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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

THE 1979 IRANIAN REVOLUTION'S ENDURING IMPACT ON THE WORLD

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P R O C E E D I N G S

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the Podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Iran's Revolution in 1979 remains one of the most important events of the late 20th Century. From the overthrow of the Western-leaning Shah, to the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, to Iran's calamitous war with Iraq, the challenges spawned continue to impact regional and global affairs.

In a new book from the Brookings Institution Press titled “The Iranian Revolution at Forty,” more than two dozen experts look back on the rise of the Islamic Republic and explore what the startling events of 1979 continue to mean for the volatile Middle East as well as the rest of the world.

On this episode, the Editor of this volume, Suzanne Maloney, joins Brookings Press Director, Bill Finan, to discuss the Iranian Revolution's continued relevance today. Maloney is the Interim Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy at Brookings.

Also on today's show, Chris Meserole answers a student's question about the risk of data mining and the ways personal Facebook data is used. This is part of our ongoing Policy 2020 Ask an Expert Feature.

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And now the interview; here's Susanne Maloney, with Bill Finan.

FINAN: Susanne, thank you for joining us to talk about your new book, The Iranian Revolution at Forty.

MALONEY: Thanks so much, Bill. I'm really glad to be here.

FINAN: It's 1979, America's ally, the Shah, has been overthrown, and a few months later, the U.S. Embassy in Teheran is stormed and 52 U.S. diplomats are held hostage until Ronald Reagan is sworn in as President in January 1980. Washington loses an important ally in the Middle East, and in the four decades since, relations between Iran and the United States have never normalized.

We managed to do that with two other revolutionary regimes, the Soviet Union and China within four decades. Why not with Iran?

MALONEY: Well, I think that's what's so fundamentally important about the Revolution itself, because it left a legacy that we're still contending with today. It changed so much of the way that the Middle East interacts with one another, so much of the way that the United States interacts and engages in the Middle East. It is very much one of those defining historical moments where there is a before and an after, and the after is fundamentally different than the before.

And I think the sort of failure to normalize is one that reflects the significance of the changes that were wrought by the revolution in terms of Iran's ideology, in terms of its governing structure, and the long memories in both countries about the animosity that was sparked even in the experience of the revolution itself.

There have been efforts on the part of every American President, from both

the Republican and the Democratic Parties, as well as from various other actors on the scene in both countries throughout these four decades to try to bring about a better relationship between them. But we continue to struggle with fundamentally antagonistic Iranian leadership, a regime that is still governed by an ideology in which anti-Americanism is essentially a foundational principle.

The divergence in the interest that the two countries have on a wide range of regional and international security issues, even where at times there is occasional convergence.

FINAN: What led to the revolution in 1979?

MALONEY: It's a fascinating historical story. Because of course you can identify a number of different factors, the rapid pace of modernization, and industrialization within Iran over the course of the 1960s and '70s, the determined secularism of the monarchy and imposing of essentially a rapid cultural change in the country, the dramatic trends in the growth of the population, of urbanization, of massive oil revenues that spiked in the early '70s and led to traumatic, and often disruptive, economic program.

But frankly you can look at these sorts of trends and see them in lots of other countries, and there is not a sort of clear explanation for why it is that Iran underwent the particular change that it did.

That the spark of revolution which often ignites, but is more often extinguished as a result of the overwhelming course of power, particularly of the regimes in the Middle East, why it took root in Iran in the late-1970s. And why it

succeeded, not just in ousting the sitting monarch, but in fact putting in place a system that has been to endure for more than four decades.

There's a wonderful book by a sociologist by the name of Charlie Kurzman, who calls Iran the Unthinkable Revolution, and he points to all of these explanations, but what he highlights is the fact that at a certain point, the number people on the streets began to believe that in fact, revolution was possible.

The decisive reason for the success of the revolution was the fact that you had a conviction on the part of an increasing number of Iranians that they could in fact bring about a change in the system, that there was a leadership, a strategy, and a coordination among the various parties that were seeking to put pressure on the monarchy. And that that was all directed toward the fundamental end of trying to change the regime itself.

FINAN: Another question that has always boggled my mind too, is how did a religious leader become the Head of a secular modern state?

MALONEY: Well, the Islamic Republic is not a secular state, so Iran remains a theocracy today even though it has elements of a Republican system within it. The surprise of many within Iran, around the region, and of course here in Washington in the 1970s, was the presumption that a religious leader could spark and then direct a revolution, and then even more surprisingly, that he would choose to remain as the titular head of state of the new system, it was something that frankly just wasn’t contemplated.

The presumption was that religion was an archaic force, that Iran was a

country that was becoming increasingly western. There were thousands of Americans living and working in Iran, there were thousands of Iranians who studied, and traveled, and worked in the United States.

It appeared to be a sort of cultural match, and Ayatollah Khomeini who was, of course, the individual who was the Spiritual Leader of the revolution, and eventually became the Supreme Leader of the state that followed, was not part of the picture for most of those who presumed that Iran was somehow becoming just like America.

FINAN: One of questions that still puzzles many people and they never get around, is how does the political system work? We have a Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, yet there's a government system in place too, where the President Rouhani, who is the main spokesperson for that government. But there always seem to be a tension there. Can you explain that for us? Who really is in charge, and how does it work?

MALONEY: Iran has a very unique and interesting system of power, and it is one that incorporates both elements of sacred religious authority, and those elements actually have ultimate control, through the position of the Supreme Leader, and the various elements of state power that he controls, particularly the judiciary, the armed forces, and broad oversight over all the policies of the state.

But there is the element of a Republican system that exists within the Islamic Republic. This is a legacy of more than a century of representative government that Iranians themselves had fought for and invested in. And it was a strong enough

legacy that even the religious leaders who wanted to bring about a religious state, were forced to incorporate it in the system that they built in the months after the revolution succeeded.

And so Iran has an elected parliament, it has an elected President, it has local municipal bodies that are elected to run municipal village, and provincial governments, but ultimately those structures of power are subordinate to the religious elements of the system.

And so even where you have efforts on the part of those who are elected to try to change laws or try to liberalize policies within the Iranian Government that can and often are overruled by the unelected elements of the state.

And the elections themselves are all held within a structure of power that is highly limited by the unelected religious officials. And so this has been I think the story of why Iran hasn't firmly and fully ever found a path to a durable reform, because ultimately the structure of power is stacked against those who would like to make changes.

FINAN: And these outbreaks of dissent over the last several years always seem to fizzle out, and I think nothing ever created a critical mass that creates real structural change.

MALONEY: There's a lot of dissatisfaction with the system. Iranians complain about the government the way that Washingtonians complain about the weather or the subway system. They're frustrated by it, but they don't see an alternative or a pathway to an alternative which is achievable, and I think that that is

fundamentally the dilemma that the country itself faces.

There have been efforts to try to change the system from within, but as I suggested, it's doomed to failure simply because those who control power are unwilling to cede any of that power, and they're unwilling to permit any durable liberalization of the political structure.

And the efforts to change or to press for change from outside the system are subject, unfortunately, to the massive repressive powers of the Iranian Government. And so what we've seen is people come to the streets, in 2009, most notably, millions came to the streets to complain about an election that was blatantly rigged in favor of a hardliner.

They were repressed, they were forced off the streets, the movement that was created was put under such pressure -- its leaders put under house arrest now for many years -- that it became essentially enfeebled and powerless to really promote change.

There have been more recent protests, often over economic issues, but with little strategy behind them to try to push for specific changes, other than to express their outrage and frustration over corruption and mismanagement, in the poor economic situation in Iran.

FINAN: And the economic situation actually is where I wanted to turn to. How well has the Revolutionary Government done in meeting the economic goal that it set for itself? One of the contributors to the book says that, "Iran associated economic challenges cannot be separated from its political economy that favors

regime loyalists, and is marked by mismanagement, cronyism, nepotism, corruption and the absence of much needed structural reforms."

MALONEY: Well, it's a damning indictment of Iran that, if you think back to the years before the revolution, Iran was a country with epic growth rates, something that we might associate today with countries like China. Its economy was on par with countries like Turkey and South Korea, and now it is far less vibrant and far less dynamic, and the per capita income of Iranians has declined in significant ways since the revolution.

The economic policies that the post-revolutionary government has put into place typically involved high degrees of state control, limited opportunities for private sector entrepreneurialism, and a commit to social justice, that ultimately meant a high spending on subsidizing basic goods for Iranians in a way that was simply unsustainable and uncompetitive.

All of this is true, and all of this is deeply frustrating to ordinary Iranians. It's also true though that the Iranian regime has invested in a variety of different ways in the education of Iranians, in creating infrastructure that didn't exist prior to the revolution. And so in some ways it has been an internally developmental regime, but one that ultimately has produced a corrupt, mismanaged and non-competitive economic structure for the country.

FINAN: The economy also has to now deal with sanctions that have been put in place, crashing oil prices that just happened in the last week or so, and then COVID-19 too. Talk to us a little bit about COVID-19. That's not in the book, but

it's obviously something that's on everyone's mind at this very moment with this global pandemic, and Iran seems to be an epicenter of it, but we don't know much about it, and what's happening there.

MALONEY: Iran has been a hotspot for the spread of coronavirus, the novel coronavirus COVID-19, precisely because of its economic position and the pressure that Iran faced as a result of American sanctions over its nuclear programs and other differences.

Iran, in part, because of those sanctions has had a vitally important lifeline with China for preserving its economic capacity during this time of immense pressure, and disinclination because of the need for that economic relationship to cut off either travel to or engagement with China even at a time when the pandemic was spreading in China originally.

And this appears to have been a vector through which the virus came to Iran. It has struck immensely hard, and it has spread very quickly in part because the Iranian Government mishandled the crisis in a terrible fashion at the outset, denying that in fact the virus was spreading, refusing to provide transparent information about the origin of the virus, and the efforts, and mitigation that would be needed to try to contain it.

It has hit the Iranian leadership very hard. A number of senior officials have, in fact, contracted coronavirus. In some cases have died as a result of coronavirus. And just now we're learning of what is likely to be a much larger scope than the Iranian Government has admitted to publicly with what appears to be evidence of

mass graves dug around the environs of the Holy City of Qom, where the coronavirus has struck most significantly within Iran.

So we're likely looking at a death toll that is much higher than the several hundreds that the Iranians have thus far admitted to.

FINAN: So this will be an ongoing story too, to learn just how large the effect of this has been. And there will be political and economic consequences most likely too, in some way.

MALONEY: We're still watching to see how this plays out within Iran. I think the death toll and the dysfunction with which the Iranian Government has managed this is something that is going to play directly into the deep alienation of many segments of the population, who are disappointed, not simply with the government's various policies, but with the sense that at least for some time, the Islamic Republic appear to be a reasonably functional system.

The garbage was picked up, schools were built, people had a life that appeared to be at least on par or better than that of many other countries in the Middle East. And so even when they were disappointed with, or alienated from different aspects of the religious policies of the government there was a still a preference for the devil you know rather than the devil you don't know.

But in recent years the Iranian Government has botched the response to natural disasters, droughts, earthquakes, fires, there has been a sense that it at least appeared to be a government with some technocratic capabilities is simply fraying at the seams, partially, no doubt as a result of the fact that the senior leadership of the

Islamic Republic is reaching an age in which there's likely to be some need for succession and transition.

And so my expectation is that the COVID-19 crisis in Iran will have significant political implications as the health aspect of the crisis begins to abate, and as Iranians can focus on what they've lost and why that has happened.

FINAN: Do you see that affecting Iran's regional role too, going forward?

MALONEY: Well, unfortunately Iran's deep engagement in military conflicts around the region has meant that it is likely transporting the COVID-19 crisis, along with the weapons and militias that it supports around the region. And so the real danger is not just what COVID-19 might do to Iran, but what bringing COVID-19 to a country like Syria, with millions displaced, or Lebanon with millions of refugees present, might mean for the broader security, and political and economic stability of the region.

FINAN: I want to also ask you about Iran and the bomb. Where are we now with the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Pact that Iran signed on during the Obama administration restricting the development of its nuclear weapons program?

MALONEY: Well, Iran has begun to reduce its own compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 Nuclear Deal that was signed with the Obama administration and which the Trump administration walked away from in May of 2018. Iran is now amassing a stockpile of low-enriched uranium, moving closer to the weapon's grade material that would needed to produce a nuclear weapon.

That doesn’t mean Iran is on the precipice of having access to a bomb, but the deal itself is no longer achieving what it was meant to do, which is to keep Iran at least a year away from the fissile material that would be needed for a nuclear weapon.

And at this stage I think we have very little expectation that the meaningful aspects of the deal can be retained even as the United States applies the devastating level of economic pressure to Iran. This produces a real challenge because if Iran is moving ever closer to weapons' capability, and there is no diplomatic agreement to stop it, the only alternative that is at least readily available, would seem to be military action.

Clearly, the Trump administration does not want to get into another war with Iran. And so what is the strategy here? It's very unclear that there is one, and even if there to be a change in the American administration in January of 2021, with a Democratic President coming into office, there will be a Herculean task to try to negotiate an end to this crisis.

We can't simply go back to the Iran Nuclear Deal because Iran, by walking away from its own obligations, has made that deal less viable today. We'll have to begin negotiating with Iran about some kind of a partial return to status quo ante might look like, even as we look to try to extend some of the restrictions of the original deal, and make this a durable framework for keeping Iran away from having access to nuclear weapons technology.

FINAN: The book, in looking at Iran domestically, also explores the status of

women in Iran. In an essay you coauthored you write, "To question the hijab, is to question the essence of the Islamic Republic." What does that mean?

MALONEY: Well, Iran has invested itself in certain ideological principles which then implements with a forcefulness that defies pragmatism that we see in other elements of Iranian policy. So, even as Iran, over the years, has often bent its ideological principles, it still continues to enforce the insistence that women cover their hair by wearing a headscarf or some other form of all-encompassing head covering.

And this is persistent issue of deep frustration for Iranian women. It's certainly not the only element of their frustration with the post-revolutionary government. There have been a host of legal changes that affect women's rights and status, as a result of the religious law that was put into place after the revolution. And those are areas where Iranian women have fought over the years, and in some cases seen at least modest improvements.

There's much more to do on that front, but the durability of this determination to enforce a kind of second-class citizenship on women by harassing them on the streets, by insisting that they cover their hair, or dress in a certain manner, is something that I think is one of the Achilles' heels of the Islamic Republic. The inflexibility with which this ideological principle is enforced has left such a deep distaste amongst so many women who simply want to be able to go about their lives, and live as equal citizens within the country.

And after years of different types of protests by women, what we've seen

over the course of the past several years, is an increasing determination to try to resist the head-covering mandate, and has become a fascinating debate both within Iran and also within the Diaspora.

FINAN: In your introduction to the book you write that, "It has been said that a revolution is not a secret that can be conclusively revealed, but rather a mystery, a phenomenon that requires unraveling and interpretation." That reminds me of the remark, now as Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai, reportedly said when asked what he thought about the effects of the French Revolution, "It was too soon to tell."

With that in mind, maybe it's too soon to draw any conclusions on the Iranian Revolution after only 40 years, but I'm going to put you on the spot, and end by asking you, what do you think are the main themes, conclusions that we can draw from it today?

MALONEY: It's a wonderful question. But I'm not sure I have an optimal answer, but I do --

FINAN: It's too soon to tell?

MALONEY: (Laughter) It's too soon to tell. I think we are persistently surprised by what happens in Iran. That surprise came first in the most dramatic way in January of 1979, when the Shah departed on what he thought would be a short vacation, but what ultimately was his final departure from Iran.

We were further surprised several months later when students stormed the U.S. Embassy, and all hope of retaining anything like a working relationship with the new government ended. We have been surprised repeatedly throughout the

course of the Islamic Republic's history, and I look forward to a future surprise that will bring about a better government in Iran.

FINAN: Thanks, Suzanne, for taking the time to talk to us about The Iranian Revolution at Forty.

MALONEY: Thanks so much for publishing it.

DEWS: You can find the book, The Iranian Revolution at Forty, edited by Suzanne Maloney, on the Brookings' website, or wherever you like to find books.

And now here's Chris Meserole, Deputy Director of the Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative at Brookings, with an answer to a student's question about how Facebook and other social sites use personal data. You can find more on our SoundCloud channel, or visit Brookings.edu/policy2020.

SPEAKER: My name is Helena. I was schooled here in Washington, D.C., at Georgetown University where I studied biology. And my question is: How does big data and companies like Facebook that engage in data mining, present a risk to us as individuals, and also to our nation? And what are some of the proposals about ways that we can, as individuals, and as a country protect ourselves and curb these companies?

MESEROLE: Hi, Helena. Thank you for your question. This is Chris Meserole, I'm a Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, and I'm also Deputy Director of our Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative.

To answer your question I think it's probably helpful to just illustrate a bit, or a flesh out a bit, what Facebook is actually data mining, and what they're using your

data for. And there's really kind of two ways that they use their data. One is for targeted ads where they're using the data that they have on you to figure out what ads to show you any time you log in.

The other is a more challenging technical problem, which is that anytime you have a message board, or social media app, you have to figure out what content among all the pieces of content produced by people someone follows, or friends, should show up first in the newsfeed, or should have priority in the newsfeed.

And the way that most Facebook and other platforms have solved this problem is by relying on algorithms, and training those algorithms on the data that they have collected on different users over time. And what those algorithms find is that users are more likely to click and engage on material, the more sensationalized it is, the more emotional the content is, whether it's good emotions.

It could be a very joyous email, like a CAV video, or it could be something a little bit more strident and hateful, and which will also produce a lot of really strong emotions, and a lot of engagement.

And so what Facebook is doing when they're data mining, is they're trying to figure out what pieces of content they have, either on the ad side, or in terms of content that you're logging into Facebook to see from your friends what would most likely cause you to give a positive reaction and engage with it.

And this is problematic in the sense that it can lead to what's called narrow-casting. On the one hand where you're only really seeing content that already kind of plays into you're belief system. On the other hand, it also kind of leads you to kind of

emotional and political extremes. It's not, I wouldn't say, you know, once Facebook kind of verges into politics, it may not be the best way of carrying out a deliberative discourse for democracy.

On the solution side of what to do about Facebook, I think there's a few things that come to mind. But the one that's probably foremost is trying to identify, from a regulatory perspective, whether Facebook is just a publisher of what's effectively kind of conversational speech, like a bulletin board, where anybody can go and post something that they want.

Or whether or not Facebook is actually something more like a broadcast medium, and needs to be regulated with the same standards that we might regulate broadcast TV network. My sense is that what's going to happen going forward is that we're increasingly going to see regulatory efforts to try and curtail the kinds of content that can flow through a platform like Facebook.

The U.S. is beginning to rethink legislation that probably most closely impacts on this, particularly what's called Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act from 1990s, which, up until now has kind of given Facebook a lot of leeway to not really have to regulate what's happening on the platform at all.

Outside of the U.S., there's a lot of regulation happening in Europe, and I expect that we'll see a fair amount of regulatory activity there that tries to balance some of the need for free expression with the need to begin to regulate and curtail, and moderate speech when it's been occurring at scales of tens or hundreds of millions, or even billions of people. So I do think that things are about to probably

change in the next couple years, and we'll see where we go from there.

DEWS: Record and send your own question to BCP@Brookings.edu, including your name and where you're from.

The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with Audio Engineer Gaston Reboredo; and Producer, Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of The Brookings Institution Press, does many of our book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support; finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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Carleton J. Anderson, III

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