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(Mis) Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy from Washington

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Introduction

By Negar Razavi

This roundtable brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to further contextualize Iran's foreign policy before and after the so-called "12-day war," launched by Israel against Iran in June 2025 with direct military support from the US.

In many ways, the 12-day war has been decades in the making. Since the 1990s, Israeli leaders and their allies in Washington have repeatedly called for military strikes against Iran, accusing the Islamic Republic of secretly developing nuclear weapons that they would use to annihilate Israel – accusations not only denied by Iran's leaders but also undermined by U.S. intelligence assessments. While ending and/or delaying Iran's nuclear program was the explicit reason Israeli leaders gave for attacking Iran in June 2025, they quickly expanded their charges against their regional enemy, pointing to the Islamic Republic's support for its armed regional allies in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen – the members of the "Axis of Resistance" – and their domestic oppression of the Iranian people as further justifications for such strikes. In response, Iran retaliated by sending long-range ballistic missiles against Tel Aviv and other cities across Israel over the next week. After the U.S. dropped several 30,000 pound "bunker busting" bombs on Iran's underground nuclear facilities, Trump declared an end to the war and forced a ceasefire between the two regional enemies. Pundits and policymakers in Washington and Tel Aviv alike were quick to claim victory, even as they failed to achieve their stated (or even unstated) objectives.

But how did this war play out for those in power in Tehran? How did the war align with or undermine the Iranian government's foreign policy objectives over the past decade? How has the war shifted the Iranian government's geopolitical and domestic political calculations? What role – if any – did ordinary Iranians living inside and outside the country play in shaping these policies?

At Security in Context, we have been organizing a series of events and discussions over the past year focused on "Reassessing U.S.-Middle East relations" through a regional lens. Too often, analysts in Washington and various European capitals fail to attend to the broader historical, geopolitical, and political conditions that shape the policies of regional actors – particularly those, like the Islamic Republic, that they deem as adversaries. Our project aims to address this gap in knowledge.

In July 2025, we hosted an interview with Professor Vali Nasr on his latest book which attempts to assess Iran's foreign policy in its own historical and geopolitical context. The following roundtable expands on that discussion by inviting a group of scholars and researchers, who not only have studied different aspects of Iran's foreign policy through a historical, media, and political lens but also have a deeper understanding of how Washington represents – and often misrepresents – Iran's foreign policy.

Roundtable Discussants:

Reza H. Akbari (PhD Candidate, History, American University)
Niki Akhavan (Professor of Media Studies, Catholic University)
Peyman Jafari (Assistant Professor History and International Relations, College of William and Mary)
Daniel Tavana (Assistant Professor of Politics, Pennsylvania State University)
Moderator: Negar Razavi, Senior Researcher, Security in Context

1. What have the Iranian government's primary foreign policy objectives been over the past decade?

JAFARI: There is a tendency among US policy analysts to overstate ideology in Iran's foreign policy and overlook it in US foreign policy. In Washington, many view Iran's actions through an ideological lens that exaggerates its threats and distorts the factors shaping its decisions. This is especially true regarding Iran's two key foreign policy objectives: building regional alliances (often labeled "proxies") and pursuing a nuclear program.

The former is attributed to "religious fanaticism" that drives Iranian leaders to export their ideology. Yet even at its peak in the early 1980s, exporting the revolution was not purely ideological. According to the CIA, "The revolutionary leadership believes that if Iran fails to export its revolution, the country will be isolated in an unfriendly environment of hostile regimes. Most of these leaders are preoccupied with the example of Prime Minister Mossadegh's government in 1953…" Iran's sense of isolation and its security concerns intensified after Iraq invaded in September 1980 – a war in which Baghdad received critical backing from Arab states, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, even when it used chemical weapons. This experience shaped Iran's defense doctrine of self-reliance through its missile and nuclear programs, and forward defense through alliances with regional groups that were united in opposition to US support for Israel and dominance in the region. However, it was only after the US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) that forward defense became central to Iranian strategy, culminating in the formation of the "Axis of Resistance" in response to Iran's inclusion in the "Axis of Evil."

Similarly, Iran's nuclear program is not driven by a messianic desire to hasten the apocalypse. Instead, the ideological rationale for Iran's nuclear program is rooted in the discourse of national sovereignty and opposition to foreign interference, which can be traced back to oil nationalization under Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1951 and under the Shah in 1971. Until recently, Iran aspired to achieve "nuclear latency," which means that it has a civilian nuclear program that provides some of the technologies, facilities, materials, and expertise needed to develop nuclear weapons, but that it doesn't develop nuclear weapons. Rather, Iran uses its "nuclear latency" to create both deterrence against its adversaries, and leverage in negotiations with them. Iran, however, never achieved genuine "nuclear latency" as it agreed to limit its

nuclear capabilities and subject them to international supervision under the provisions of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

AKBARI: To echo and add to what Peyman said, the underlying logic of Iran's foreign policy has revolved around the core principle of "strategic deterrence," or as Iranian military officials refer to it, "forward defense." The Islamic Republic maintains that it will not initiate war, but it has the capacity for "rapid and proportionate response" to incursions. This doctrine rests on three pillars: 1) building an "Axis of Resistance," 2) maintaining a nuclear program, and 3) expanding the country's missile arsenal.

For Iran, "strategic deterrence" functioned as a dissuasion tactic intended to impose costs on potential aggressors. Following this logic, the "Axis of Resistance" was built as a defensive shield through diplomatic engagement and material support for non-state actors and allied governments in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine. This network aimed to keep conflict beyond Iranian borders, and when necessary, wage asymmetric rather than direct warfare. This strategy emerged partly in response to Iran's limited modern weaponry compared to advanced military capabilities of rivals such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, as well as from historical lessons drawn from the Iran-Iraq War, as highlighted by Peyman.

AKHAVAN: One of the Iranian state's primary claims for its regional foreign policy over the last decade or so is a rhetorical argument almost identical to the one that George W. Bush's administration used to justify its ongoing presence in Iraq after the 2003 invasion: "we fight them there so we don't have to fight them here." Having previously faced security issues on its eastern borders, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria in 2013 and 2014 provided the state with the justification for "defensive" activities beyond its western frontiers. Of course, the state was active on the ground in both Syria and Iraq before this, but after the rise of ISIS, the state rhetoric increasingly shifted in the direction of justifying intervention in the name of protecting the homeland.

Were they successful in achieving these objectives?

AKHAVAN: The Iranian state could point to the ostensible defeat of ISIS in both Iraq (2017) and Syria (2019) as evidence of its successes. Over the last decade a familiar phrase has cropped up in Iranian media spaces, which is repeated in seriousness by state supporters and as a form of ridicule by critics: "at least Iran has security." Although not always as explicit, this logic of defense in the interest of domestic security could also be found in justifications for Iran's support of its other regional allies, including those like Hezbollah with which it has had decades' long relationship. Syria and to some extent Iraq as well as allies like Hezbollah and the Houthis were not just within Iran's sphere of influence but provided it with a defensive buffer zone. This is why, as we discuss further below, the fall of Assad (and the rise of Ahmed al Sharaa, previously known as al-Jolani) as well the weakening of Iran's other allies in the region in 2024 have been seen as such a major blow to Iran's standing and power in the region.

JAFARI: A success? Yes and no. Over the past two decades, Iran has had relative success in building regional alliances and advancing its missile and nuclear programs, thereby establishing a measure of deterrence. Yet these same strategies have created vulnerabilities and tensions, especially after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, which led to Israeli-American strikes on Iran last June. More importantly, the effectiveness of these strategies has been constrained by domestic political dysfunction, which has fueled economic problems and public dissatisfaction. As a result, the Islamic Republic has lacked both the hard and soft power necessary to be a regional role model capable of transforming its alliances into an alternative political pole.

AKBARI: There have definitely been some gains but also serious costs to Iran's foreign policy. Building a defensive shield through the "Axis of Resistance" has come at the cost of economic hardship, international isolation, and domestic challenges. The loss of key allies such as Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the recent 12-day war, has further strained the core pillars of Iran's strategy. A surge in nationalist sentiment and relative state-society unity following the war may temporarily bolster past practices, but the conflict has also exposed the limits of the deterrence doctrine and undermined the leverage once gained through its dual-track framework of resistance and diplomacy.

Until the 12-day war with Israel, this approach proved to be relatively low-cost, flexible, and effective. It was rooted in the war-of-attrition logic developed during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which emphasized the use of prolonged battles to deplete enemy resources over swift victories. The recent conflict, however, has forced Iranian officials to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their security plan. The present moment is marked by confusion, indecision, and ongoing debate, which some in-country scholars have described as the "purgatory of ceasefire."

In a similar vein, Iran's nuclear program has served more as a tool of diplomatic leverage than a direct pursuit of nuclear weapons, though the threat of weaponization always looms. Through this balancing act, Iran has sought to gain bargaining power, deter threats, and strengthen its regional and international standing. This calculated ambiguity has produced mixed results. It has brought occasional diplomatic recognition, most notably amid the 2015 Iran Deal negotiations, as well as severe economic sanctions. Meanwhile, Iran's missile program offers conventional retaliatory capabilities, especially given its aging air force.

2. Looking back into history, are there continuities in how Iran has pursued its foreign policy interests (even before the Islamic Republic)? How and why have these calculations or interests changed over time?

AKBARI: Widening our historic lens beyond the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, which rarely happens in Washington's analysis of Iran, reveals important continuities and changes in how the country has defined its interests over the past century. Notions such as protection

against foreign intervention have long been central to Iran's foreign policy, particularly since the 19th and early 20th centuries, when fluctuating borders and repeated foreign interventions played a key role in shaping national identity. These historic conditions informed Iranian views on nationalism and expectations from their state, especially regarding its responsibility to provide territorial defense.

As a case in point, not unlike his successors, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979) defined the country's national interests around pillars such as sovereignty, regional dominance, and military advancements, particularly during the second half of his reign. A close reading of declassified documents from the late-Pahlavi era (mid-1960s-1979), for example, reveal remarkable continuity in the Shah's negotiations with America over Iran's nuclear program. While the Shah invoked "national rights" the Ford and Carter administrations remained deeply concerned about weaponization potential and actively curtailed the country's nuclear ambitions. The Islamic Republic's current anti-American posture complicates diplomacy, but historical evidence also shows that US nuclear policy has been mainly driven by nonproliferation concerns rather than apprehension over the nature of the regime in Iran. The popular narrative of unequivocal US support for the Shah, promoted by the Islamic Republic, also misrepresents the historic fact that several US administrations during his reign tried relentlessly to limit the nuclear program. While today's focus is on uranium enrichment and debates in the 1960s and 1970s centered on platinum production, the underlying concern in both cases is weaponization.

A significant change has been Iran's overt anti-American posture. During the Pahlavi era, the US viewed Tehran, albeit sometimes reluctantly, as an ally. The Shah's direct line to Washington enabled him to cultivate a nuanced relationship, leveraging US support and entangling Washington through military deals and other means to bolster his position against regional threats such as Iraq's Ba'athist regime, the Soviet Union, and internal dissent. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has maintained several core principles of Iran's historic foreign policy. However, the current government's framework is more blatantly grounded in anti-imperialism and self-reliance, while simultaneously pivoting toward Russia and China for economic survival, strategic balancing against the West, and enhanced global connectivity. It is also important to point out that such anti-colonial paradigms were not invented by Islamic revolutionaries as a complete break from the past; rather the current Iranian government absorbed and reinterpreted many existing pre-revolutionary discourses. Anti-Western attitudes and critiques of "Westoxification," for example, were promoted by Pahlavi-era cultural elites as early as the 1960s, despite the Iranian government's Western-dependent modernization agenda. This line of thinking was gradually adopted, expanded, and institutionalized as part of the Islamic Republic's official ideology, including its foreign policy.

AKHAVAN: The history that Reza is laying out showing continuities between the two radically different systems of the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic of Iran – may be very hard for us to imagine. However, at least two important additional continuities come to my mind: establishing and maintaining its status as a regional power and building a civilian nuclear

program, with the latter being a pillar of the former. The alliances and partners each government formed in pursuit of these goals are radically different, of course, but the core policy aims are parallel. Late in his reign, the last Shah made no secret of his goal to be the dominant power in the region, telling a reporter in 1973 that this was not just ambition but an inevitability. While the IRI has not been as explicit in its quest for regional power, it has exerted its influence beyond its borders via its support for groups such as Hezbollah and others in Syria and Iraq.

We must also view Iran's nuclear ambitions in the broader context of regional power. For the Shah, the nuclear program was a sign of modernization, and modernization was a key platform of his and his father's rule. While emphasizing a peaceful nuclear program built for research and energy needs, the Shah built up Iran's conventional weapons arsenal. This has also been the case with the Islamic Republic, which has insisted on the civilian nature and necessity of the program while expanding its conventional weapons arsenal, most notably its missiles. Whereas the Shah pursued nuclear and regional ambitions with the help of European and US partners, the Islamic Republic turned elsewhere, looking at China and Russia as an ally, but also seeking to develop its homegrown civilian nuclear and conventional weapons program. In a very broad sense, then, Iran's plans for regional power and independence have remained continuous – the allies, ideological alignments, and tactics have changed, but the vision of being a regional power is the same – and civilian nuclear capacities are very much a part of that vision.

3. Today, there's a lot of talk in Washington that the Iranian government is facing its most serious crisis since its establishment in 1979. The popular policy view in DC is that Iran suffered a humiliating loss from the "12-day war," which set back their nuclear program and destroyed their top security leadership. Combined with Israel's decimation of Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and the Houthis in Yemen; the fall of the Assad government in Syria; and growing domestic opposition to the Iranian government, the Islamic Republic is the most vulnerable it has ever been. How would you assess Iran's security position after Israel and the US attacked Iran?

TAVANA: It is natural for the US and Israel to sell the war as a "success" from their perspective. Unsurprisingly, Iran is doing the same. But I am not certain either side won or lost. And in many ways, the optics of the war – or how its outcomes are sold to domestic audiences on both sides – are more important than the objective realities of the war itself.

My assessment is that the war was largely a stalemate. The US and Israel succeeded in infiltrating upper echelons of the military command, destroying certain military capabilities, and doing some damage to Iran's nuclear program (though we do not yet know the extent of this).

But I think we should be careful in describing the war as a "loss" for Iran. The military command survived the initial infiltration of its command structure and was able to fire rockets into Israel

for the duration of the war. Iranian leaders also learned something about the US' reluctance to participate in a large-scale, conventional war – in part due to the pressures of public opinion in the US There are other factors, too. I just do not think it is clear yet that the war itself really changed much of the balance of power.

JAFARI: I have to agree with Daniel. Israel has indeed weakened Hamas and Hezbollah, and contributed to the downfall of the Assad regime, before turning, with American support, to waging war on Iran. Yet, several issues complicate the picture, showing why Iran is not as weak as some policy makers assume.

The "Axis of Resistance" has been degraded, but neither Hezbollah nor Hamas have been eliminated. As the United States presses Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah in the coming months and Israel intensifies its campaign to annihilate Hamas, they will confront the fact that these groups are not simply creations of Iran but products of specific local conditions. Moreover, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units and, especially, Yemen's Houthi rebels (Ansarullah) have proven more resilient than many expected. It remains too soon to predict their long-term trajectories, as future crises could reconstitute or reinvigorate some of Iran's allies.

During the June war, Iran was able to retaliate against Israeli strikes by launching missiles that caused significant damage to Israeli military and strategic infrastructure – damage that was underreported due to Israeli censorship. Both Israel and the US depleted their stockpiles of defensive interceptors, limiting their capacity to sustain a prolonged conflict. A ceasefire was reached after the US struck Iran's nuclear facilities and Iran responded by launching missiles at the American Al Udeid Air Base. Although Iran informed Qatar in advance to allow interception, it was later revealed that at least one missile struck the base, demonstrating Iran's capacity to inflict damage under different conditions.

While the US strikes severely damaged Iran's nuclear facilities, they also gave Tehran an opportunity to wield its "strategic ambiguity" more assertively by curtailing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency – particularly regarding the location of its enriched uranium stockpiles and remaining centrifuges.

Finally, Iran's strength or weakness must be understood relative to its adversaries' capabilities. Israel and the United States are both nuclear powers with advanced military technologies. However, Israel is militarily fatigued, economically overstretched, and facing severe domestic and international political fallout from its actions in Gaza. These challenges, combined with its military dependence on Washington, impose constraints. Iran recognizes that pursuing its current strategies risks provoking further Israeli attacks, but it also understands that if Israel escalates beyond a short war, as in June, US support will be less certain. President Trump is unlikely to risk being drawn into an extended, costly ground war.

AKBARI: I don't want to downplay the facts. Iran, despite its public posture, endured significant losses in the 12-day war. Israel claims to have killed 30 Iranian commanders and 11 nuclear

scientists, and targeted eight nuclear facilities and 720 military sites. Iran's Health Minister reported 1,060 dead with nearly 700 of them civilians. The civilian toll alone will leave an indelible mark on Iranian society, with trauma that may last for decades – a sociopolitical reality that receives little attention in Washington's macro-level analysis. The IAEA confirmed US strikes caused serious damage to Iran's above-ground nuclear sites, though the full extent remains unclear. A Pentagon assessment suggested only a months-long setback, yet the US president claimed the program has been "obliterated." This has promoted a facetious response from Tehran, which argues that if the facilities were destroyed, there should be nothing left to inspect or sanction. Leaning into this narrative, Iran has adopted a short-term strategy of "nuclear ambiguity" as it builds internal consensus on a longer-term path.

The collapse of the Assad regime dismantled over a decade of Iranian investment in Syria. Combined with Israel's blows to Hezbollah and Hamas, for now, Iran may find itself fighting on the back foot, reassessing its deterrence doctrine under mounting regional pressure and strategic uncertainty.

Yet it would be shortsighted to see this as Iran's exit from the battlefield. Much writing on the topic focuses on the immediate crisis, but a broader temporal frame, may reveal multiple potential avenues for Iran to regain influence by exploiting emerging power vacuums.

While Tehran's next moves remain unknown, its strategic calculus could extend well beyond the near term, factoring in the possibility that Israel could overplay its hand.

What are policymakers and pundits in Washington getting wrong here?

AKHAVAN: As you've indicated, this talk in DC predates the 12-day war. Many pundits and analysts had called 2024 Iran's *annus horribilis*, a year which saw, in addition to what you have noted above, the death of Iran's president and foreign minister in a helicopter crash, the assassinations of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh while a guest in Tehran, and ongoing internal squabbles about its regional and domestic policies. While Iranian leaders and officials attempted to counter the narratives about the loss of their regional influence and overall power, it was hard not to see these attempts in 2024 as anything other than a denial of their now diminished standing.

Ironically, the 12-day war has had a restorative effect for the state. I am not speaking here of the leadership or material losses because it is undeniable that the state took major hits in terms of the assassinations, the damage to military and civilian infrastructures, and the embarrassment of intelligence failures. The latter has magnified an already existing paranoia about infiltrators and a compromised security structure. So clearly, all of these are real losses.

But the war had a restorative effect in at least two ways. The first has to do with the domestic response which – while not a full rally-around-the-flag reaction though some of that was evident – was nonetheless one that tended toward messages of unification against an external enemy. I will say more about the domestic response in my answer to your next question, so I will move

here to the second way in which I think the war had a restorative effect for the state, and that has to do with its regional reputation, which had taken a major hit after many years of supporting Assad during the Syrian civil war. Iran's military responses to Israel's attacks, seem to have shifted the sentiment on the "Arab Street." This support was not only evident in the large number of social media posts of users celebrating or praising Iran's military response but also in the discussions taking place on major Arab television networks.

TAVANA: Over the past four decades, at various points, security experts have described Iran as both simultaneously exceedingly weak – but the US' greatest rival. They have described Iran as operating in a "crisis of legitimacy" – but still somehow able to maintain rigid ideological control over a network of proxies across the region. They have described Iran as a "rogue state" unconstrained by international rules and norms – but still a "rational" actor aware of its own vulnerability.

I find these characterizations of Iran exceedingly lazy. This is not to say that nothing has changed over the past two years, or that the war has not changed the way the Iranian government views the region or its own survival. There were certainly moments during the war when I thought the Islamic Republic might not last. But it is still here – and as of this writing it seems likely to survive this most recent "crisis."

4. Turning then to the point about domestic opposition, how did Iranians view their government before the war began – particularly as it related to their foreign policy? Were there observable social and political differences or tensions inside the country? Areas of agreement? Have these views changed in any clear way since the war?

TAVANA: First, Iranians – like people everywhere – spend very little time thinking about politics and government. And they spend even less time thinking about foreign policy. This is not to say that politics do not matter, or that Iranians do not have thoughts or feelings about the way they are governed or what their government is doing. But most people are busy living their lives, working, spending time with their families, and so on. Second, Iran is not a democracy, which makes it difficult to reliably assess public opinion. With these two points in mind, I think we should be cautious when making inferences about what Iranians want, or think – or how they view their government.

As a quantitative social scientist studying public opinion in authoritarian regimes, these are questions I struggle with myself. But, in a recent nationally representative survey I conducted in Iran, my co-authors and I found that support for the Islamic Republic is likely between 33 and 54 percent (among Iranians over the age of 18). The Iranian government would like the outside world to believe that number is much higher. Opposition groups and movements inside and outside the country would like the outside world to believe that number is much lower.

But I think the finding points to the fact that Iranians – like people in many countries – are deeply divided. The nature of that division is complex. Some who oppose the government do so for ideological reasons. For example, they may oppose theocratic government or may reject strict (state-sanctioned) enforcement of Islamic laws and customs. Or they may oppose the government for nationalistic reasons. Alternatively, those who support the government may do so because they believe in the government's religious mandate to rule. Or they may simply have a difficult time imagining what an alternative government might look like. It is difficult to paint a clear picture of these divisions – but they are there.

It is still too early to say how things have changed since the war. Scholars have documented a "rally around the flag" effect in a variety of post-conflict settings. Something similar is likely playing out in Iran, but – if it does exist – we do not know how long it will last, or what it will mean. We do not know what, if anything, the Iranian government may do to capitalize on a small bump in public support.

AKHAVAN: Discontent and opposition to the Iranian state is widespread, and this includes Iranians who are not "regime change" proponents. In other words, it would be a mistake to see tensions around domestic and international policies as merely aligning along the lines of "pro-regime" and "anti-regime." Having said that, it is clear that before the outbreak of the war, there was also much hopefulness about the nuclear negotiations. With the exclusion of hardliners who have been against any nuclear deals with the US all along, there was a sense that a nuclear agreement was the best way to get some relief from the economic ills plaguing the country. Significant segments of the political elite and ordinary people believed that the hostile stances promoted by factions aligned with the likes of Saeed Jalili, the former nuclear negotiator and a hardliner conservative, had only isolated Iran. Indeed, the more moderate President Masoud Pezeshkian was elected with the hopes that he would usher in kinder and gentler foreign and domestic policies, and the nuclear negotiations were to be part and parcel of this.

The Israeli attack on Iran two days before Iran's sixth round of negotiations with the US shattered these hopes. Hardline factions claimed vindication for saying that the US could never be trusted – in their view, Israel would not have attacked Iran without US knowledge or approval, with the US's own attack on June 21 further entrenching this view. The response of these factions and their supporters is not surprising, but what is notable are shifts among those who had otherwise generally been in favor of negotiations.

Murmurs of calls for nuclear weaponization became louder among social media users of all stripes, but even those who remained against weaponization (or even against nuclear enrichment all together), applauded the role of Iran's missile system. As indicated in later reports in the US, Iran's missiles rapidly depleted US-made terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD) missile interceptors. Many Iranians believe that Iran's ability to impose both physical and psychological harm with its missiles were key to getting Israel to agree to a ceasefire. While Iran's official policy still indicates a willingness toward negotiation, Israel's attack acted as a

wake-up call for those who may have put all of their eggs in the diplomacy basket, and the state can now more easily make the case for further militarization, specifically as it relates to Iran's missile systems.

JAFARI: In Iran, as elsewhere, public opinion is divided on many issues, including foreign policy. My sense is that a majority resolutely condemned the Israeli and American attacks. The war did not appear to significantly alter Iranians' critical stance toward the Islamic Republic, but it did produce four notable shifts. First, nationalist sentiments were reinvigorated, with officials seeking to mobilize them by fusing traditional nationalist narratives and symbols with Islamic ones. Second, state repression has increased, and some Iranians became less willing to voice criticism of the state or participate in protests, fearing that instability could benefit Iran's foreign adversaries. Thirdly, while still critical of the Iranian government, many became more distrustful of Israel and the US, and their Iranian supporters in diaspora. Finally, a growing number were inclined to accept the official narrative that Iran's regional alliances are essential for its security. Obviously, not all Iranians have experienced these shifts, and some of them may prove temporary.

A clearer picture emerges from Iran's organized civil society, which has expressed its position in public statements and articles. Opposition to the war and calls for national unity appeared prominently in newspapers such as *Ham Mihan* and *Shargh*, as well as in statements from academic and cultural associations. The Writers' Association of Iran, five labor organizations, a Baluchi women's collective, and over 1,700 academics all issued strong condemnations of the Israeli-American attacks, arguing that war causes death, destroys infrastructure, and undermines the civil society driving Iran's pro-democracy movement.

Dissidents, too, have spoken out. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, currently on medical furlough from Evin Prison, and others issued statements opposing the war and the Islamic Republic's policies. More than 700 dissident intellectuals and political activists joined Mir-Hossein Moussavi in condemning the war and calling for a referendum so Iranians could decide their own future.

AKBARI: Depending on the exact moment in question, the Iranian public's attitudes toward their government's foreign policy have long reflected a mix of ambivalence, opposition, and support. Yet Washington's analysis often reduces the people to a homogenous grey blob stripped of nuance, diversity, and political complexity. In reality, the society is marked by pluralism and shaped by overlapping factors such as social class, economic status, and cultural upbringing. The population, now over 90 million, is highly educated, politically aware, and capable of distinguishing between foreign threats and domestic repression. Before the 12-day war, a substantial portion of the citizens had expressed frustration with the government's "Axis of Resistance" strategy. This was reflected in protest slogans like "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, my life for Iran," which criticized the Iranian government's regional spending over domestic needs. Such sentiments were also echoed by reformist and moderate technocrats, intellectuals, and politicians. Recent opinion polls have shown the diversity of views. For example, in October

2024, even though a majority remained skeptical of normalizing relations with Israel, a majority also supported restoring diplomatic ties with the US. The public's pro-American sentiments may shift after the recent conflict, but there is currently insufficient evidence to draw a definitive conclusion.

The aftermath of the 12-day war is disrupting some long-held beliefs across the political spectrum. For the first time in recent memory, the threat from abroad is no longer theoretical as Tehran and other major cities endured nightly bombardments; an experience many opposition voices had dismissed as fictional hardliner "resistance" rhetoric. Despite existing widespread belief that the ruling authorities' have contributed to the crisis, these opposition groups now find themselves relying on the same state and security apparatus to defend the nation. This uneasy dependence has emerged amid a fragile ceasefire, the longevity of which remains in doubt.

In the wake of the 12-day war, a new iteration of Iranian nationalism has emerged as well, which is being forged through a dynamic negotiation between state and society. This version blends love for the homeland with religious symbolism: framing Iran as a sacred land tied to Shia sanctuaries and ancient Persian mythology. Amid the war's collective shock, there appears to be a temporary sense of national unity, but its endurance is precarious. As time passes, old divides are likely to re-surface between government factions and among various segments of the society and the state. Historically, amid such factionalism and domestic sociopolitical protest, the ruling elites tend to find ideological allies within the population while marginalizing opposition voices in their national narrative.

5. And how do you as a researcher make such assessments? What pieces of evidence do you rely upon to analyze Iran politically?

AKHAVAN: As a media researcher interested in how the state and officials use media platforms to communicate and push their agendas and how ordinary citizens use these same media spaces to "talk back," and as someone who is unfortunately unable to return to Iran, my primary sites of analysis include a variety of social media spaces, Iranian newspapers, and news and other programming from inside Iran. Unfortunately, there are no major independent Persian language platforms either inside or outside Iran. Inside Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is not just state owned but managed by particular hardline factions, and outside Iran, all of the major broadcasters are funded by dark money or foreign governments. However, when clips from such media are circulated on social media, a researcher can get a sense of how their ideas are being received by different sectors both inside and outside the country. This is an imperfect method since it relies on mediated spaces and cannot account for those users who are not online (by choice or necessity), and there is the rising problem of bots, content manipulation, and censorship imposed by social media platforms themselves. But media clips remain an important window into viewpoints that may not otherwise get air time,

and in the case of official accounts from inside Iran, they provide a direct view into how they are assessing and framing issues for Iranian and other audiences.

AKBARI: For my assessment of Iran's domestic opposition and state-society relations, I do my best to rely on a wide range of evidence to form a layered understanding of the dynamics. I draw from some opinion polls to track shifts in public sentiment over time. I also pay close attention to protest movements and their demands. Intellectual debates within the country – whether in journals, university circles, or clerical speeches – offer further insight into the evolving landscape of how the state and society interact. I monitor the activities of opposition parties and assess how they attempt to mobilize support, both inside and outside Iran. Social media platforms like Telegram, Instagram, Clubhouse, and X provide real-time access to popular discourse, while academic scholarship helps contextualize these developments. Finally, I study official government rhetoric and state media narratives to understand how the Iranian government frames its legitimacy and responds to internal dissent. The interplay of these sources form my analysis of Iran's state-society dynamics.

6. Can you speak a bit about the role of the Iranian diaspora in shaping Washington's perceptions of Iran's foreign policy generally and during this latest war specifically? Can you also explain some of the divisions in the diaspora? And how do these divisions play out to influence US policy decisions?

AKHAVAN: This is a tough one to explain briefly, so I will respond to this from the position of a diasporic Iranian who has long worked against sanctions and war on Iran. My personal experience in this regard reflects the divisions within the Iranian diaspora and how hard it can be to influence Washington's perceptions without being tied to unsavory funding sources or political movements. My position has always been and continues to be that sanctions are another instrument of war that only hurt ordinary people and civil society, increase corruption and strengthen hardline movements inside Iran, and lay the groundwork for full scale war. For these views, I and others who have worked against war and sanctions have long been smeared by fellow diasporans as "regime agents." Ironically, my activities against war and sanctions are also the reason I am unable to return to Iran. The prevailing currents in the diaspora are platformed on foreign-funded Persian channels as well as on mainstream media and cannot countenance any anti-war or anti-sanctions viewpoints. Such currents are in many ways the flip side of the same coin as hardline officials and their supporters inside Iran: any nuance and/or call for diplomacy is seen as anathema and a reason for calling someone an "agent." There is no shortage of Iranians in the diaspora – whether recently arrived, longtimers from the first generation, or second generation and beyond – who have been marginalized by these extremist diasporic voices. The fact that their assessments and predictions have been proven false time and time again has proven no barrier.

In the US, it has long been a career killer to offer even the mildest criticism of the state of Israel. The platformed figures and movements in the diaspora (the most obvious being Monarchists) have made it similarly risky for analysts assessing Iran, but from the other direction: anything short of demanding regime change in Iran by any means necessary is unacceptable. The confluence of the two trends was apparent after Israel's attack on Iran. Diaspora-organized anti-war protests had taglines of "Stop War" and "No to Regime in Iran," bizarrely not even naming Israel in the posters or at the protests. Reza Pahlavi and his Monarchist supporters as well as major outlets like Iran International were happy to name Israel, but far from issuing condemnations, they openly supported and cheer-led the attacks, downplaying or outright denying civilian casualties and calling for people to fill the streets in opposing the state – unsurprisingly for any serious Iran analyst, their calls to hit the streets were not heeded.

While such voices are magnified on foreign-funded outlets and within Washington circles, their positions were not uncontested. An outright war seemed to have been the red line for many across the political spectrum in the diaspora. It was heartening to see nuanced anti-war commentary not only from Persian language diasporic Iranians but those in the second generation who were fearless in their ability to offer clear-eyed analysis of the war and its impact.

As a media researcher, I must emphasize the lack of independent Iranian or Persian language platforms as a major problem. While we have plenty of thoughtful analysts in the diaspora, they are often bullied into silence and/or simply do not have the space to make as much impact on the broader discourses and the policy community.

TAVANA: Many diasporic Iranians maintain strong cultural, communal, social, and economic ties to Iran, and a significant number do not necessarily live outside Iran by choice. At the same time, many diasporic Iranians are relatively disengaged from political developments in or related to Iran. This mix is common among diasporic communities: some members are deeply engaged, and some are not.

In recent years, a very large and vocal segment of the diaspora has openly criticized the Iranian government and, in many cases, tried to pressure their own governments to act accordingly. But just as Iranians inside Iran are divided, so too are diasporic Iranians. We have even less insight into the views of diasporic Iranians than Iranians in Iran.

During the "12-Day War," many diasporic Iranians – including those opposed to the Iranian government – criticized the US and Israel's military strikes on Iran. Others, however, saw the strikes as a potential opportunity to end, or seriously weaken, the Islamic Republic. Iranians who live outside Iran should of course be free to exercise their right to criticize the Iranian government however they see fit. But ultimately, decisions about Iran's political future should be made by Iranians who live inside the country.

To speak from personal experience, I have seen relatively few examples of diaspora organizations – from across the political spectrum – seriously engaging with what Iranians inside the country expect or want from their government. That lack of engagement is a huge problem.

Here in the United States, we know from experience that political change imposed "from the outside" rarely succeeds. And yet, rather than amplifying the diverse voices within Iran, many diasporic groups tend to speak on behalf of Iranians in Iran. This tendency worries me.

7. Where does Iran go from here? What security calculations do you foresee the Iranian government making moving forward? Do you see a path toward a peaceful resolution between the US and Iran? Has Iran's relationship to the Arab world and/or Turkey changed since the war? Will this shift the regional balance of power in any way?

JAFARI: The June war was shocking for Iran's political and military establishment that is now trying to ramp up the country's security and deterrence based on the weaknesses and capabilities I described earlier. The "Axis of Resistance" will continue to operate with a lessened role in Iran's deterrence strategy, while the Islamic Republic will try to restore some of its capabilities. The alliance with the Houthi rebels remains important, for instance, and Iran's increasing influence in the Horn of Africa shows that it is still able to project power beyond its borders. For short-term deterrence, Iran will invest more in its missiles and its capacity to close the Strait of Hormuz, if needed.

Given the weakening of its informal alliances, Iran will turn more towards formal regional and global alliances. In fact Iran could capitalize on the growing fear of Israeli domination among regional powers such as Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and use its relations with them to put pressure on Washington. Iran received no immediate military assistance from Russia and China during the war, but their political pressure on Washington played a role in achieving a ceasefire and Iran will rely on them to restore its military capacity, especially its air defense and missiles. At the same, Iran stands to benefit economically and politically from President Trump's policies that are pushing together and antagonizing BRICS members.

The most urgent issue that determines where things will go from here is the nuclear issue. While the June war emboldened those in the establishment that argue for rebuilding Iran's nuclear facilities and militarizing it to restore deterrence, there is a growing consensus that this option would lead to new attacks by Israel and the US and that a nuclear deal with the US is the best way out of the crisis. This is the view of President Masoud Pezeshkian and the appointment of his ally, Ali Larijani, as secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) signals that the conservative political and military forces that had sidelined him are open to a change of direction. The problem, however, seems to be the reluctance of the US to engage in negotiations, in order to keep the military option open to itself and Israel.

AKHAVAN: I agree with Peyman. Iran is still signaling that it is open to negotiations. Despite not getting any direct help from Russia, China, or others in the region during the 12-day war, it is attempting to maintain relationships and avoid further isolation. Aragchi's media appearances and social media posts indicate how Iran is pursuing both. On August 7, FM Araghchi posted an interview with a Geopolitics Professor on his Telegram page with the headline "Resumption of talks more likely than new conflict," which examines the policies and challenges currently facing Pezeshkian's administration. The interviewee points to recent changes in the SNSC as an indicator that Pezeshkian and his cabinet may face less resistance to resumption of negotiations. I agree that such changes are significant, especially since they could not have taken place without the approval of Ayatollah Khamanei. Nonetheless, the resumption of negotiations faces many uphill battles. It is not clear how open the US remains to them, and as I indicated earlier, the Israeli attack and subsequent US involvement has dampened the expectations of many who were pro-diplomacy and hardened the positions of those who were not.

In terms of its approach within the region and with China and Russia, Iran appears mindful of not harming what strategic partnerships or fragile relationships it does have. Multiple meetings with Saudi Arabia (July 8 and August 8), for example, indicate that the Iranian government wants to continue the Beijing-brokered 2023 rapprochement between the two countries. Relations with Turkey are a bit trickier, considering Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan and Iran's suspicions of the latter providing intelligence help in facilitating Israeli attacks on Iran. Turkey's relationship with Iran has also long been uneasy over Syria. While Iran has not been as active in its public diplomatic engagements with Turkey in the same way that it has been with other actors, it has not rocked the boat either, again indicating that Iran is playing it safe in the post-war environment as it recovers from the various blows of the Israeli attack and maps out what may lay ahead.

AKBARI: Iran's political system is autocratic. Nevertheless, dominant narratives in Washington often overlook the limits to the Supreme Leader's power. The idea that all government actors follow Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decrees ignores the Islamic Republic's complex and opaque policy-making system, which involves numerous executive structures, institutions, and bureaucratic layers. Policy-making in Iran, like most countries, still requires a process of consensus-building, in this case with bodies such as the SNSC, in coordination with the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), executive branch, and other stakeholders, translating the Leader's general directives into action. This process is ongoing right now with multiple potential directions being debated. As the internal negotiations continue, however, some preliminary agreements have emerged among officials and opinion makers.

Most Iranian government insiders and critics have concluded that Israel's aim was regime collapse, leading to chaos and potential partition. Opinions on US intentions differ. Security organizations and hardliners in Iran argue that Washington has given Israel free rein in the Middle East. In contrast, centrist, reform minded, and diplomacy-orientated Iranian analysts

believe that the US made a long-term strategic error, echoing its misadventures in Iraq and Libya, with Netanyahu dragging America into an unwanted war. This understanding has produced two diverging schools of thought in Tehran.

The far-right in Iran argues military escalations justify exiting the Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and perhaps even pursuing nuclear weapons as deterrence. Moderates and reformists advocate for strategic calm, diplomatic re-engagement, and easing of internal sociopolitical tensions. Their vision may include flexibility on red lines like enrichment, regional presence, and the missile program. This approach hopes to signal transparency and an attempt at driving a wedge between Netanyahu and Trump. The pro-diplomacy camp also criticizes strategic ambiguity, citing Libya and Iraq as cautionary tales. The upper echelons of power have not set a definitive path. However, like the others on this roundtable, I see the President's appointing Ali Larijani, a veteran moderate conservative, to lead the SNSC as a cautious pivot toward pragmatism.

Domestically, the public will ultimately decide whether any conciliatory approach by the government has gone far enough. Much has been written about the "rally around the flag" response, yet what perhaps matters more is who is carrying the flag. Many intellectuals and critical politicians who acted as a bridge between the state and the discontented public have been sidelined, exiled, or jailed. Opposition attempts to revive some figures have yet to produce tangible change. Even in less dire conditions, national reconciliation is a difficult undertaking, yet now it is more crucial than ever. If the state continues to isolate itself, it risks losing vital societal support amid the crisis.

The leadership is forced to walk a tightrope of managing domestic expectations, rebuilding deterrence capabilities, and re-igniting diplomacy as the threat of the UN Security Council's "snapback sanctions," set to expire in October, looms. Though voices of moderation struggle to be heard these days, de-escalation remains Iran's best option. Achieving it, however, is more difficult than ever. Any new outbreak of conflict, regardless of which side initiates it, risks dragging regional and global players into another prolonged and costly Middle East war.

TAVANA: I think we can all agree that it is difficult to predict where things will go from here and if, or how, the war has fundamentally changed the way the Iranian government views the region or world. But I will draw from comparative examples to highlight two possible paths for Iran's domestic future.

One possibility is that the Iranian government reacts to the war by repressing its domestic opponents with greater tenacity. There is evidence that at least some elements of the Iranian government are already pursuing this strategy. In July, for example, the Iranian government expelled nearly a million refugees from Afghanistan, with some Iranian officials accusing them of posing a security risk and alleging that some were paid by Israel to carry out seditious activities inside Iran. If the Iranian government perceives itself as weak and vulnerable, it may

accelerate or expand these activities – and whatever limited political competition that exists in Iran could be further constrained.

The second, less likely, path is one where the Iranian government reacts to the war by realizing that, in many ways, domestic dissatisfaction and unrest encouraged the war itself. And so, according to this logic, the Iranian government may manage some sort of controlled opening: either by freeing political prisoners through various amnesty initiatives, facilitating a long overdue political transition, or encouraging greater participation in government among younger Iranians. I must admit that the prospects for something like this seem low. But there are signs, for example, that some members of the political leadership feel this way. In recent weeks, for example, the Iranian government has used more nationalistic – rather than religious – rhetoric to shore up support for the government. There has also been some recent reporting that political elites are beginning to imagine, and jockey for power in, a post-Khamenei Iran.

I think it is still too early to tell how this may change the government's approach.

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