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STOLEN REVOLUTION: BETRAYAL AND HOPE IN MODERN IRAN
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MALONEY: Good morning, everyone. thanks to those who joined us here in person, and thanks to the much larger crowd that we have joining us online from around the world. I'm Suzanne Maloney. I'm the vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution, and on behalf of Foreign Policy and Brookings, I'm really thrilled to welcome you all today to this incredibly timely conversation with two award-winning journalists, Yeganeh Torbati and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, who have written a new book titled "Stolen Revolution: Betrayal and Hope in Modern Iran."

Torbati and Sharafedin have spent their careers covering Iran and highlighting the experiences of the Iranian people. In "Stolen Revolution", they tell the stories of six Iranians who, who have lived and shaped the arc of the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution. Through personal narratives spanning nearly five decades, "Stolen Revolution" documents both the broken promises of the 1979 revolution and the enduring hopes and dreams of the Iranian people.

The book intertwines personal stories of activism, collective action, complicity, and regime repression. Earlier this week, a review in The New York Times praised "Stolen Revolution" as one of the most perceptive books on modern Iran in years, capturing not only the machinery of repression, but the fragile forms of hope that survive beneath it.

I couldn't agree more with that assessment. At a time when the world is transfixed by a security crisis in and Iran, this is an absolutely essential read to understand the regime, but more importantly, the society, economy, and people of Iran. I'll start by introducing the authors of "Stolen Revolution."

First, to my left is Yeganeh Torbati. She's a correspondent for The New York Times covering Iran. She's previously worked for The Washington Post, ProPublica, Reuters, and The Baltimore Sun. She was part of a Reuters team that won the Gerald Loeb Award, the Overseas Press Club Award, and the European Press Prize. Yeganeh was born in Oklahoma to Iranian immigrants.

Next, Bozorgmehr Sharafedin began his journalism career in Iran, rising to editor-in-chief of one of the most popular youth magazines in the country. In 2008, he left Iran to work for the BBC in London. He joined Reuters in 2015, where he shared a National Press Club Award. He moved to Washington, D.C., in 2024 and works as head of digital for -- at the Persian language channel, Iran International.

I'm incredibly grateful to have them both here today at Brookings at this pivotal time for Iran and the entire region. I want to note for our audience that this event is on the record and live streamed on the Brookings website.

We'll end our conversation with an opportunity for questions and answers from the audience here in person, and I also have questions that were submitted from our online audience. We'll end, we will, please use the, please use the email address events@brookings.edu for any questions that come up from those of you who are watching online, and please use the hashtag StolenRevolution in any of your social media.

Thanks so much for being here today. Before we delve into the discussion, and I have a long list of questions and topics that I'm hoping to explore, I wanted to give both Yeganeh and Bozorgmehr an opportunity to say a few words, introduce themselves about the book and how it came to be.

TORBATI: Well, first of all, thank you, Suzanne. thank you to the Brookings Institution for having us. Suzanne's own work on Iran, particularly on Iran's political economy, was a huge resource for us. And it's really wonderful to be able to speak about the book with her and kind of delve into Iran.

You know, we started this project over five years ago, back in late 2020, and obviously Iran was in a very different situation then, and in fact, really not really in the headlines. And we couldn't have quite predicted that it would be released at this moment and kind of in this context. But our aim was really to try to tell a different story of Iran. I think we all kind of focus on the nuclear program or in you know, the ideology or sort of politics. But we thought there were different angles and different stories to be told about greed, corruption, and also the people who have fought for a different type of future for their country.

And so we're really honored to be able to have the book out there and have it be a part of the discussion and in hopefully informing, people in this, very critical moment.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. Thanks, Suzanne, for having us, and thank you for being here. Yes, I—as Yeganeh said, I think the book was difficult as if it, it was a moving target. Like Iran five years ago wasn't the same country. And, during these years we went through Women, Life, Freedom movement, and then, the, the June war, the 12-day war. So it was very difficult how to maintain the same rhythm and focus on the same themes while the, the Iranian society was evolving. So that, that was the main difficulty.

And I, as you, as you've seen, we tell the story of six Iranians, but that, that was also very difficult in the sense that many of the characters had to drop out. Many of them were forced to drop out. So that, that was also another challenge that, that we had, but luckily we made it.

MALONEY: Well, I think what really struck me about the book is how deeply researched it is. You draw on, like, mountains of sources and, but you focus on individuals. And I think especially for Americans to understand Iran through the lens of individual stories is so incredibly powerful because we are fundamentally not able to see this for ourselves for the most part.

You spent a lot of time, reporting and researching the book. How was it that you chose the individuals that you did? What was it about their stories that really spoke to you?

TORBATI: I think we wanted people from a wide, you know, diverse sort of subsection of society. We didn't wanna only focus on protesters or only focus on men or just women. We wanted six people who... You know, of course, Iran's a country of 92 million. It's impossible to completely capture it, but we wanted people who at least could represent different segments. So we've got different ethnic minorities, we've got men, women, members of, you know, people who were born in the '30s, people who were born in the '90s.

And I think the, the one thing that they kind of all have in common, which was very help- we found very helpful in writing about them, is that they all exhibit agency. They all act to change their own circumstances, and that makes them very interesting characters to follow.

Very few people in the book are heroes. I think, living in an authoritarian state, you make compromises and, we all kind of act in ways to survive. And so I think we try to not condemn people, but just present, you know, their life stories and through them, kind of the story of this country in a very detailed, nuanced, but unflinching way. We weren't going to shy away from the things that they did wrong at times. But then we also wanted to show ways in which they show, showed great bravery and and courage.

So yeah, as we were sort of searching for characters, we just tried to find people who did not just let events happen to them. They acted to change their circumstances, and that made them kind of more interesting to follow.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. If I may add something that I think if our book is the story of transformation of the Islamic Republic from a revolution that promised an egalitarian society, to turning into its exact opposite, the mafia state, we try to tell the, the, that transformation.

And we thought it's good to choose characters who go through the same transformation in tandem with the Islamic Republic. Like, it's most of the characters, they were first believers in the system. They even helped to build parts of the system, and then they go through a disillusionment phase, and they, at the end, they, they rise up to fight against the same system.

MALONEY: Well, let me start from that very premise, someone who helped to build the system. You start with the story of Mehdi Karroubi, who held a number of senior positions and also eventually became a leader of the opposition against the Islamic Republic. It is, let me just say, this is such a readable book. It is so fast-paced and, you, it puts you really live in the action, including from the very moment, the opening pages of the book that tell the story of Karroubi's youthful effort to travel to Iraq in order to study under Ayatollah Khomeini.

You know, to me, Karroubi felt like a, an incredibly useful lens through which to tell the story of the birth of the regime. And then, of course, this movement from within the regime that emerged in the late 1990s to try to reform the regime from within. And then, of course, longer into the story, the, the way that insiders played such an important role in both shaping and then trying to contest the system.

Can you tell a little bit about the story of of Karroubi and, you know, his beginnings and, and, and how his, the arc of his story?

TORBATI: You probably maybe should start with that one.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. First of all, we got, we were, we were very lucky that Karroubi was very generous. He shared with us his unpublished memoir. So we had access to a lot of details about his life. We went and dug out thousands of pages of newspapers from before the revolution, so we, we found facts about his life that even he didn't remember.

So, but story of Mehdi Karroubi starts when he's very young and he's a true believer in the Ayatollah Khamenei, Ayatollah Khomeini's, promise for a revolution. At that time, Karroubi, because he was son of, son of a cleric, he was fascinated into this Islamist idea of a revolution to form an Islamic society.

But as he was jailed, he got to know other revolutionaries who were fighting against the Shah for another reason. There were mainly communist And he got to know that, these guys are against the somehow what they saw as corruption within the, the system. And it was that moment that Islamists borrowed some ideas from leftists that was forming economic justice in the society.

But Karroubi, after the revolution, he he goes on this Robin Hood style of gathering wealth, mainly by confiscation from the, the rich and distributing them among the poor. So he is still following on those promises. But as we, as we go forward, as the Islamic Republic transforms into a system that only serves a, an elite and other parts of the society are suffering from the economic hardship, we can see that that's the moment that Karroubi turns into a critic of the system.

He is very much vocal against the participation of the IRGC, the Revolutionary Guards in the, in in the economy. And so that's, that's the moment that he s- stands up against the system, stands up against the, the Revolutionary Guards, and of course, pays a high, pays, paid a high price by being put under house arrest for more than a decade.

TORBATI: And what kind of makes him very interesting as a character is he kind of laid the foundation for some of the things that then repressed him later on. So these foundations that he used to confiscate property from the wealthy or from people who were associated with the previous, you know, regime, and then redistributed that. Those foundations, through his work and through the work of others, got exemptions to certain rules.

They were sort of this, not private, not quite state, but kind of very privileged actor, that then later on when he kind of rises through the reform movement and becomes speaker of parliament in the late 90s and early 2000s, he tries to bring transparency to some of those foundations.

Now they were under the control of a political rival, Khamenei, who was Khomeini's successor, and he tries to institute, you know, transparency, auditing, taxation. And at this point they're too powerful and Khamenei is too powerful.

And so the kind of the tragedy of Karroubi is that when he was in power in the 80s, he sort of didn't quite foresee that putting in place these exemptions and sort of with good intentions to help the poor or to help the, you know, the veterans that he was, of the Iran-Iraq War, he kind of put in place a process that was then used to justify something much darker than he had foreseen.

MALONEY: The story of Karroubi also really brings out the, the promise, but then of course the ultimate failure of the reform movement in Iran. And I think that that is a, a really powerful message, particularly at this moment of time, of how things could have gone differently. There is a there's a, a reference by Mohammad Khatami that you quote, who was the two-term president of Iran, who spoke about a dialogue of civilizations, who had positive things to say about America, who did introduce some limited press freedoms and other reforms that were seen as potentially leading to greater accountability and representation within the system.

But ultimately, he was not successful. And his two terms ended with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who brought, took Iran in a, in a harder line direction. There was a reference in, in the book, that where Khatami describes Karroubi as a Man of Saturday, essentially someone who would be willing to go to the streets or willing

TORBATI: Mousavi.

SHARAFEDIN: Mousavi, I'm sorry.

MALONEY: Yeah. But was a, was there a, was there a moment when more decisive action by the reform movement, by Karroubi, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who was the other candidate in those 2009 elections that many of you will remember when things could have gone differently if the reform movement had taken, either before that election period or in the aftermath, when there was the Green Movement protest movement that, that continued over the month, the later months of 2009 and early 2010. Was there an opportunity that was lost during that period for more decisive action?

TORBATI: I think, you should probably take this one 'cause you lived through a lot of this.

SHARAFEDIN: Well, I was 16 when Khatami was elected. Excuse me. And yeah, I think that was the hope of our generation that we can see some change finally. I think that was a lost moment. Why? Because the system was surprised by that victory where Khatami, even Khatami was surprised, even Karroubi was surprised. Those who won that election in 1997, the Reform Movement, and those who lost it, they were surprised.

So there was one opportunity because I, I would say the nation, my generation, we hacked the system. We, we found the, the weakness in the system and, and we, we went for it, and we got it.

After that, the system recovered in a way that it blocked all those things. And so I would say after the reform era, we didn't have any, like, election with a chance of a victory for, for a surprised candidate. They became more engineered and, and, predictable. So that was the lost opportunity.

The second lost of opportunity was in the Green Movement, when, again, my generation, they came to the streets. They, they gave up on the election. So they came to the streets. Three million came to the streets of Tehran and protested. And again, the, the leaders of the movement, they didn't realize the power of having people on the streets, and they didn't use that properly in a way that it faded away gradually.

And a couple of years later, we had the Arab Uprising, we had the Tahrir Square, and we saw how other Middle Eastern nations, some of them managed to make the most of people's presence on the street. At that time, Karroubi and Mousavi got inspired, tried to, to, to use that, but that, that failed. I think it was too late when they realized that they have lost the presence of people on the street

MALONEY: Can I use that to ask you to talk a little bit about one of the other individuals who you profile in the book, Hila Sedighi, who's one of the protesters who does come to the streets and was hoping for some different outcome.

TORBATI: Yeah, Hila sort of represents this kind of young generation that was rising kind of in the '90s. And, you know, of course it was Karroubi and Khatami and the kind of leftist clerics who sort of made the reform movement from the top, but they were really pushed by this massive social movement from below, this baby boom of people like Hila and people a few years older than her who really... you know, the revolution was a memory for them, if even that. They, many of them, most of them had not actually lived through it. And so they wanted a different type of life. They were still, I think, operating within the framework of the Islamic Republic, but, you know, believed that they could reform it into eventually something where religion and kind of the theocratic elements were just not as important, and it would be kind of a more republic, Islamic Republic.

You know, she, so she, you know, was too young to vote for Khatami but she benefits very much from his win. She starts forming, and along with a lot of people in her generation, these civil society groups that sort of help teach her and others about democracy. And they form this really, strong kind of, like, civil society network. And these organizers, they all know each other. We read one of their journals. They, you know, were going to each other's houses. They knew their kids' names. Like, they ha- they were meeting all the time.

And so, you know, from our perspective, maybe in the West, the Green Movement feels spontaneous, but it was the the forces that made up Mousavi's campaign and that then came out onto the streets, those were people who had gotten their training in civil society and in organizing back in the late '90s and early 2000s. And so they, they just had deep networks within society and could kind of mobilize people.

She then, I mean, very bravely sort of delivers this very famous poem in the midst of the Green Movement. All her friends have been arrested. She's kind of, like, semi-in hiding, but she delivers this poem, and kind of referring to rapes that had occurred in prisons, people being killed, like, really brave things to say, and kind of becomes the symbol of that movement, and eventually pays the price in terms of judicial cases being opened up against her and eventually having to leave the country.

MALONEY: One of the questions that I think - excuse me- always looms here in Washington is whether a more outspoken American stance in 2009 might have made a difference. Do you, either of you have a view on that? At the time, President Obama sought to avoid putting the United States in the center of the story, which was a fundamentally, you know, unique moment as you described. This power of having three million people on the streets of Tehran, which hadn't really happened in that significant size since the revolution itself.

But of course, both Obama and then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have both described this as the decision to kind of stand back and to not center the United States and publicly

push for, you know, both a potentially a reconsideration of the of the election outcome, but also fair treatment and, and, you know, a lack of repression of the protesters as one of their greatest regrets from their time in office.

TORBATI: I don't, I, I know that they have expressed it that way. I mean, you might disagree. I don't know that it would've made a huge difference. I mean, the Iranian protestors first, there was some segment of them who did want that, and there were chants to that effect in the streets in Tehran. But they didn't, they didn't come out, the US did not really say much about the protests, especially initially. And yet, the regime, Khamenei, his sort of apparatus, still accused Mousavi, Karroubi, and their supporters of being kind of a Velvet Revolution and, you know, American elements. And there were billboards or placards with Karroubi kind of dressed as, like, Uncle Sam in a turban.

You know, and these were people who were devoted to Khomeini and to the revolution, and repeatedly in those early days put out statements kind of calling for a return to the time of the imam and sort of emphasizing their, their loyalty to the revolution, which helped them to kind of counter those accusations. But also, I think, eventually divided them from their supporters who, you know, that, that young generation didn't have any nostalgia for, the 1980s certainly.

So even those people, even without any kind of firm US support, they were cast as American lackeys. And this, this is just kind of a repeated accusation that the regime makes against its, its internal enemies.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, I think from the perspective of Iranian people, it, it was disappointing. I can understand why Obama did it because at that time he had sent a letter to Khamenei, and there was this behind the scene letters going back and forth, and he didn't want to break that. He thought he, he has a chance, so he didn't want to ruin that by siding with the protestors.

Years later, he, he said himself that that was a wrong decision. He, he had to, he should have sided with, with the protestors because when it comes to the values, we should be brave, we should be vocal, we should, support with those who believe they need help.

In the eyes of Iranians, I remember, like, in, in Farsi, like, name of Obama, Obama means "with us." So Obama, so Iranians were saying, "Are you Obama? Are you with us or not with us?" So Iranians were making those slogans that they say, oh, make – you just, just make a decision. Are you with us or with them? So that was it.

But to be fair, coming forward, like, one of the criticisms that my generation had to Khatami was that why didn't you stand firm against the system? And I remember there was a, a meeting at Khatami when he was asked that question. He said, "Look, guys, you don't know these people. There will be blood, rivers of blood on the streets if we push back, and I don't want to, to get there."

So fast-forward, January 2026. Somehow we saw that maybe sadly that prediction was true. So it, came true in, in a sense that, that system didn't hold back to, to kill thousands or tens of thousands of people. And the US president sided with the protestors, but that maybe didn't translate into anything tangible.

The counterargument can be that if these things had been done decades earlier, maybe the cost wouldn't have been this high. I, I think we waited too long for both for the Western support and and also for the presence of of people on the street. So the system, the, the, the oppressive system of the of the Islamic Republic became so powerful and so modernized that we, we saw this high cost.

MALONEY: I want to introduce a third character that you, excuse me, reference in the book, and tell the story of – oh, and, and the wonderful part of this book is that it's not discrete

chapters on individuals. It really is telling the story, the arc of the Islamic Republic through the progression in time through each of these individuals.

But Amir Moghadam was a very interesting character, someone who was serving in government, who suffered repression, who also then took incredible risks. Can you tell us a little bit about his story and, and what it tells us about how the Islamic Republic was evolving as we saw greater authoritarianism and, and greater corruption in particular?

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah. So Moghadam, he was a young person that when he was a teenager, he would put a poster of Khomeini above his the bed. So like that, it, that he, he came from that background, and he was a true believer in the system. Later, he was attracted to become a politician, and he joined the several governments.

But I think the part that we try to say in this story of Amir Moghadam was again, the disillusionment of the nation with the reformists' ideology. So there was a time that in Iran we were, like, in this dichotomy that we choose reformists against the conservatives, and all the elections were this dichotomy.

But through the eyes of Amir Moghaddam, who went to the office of President Rouhani and worked with the vice president, he saw corruption firsthand. He realized that it's not about this or that faction. All of them are just thinking about filling up their, their own pockets. So that was the moment of disillusionment of Amir Moghaddam, which is exactly in tandem with the disillusionment of the nation.

In the protest that happens under Rouhani's presidency, people came to the streets, and the main slogan at that time was that, "Oh, reformist or conservatives, beware that this is the end of both of you." So, so that is the way that Iranians decided that this system is not reformable.

And from after that, we see that they, they took a more radical stance against the Islamic Republic, the way that Amir Moghaddam did himself, doing a lot of revelations against the system and fighting with the Islamic Republic as a whole

MALONEY: I thought the story of corruption and the extent to which the regime itself became, you know, essentially a crony capitalist system was very, very powerful, and it is part of the story of both the increasing authoritarianism of the government, but also of the hollowing out of what had traditionally been and could have still been a, a vibrant private sector in Iran.

This has been a subject of your reporting, both of you, for many, many years. How much of a factor do you think economic corruption is in terms of the way the, this regime has evolved?

TORBATI: Thank you. Yeah, that was one thing that we felt like we could bring to bear that was a bit unique in terms of modern reporting on Iran, because we both have this background in reporting on Iranian corruption. And we thought it was kind of an underexplored facet of how the regime runs and sort of manages to keep its supporters on side. It has sources of revenue and control over vast parts of the economy that it can use to pay its security forces, pay off kind of people close to it, provide pretty lucrative posts for loyalists.

And so we just felt like it was really important to dive deep into this and to explain how it works and why we don't have an independent private sector in Iran. And it- there's very specific reasons for that. Over and over when we were doing the reporting for the book, we heard the same refrain, which is as soon as you reach a certain level of success, you'll get a knock on the door, usually from the IRGC intelligence organization, asking for a cut. And if you don't bring them in somehow, you're at risk of being imprisoned or at, at the very least, of your business being destroyed.

And even if that expectation is not borne out 100% of the time, it's enough of a brake on the economy that we just don't see really the most productive and successful companies rising to the fore. The ones that win the contracts or are able to succeed in a big way are the ones that have connections to specific people that are powerful or to the state.

And so we kind of explore this through Iran's tech sector. And especially after the nuclear deal, this was a sector that was booming. There were still American sanctions, so Amazon and Uber couldn't go in, and so Iranians would kind of build their own versions of these things. They got a ton of funding from European VCs and Russian financiers, or at least entities that had been operating in Russia kind of in the post-Soviet era. And they were really successful for a time.

And we kind of like I, I, we tried really... This is the kind of the most investigative part of the book. We got access to documents, we talked to over 70 people in and outside of Iran who had touched on the startup sector in some way. And we got first-hand accounts of how first, when... So Khamenei gave a speech right after the nuclear deal was signed, basically saying that, you know, fine, we've signed this thing, but we don't want, any kind of like infiltration, and that could be economic infiltration, cultural infiltration.

And very quickly, you kind of see then his favorite newspaper starts putting out op-eds saying that the startups are connected to the West and they're a vector for American influence. Then there's, like, this shady kind of like, social media page that starts, you know, making posts about individual startup tech entrepreneurs, and, you know, where are they getting their money from, and they're connected to this entity and that entity in the West.

And then people start getting called in for interrogations, and they get arrested, and there's raids, and there's like mysterious break-ins, and there's just this kind of overall campaign of harassment.

So these guys are then very vulnerable when, you know, connected characters, people with one foot in the security state and one foot in the private sector, come to them and say, "Listen, give me some percentage of your business and I'll protect you from all of these things that are happening." Or maybe there's a, a, you know, state connected foundation that reaches out and wants to buy some of their shares.

And so they sell thinking that this is going to save them. The problem within Iran, which is maybe different from... I'm not a China expert, but I get the sense that China is kind of more, there's one power, there's one entity that you have to sort of obey. In Iran, it is really a multitude of competing factions, and they're always shifting.

And for business, that's poisonous because there's no predictability. There's no stability. There's no sense like, okay, I've made one deal. I've had to compromise quite a lot, but at least now I'm safe. No, you make a deal with one entity, and then maybe that person in kind of this mafia underboss battle that's happening, like, they lose out, and then you're on the wrong side, and maybe your business gets taken over or confiscated or raided.

And over time, I mean, so people do make these deals. They sell off their shares, and this, the tech sector never quite reached that great potential that people thought that it had back in 2015.

MALONEY: Well, the story of Said Rahmani illustrates exactly what you've just described. But I think especially for Americans or for audiences outside of Iran to understand how much talent there is in Iran, how much ingenuity and innovation there is. This was someone who was setting up a kind of Digikala, which, it was, something like an, the Amazon, Amazon of Iran. There was an Uber of Iran. There were, there were all kinds of, you know, unique, yeah, tech ecosystems that were thriving.

And it, you know, I used to hear that at times it the tech sector and economic opportunity was seen by many young people when they became disillusioned with reform, they, they kind of stayed away from politics, but thought that, you know, here is something that they can invest, and it, this could be a future pathway for, you know, the advancement of their own opportunities, but also for Iran as a whole. And the story of Said is, is quite a tragic one in that respect.

I don't know, Bozorgmehr, if you'd like to say a few words about him.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, I think just, shortly, I think, I think Yeganeh described the, the whole, section, I think really nicely. The only thing I, I wanted to add is that there've been a lot of articles about Iran, the Iranian economy, that 80% of it is owned by the Revolutionary Guards. And we've heard that over and over.

I think what we tried to do in this book was just exactly explain how did that happen. And in this startup section, in Said Rahmani's section, we, we, we explain in details how the Revolutionary Guards has taken over all these lucrative businesses.

So that, I think that's the – it's like if you are watching a, a movie about a mafia system, you want to know how they take over that restaurant. Like, what, what are the pressure system they use? They, they threaten their family. They, they become friendly, and they become aggressive. So I think that, that startup section, I think, as a case study, really shows how they use their military power, intelligence power, and political power to gain economic leverage in, in the Iranian system.

MALONEY: It definitely had the air of The Sopranos or something like this, of how they muscled out, you know, something, an industry that was doing very well, that was thriving, and effectively took it over. And I think especially at this moment in time where we see a, a regime that is more heavily influenced and controlled by figures from the Revolutionary Guard Corps, it, it's important to appreciate how they, how they developed, this economic empire that is, one significant source of their power.

You've talked already about some of the epic protests that have taken place across Iran and in different points in time. But, one of the, the culminating chapters of the book focuses on the Women, Life, Freedom movement, and both Rozhin Yousefzadeh and Kosar Eftekhari and, you know, their own engagement and, you know, the sort of bravery and also the suffering that they experienced as a result of, of that movement.

And that was a movement that I think transfixed the international community in a way that perhaps because it had greater longevity, at least in the public eye here. Unlike 2009, which was a, you know, sort of burst onto the scene, the Green Movement, and then unless you were an Iran expert, you probably weren't focused on it for much after the summer of 2009.

Women, Life, Freedom seemed to continue and, and yet, obviously, it did not succeed in producing lasting governmental change. It did apparently create some change in terms of the, the, enforcement of hijab mandates. But what is it about that set of protests and about the experiences of Rozhin and Kosar that tells us how the Islamic Republic had evolved at that point? Why was it a, apparently a more durable and potentially more impactful movement but still not able to succeed in, in producing lasting change?

TORBATI: Yeah, we wanted to, you know, through the stories of Rozhin and Kosar kind of just show people, like, who were these people who protested and kind of, like, transfixed the world with their actions. And we sort of show both of their journeys from relatively small towns. I mean, Rozhin was from a village of, like, 600 families. And the oppression they faced from their families, culturally, socially, and the restrictions and kind of how they could behave as women. And this is even true for Rozhin, who comes from a Kurdish, Sunni family

that was, like, pretty opposed to the government. That area was quite restive. But still, the strictures that she had to live under when she was a child were quite restrictive.

And they both kind of make their way to Tehran, and they're, they're no longer facing the restrictions of their families, but now they're facing the restrictions of the states and the morality police, which is much more common in kind of these big cities than in some of these small towns and villages.

And they, you know, they had already at such a young age become kind of very stubborn and sort of adamant in pursuing their own rights. And that didn't change even when, you know, the person on the other end had a baton and a van to throw them into.

And so both of them are arrested repeatedly for how they're, how they dress in the streets. Both of them kind of pushed the boundaries on hijab in the years leading up to 2022. And then, you know, that summer there was just a sense, I think, overall in Iran that, like, something was about to happen. The, you know, Raisi was, President Raisi, was in charge at the time, very hard line, very conservative, and under him, the, the mood was just very much people were being arrested in really violent ways. We saw these videos of, you know, a woman pleading with the morality police not to take her daughter because she was sick, all these sorts of things.

And so then when Mahsa Amini dies, is killed, I think, you know, we try to try to trace, like, why did that, why was it that moment? And I think we kind of chalked it up to a few different things. One of which being, you know, she wasn't an activist, she was just an ordinary person in Tehran and visiting Tehran. And she was killed. And many people, millions of Iranian women, and then millions of men who knew their daughters or their wives or their sisters who had also been arrested by the morality police, they felt like this could have happened to any of them.

And I think people were just, they just had it. And so we kind of see this very spontaneous outburst. And it, it lasts quite a bit. I mean, it, I think it got power from the strength of its slogan, which Woman, Life, Freedom, a very kind of unifying one. Those are basic things that Iranians kind of wanted to assert their right to. There were a few different other elements, of course, it kind of grew into a larger set of protests that encompassed kind of all of the demands that Iranians had had.

And it did have an enormous cultural impact, and social impact. I think what we learn kind of in talking to people and what we see now is that, you know, Rozhin's family, for instance, has changed in some of their views, and members of her family have apologized to her for how they treated her when she was growing up.

I've talked to women who used to wear the hijab and don't anymore. I've talked to women who, always resisted against it but got flack from their conservative family members, and they don't hear that criticism anymore. So I think across a range of kind of societal sectors, things like ideas have changed.

In terms of why it didn't result in kind of political change, I think these demonstrations can be powerful, but street protests are just one tool, and they're a very dangerous one. You're quite vulnerable when you go out into the street against an entity that is willing to use firepower against you. And I think the Iranian opposition, due in large part to great repression internally, has not been able to kind of strategize about different methods of resistance, what might be safer methods of resistance. And so I think that is one factor.

We kind of talk about this in Kohsar's story, sort of the techniques that she uses, the ways, the tools that she has to kind of fight back. A lot of it is sort of public-facing, social media, going out in the street, et cetera. There's not kind of a organized way for her to, you know,

when she's in Iran, to use her rage to kind of channel it in a more maybe strategic way. Do you want to add anything?

SHARAFEDIN: Just, just briefly. I think if you look at the, the Women, Life, Freedom, and the story of Rozhin and Kohsar from a generational perspective, the first generation of the revolution were those who believed in the system, like Mehdi Karroubi, who was a true believer.

I think then it, it came my generation that they wanted to argue with the first generation and make some, gain some liberties. Like, if I wanna just give a very simple example, the first generation believed that no one should wear jeans because it's a Western culture. My generation was arguing with them that it's okay, it's not really a Western culture.

But the third generation-

MALONEY: Interesting

SHARAFEDIN: ...they didn't ask. They just wore short jeans and went on the street, to the streets. The, the, the way they did it is, like, is so brave, and it was a fight against authority. My generation was trying to argue with the authority, and authority included my parents as well.

But this generation, they didn't believe in the authority. As Yeganeh explained, the, the rebellion of these characters starts with their own family, and then against the system. So that, that, that's an interesting part that we see it's happening.

And also, I think the interesting part that we try to show in this book is this constant pull and push between the nation and the state. And it's a sad story when, when you read that how they felt, but it's also an inspiring story that how Iranians don't give up. They go after the Green Movement, after the Reform Movement, they go and find another innovative way to fight against the system.

Women, Life, Freedom is interesting because it's a leaderless movement. Why it became leaderless? Because the previous movement, which was the, the Green Movement, the, it, it had leaders, but it was controlled because the, the system put the leaders under house arrest. So that they, they, they, in, evolve in a way that we will create a system which is leaderless. They tried it, but it didn't work, but I think the inspirational part is that they are trying to come up with new ways to fight against the system

MALONEY: I think the word inspiring is a great, great descriptor for this book because it is, as you say, there are no perfect characters in here, but it is so inspiring to, to see the, the trials and tribulations, but also the efforts that people undertake to come together to really continue to push back against the creeping authoritarianism and repression and violence of this regime.

The, the book ends in a really powerful way as well, with the return, to the screen, the first speech of Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader who, who has since been killed, after the June war. And it, and it ends with a sense that felt very ominous and, and really does, I think, lead you to understand, where the regime was on the eve of the January protests, and then the decision in February of the United States and Israel to launch just, not just a set of strikes, but a full-fledged effort to try to change the regime through military violence.

We know the outcome of that. The regime appears to have managed to, to stand, to, you know, it remains today. Khamenei himself was killed, but his son, who has not been seen in public, appears to be the, has been named the new supreme leader and appears to be helping to shape decisions from behind the scenes.

Can you give us a little bit of a sense of of, you know, based on this rich history of the way the regime is managing to get through this period of time with, you know, you know, a country that's been bombarded, a senior echelon of leaders who were removed by those initial strikes in February, and an economy that's now being blockaded by the United States, and yet it appears to be holding against, against all odds and against two of the most, technologically superior militaries in the world.

How is that possible, and what are your thoughts on how the, you know, based on this amazing history, how the regime may evolve?

TORBATI: Yeah, I mean, I think what we learned kind of in the last 10, 12 weeks is that, and sort of has become clear to us as well, individuals are very important in shaping kind of the trajectory. I think Khamenei had a huge impact on what Iran has become over the last 37 years. But the system is bigger than one person or one general or one national security advisor, whoever it might be. And it's a system that's very devoted to its own survival and self-preservation.

The, it's also a bit of an uneven playing field. So, you know, Iran is projected to have 70% inflation this year. Food prices have gone through the roof. There's, you know, layoffs that have been happening as a result of the war. And it, the, the system and the leadership is willing to absorb those costs and have Iranians pay the price for that in order to survive this, this war and not capitulate to the United States and Israel.

And that is something that, you know, the United States has to worry, like Trump, President Trump has to worry about public opinion, and his, his party has to worry about the midterms. And so I think the, the, the Iranian government can use tactics and can bear a lot more pain than the American side can. And I think that helps to explain some of, you know, their, their survival up to this point. I'm sure you have thoughts.

SHARAFEDIN: Just to briefly add to that you've heard, I'm sure you've heard that, why all the leaders of Iran have the same name, Khomeini, Khamenei. And guess what? We have another Khamenei again. Like, it's, it's not accidental. It's all about continuity. The system wants to create this image of continuity that it's the same, it's the same thing. We are in charge, and we are in control.

And all the fights against the system was to cut this continuity, to change it, to transform it into something new, but the system is very resistant. And now we saw that, that even an, an, a foreign intervention can't create any disruption and disconnection. So that, that, that's interesting.

I, I want also to add that this trajectory is interesting. Let's remember that the Islamic Revolution happened because many Iranians want to be independent from the Western and Eastern powers. So that sentiment has been very strong in the Iranian society. But what happens in almost 50 years that many Iranians wish that a foreign power comes and attacks Iran, and, at, at least we see in some of the characters of the book, they're happy when Israel and the US hit, the, the military targets and military commanders. So also that, that evolution is also very interesting that we see in the Iranian society.

The result of the, the war is not that promising for many Iranians and those who wished for a change, in the system. There is – they say that the system, the regime has changed, but in the eyes of Iranian, there is no regime change, and if there is, it has changed to something worse.

MALONEY: Well, I now want to turn to the audience and bring you into the conversation directly. We have microphones at the back of the room, and if you could please state your name and any affiliation, and please keep your questions short and in question form. Over in the back here. Microphone. Okay.

QUESTION: As a journalist, are, are you just worried about the ethics? And I'm – I wonder about the destiny of the sources because there's, there is so many executions is going right now in the middle of the war.

TORBATI: Yeah. I mean, you know, obviously, like, there's some things that we can't speak about, but...and a lot of the people, who we write about are not, no longer in the country. You know, as a journalist, I give people a lot of chances to, you know, understand sort of how they're going to be named. Are they okay with that? Do they, do they, you know, how, what do they feel most comfortable with; over, and over, and over, for months and years really for some of these people.

And at some point, I have to take yes for an answer. And I, I, you know, I try to give people also their own agency. They understand what their [questioner interrupts] yeah, yeah, we're for, for most of them we do. [questioner interrupts] As far as we understand, yeah. I kind of don't wanna get into a ton of details, but yeah.

MALONEY: How about back in this side of the room, and then we'll go to the middle.

QUESTION: Sure. Hi, Alex Sanchez. I'm a journalist and analyst with different places in here in DC. You talked about at the beginning of your presentation that Iran is a very multi-ethnic nation. Of course, you have the Persians, the Azeris, Kurds, Baloch, Turkmen, and many others. Can you discuss more how your book portrays them? What kind of stories do they have? For example, the Azerbaijanis in the north that live in East Azerbaijan province or West Azerbaijan province, they have been treated second class citizens quite a long time. They have suffered because Lake Urmia has dried up. Can you discuss more how the people outside Iran, outside Tehran, the non-Persians are, are portrayed in your book? Thank you.

TORBATI: Yeah, so Rozhin is Kurdish, and in kind of describing her upbringing, we talk about kind of the lack of investment in the, the villages. Like, she didn't have running water until she was nine, and sort of the resentment that a lot of Kurds in her area had towards the central government, not just the Islamic Republic, but also the Pahlavi government before that.

Kosar is Azeri Turk, and we talk about some of the chauvinism that she faced when she came to Tehran, the kind of making fun of her accent and sort of, you know, things that she faced in the workplace, and, and in school.

I think, so Karroubi is Lor.

SHARAFEDIN: He's, yeah.

TORBATI: Yeah, so he's another kind of ethnic minority.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah ...

TORBATI: We tried to kind of have a diversity of ethnicities as, you know, well.

SHARAFEDIN: And I think we, we try to include these provincial stories as well. One example that I can say that is in the book is the travel that Mehdi Karroubi makes to Sistan, Baluchestan, in south, southeast of Iran. And he sees the absolute poverty of many Iranians who are living there. Children don't have shoes, their face covered with flies, and there's no sewage. And he becomes very upset when he saw, he, he sees that because he said, "Well, the first two decades of the revolution, it was war, we were blaming the Shah, but now if there is some such shortcoming because of corruption, it's our problem."

So when he comes back to his hotel, he's not a smoker, he, he asks for a cigarette and starts smoking. So we try to show that how, they saw firsthand how the corruption in Tehran

and the central part of the government has created, and this, like, discrimination in the sidelines of the, the, the, the country.

MALONEY: I think we have a question here in the center.

QUESTION: Thank you. my name is Bill Klay. I'm a retired international banker. it is my belief that the the Chris- Christian West, and particularly the Christian right, has a very negative impression of Islam and Shia Islam. Therefore, the question that I have for you is twofold. To what extent do you think the Iranian government has impacted the view of the West, the Christian West, on Islam, and particularly Shia Islam, and what's happened inside Iran to the devotion to Islam and Shia Islam? Thank you.

TORBATI: I don't know that I am capable of answering the first question, 'cause I'm not totally sure how much interaction the Christian right has had with Iran and, and what, what role it plays kind of in their imagination. The second question I definitely can answer. we, we kind of talk about this with Rozhin's character. She, she kind of rejects sort of religious belief pretty early on in her life. And we show through her there's a government poll that was conducted, its results were secret, but then they were leaked to BBC Persian a few years ago, and it found that huge numbers of Iranians, they were asked, "Are the people around you, have they become more or less religious in the last five years?" And I think that was sort of a, a clever proxy question for, have you become more or less religious over the last five years? And huge numbers of them said less.

There was a big increase in the number of people who wanted the separation of mosque and state. And I think, I mean, we talked to kind of some sort of atheist activists and people who are kind of in that space, and there's a sense that Iranians see, some Iranians at least, see Islam as responsible for what is happening to them, and they maybe don't distinguish between Islam versus the kind of Islam that the state is practicing and enforcing on them.

And so there is kind of a moving away of, in some sectors from Shia religious belief, sometimes towards Christianity, sometimes just towards atheism, sometimes towards kind of like a Eastern spirituality. It's a very interesting kind of change in Iranian society.

SHARAFEDIN: Yeah, I think, let's be realistic. The move in the region towards Islamism happened after the Islamic Revolution. So Islamic Republic was a role model in the whole region, and it pushed other countries, Saudi Arabia and many others, towards Islamism. And I believe we are experiencing a renaissance of somehow religion in Iran, that people, Iran, many Iranians, they're, they're moving beyond religion. They don't see that as, as a savior. And they, they believe in a secular system.

So if this movement can succeed, I think it can create a ripple effect in the whole region, that it moves the region beyond this, the wave of Islamism that it experienced. Because if you look at the history of the Middle East in, in the last few decades, they have only tried to experiment new Islamist systems, like al-Qaida, the Taliban, Islamic State caliphate. They, that Islamism that started with Islamic Republic created that ripple effect.

But I think the secular Iran, we have the most religious government at the moment and the least religious society. And I think if that can be translated in the, into a political system, it can have an impact in the region as well.

MALONEY: We have just a few more minutes left. I'm going to try to squeeze in two more questions. I have two up front. You have a mic right next to you.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Rebecca Morrison. I am an Iranian that left with, at the time of the revolution as a child. As a writer and novelist, I have a hard time trying to figure out what Iran looks like today. And I was wondering how much of the social media that we see from Iranians in Iran, the Instagram accounts, Twitter, how much of that is a true reflection of the

different people's lives? Because there is, as, as you know, there's these accounts that show millionaires doing tennis clubs, and then you have creatives on the street, and then you have protesters. I don't know how much of that is filtered through other sources.

MALONEY: And we'll just take one other question, and you can answer them-

TORBATI: Sure ...

MALONEY: and, and give any closing remarks you wanna make.

QUESTION: Kei Kato. I'm a visiting fellow at the CSIS. Just arrived from Japan. I just purchased your book, and have yet to read it, and I look forward to drawing lessons. But do you have any warnings, to, after doing a study of Iran, do you have any warnings to other countries' leaders about what's happening in their country and what might happen? Any country, preferably the US, but other countries as well.

TORBATI: Well, I don't wanna really necessarily comment specifically, but I think particularly the corruption section shows what happens when the private sector acquiesces to authoritarian impulses. And I think a lot of countries can take lessons from that.

On the social media front, I think it's like any country, like, there's a subset of very online people here in the States, and there's, you know, a certain way you would view society that way, but maybe it's not the full picture. But I do think it reflects some portion of society.

I mean, Rozhin and Kosar were very online, and, you know, the, and they are representative in a lot of ways of their generation. But they're not the only members of Gen Z, and they're certainly not, you know, they don't reflect someone like Karroubi or even Hila. They're just very, they have different influences, different views. Kosar and Rozhin grew up online, and the other characters kind of didn't.

So I think just like any society, it's just really hard to draw broad conclusions from kind of just what we see on, on social media.

SHARAFEDIN: I, I totally agree. Yeah, I think in a, in a sense, I think it's—in a society that we don't have free press, there there's no freedom of speech, I think social media is the best gauge we have to understand the, the Iranian society because that's where they go and express, express themselves.

I think maybe what we try to say in this book is that a lot of actions with the best intention can have devastating results. And I think what we try to say in the book is that this transformation doesn't happen because the system wants to turn into a worse version of of itself. Usually, we see that the, those turning points were moments that could have been stopped and prevented.

The, our book is not for, like, was not intended to, intended to be for other countries. But we thought that if there is a change in the system in Iran, if there is a revolution in the future, I think they can benefit by going through this one and learn how not to repeat the same mistakes again.

MALONEY: It seems like a very fitting way for us to close this discussion. Before we do, I do want to remind you that we have a table out front where you can purchase a copy of "Stolen Revolution." If you're watching online, I would strongly encourage you to find a copy at your local library or from your local or online bookseller. This is a book that, in my honest opinion, it will be of huge interest to those who have never read anything on Iran, but are watching the news and want to understand better. It will be of equally huge benefit to those of us who have large libraries of books on Iran. This is a classic, and I strongly urge you to read it.

And I want you to join me in thanking Yeganeh and Bozorgmehr for the book and for their conversation today.