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

MS. MALONEY: Good morning to those of you who were joining us from Washington. Good afternoon to several of our panelists. Good evening to one of those who will be joining us from other parts of the world.

I'm Suzanne Maloney, I'm vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution, and I'm delighted to welcome you all to our discussion today on the protests underway currently in Iran.

Earlier this month, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was arrested, apparently for concerns about her hijab by Iran's morality police. She died in custody, and as we've witnessed, her death has sparked protests across Iran, in one of the largest displays of defiance of the regime in recent years. Women have been burning their headscarves in the streets in public displays of protests, and we know at least several demonstrators have died, as the unrest has been met with a fierce crackdown by the regime. These protests come at a time where there have been questions about the health of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. And while Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, is currently in New York attending the United Nations General Assembly meetings. The case of Mahsa Amini has drawn widespread into international attention. Acting U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif has stated Mahsa Amini's tragic death, and allegations of torture and ill treatment, must be promptly, impartially, and effectively investigated by an independent, competent authority that insures, in particular, that her family has access to justice and truth.

With all of these developments currently unfolding, I am very grateful to have the opportunity to come together and take stock of events. I'm joined today by three panelists who will be discussing this from the perspective of those who know Iran best.

Today, we have with us Maziar Bahari, who is the founder of IranWire, a groundbreaking journalist, and the author of "Then They Came for Me," which was the basis of the 2014 film "Rosewater," directed by Jon Stewart.

We're also joined today by Aida Ghajar, who is a journalist with IranWire.

She was among the first to report on the death of Mahsa Amini and bring this story to the wider world.

We're also joined by phone by professor Dr. Sadegh Zibakalam, who is an Iranian academic, author, and a pundit. He teaches at the University of Tehran. He often appears on news outlets within Iran and all around the world, and he has written a number of books including "How Did We Become Who We Are?" and "An Introduction to the Islamic Revolution." Both of those are best sellers. We apologize that we're unable to bring Dr. Zibakalam to you via video, but we're really thrilled that he's been able to join us on the telephone today to give us a firsthand perspective of what's happening on the streets across Iran today.

I'm going to turn the mic over to my colleague, Maziar Bahari, who will be conversing with Dr. Zibakalam, and then both Maziar and Aida will give us a perspective from their own reporting of the events that led up to the current protests, and what this may all mean for Iran.

MR. BAHARI: Thank you very much, Suzanne, and thank you so much for organizing this event in such a hectic time. I know that, during United Nations, general assembly, all the thinktanks and everyone in the U.S. is quite busy, but we are thrilled to have great panelists, my dear colleague Aida, who is in Paris, and she will join us.

But I would like to start with Dr. Zibakalam, because he's on the phone, he's on speaker phone as you can see, and I hope that we're not going to lose Dr. Zibakalam. As you know, the internet bandwidth in the past few days have been narrowed severely in Iran, so it's very difficult for our colleagues in Iran, our friends in Iran, to be able to use even the simplest of the softwares, like WhatsApp or Telegram. But we are delighted to be able to talk to Dr. Zibakalam in Tehran via landline. I guess you always can rely on the old technology.

So, I think with Dr. Zibakalam, I would like to ask you, what is happening in Iran? What do you see when you look out the window, when you go to the streets, what's

going on?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: (Speaking Foreign Language). Let me -- let me begin by apologizing for not being able to attend our discussion, our panel, properly, because it seems that two days ago there have been virtual shutdown of internet poles, and it's just been very difficult and unreliable to use the internet. So, I really couldn't -- couldn't be with you to the internet.

Let me also say that what has happened has surprised, also astonished, even opponents of the government. And not only the authorities, but even ordinary Iranian citizens are quite astonished, as the widespread uprising throughout Iranian cities. When it began four nights ago, we all thought that, or at least I thought that -- that that would be few hours and it would be only in -- in Saqqez, the city that Jina came from, because this girl that was killed by the police, by the ethic police, or whatever its name is.

MR. BAHARI: Morality police.

MR. ZIBAKALAM: And we all thought that -- yeah, morality police. Morality police. Thank you, Maziar. And it would be -- and it would be it. Tomorrow -- tomorrow, everything would be back to normal. But then what happened, tomorrow, instead of being normal, we witnessed widespread unrest in other Kurdish cities. Then it came to Tehran, then it went to Tabriz, then it went to Hamadan, then it went to Mashhad. Then it went to the point that surprised even further, it went to Qom, the heart of the Islamic establishment. Now, everyone is tweeting that this is something completely different from -- from what we have experienced. After the -- after the unrest four years ago, which many Iranians were killed, the whole thing actually -- the whole thing -- there was a price uprising of petrol, and there was one- or two-night dispute protest, the government says that, at that time, nearly 300 people were killed. Others put the number at 1,500. But the whole thing -- the whole thing finished in two to three days. And it is quite unprecedented because it has lasted so far.

Point number two is the government reaction. The government simply is

using the -- the tactic, using the explanation that they have always used. That this is the work of the royalists, this is the work of the Mujahideen, this is the Americans, and other country revolutionary who are using, rather misusing, the death of this Kurdish girl, and they are -- they are more or less saying what they have always maintained, which is -- which is, you know, it's a conspiracy by the enemies of the state. More or less that -- that -- the idea that is used by Putin and other authoritarian regime. They haven't -- they haven't said a word about which -- which says that we can understand, which we should, meaning that we can understand the anger our people, we have sympathy with them, maybe some of the tactics have been harsh, none of this, none of this. And some of the -- some of the leaders, some of the Iranian leaders, they are talking as though nothing is happening, because that is really -- that is really strange --

MR. BAHARI: So, what do you think is different between this protest and the previous ones, like in 2018 and 2017, what is the difference?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: There are -- there are a couple of points, which is a radical departure from previous protests. Point number one -- as I mentioned, point number one is the fact that it's so widespread, and previous protests were mainly in principal cities, large cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Rasht, et cetera. But you -- but there are reports that, even small towns and cities where people have come out onto street. That's point number one.

Point number two, the -- the degree of participation of youth, most of them in their teens, the 18-year-old, 19-year-old, 20-year-old, 15-year-old, most of them are actually younger Iranian generation.

Point number three is the leading part which Iranian girls are playing. They're so courageous, so brave, that it is really remarkable, and they are in fact, they are pushing everyone that, why don't you come out, why don't you come out, they are asking in such a way, they are burning their headscarf, they are saying no to hijab, and -- and so on and so forth. Back to point number --

MR. BAHARI: Sorry, you're speaking about Iranian women, let's hear from an Iranian woman now. So, Aida, when you heard the -- when you reported last Wednesday, I remember I was shocked by when you reported last Wednesday, I remember I was shocked by your reporting when you reported for the first time that a woman named Mahsa was beaten by the morality police, and she was in coma. Did you expect such demonstrations to happen, and if not, why do you think these demonstrations have happened, and why do you think these demonstrations and these protests are different from the other ones? And what's the role of women in them?

MS. GHAJAR: Hello to everyone, and thank you for having this session, this webinar. About your question, Mr. Bahari, first of all, I agree with Mr. Zibakalam about the leadership and the role of women on these protests.

But they're not just leading these protests, they are -- they have -- there's a difference that they are taking off their hijab, they went face-to-face with the police, not just the morality police, all the police that they are on the street for -- for ending these protests. And they are with -- fully armed. But these women, these girl, young women, they have nothing, and they are just the -- they are with the voices. So, when we -- when I saw the unconfirmed news on the 13 September, it was mentioned on Twitter that there's a girl who was arrested by the morality police and that she is on hospital.

We didn't have any name with any name, we didn't have any confirmation about this news. But we are starting searching. I contacted my contacts on Iran, and with my dearest colleague on IranWire, Shima Shahrabi (phonetic), we start searching, compacting the others inside of Iran, and then suddenly we found out that this is truth. This is the truth, and Mahsa, the name of this girl is Mahsa, and when she arrested, her brother was with her, they -- Mahsa was at Tehran, capital of Iran, as a tourist, and as such an ordinary girl went outside on the street, and then is stopped by the morality police and then they arrested her. They told Mahsa's brother that Mahsa going to be at this detention center, named Vozara, for just one hour. She should has some training lesson how to wear

the hijab, and then they going to liberate Mahsa. But her brother --

MR. BAHARI: -- Islamic moralities -- yeah.

MS. GHAJAR: Yes, exactly. Yes, thank you. Yes, exactly. And her brother went to the detention center, is waiting for her, waiting for liberated her outside this detention center, and then less than two hours, there was ambulance who went out from this, from Vozara detention center, and Mahsa's brother asking the police officer, who was at the ambulance, what happened there. But police officer lied to him and said there's another officer, nothing important as Mr. Raisi said on the U.N., that there's not such important news, killing Mahsa.

But we found her brother, we talked to him, and he told us all the story, and he wanted -- he asked us to say -- be being their voice, being Mahsa's voice around the world. So Mahsa was at coma, and the first thing that we had was we hoped Mahsa going to survive it. But unfortunately after three days in coma, the doctor announced that she has been died.

Two latest news that maybe I can give you now, the first is about the family. Yesterday, I in IranWire, we had interview with a member of Mahsa's family, and they told us, the family of Mahsa, they are under pressure for be in front of the camera, camera of the Iranian government's media, and confessing by force that Mahsa was sick before. But until now, they denied that, and they said that they didn't accept this scenario, this is a known scenario from Iranian government always, always they did that. And they resist then, the family -- Mahsa's family resistance for accepting this lie.

And another thing that I can confirm here today, there was a pressure on the Iranian media and Iranian journalists inside of Iran. We have one name, one journalist Nilufar Hamedi who was arrested, and her lawyer announced this news on Twitter and social media, but we have two other journalists that we can't say their names, but they are arrested inside of Iran, and intelligence service. They called Iranian journalist and they told they should stay at home and not going outside of their home. If they move from their home,

they're going to arrested. And other things that they -- intelligence service, they called responsible some of the journal, some of the newspaper on Iran, and they told them they shouldn't publish any other news about the protest and about Mahsa's family.

MR. BAHARI: Thanks, Aida, and I believe you -- when you spoke with the cousin of Mahsa yesterday, the conspiracy theory goes beyond her being ill when she was a child. Because this cousin, he is part of the Komalah group (phonetic) in the Iraqi Kurdish region, and apparently, according to Aida's reporting and or others' reporting, the conspiracy theory, the scenario that the government is cooking right now is that this cousin took Mahsa to outside of Iran to Iraqi Kurdistan, trained her, and then she came back as an agent of that group and died in a kamikaze mission in order to provoke all these protests. Is that correct?

MS. GHAJAR: Exactly, that's it. And he denied that. He said that this is a big lie, and this is a new scenario.

MR. BAHARI: That's -- that report is translated, and it's being edited as I speak, and it will be on IranWire in a couple of hours from now. But Mr. Zibakalam -- Dr. Zibakalam, I wanted to ask you, what do you think about the role of women in the recent protests, and what do you think will happen to these protests as -- when you -- I know that you know many of the Iranian officials, former officials, and maybe some of the current officials, what do they say about the role of women? Does it really -- does it scare them that women have come out in such numbers, that movement is really led by women? And we had Mr. Vahidi the minister of interior saying a few weeks ago that our Achilles' -- the Achilles' heel of the regime, of the system of the Islamic Republic is women, and it's women who are going to hurt the system. What do you think about the role of women?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Maziar, there are many Iranian analysts and academics, many of my colleagues at Tehran University, that for some time we -- we have felt that the role of the woman in Iran would become the most important role as far as the protest is concerned. We know that, for example, in many societies, including Iran, even intellectual rise of dissidents -- ethnic dissidents -- they all have -- they all have active (inaudible).



There are many -- many observers, who believe that, in Iran, in future of Iran, this role was played by Iranian women, because they have been subjugated to much greater social pressure under the Islamic regime than any other group in Iran. Although it is -- although it is true that the Kurds and other ethnic minorities, Sunnis, et cetera, they have been under that much greater pressure than other Iranians. But then again, many believe that women in Iran, females in Iran, because of the Islamic regime attitude towards women, they have been under much greater social force.

You're a woman in Iran, you want to travel, you have to seek your husband's permission; there is a court issue, you will be counted as half -- there must be two women the equivalent to a man. There are many aspects of Iranian female life that -- that discrimination is so vivid, and so strong against them that in many respects that I'm not surprised, really, to see women at the forefront of this social protest in Iran.

MR. BAHARI: Okay. Suzanne, you have a question? Go ahead.

MS. MALONEY: Yeah, I was hoping to ask both Dr. Zibakalam, but also both you and Aida, Maziar, just what it is you think has precipitated this dramatic response to this particular case. Obviously, we know that the question of veiling has been a sensitive one for Iranian women for all of the post-revolutionary period. The very first protests that took place after the revolution were on Women's Day in March of 1979, when women came to the streets even then to demand that there should not be compulsory veiling. We have seen over the years other women come to the streets to protest this issue. But what is it about the case of Mahsa Amini that has struck such a nerve across the country and brought so many people out to the streets and -- and clearly so angry, these are -- these are protests, the protests are chanting "marg ba dictator," "death to the dictator." This is, you know, a very strenuous and vociferous protest against the regime as a whole. And I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on -- on what are the conditions that brought that about?

MR. BAHARI: Well, when I saw Aida's reporting, and when I saw the picture of an innocent young woman in our website IranWire, and the fact that she had been

killed in the hands of the morality police, that really made me angry.

And I'm not -- and I don't live in Iran, I don't go through the economic pressure, social pressure, political pressure that an average Iranian is going. We knew that the situation was not tenable, and we knew that everyone, many people around Iran, maybe most people around Iran, were just waiting for a trigger to, as Dr. Zibakalam said beautifully, to trigger this box of dynamite to be exploding. And also on top of that, I think we have to understand the Iranians' fascinations with icons and saints, and I think Mahsa, in her innocence, the way that she was portrayed in those photos, the way that she was not a political figure, that she was not a political agitator, she was just a simple girl from a very small town in Iran, who came to Tehran to just change -- you know, just to have a, you know, for touristic reasons, as Aida said. And the way that she was killed, it was so unjust, but at the same time, she became an icon, a maybe-accidental icon for this movement, and triggered this box of dynamite, which is really the Iranian society. And that's why we see such protest.

But Dr. Zibakalam, what do you think? Why do you think that the death of Mahsa triggered these protests?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Maziar, you are quite right, you are quite right. Even if this were not an incident of the killing of Mahsa Amini, or Jina, as the Kurds named her, I believe that something else would have happened and maybe would have steered this anger erupting again. If you -- if you want, I think it's a proper analogy with that Tunisian man who was --

MR. BAHARI: Set himself on fire, yeah.

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Yeah, set fire to himself, and that ignited the whole Arab Spring in the Middle East. In a way, we can't -- we can ask the same question that -- that burning, that youth -- this was an uprising, because there were enough (inaudible) of the authoritarian regime throughout the Arab world. It's very (inaudible), just like ignition to a pile of dynamite. I think due to Mahsa's unfortunate death, after the (inaudible), like that

Tunisian youth, burning himself.

Because we see that it's the hatred, it's the dislike of the Islamic regime, it's the anger, it's the frustration that we see erupting in Iranian cities. (Inaudible), but it's so arrogant that it didn't take that course. The government could have acted more apologetic right from the beginning. But the government acted very proudly, very innocently, as though it hadn't done anything wrong, and it's all (inaudible), it's only the opposition, it's only the people who criticize the government, that they are telling lies, that they are making up stories, and that they are using Mahsa's case as an excuse to rise against the government, et cetera, et cetera. And I believe that the government could have acted much more wisely, and much more shrewdly, and could have actually prevented that day option.

MR. BAHARI: But it seems that they just don't know that they don't understand, as we call in Persian, they have (Speaking Farsi), they have double ignorance, that they do not know that they do not know. And it seems that these new sets of protests, really show the chasm between the government on one hand and the majority of Iranians, especially young Iranian on the other hand, that the government is leading Iran by these aging men who have been -- who were revolutionaries in the past, and who have been living good lives in the past four decades, and their ideology is decaying, they're getting richer, they're getting fatter, they're sending their children outside. And on the other hand, you have young Iranians who are outward looking, they want to be in touch with the rest of the world, and they just -- I don't think that they can ever reconcile.

I have a question for Aida, what do you think about the role of hijab as a fabric, in terms of an instrument in the hands of the government to oppress Iranian, especially Iranian women, and on the other hand as a device for women to liberate themselves as an -- when they burn it, and, you know, what do you -- what role do you think hijab, a piece of fabric, played in all these protests?

MS. GHAJAR: Thank you, Mr. Bahari. I'm going to -- going back to the protest, starting from there, the people on these protests, starting being at the street with the

-- they are screaming "woman, life, liberty." So, these words -- these words I think it's more important that we should be thinking about women, what's happening about women, and then, as you know, such a symbol, icon that expose this anger in Iranian society.

But when I talked to Iranian women inside and outside of Iran these past days, they told me they thought Mahsa could be their daughter, themselves. I think any Iranian woman who are not accepting hijab from last before the -- last years, they have this experience arresting by this police, kind of police. I remember that for myself. When they arrest you, you don't have any idea what's going to happen to you. If they are going to have some sexual violence on you, if they're going to kill you, that happened to Mahsa. They start with touching your body, and then they continue with verbal violence, any kind of violence that you can imagine could happen to you. So, in Mahsa's case, everyone touched this feeling, everyone has this feeling that could be -- for someone could end up with death by these kind of police, by this government, we don't any justice, we don't any truth, because of the censor. We know that Iranian government have this censor everywhere on the media. So, the family needs to have this -- needs to know about the truth.

But the hijab, I'm going to give you some examples. It's not just about hijab, but the hijab is an important visual thing that we have it. For example, in Iranian, in Islamic Republic of Iran law, the women has not any right to divorce. They couldn't decide for divorce. This is the man who have this right. Another thing, for example, when you're married, as a woman, you should say yes to the man any time they want to have sex. So, this is -- if you said no, they can divorce you. You don't have a right to ride a bicycle, you don't have a right to any basic right that any human being has. So, this anger, this suppression on women, this discrimination, it's more than 40 years that they have it by the law, by the government -- by the government. So, hijab, that means when you are -- you reached seven years old, when you are a girl, seven years old, you should wear hijab. That means that that if you don't have this hijab, any other man around the street, around your family, everywhere, could have this sexual feeling about you. This is pedophile. This is

exactly pedophile. But we have child marriage in Iran by law, authorization by the law. So, hijab, it's a symbol of prison for women. We, from seven years old until when -- until this maybe, we should wear hijab, because they said other man can't control themselves. This is insult for men too, for sure. So --

MR. BAHARI: Many things we see in this protest is the resistance of young people, especially women, against this security forces. I remember in 2009, during the Green Movement, what really astonished me and millions of other people, was the silence, the fact that millions of people, they marched silently in the streets of Tehran. But I guess those people who were silent in 2009, they are getting older, and the younger generation, they do not want to be silent anymore.

MS. GHAJAR: Exactly, exactly.

MS. MALONEY: Maziar, I'm going to just jump in on that point, because one of the -- the issues around this current burst of protests that has been commented on in the media, and especially on social media, is that we see, perhaps new tactics by demonstrators, we see more fighting back, and more deliberate attempts to try to disempower the security forces on the streets and confront them, rather than just try to go out, and make a statement, and then run away from the repression. So, can -- do you think that this is an accurate depiction of what we're seeing, and what does it mean in terms of both the public mood, and the prospects for these protests being sustained and having some impact on the stability of the country?

MR. BAHARI: I think you're right, except that I don't think it's a tactic. I think it's a knee-jerk reaction. I think when you had oppressors for more than four decades who have been brutalizing you, brutalizing peaceful protestors as we saw in 2009, 2017, 2019, then this new generation doesn't want to react peacefully. I'm not saying that it's right or wrong, but this is what we see on the streets. And maybe it's the violence is futile, I'm not sure. But what we're seeing is that the young people, they do not want to remain peaceful. And they -- and it has really scared the authorities, I believe.

What do you think, Dr. Zibakalam, from your vantage points in Tehran? Do you think that this new wave of resistance, especially young people, against the paramilitary basij, police, and Revolutionary Guards is a new phase in the movements of the Iranian people?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Let me first, Maziar, respond to what Emily said about hijab, either it was Emily or the women --

MR. BAHARI: Aida.

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Aida, I don't know which one. And saying that the Islamic principle that exerted so much pressure on Iranian women. To understand to some extent (inaudible), it is --

MS. MALONEY: It seems as though we may have lost the audio from Dr. Zibakalam.

MR. ZIBAKALAM: -- University, which is barely for women. It is not only for women, but it is also -- it's very religious in (inaudible). And most of the students in Azad University, they wear their hijab voluntarily. But interestingly enough, yesterday one of the -- one of the protests was at that university. Dozens of the Azad student who were wearing veil were actually shouting and (inaudible) against hijab and against the government, which, that was really surprising. You know, you wouldn't -- why are they protesting, (inaudible). The fact is that, what I'm really trying to say is, is that I agree with you, there are some -- some pressure because of the hijab, but I believe that the pressure on Iranian -- the females are much more greater, or deeper than simply hijab, and Islamic jurisprudence. There are social pressures, political pressures, and general is quite (inaudible), as well as religious pressure.

But as the question that Maziar, you raised, about the outcome of these protests, and the expressed possible effects that they might have on revolution is good, and the other Islamic structure (inaudible) going to respond, and their reactions that we have observed so far from the Islamic authority, I daresay that it won't -- it won't change anything.

I mean, two days ago, the Iranian supreme leader talked about -- he talked with the Revolutionary Guard leaders, et cetera, et cetera, and everyone was expecting -- everyone was waiting to see what the supreme leader would say about this unrest. Not at all. He didn't say anything. As though all these protests, all these demonstrations, all these -- they all are happening in another country, they are happening in some country in the middle of Africa, or Europe for that matter. It's nothing to do with Iran.

Unfortunately, this is the attitude, Maziar, of the Iranian authorities that -- that nothing has happened, and they would simply go on with the politics that they have been going on during the past 43 years, at least, at least. This is my observation, from other protests that we have had during the past 1 or 2 decades.

MR. BAHARI: Great. I think we have some questions from the audience, I don't see --

MS. MALONEY: Yes, we've been collecting questions via the email address events@brookings.edu, and also using the hashtag MahsaAmini, and so I'd like to pose -- start to pose several of these questions from our listeners to our panelists here today, and I, of course, still have a few of my own questions to build in as well.

In particular, I have a question from April Brady, who is a scholar of Iran at the Project for Middle East Democracy here in Washington, and one of her questions is whether we should anticipate that the crackdown will become more severe as Raisi returns from New York, does he play a particular role, given his own past history of human rights abuses? Are we likely to see an even more fierce crackdown once he is back in Tehran?

MR. BAHARI: Well, I don't think that the president has anything to do with the security forces, the supreme leader of Iran is the supreme commander of the security forces, and Ebrahim Raisi has proven himself to be quite inefficient, inept, and really out of depth. So, I don't think whether he is in Tehran, Jakarta, or New York would matter whatsoever. It's the supreme security council that is making decision about these matters, and at the end of the day, it's the supreme leader of Iran who commands the security forces.

MS. MALONEY: Let me turn to another question from John Sotos, sent to our email address, someone who knows Iran quite well, and what he asked is, you know, we've seen sporadic eruptions of protests. I was in Iran way back in 1999, when students came to the streets. Obviously, Maziar, you were arrested when you were covering the unrest that erupted after the 2009 election. There have been spasms of protests that have captivated the world, and that have created a sense of clear dissatisfaction with the regime. And yet each time the regime has managed to suppress them with increasing violence. And we don't necessarily see that there is a kind of sustained movement.

And so, what John Sotos asked is whether there are any new developments, new protest tactics, grassroots organizing, cross-class cooperation in these latest protests? Do we see that they're -- the protests that we're seeing this time may be gaining strength or efficacy, and really challenging the regime in a way that would have long-term implications?

MR. BAHARI: I can give you my answer, but I'd love to hear what Aida and Dr. Zibakalam have to say about this as well. I think one of the -- the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the luckiest governments in the world, because it does not have a viable opposition. If there was a viable, cohesive opposition at the moment, it would lead the -- these protests much better, they would have maybe the same slogans all around Iran, and they would propose an alternative to this government. Unfortunately for the past four decades, the Iranian opposition, they begin fighting amongst themselves, and they have been their own worst enemies. But Dr. Zibakalam, what do you think about the protests?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: I don't agree with you, Maziar, that we have no viable, we have no real opposition, unfortunately. Even though -- even though there is -- there is such a widespread dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction against the Islamic regime, you would have thought that there must be a very, very organized, strong opposition. But this isn't. Why they're inside the country, no, outside the country, given the fact that we have over 7 million Iranians ex-pats living in the United States and in Europe. Despite that huge number, you



don't see any real and pragmatic opposition, organized opposition outside Iran. Perhaps, perhaps one of the reasons is that the opposition has always been thinking of overthrowing the Islamic regime. And because -- because their sole objective is to overthrow the Islamic regime, rather than trying to reform -- I think that's one of the reasons. And recently, recently, after the Rouhani government, this belief that we must overthrow the Islamic regime, and we only get real salvation for Iran is the overthrow of the Islamic regime, unfortunately it has become much more resonate, much more powerful amongst the Iranians, both inside the country and outside. That, that idea that there is only one solution, and that's the overthrow of the Islamic regime, I think that has presented some -- some opposition that can be used, for example, the present unrest, and done the realistic and practical ways of actually combating the Islamic regime.

MR. BAHARI: Yeah, overthrowing into what, that's been the question. What do you think, Aida? What do you think about the Iranian opposition? You've been living outside of Iran for the past 13 years.

MS. GHAJAR: Yeah, yeah. I'll agree with you that we don't have any powerful opposition group can lead the protests and can organize this anger, these people, this young generation who are on the street facing the police. But maybe I can just add something on this subject. That I'm not a political activist, I'm a journalist. So, as a journalist who works on the human rights domain, maybe I just thinking about the other countries, the other governments who are dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yeah, I know that this is a politic and this is economical issue, that they are going to dealing with that, all the media are talking about the nuclear dialogue. And yes, we know that, but the other government, they are dealing and having dialogue with this kind of regime -- political regime. So, maybe, as a human rights community on each country, civil society on each country, we can ask the government, we can ask the political regime in any country that we are, that, where is the human rights in their dialogue?

Mr. Macron for example, president of France, they told Iranian journalist that

yes, we -- he said yes, we have a discussion about human rights, women rights, with Mr. Raisi, president of Iran. But that's it, he didn't give us any details. I think the -- this is the important thing, because the Iranian people, they are alone, they are themselves, they have -- no one's with them, there is no leader for them. So, maybe this can help them, talking about the human rights, and not closing the -- our eyes on Iranian people, and maybe something else that, in these days, we are really feeling -- we is caring about -- we're thinking about the internet, we have this kind of government, this kind of political regime can shut down the internet and we don't know what's going to happen then. Because this history, on November 2019, they shutting down the internet for two days, and we confirm on IranWire that we -- that we spoke with the family of more than 350 --

MR. BAHARI: That's why we're talking to Dr. Zibakalam online -- on the landline, yeah. So, I'm not sure, Suzanne, if Elon Musk is a fan of Brookings or not, but Elon, if you're watching this program, if you're listening, please do something, and, you know, Iran -- you might be the most popular person in Iran at the moment, because that is the fear in Iran, joking aside, is that the government is shutting down the internet, they are in fact narrowing the bandwidth, in order to be able to have another set of killings, even worse than what we had four years ago.

MS. MALONEY: I wanted to press on this point just as we move toward the end of our hour. Obviously, this question of what the international community does at times of tensions within Iran, specifically how the international community can help.

We know back in 2009, in fact, someone in the state department reached out to Twitter to make sure that Twitter didn't do a sort of ordinary reboot that would have taken that system offline and made it inaccessible to Iranians. There has been talked about whether there are mechanisms that the United States or other governments can utilize to try to ensure that Iranians do have access to the internet.

I know that's a subject of a lot of conversation here. We have seen statements from the podium, at the state department, Ned Price, as well as from the U.S.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, but of course, all of this is happening while the world's leaders have been assembled in New York, and Raisi, who has a particularly gruesome track record of his own over the course of his career in the Islamic Republic, has had meetings at -- with a number of other heads of state, and it isn't very clear that this issue has been raised or put in a very prominent place.

So, you know, you've already made the pitch to Elon Musk, what is it that you would say to President Biden? What is it that you would say President Macron, others around the world, about how they should be speaking and dealing, and what role the leaders of the world can play in helping those who are on the streets today to have their voices heard?

MR. BAHARI: First of all, I would thank President Biden for mentioning Iranian women in his speech, yesterday I think it went, and I think the best way to help Iranian people at the moment is to make an effort in order to have free internet, whether it's a satellite internet or another kind of internet inside Iran, so we can have free flow of information within Iran, between Iran and the outside world, and the outside world and inside Iran.

And if we have that, the European community, the United States, other countries, they do not have to worry about that much anymore, because if we have free flow of information inside Iran, people can mobilize themselves, they can inform each other, they can be in touch with the rest of the world, they can share news, they can gather news, and that is the most, I think -- the basic priority at the moment for the world community.

So, think about -- and that's why we see, after Mahsa Amini these days, Elon Musk might be the second individual whose name is mentioned in the Iranian cybersphere. I think Dr. Zibakalam, what do you think, what do you think that the international community can do for Iran?

MR. ZIBAKALAM: Well, first of all, I'm not so sure if this is a proper idea that is -- that is percolating among many Iranians inside and outside the country, that others

must help us, that must do something about human rights in Iran, that Americans must do something about the human rights in Iran, Europeans must do something about the human rights in Iran. I don't know. I believe that this is not the issue, not the right attitude.

I don't think Russian opposition to Mr. Putin had such an idea, or the Chinese dissidents have such an idea. And obviously, obviously, we must raise the human rights issue, and the fact that we have political prisoners, et cetera, et cetera, with European leaders, with American leaders, and help them to put pressures on Iranian government, as far as human rights is concerned. Or for example, if they can help with the satellite internet, et cetera, et cetera. But to demand them, and to look upon the Westerners as though -- as though they should have done something, to have a duty to help us, and why don't they help us, I think that's -- it's rather too much.

MR. BAHARI: Yeah. And I get what you're saying. If you had a session with President Biden, what would you tell him?

MS. GHAJAR: Give us the internet, please. We need it. We need internet, we need to have access to Iran, the Iranian people need the access to the free world. They are like a prisoner on Iran. Just give us internet, please. Just that.

MS. MALONEY: Well, I want to express my deep gratitude to all of our participants here in this discussion, to Dr. Sadegh Zibakalam who joined us by telephone from Tehran, to Maziar Bahari who has created this platform IranWire that has enabled Iranian journalists, both within the country and outside the country, to continue to share the news of Iran with Iranians and with the wider world, and especially to Aida Ghajar who is one of those responsible for ensuring that the story of Jina, the story of Mahsa Amini, has been heard by so many people around the world. We will continue to follow your reporting. We're grateful for all that you shared here today, and we look forward to continuing the conversation on all the issues that concern Iran. I am especially grateful and look forward to speaking with you again soon. Thank you all.

MR. BAHARI: Thank you, thanks very much.

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