowed to sell Iran dozens of airplanes, and Boeing has made the case that this is going to create hundreds of jobs and raise a lot of money for American industry, something that Trump has spoken very favorably about. Boeing has taken out full page ads in newspapers praising the wisdom of President Trump.

On the other hand, Trump's national security advisors and members of Congress are

very exercised about the idea of providing Iran more airplanes which they could theoretically use to arm Hezbollah and al-Assad.

I think the second question which the administration will have to think about Iran's role is ISIS and how do you counter ISIS. Is Iran the arsonist in the fight against ISIS or the fire brigade? Do they fuel ISIS given their support for al-Assad and Shia militias, both in Iraq and Yemen, or enlisting the support of Shia radicals to kill Sunni radicals actually tactically expedient?

In some ways, I feel like there is a distinction between President Trump and many of his advisors on this issue, so it remains to be seen.

MR. CROWLEY: Let me just add on that myself, if I may. It's been interesting to see the Trump administration say -- they are vague, but some receptive things about the latest Russian led peace initiative in Syria, and this idea for it to have de-escalation zones, while at the same time complaining that Russia has to work to reduce Iranian influence in Syria, because Iran is a party to this process, and will essentially have to be a party to almost any kind of a peace deal.

It seems like the Trump administration is trying to do two things at once that are in tension, and they have not resolved that tension, working with Iran to stabilize Syria to stabilize -- I'm sorry, working with Russia in the near term to stabilize Syria would seem to imply working at least indirectly with Iran, and that is a rock and a hard place for them.

Mehdi, did you want to jump in on this point?

MR. KHALAJI: Any engagement has to be relying on both parties' willingness. We can ask about the willingness to engage with Iran, but we can reverse the question, the next president's willingness, whether it is Raisi or Rouhani, to engage with the United States.

I think this is Khamenei who designed and enforced the main foreign nuclear military policies. I don't think he would change his position on the United States or Israel. I think the only time you can expect some transformational change in Iran's foreign policy is after his death.

MR. CROWLEY: Great. Next question.

MS. LANGAN-RIEKHOF: Thank you for your remarks. Maria Langan-Riekhof from here at Brookings. Suzanne, if I understood you correctly, in your opening remarks, you said something about a Raisi win could be an indication of kind of an inward turn for Iran.

Two questions out of that. I was curious, if that's true, what kind of forces within Iran, the region, or more globally could be pushing Iran toward a more inward focus, and if that happens, what does an inwardly focused Iran look like? How does it change their engagement within the region?

MS. MALONEY: Those are really good questions. My interpretation of a Raisi win as a sort of turn inward is in explicit contrast to what Rouhani has sought to do, which is to bring Iran back into the world, to capitalize on the nuclear deal as an avenue for Iran's rightful statute in the international diplomatic community but also, of course, in terms of bringing back foreign investment and trade to Iran.

Raisi has on the campaign trail emphasized the kind of idea of resistance economy, that we need to be self-sufficient, which is an enduring part of the Iranian revolutionary narrative, something that Khamenei himself has emphasized substantially, but much more, I think, on the grounds of the cultural threat that is presented by wholesale integration into the international economy.

My presumption is that a Raisi led Iran would be far less engaged in trying to lure European and Asian companies to invest in Iran, would be looking for ways to strengthen domestic industries, would be more protectionist and less engaged in the very sorts of return to other international fora, whether it is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or other kinds of international organizations that Iran has sought to assert itself in as a way of staking its claim as a rising regional power.

In terms of Iran's regional activities, like Karim, I don't see a tremendous shift in the way that Iran approaches the Syria conflict, its role in Yemen, or some of the other malign activities across the region, as a result of the presidential election.

I do think a Raisi win would provide enormous traction for the Trump administration in seeking to isolate Iran, not straight out of the box, but over the course of his four years in office, I think it would be almost inevitable that we would see an increased incidence of repression at home and potentially more of the kind of completely provocative statements, you know, that are made every day by elements of the regime.

The Holocaust denial was not unique to Ahmadinejad but his brazenness in professing this kind of rhetoric, you know, around the Islamic world as well as on international stages, I think, was something that was quite unique and quite valuable in terms of creating a decision to isolate Iran.

MR. CROWLEY: Take a question here.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm here from Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty. I was watching the debates, presidential debates in Iran. The state situation of ethnic minorities. When I saw that, I talk about Sunni's, Rouhani was saying something. Is it just elections' rhetoric or something is changing in general in Iran, Iranian society?

MR. SADJADPOUR: I would be curious to hear what both Suzanne and Mehdi have to say. Mehdi has been trained as a cleric, so he has some profound thoughts.

MR. KHALAJI: (Inaudible)

MR. SADJADPOUR: I would say a couple of things. One is that Iran by virtue of the fact of this growing sectarianism in the Middle East is being forced to be much more sensitive about the treatment of the Sunni population in Iran, which constitutes approximately 10 percent.

For years, Iran thought that it could kind of use the anti-Israel card, anti-U.S., anti-imperialist card to transcend Sunni-Shiite divide, Persian divide, particularly because of the uprisings in Syria, when on a daily basis Arab Sunni's are backed by a Shiite regime, killing Sunni's on mass. That has produced tremendous anti-Shiite sentiments.

I think Iran in some ways is more sensitive to that. On the other hand, I find that a lot of these issues that are brought up about both lack of social freedoms, lack of political freedoms, lack of freedoms for ethnic and religious minorities, are only brought up for about a one week period every four years. After that, you don't really hear about it.

There is this kind of one week period every four years when Iran and Iranian politicians are trying to appeal to the population. That is kind of revealing because you hear them say things that if you were a genuine democracy, so they talk about having greater social freedoms, et cetera.

If Raisi wins or even if Rouhani wins, is improving the lot of ethnic or religious minorities in Iran going to be number one, number two, or even number three priority for them? I am doubtful of that.

MR. KHALAJI: Iranian constitution is the only constitution in the Islamic world that clearly mentions the official religion of the country. In Iran, you will find various discriminations against different communities, some of them are against Iranian law, but some of them are legal, actually discrimination against Sunnis is legal.

Legally, they cannot take many jobs, and the government systematically pushed them out of public bureaus and the government, and so on.

On the other hand, Iran has to portray itself as a sectarian government because traditionally the ruler of Iran is also the head of Shia community. They have to emphasize this.

MR. CROWLEY: We have time for a couple more questions.

QUESTIONER: I am an economist with the IMF. I have a question that anyone on the panel can probably address, especially Mehdi and Karim. It seems to me the Khamenei succession is sort of the big issue in this election, which would affect the politics of the region and the country in the long term.

My question is do we know sort of the set of people that are deemed to be potential candidates for this issue, besides Mr. Raisi and probably Mr. Rouhani, who seems to be in right now, he seems to be in critical condition. Especially given my understanding that the Supreme Leader is very patient with a lot of grit in pursuing his long-term objectives, so to me it seems a bit suspicious that he has come, he doesn't say much, at least up until now, he has not talked or mentioned any of the candidates implicitly or explicitly.

How do you read the set of people who potentially can succeed him? It seems to me very unlikely that he does not have thought about this and does not have plans actually in place.

MR. KHALAJI: I've written on this issue in several long pieces. There are four people whose names come up more than anyone else. (Inaudible) He's not been well. Yesterday morning, he had undergone surgery for his advanced cancer, and probably he dies before Khamenei.

The issue is it is impossible to speculate about the identity of individuals who might be potential successors. There is a committee that consists of three people. They are in charge of studying potential competent candidates, and interestingly, these three members of the Assembly of Experts are not allowed to report on the studies to anyone, and the only person who receives the confidential report is Khamenei.

It doesn't say anything, it is just names. They have to rate for their political dynamism after Khamenei. At the time of his death, the political context, who has more power. I think those power setters which exist now, they do their best to protect their interests after his death, but none of them are

powerful enough to dominate other factions. They need to make a consensus, and this is the place that is very important. Failure in making consensus may lead to chaos, crisis.

MR. CROWLEY: Let me interject. I promised a couple of people and then we will be about done. Suzanne, I would ask you we haven't really touched on the question of let's say the Supreme Leader dies and there is chaos and confusion, how plausible is it that there would be essentially a counter-revolution?

How brittle is the regime, and is it vulnerable to maybe not an overflow when the Supreme Leader is still with us, although I'd be interested if you think that's plausible, but in the chaos after he dies, that we have some kind of a more secular government that takes over?

Do that briefly, because I know a couple of people have questions and we are running out of time. It's a big question, I'm sorry. I think it's important to touch on it.

MS. MALONEY: Yes. I think, look, this is Iran, anything is possible. Any prediction we make today will almost surely be proven wrong within the span of days or some recognizable period of time.

I would assume that given that Iran has only been through one prior instance of succession of its Supreme Leader that the circumstances of the next Supreme Leader have been thought through very carefully, in addition to this committee.

It has to be upper most in the minds of the Supreme Leader himself, particularly since the death of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani earlier this year. He was about five years older than the Supreme Leader. They were very much of the same revolutionary cohort. His own longevity has to be upper most in his mind.

Working off just the scenario you suggest, something that might approach chaos, would be the shared goal of every element of the system, particularly the security bureaucracy.

I think what we don't know is not only who is on that list, and the short list, but who are the kind of key influences who are going to make that decision.

We know the institutions, we know the committees, but fundamentally in 1989, it was Rafsanjani and the son of the then late Supreme Leader, who got together and essentially said this is what Khamenei wanted, and then it was sanctified by the Assembly of Experts.



We don't really know at this stage who are the three or four people, five or six people, who are going to be in the room to make that decision. That in a sense is a kind of leadership race unto itself.

MR. CROWLEY: Just quickly, it's a big question, but quickly in the interest of time, do you think beyond the Leader, the governing structure is brittle enough -- Karim, you are nodding your head. Do you want to do like a two-sentence answer? Brittle enough that it could collapse under the right circumstances, or basically the IRGCs sort of step in and take over if it comes to that?

MR. SADIQPOUR: One thing I kind of drew from 2009, and this applies not only to Iran but other dictatorships, is what's important for authoritarian regimes is not the breadth of your support but the depth of your support.

If you have a monopoly of coercion and a few hundred thousand people willing to go and kill and die to preserve your power, I think they can sustain themselves. Empires come and go in three generations. We are just entering the second generation of the Islamic Republic.

I would agree with something Mehdi said earlier, which is I see Iran's evolution similar to that to post-Soviet Russia, which is that the official ideology has been bankrupted, the new ideology becomes consumerism, and whatever happens in Iran, even if there is a regime implosion, the people who then come to power are apparatchiks from the former regime. Putin was former KGB. I could see the next leader of Iran even decades down the line as a Revolutionary Guard alum.

MR. CROWLEY: That is very interesting. Quick questions, and maybe one person answer briefly so we can get in those three people lined up.

MR. KRUPANSKY: My name is Jack Krupansky, unaffiliated. How consequential is Syria in the election? Is this in any way going to be a referendum on Iran's involvement in Syria, and is it likely to change what Iran's involvement in Syria ends up being?

MR. KHALAJI: Unlike the nuclear negotiation, nuclear deal, which was quite popular in Iran, and that is why Rouhani is popular, Iran's regional policy is very popular, and not only among the supporters of the regime, but also in the highest based positions.

It is because they think the objective of Iran's policy in the region is to protect Iran's stability and integration. In the last four years, we had two national heroes in Iran. One, Mohammad

Javad Zarif, for conducting the negotiations successfully, and another one, Qasem Soleimani for fighting against ISIS.

MR. CROWLEY: Great.

QUESTIONER: I think, Karim, you mentioned the latest polls, that they were close. I think the margin of victory, the margin of these polls, is pretty important because of the division between the moderates and the conservatives.

My question is what about the younger generations in Iran? Young people that are going to universities in science and technology, Iran's openness to education for women and schools, could you maybe elaborate on the role of the young generation and how they could play a role in the elections?

MR. CROWLEY: Millennials. Are they getting their election news through SnapChat?

MR. SADJADPOUR: We have been talking about Iran's younger generations leading change in Iran since at least 1997, the 1997 election. I feel unfortunately they are going to continue to be very frustrated, and then they are going to go into kind of middle age, and then they are going to err on the side of stability rather than going out into the streets.

Actually, one of the papers I am authoring at Carnegie is about Iran's demographics, and by regional standards, Iran has actually a very young population. It already had its youth bulge, and we know popular uprisings are more likely when you have young cohorts of 18 through 25.

I don't see there being any kind of Iranian Spring the same way we saw in Tunisia and elsewhere.

On the polls, I think this is an important point because the "independent poll," independent pollster that we are working with, shows Rouhani with a very sizeable lead. I didn't check it this morning, but yesterday was over 15 points. The Revolutionary Guards came out with their own poll, showing Raisi has a 3 point lead.

These polls will have to go back once the election has been conducted and kind of cross reference them.

MR. CROWLEY: Last question here.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible) My question actually was answered partly by Mehdi about Syria, but it is basically about the Iranian role in the region. The Arab leaders say Iran deals with us

(Inaudible). I was wondering after this election, do you see any of that changing at all or are we going to see the same pattern, and what would it take to convince Iran to (Inaudible), especially you talked about the economic situation. What would it take? Thank you.

MR. CROWLEY: Suzanne, do you want to take us home with that?

MS. MALONEY: I'll try. It's a big question. What Karim has said, and I'm sure Mehdi said as well, Iran's strategic policy doesn't typically find significant alteration as a result of the presidential elections. 2013 was an exception to that in part because the election itself was used as a kind of critical juncture for the system to change its track in terms of dealing with the nuclear crisis.

I don't think there is any realistic expectation that Iran will alter its approach to the region as a result of a campaign or vote. I think what drives Iranian policy is both opportunity and the sense of threat, and if those change or if the price attached to its policies in the region changes, it's entirely possible for Iran to alter its approach.

Those who suggest the kind of commitment to Syria, many of the same were suggesting that the nuclear program was an existential commitment, and yet we saw that Iran could in fact make pragmatic compromises on the nuclear program, but only when the price became too high to continue on the track it was on.

I think at this stage and what has been interesting in the past couple of days is that Rouhani has started speaking about his desire to lift all the sanctions, which I think is an implicit recognition that the nuclear deal didn't produce the dramatic change in the daily lives of Iranians and a recognition that the residual sanctions regime that remains in place despite full compliance with the nuclear deal, still makes it very difficult for Iran to do business with the rest of the world.

Rouhani in a conference about two years ago spoke of the sense that the regime had always used its economic weight to subsidize its foreign policy and bad domestic policies, and he said we should reverse this, we should in fact use our foreign and domestic policies to help grow our economy.

I wouldn't expect that if he gets a second term, that he is in fact able to do that, simply because the ideological requirements and prerogatives that drive Iran's regional policies will not change in any way.

MR. CROWLEY: A lot to think about, a lot to watch just in the next few days with the

vote, the sanctions decision, Donald Trump's trip. Tune in. I hope you will be better informed as a result of this great panel.

Thank you all for coming and for your good questions. Have a great day. (Applause)

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