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JOHN TIRMAN: Hello, everybody. Welcome to this edition our of Starr Forum on behalf of the MIT Center for International Studies. I'm John Tirman, and today we're going to be discussing a book that I published with my two co-authors, who are here today as well, and that book is *Republics of Myths, National Narratives and the US-Iran Conflict*, just published by Johns Hopkins University press.

And in fact, if you wish to buy a copy of that, you can get it directly from the press at a 30% discount. And the promotion code on that is the letters H-T-W-N. And these details are also in the chat feature of this webinar.

Firstly, I'd like to thank our colleagues here at the Center for putting this on. Laura Kerwin, who is moving down the road to another job-- down the aisle, I should say. She's staying at the Center-- and has served in this capacity for a long time and very, very competently, and Michelle English, director of communications who's run the Starr Forum now for several years. And as you know, it's been a great number of events.

I want to point out to our viewers that we will have a Q&A session at the end of the talk. So please find the Q&A feature at the bottom of your toolbar. This is where you can type in your questions, and we will, I hope, get as many as we can. In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature, also on the bottom toolbar where we will be sending out resource links such as bios, upcoming events, and other information that may be of interest to you.

Now let me introduce my co-authors and my co-presenters today. Firstly, Malcolm Byrne, who is deputy director and director of research at the nongovernmental national security archive, based at George Washington University. He's a research affiliate of the center and a co-author on an earlier book that we did together.

If you haven't explored the National Security Archives, many offerings, not only on Iran, but on virtually every US foreign policy topic, you really should treat yourself to this extraordinary resource.

Also today with us is Huss Banai, who is associate professor of International Studies at the Hamilton Lugar School of Global and international Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, which happens to be my alma mater. He is a research affiliate of the center, and also co-author of earlier works that have come out of this long project, which I want to mention.

We have been toiling at this for quite a number of years, using a method developed by James Blight and Janet Lange formerly of Waterloo, University and Brown University, where we bring together policymakers, scholars, and documents mostly procured by the National Security Archive through Freedom of Information Act request to reconsider issues of foreign policy, crises, events that are important parts of the history of the US abroad.

And we were fortunate to bring together a number of people who have been extremely helpful, such as Bruce Riedel and Tom Pickering, Faherty Farhi, Janet and Jim, many others that have contributed mightily to this long process.

And I mention this not least because we've been able to use a lot of the new information we generated in four five conferences in the book. So this is a very key piece of what we're up to, and I hope you will come to appreciate that.

So let me begin. And we're going to go through a few of the key aspects of the book in our presentation. It's a reinterpretation, really, of the US-Iran relationship, and it relies mainly on the idea of the powerful influence of national narratives in US and Iranian policymaking and action over the years.

Narratives are stories about who we are as a nation, the legends, the myths, the tales, and some factual history that are conveyed through education, the news media, art and architecture, and other cultural institutions. There are powerful, often subtle ways of providing a sense of mission, duty, and political life.

All nations have narratives, and America and Iran each has very elaborate stories that are fundamental to the culture and politics. I won't go into the details of this because they are rather elaborate, but I want to say a few things about what these narratives consist of because it's fundamental to how we understand the confrontation that we have seen over the years-- now more than 40 years in its most acute phase-- between these two countries.

And the dominant narrative of Iran now has to do with Imam Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad who vied to lead Islam after Muhammad's death in the 7th century in the Christian era. He was murdered by rivals, and his martyrdom propelled Shia Islam, now mainly Iranian and provided a key story of noble sacrifice among other attributes and narrative warrens of foreign intrigue and betrayal.

A second strain of the Iranian national narratives draws on the belief that the Persian nation has been violated repeatedly by foreigners, hundreds of years of rule by Arabs or Turks, principally. This has led to a belief that Iran is actually Aryan, with genealogical links to Europe and a self-regard that demands global respect due to a people who trace their origins to Cyrus the Great 2,500 years ago.

These two narrative strains in Iran have co-existed uneasily. Of course, the Islamic Republic of Iran has promoted the so-called Karbala paradigm story of Husayn as the principal and most important narrative, but the fact is that many Iranians still hold on to the more secular version that was promoted, in fact, by the pre-revolutionary regime, the Pahlavi monarchy.

So they exist uneasily, but there are important commonalities. And the main one is this distrust, deep distrust of foreign influence in Iran. Now, as to the United States, the master narrative of America derives from the myth of the frontier. Puritans fostered a set of ideas in which their destiny was tied to the taming of the wilderness and reaping its bounty, all the while subduing the savages that inhabited the wilderness.

The frontier provided freedom and small league democracy, endless expansion, and the riches of that expansion, and along with it, endless wars to annihilate the savage Indians. When the continental frontier was settled by the end of the 19th century, political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson advocated for extending the frontier overseas to the Philippines and China, to Latin America and finally, to the Middle East.

You can see then that these two nations have conflicting narratives. America, expansionist at its core and indeed expansion, enabled by violence, and Iran deeply suspicious of foreign influence, demanding respect, and also relying on violence, the violence that its narrative entails.

And so here we are today, 43 years after the revolution in Iran, hostage taking and all that came with it. The one breakthrough, which we'll address in a little bit, seem to be with a nuclear accord completed in 2015. And yet it failed. It is failing. And even as we speak, we're considering what can revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as it's formally known.

And it's my belief, anyway, that the difficulty of getting back to that accord is due, at least in part, to the power of the narratives. The suspicion that comes with it, the sense of betrayal that comes with it, the belief that the other is either imperialistic or savages. All this negativity, all these obstacles are in part and the work of the national narratives that are embedded in our political culture and our popular culture.

And that's where we are today. And this is what we argue through the book, that the narratives have had this inimical effect on relations between the two countries. So with that, I'd like to turn it over to Malcolm Byrne to continue the discussion. Malcolm.

**MALCOLM
BYRNE:**

OK. Thank you, John. I hope everybody can hear me. Thank you to John and the Starr Forum for putting this together. We really appreciate it. And a big thank you to John and to Huss for this whole great experience that we've been on for many years now, exploring this extraordinary subject. It's been a blast, and it will continue. I have no doubt.

I'm going to talk briefly about one of the main features of US relations with the Islamic Republic over the years, which has arisen again and again. And that's the subject of missed opportunities.

Missed opportunities are basically occasions when chances appear to make improvements in the relationship, which we know that both sides have wanted by and large over the years, or they're chances to lower tensions or just to realize some kind of objective that is in each side's interest, but that ends up, for one reason or another, being dashed.

What is important to keep in mind when you're trying to make an academic study out of this kind of hypothetical issue is that these opportunities, these chances have to be generally realistic. They have to be achievable. They have to involve a decision or an action that a leader or a government might plausibly have taken.

So for instance, preventing the Iranian revolution or 9/11 would not count as a realistic objective or a missed opportunity, but failing to adhere to the JCPOA would count as a missed opportunity.

In fact, this approach was of such interest to us, and it seemed like such a great way to look at issues that it essentially was our main focus at the start of this project many years ago.

And it was one of the organizing themes that we had for putting together a series of what are called critical oral history conferences that involve American, Iranian, European veterans of the Iran issue sitting around a table and discussing what they tried to accomplish, what they were after, why things didn't work out, and so on. They're just fascinating discussions, and we have records of those available.

We conducted conferences specifically on the Iran-Iraq war. We had to on the Khatami period of reform, and we had one on that George W. Bush presidency, especially looking at Afghanistan, Iraq, and the nuclear portfolio.

The more we looked into this concept and studied the history and the dynamics of the relationship, it became clear that those missed windows, in many cases, had a connection to the more fundamental idea of national narratives, that they could often be explained by the impact of those belief systems that both sides held so closely.

So let me just give a couple of examples of missed opportunities, of which there are many. One that we focus on is the period of George H.W. Bush's presidency, particularly at the start and the budding set of interactions that Bush initiated with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1989 that involved trying to get the hostages remaining in Lebanon released and so on.

Related to that missed opportunity was Rafsanjani's whole initiative on his own to try to create an opening to the West using Germany as the fulcrum in the 1990s, which was a decade-long attempt that US officials essentially completely missed or dismissed.

Another example would be the post 9/11 period when there were lots of discussions and back channels in place, dealing with things like the reconstruction of Afghanistan and deconfliction in Iraq and Afghanistan that I'm going to talk a little bit more about later on.

A third example would be the 2003 fax that came in, the famous fax presenting a so-called grand bargain from Tehran that also got completely shoved aside. And finally, I would just to keep everybody on their toes. I would put Iran-Contra on the list of missed opportunities. And I'm happy to talk about that in any detail if anybody is interested.

So the next question, the one that we deal with in the book, is why were these chances missed. And let me just list a few broad reasons here. At the top of the list, I would put the fundamental ignorance that has characterized both sides' relations with the other.

We had a senior state department official under the Clinton administration at one of our conferences who acknowledged, frankly, that Iran's decision making process was a black box to them. And this was what they were supposed to be specialists in.

On the Iranian side, we also had some discussions and minor revelations from the Iranian side about the extraordinary notion that the decision by Iran to stop focusing on American targets of terrorism or assassination, even in the early 1990s and switch to Europe and other target areas, that that would somehow be seen as acceptable to the US because it wasn't Americans being targeted anymore, just extraordinary.

Related to that idea, I would add bias of different types cultural, bias in particular. And then we always have the factor of domestic politics. This is a constant obstacle that is inextricable from Foreign Affairs, as we all know, and it is just, as one example, one of the main reasons why George W. Bush's inaugural statement that goodwill begets goodwill ended up falling flat. I also list JCPOA as another obvious example of the role of domestic politics.

Lack of political will is another key element in my mind, the unwillingness to take risks or even to explore possibilities with an adversary, a pariah state like Iran. And very important, I think, on different levels is the lack of formal communications channels. We don't have relations. That has been an incredible hindrance.

During Iran-Contra, as one example of where this was a problem, we were relying on people like Manhego Bonhoeffer. Private self-interested intermediaries was just the kiss of death for anyone, and there were people involved in that operation who were interested in longer-term relations on both sides.

And another example of where this was a problem was in the post 9/11 period, where you had the Six plus two talks and even track two opportunities that had really significant potential, but were basically just too easy to wipe off the books when the likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld decided that they wanted nothing more to do with the Islamic Republic. So those are a few of the factors that can come into play.

And then now just to come back to the original point we argue in the book that each of these reasons-- and there are several others-- each of them can in turn be traced back to underlying attitudes and assumptions that are the byproducts of national narratives. So let me list just a few of those right here.

One of them is-- probably the most important-- would be the persistence of a sense of abiding distrust of the intentions of the other side. Another would be the tendency to make assumptions about the irrationality of the actors that you are forced to deal with.

Another would be seeing the other side, the adversary, in the Iranian case, looking at the United States in particular as irretrievably imperialistic and hegemonic with no possibility of reversing that trend or it was just seeing them as plain cruel or evil. And both sides have that tendency.

Then there is the notion that, again, both sides share the tendency to have a moral aversion against dealing with an enemy like Iran or like the United States. And we have plenty of examples of that kind of thinking.

And lastly, I would just put in basically the fear and loathing of being accused of appeasement. And that is something that we're going to face as the new round of JCPOA, whatever form it takes, if it even gets to that point, it's going to meet that big domestic barrier in both countries.

So it's not always down to narratives. There are a lot of factors that can be involved, but a lot of the time it is. And what I've just gone through are some of the beliefs and conceptions that you see coming up over and over again over the course of the last 40 years.

And in some ways, these are at the core of the problem that the two governments have faced with each other. And what makes them even trickier to deal with is that they do not fit neatly into any of the main theories of international relations that are out there, and that is the topic that my friend Huss is going to talk about next. Thank you.

HUSSEIN

Thank you, Malcolm. I hope everyone can hear me. Let me also begin by thanking the Center for National Studies and the Starr Forum and especially Laura Kerwin and Michelle English for their help in arranging this talk.

BANAI:

And a special thanks to John Tirman for organizing this book launch at MIT, which I think is the most appropriate place to launch this project in this way since it was there where the germs of this particular framing of US-Iran relations really came together over a series of meetings that John arranged.

I also want to acknowledge Malcolm and John as co-authors in this project. I have been very much a junior partner in this critical oral history project from the beginning when I was a when I joined up under the auspices tutelage mentorship of Jim Blight and Janet Lange, who invited me to meet John and Malcolm for the first time on Lake Como in Bellagio of all places, which is not too shabby for a destitute graduate student to get launched on his academic career.

And it's been a very blessed-- if I could use that religious language-- experience over the course of the last 15 years and a special honor for me to have been part of these projects. So thanks to both of them for being so central to my own academic and intellectual growth through this project.

As Malcolm said, I want to say a few words about how our framing of the narrative fits within existing explanations of their relationship, how it differs from some of the more dominant lenses through which scholars of international relations of US-Iran relations in particular have looked at this relationship, which is a major reason why we decided to really highlight and advance this narrative frame above those existing frames.

The first thing I want to say is that narratives, as John eloquently explained, cut across a multiplicity of factors that usually account for state behavior. The material factors, and there's a big disparity in US-Iran relations.

The United States is overwhelmingly the most powerful side of this relationship. Iran is militarily, strategically outmaneuvered and outweighed by the United States on the global stage, not to mention also the subject position of the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary regime that comes to power on the heels of some of the most-- if I'm being generous-- iconoclastic imagery in late 20th century that the world had not seen before. Hostage crisis, the seizure of US embassy, the open brazen contravention of diplomatic norms and international law in hostage taking.

But also on the reverse side of this, being a victim of an aggressor state next door, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which the United States, as we outline in the book, as we have in previous projects, did its utmost to ensure it weakened not only the Islamic Republic as a particular regime, but Iran's national interests and position in regional politics over time.

The narratives, in other words, that are born out of this specific relationship in this point in time are uniquely mutated derivative versions of those master narratives that John outlined and that we see continually evolve with different presidents, after different crises, but also after missed opportunities and breakthroughs in the relationship.

And as we took a measure of this relationship from the late period of the Carter administration all the way to the end of the Trump administration and the beginning of the Biden term, it's very clear to us that narrative that each government, each set of elites that are key players in maintaining this relationship has curated over time plays an enormously powerful role in conducting all sorts of direct, indirect, proxy relations between these two countries.

And here, when we look at it from this perspective, it's not that narratives are primarily about ideas or that they're primarily born out of particular events. They are a hybrid of all of those factors.

So it's very clear, as Malcolm and John laid out, that the national interests of each country-- and I say in the case of the Islamic Republic-- the interests of the regime itself, which is survival above and beyond anything else, above and beyond Iran's national interests as a country even. That those interests absolutely get channeled through these narratives, the narratives of martyrdom, of victimhood linked to the Karbala myth that John outlined for instance.

Weave in these events and specific subjectivities that Iran or the Islamic Republic is positioned in into either alibis for why it is that they're not responsible for particular actions or why they have been put or cornered into the positions they find themselves and by necessity act in this way.

And in the case of the United States, similarly, the hostage taking, Iran's support for terrorist groups and organizations across the Middle East, the fact that the Islamic Republic is very vociferous in its wish that the state of Israel is disappeared from the map of the Middle East, et cetera confirmed to the United States that this is a pariah outlaw regime that has to be tamed.

This is a frontier for the United States that is very much deserving of the kind of liberal international order that-- obviously, the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns has been in great dispute. And as a result, very much to the advantage of the ascendance of Iran's regional position at the expense of that narrative.

So it's not that national interests, which is a central pillar of realist theory for instance, in which states behave the way they do are invalidated by us highlighting the role of narrative. We merely show how narratives oftentimes undermine what is very much in the national interest of a particular country, precisely because they have become a badge of identity that the elites find it very difficult or disadvantageous to them to dispense with.

And that then puts in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy. The actions that follow those narratives tend to be taken in order to support a particular grievance borne out of that narrative that was spun after the previous event, et cetera. And we'll highlight some of these narratives in the next segment.

What I also want to highlight here is that what we are presenting here is very different from the kind of Huntingtonian clash of civilizations framing that very much projects onto not just nations, but regions, groupings of states, a civilizational identity that determines their perspective toward the world.

We don't make any such argument. We also don't want to essentialize Iranians or even particularly Iranian leaders as being driven by a civilizational, ideational framework that somehow guides their action independent of their decision making.

Rather what we're pointing out here is that precisely by looking at missed opportunities and breakthroughs in the relationship, what we discover is that narratives, when they are self-serving, when they are very much useful to elites for supporting their particular position, their interests, sometimes their material interests, their power hierarchies play a significant role as alibis for the kinds of actions that are, in fact, contrary to the stated interests by those leaders or the material interests of that country in that particular time.

Also we think the variation in the relationship. Since 1979 all the way to today demonstrates a pattern that shows that there are, in fact, coalitions, specific elites that are constantly trying to undo some of these narratives at crucial times in order to ensure the long-term interests of their respective countries and are either successful for a very short period of time-- I suppose in the case of the Obama administration, but I'll talk about in just a little bit, or in the case of the Khatami administration in the late 1990s, for instance-- but that eventually are undone because the balance of power of elites and coalitional politics domestically and in terms of third-party countries that support particular narratives outweighs those individual initiatives.

So there's a great deal of dynamism. By no means do we superimpose cultural identity, much less civilizational identity, on particular on these two states or even political actors. But in our interactions in the many conferences that we've held, in the debriefing we've done with former officials, it's always been a constant that whenever there is a counterpoint or a set of alternatives that are articulated to what the particular principle is articulating as the justification for their behavior or their decision making at the time, we find that there's immediately a convenient alibi in the narrative, that those principals and policymakers who can point to and say, well, we can't trust them, the other side because of this kind of pattern of behavior, et cetera.

One last thing I'll say before moving on to specific instances of narrative. One other crucial thing I don't want the audience to take away from this kind of framing is this notion that we are somehow drawing a moral equivalence between these two regimes, these political systems. There are times in the relationship in which-- and we are evaluative in this way in the book-- where we absolutely point to the opportunism of elites, to the moral deficit and decision making of particular administrations and leaders. There is no both side-ism here in other respects.

And that's one of the crucial points of departure for us, in fact, in this project in that this is not a equal relationship in material terms, but more importantly, when it comes to the power of narrative, it is variable, highly variable in how narrative is deployed by specific leaders at different points in time.

And it's important for us to always contextualize and go to particular events and looked at missed opportunities and breakthroughs, and evaluate them respectively and not rest back on easy narratives and frameworks that somehow make the actions predetermined or unchanging. I'll leave it at that, and I believe we now turn highlighting specific instances of narrative.

**MALCOLM
BYRNE:**

Let me just list three. We each did separate chapters, and we covered different periods of time and different issues. And so in my chapters, I looked at, first of all, the period basically from Mosaddegh to Khomeini, so the lead up to the revolution and incorporating that big original sin of 1953. That was one chapter.

And then I looked at the Iran-Iraq war. I looked at the Clinton-Khatami relationship and then the Bush 43-Khatami relationship. So I'll just pick one example of an event, an issue in each of those three post-revolution chapters.

So the first would be the Iran-Iraq war itself, which is interesting as both a product and a generator of national narratives or encourager, abettor of national narratives.

For example, it was simply assumed by the Iranian leadership that the United States Jimmy Carter's administration had given Saddam Hussein a green light to invade when every piece of paper that I found in the record shows that there may have been a couple of people like Brzezinski or conceivably Kissinger who wanted both sides to lose. Jimmy Carter had other concerns, the lives of the hostages, the free flow of oil, stability in the region, and so on. So this was just an assumption, one of many on the Iranian side about American perfidy.

Another instance during the war was that cemented American horror and distaste for Islamic Republic methods was the willingness of the regime to use human wave attacks and children in waging the war.

For their part, the Iranians were equally horrified at the assistance that the West provided to Saddam's forces in terms of chemical weapons, either wittingly or unwittingly providing chemical precursors, targeting information, what have you, topped possibly only by the shooting down of the Iran Airbus in July '88. That is one of the moments that still rests very uneasily with many Iranians in terms of building a picture of American and Western cruelty, if you will and evil intentions.

In the Clinton period, the event that stands out the most is the Khobar towers bombing in June 1996. And the byproduct of that that I want to just draw attention to was the letter that President Clinton wrote to President Khatami, hoping to open up a new era in the relationship with this new reform-oriented administration in Tehran.

And yet what it turned out to be, this, letter was not just a pure offering of goodwill, but essentially a litany of charges leveled directly at senior members of the Iranian leadership, including the Revolutionary Guard. This message was just completely messed up.

It was bungled because of the intrusion of domestic politics, the pressure on Clinton and his aides to show toughness, to show a rejection of Iran's terrorist methods, which by itself is hard to criticize, but the medium became very muddled. And the message that was delivered was just the opposite of the one that Clinton had initially intended.

So it's an instance of a combination of both domestic political pressure and Clinton's own aversion to the actions that the Iranians were believed to have taken by the evidence that they had available to them, and it resulted in a complete backfiring. The Iranian response was livid, and it basically was the last hurrah for the Clinton administration.

Then my last example is from Clinton's successor, George W. Bush. In the aftermath of 9/11, as more and more people, I think, are aware, there actually was quite a bit of an opportunity for both sides to cooperate in places like Afghanistan and even Iraq.

And at the Bonn conference in December of 2001, we have the best example of open cooperation between Mohammad Javad Zarif representing Iran and Jim Dobbins, the American diplomat, representing the United States at these talks on the reconstruction of Afghanistan, where Dobbins has written widely about Zarif's incredibly helpful and insightful contributions to drafting of the Afghan Constitution and coming up with ideas to pave things over in that part of the world.

But his attempts, Dobbins attempts to bring that to the attention of senior Bush administration officials in meetings at the White House and elsewhere fell completely flat because they went directly against the aversion that people like Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld had for dealing with the Iranians.

And President Bush himself thought for a long time that it was almost immoral to deal with these people, whence the idea for the axis of evil and the subsequent shutting down of any possibility of further cooperation during that presidency. I'll pass it on to, I think, John.

JOHN TIRMAN: Actually, we're going to go back to Huss--

MALCOLM Oh sorry.

BYRNE:

JOHN TIRMAN: --at this point try to keep it a little bit chronological. Go ahead, Huss.

HUSSEIN Thanks. So actually my favorite case of narrative being crucial to the relationship turns out to be both a breakthrough case but also the exception that really proves the rule of the narrative trapping, the relationship, and that's the Obama administration.

I think we're all familiar with the way in which Barack Obama-- and I'll say his full name Barack Hussein Obama-- bended the American narrative after his or by his election in 2008 and even prior to that and during the period of the Democratic primaries.

It's hard to imagine now so much has happened. But I'm old enough to remember how much the reason for candidate Obama's eventual success over the overwhelming favorite, Hillary Clinton, in the Democratic primaries in 2007 and 2008 was Barack Obama's opposition to the Iraq War but also, crucially, his very public vow to move away from the Bush administration's approach of alienating and not talking to America's enemies abroad.

In fact, Barack Obama as a candidate campaigned on holding talks with even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was probably the least palatable face of a post-revolutionary Iran in the office of a president. And Obama said that he would, in fact, engage but not compromise on America's national interests either.

So he articulated a very clear case of what some other scholars have called ethical realism, that the United States will in fact, stand for principle, but that it would engage. It would not continue on doing what the previous administration-- and frankly, what the long history of administrations before him had done, Democratic as well as Republican-- to basically draw a very bright red line in terms of what are the countries that are worthy of our attention and which ones that are not, and Iran was very much on the other side of the red line.

So Obama comes into office. And in his inaugural, he has this famous line of extending an olive branch if it is met by an unclenched fist, a direct reference to Ahmadinejad and Iran's very dangerous tilt toward increased enrichment activities of its nuclear program-- in its nuclear program, I should say.

And that really began to roll the ball, as we now know through a lot of memoirs and interviews we've done with officials who were involved in this. And a key figure here is the now CIA Director Bill Burns, who at the time was the Undersecretary of State, if I'm not mistaken, who transitioned from the tail end of the Bush administration to the Obama administration who became the number two in the State Department in the Obama administration eventually, who had a very key role in curating the backchannel talks or getting them going that eventually turned into the direct talks with Iran over its nuclear program.

At each step of that process-- and we record this in the book-- it was remarkable the extent to which media outlets, third party interest groups, pro-Israel groups in Washington, pro-Saudi lobbies in Washington.

In Tehran, the office of the Supreme leader, the very hard line regime loyalists around that office and the Revolutionary Guards and their media outlets basically screaming out the dominant narrative and setting their particular red lines for the negotiating teams in their respective capitals.

And it got to such an extreme point that President Obama himself had to give a series of very long interviews-- and these are now become very famous-- one with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* and another one with Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* in which he explicitly lays out why it is that despite inherent asymmetries in the relationship, it is very important for the United States to preserve its national interest and really focus on arms control and containing Iran's nuclear program.

And on the Iranian side, Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister and President Rouhani did a similar kind of messaging with their domestic media, although obviously the media environment in Iran is far more limited. Their power is far more limited ultimately vis a vis the Office of the Supreme leader, but in their own way try to communicate the national interest as well.

And managed to get a deal through only to see the very bend in the narrative himself, Barack Obama, be fingered by Donald Trump as an abomination, as a rejection of the American frontier myth, of the American meta narrative itself and by making America great again, obviously a central project of that message was to dispense with the Iran nuclear deal, which Trump did with gusto and with the support of the entirety of the Republican Party and even some Democrats, such as Chuck Schumer in the Senate as well. So that instance really highlights, I think, in a very dramatic way how the exception really ends up proving the rule. Let me toss it to John.

JOHN TIRMAN: Thank you both. I'll be brief. And it's an easy one to give a case of how narratives affect policy, and that is our former President Donald J. Trump. When the Trump administration began, actually during his campaign in 2016, Trump was very clear about wanting to undo the deal that his predecessor had put together.

Some people believe it was simply about his hatred of Obama with a good dose of racism involved, but what enabled this to some extent and how Republicans to a man and woman had lined up behind him in withdrawal from the deal, trying to destroy the nuclear deal was brought by, I think, the narratives again. And you can see it in some of the language that was used at the time.

And I'm going to read from the book and the chapter on Trump. I'm going to quote John Bolton, who wrote at some length about Iran, both just before he got into office as national security advisor and during his time there.

One thing that he talked about was Iran's significant violations and unacceptable conduct during the first months of the JCPOA. He then outlined a campaign to exit the nuclear deal and impose harsh and broad penalties on Iran.

In an op ed in *The Wall Street Journal* in early 2018 he called for ending the IRI altogether, quote "Recognizing a new Iranian regime in 2019 would reverse the shame of once seeing our diplomats held hostage for 444 days."

And later on he talks about-- in September 2018, he called the nuclear deal the worst diplomatic debacle in American history and warned, quote "According to the Mullahs in Tehran, we are the great Satan, lord of the underworld, master of the raging inferno. So I might imagine-- and they would take me seriously when I assured them today-- if you cross us, our allies, or our partners, if you harm our citizens, if you continue to lie, cheat, and deceive, yes, there will indeed be hell to pay."

Now, this was not very different from language that Trump himself, used although Trump usually conveyed things in tweets, of course. And you can't go on very long in a tweet, but he tried. He had dozens of tweets about Iran, including threats like the I just read from Bolton.

His Secretary of State at the time, Mike Pompeo, in somewhat more guarded language but nonetheless said many of the same things. So we saw not merely a withdrawal from a treaty that was popular in the United States and gave us the benefits of some stability in the region, but using extremely harsh language, it was practically borrowed right from everything we've ever heard about savages, that we need to subdue, annihilate, contain, what have you.

In the end, I think the point here is that as with the war in Iraq, where during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, we saw a reversion very quickly to the language of the frontier, the frontier myth, the particularly belligerent language toward the savages of Iraq, which is Hussein and the Ba'ath party and virtually all Iraqis.

And in that rhetoric, we have seen the old Cowboys and Indians references constantly, captivity myths, the captivity narratives that were very much part of the frontier experience, captives usually white women being taken by Indigenous tribes.

And we saw that in Iraq. We saw other kinds of language about how we had to protect our women and men had to man up and so on and so forth, things right out of the American frontier

So same thing in Iran. We haven't been to an actual war with Iran, although there's been a lot of violence, sabotage, the assassination of Soleimani in-- when was it? 2020, and a great deal of belligerent language. Just the other day, the Secretary of State again said about Iran that "all options are on the table," I mean this old, bone-weary phrase of clearly threatening with the most advanced possible weapons we have a regime that is not behaving the way we think they should behave.

So Trump really, I think perhaps more than anyone else, partly because he was a crude and ignorant man but also just acts on instinct, Trump perhaps more than anyone else brought these old tropes to the fore in policy and action in the very recent past.

So with that, I'd like to turn to the Q&A. And we do have some time for this, I'm happy to say. I'd like to remind everybody to type in their questions in the Q&A a function at the bottom of your screen. And we do have some questions, which I will summarize and direct to one of my colleagues.

Actually, the first three questions all have to do with the toppling of Muhammad Mosaddegh and how that has affected relations ever since. And I think it would be worthwhile-- I'll give this to Malcolm since he published a book on Mosaddegh, so he's knowledgeable-- to describe how it reflects, again, the national narrative but also how it really conditioned relations over the past now almost 70 years. Malcolm.

**MALCOLM
BYRNE:**

Yeah, thank you. It's a critically important question and it's one that would take forever to do justice to. I would just raise a couple of basic points. To me, what has always stood out as a tragedy of 1953, as far as US relations with Iran are concerned is that it followed such a bright period at the end of World War II when the Truman administration helped-- they didn't do it by themselves. The Iranians were actors as well in this-- but helped to get not just the British but the Russians out of Iran when the Russians in particular had violated their agreement to leave the country six months after termination of hostilities.

The US did not then rush in to replace those other great powers, as was the practice by imperial powers for many years before that. And for that, many Iranians, most Iranians thought this is great. The US is breaking the mold. And it was an incredibly positive period, but it was short-lived.

It wasn't that the coup immediately produced waves of negative reaction. I think it took time for that the notion to percolate, that what had really happened was not the liberation of the country from the clutches of an increasingly dictatorial prime minister.

It took some time for people to understand as the Shah's rule became itself more dictatorial, and as the US's role as seemingly unquestioning supporter of the Shah became embedded in the imagination of Iranians-- and I don't mean imagination as in this was not real. I mean embedded in their thinking-- as that image of US support for a dictator became more and more embedded, than it was inevitable that the US was going to pay some price when the revolution came.

And whatever the details are surrounding the coup, what the motivations were, what Mosaddegh's position was, et cetera, the important point here is that the narrative is that the United States overthrew a democratically elected leader and made certain that Iran's experiment, embryonic experiment with democracy was going to be nipped in the bud.

And that is a painful image that has stuck with many Iranians, not just the regime, although the regime has used it to pummel the United States repeatedly for years. But it is the equivalent for Iran of the image of blindfolded hostages for Americans, and it continues to color many people's perceptions today.

JOHN TIRMAN: Thank you, Malcolm. Here's a question that is an interesting one and that is the question is about the US obsession over Iran is so much greater than its seeming attention to North Korea, despite the fact that North Korea has already developed and deployed nuclear weapons while Iran has not. Huss, can you address that?

HUSSEIN BANAI: Sure. I was thinking about this. It is a very good question. I think it actually points to this earlier qualification that you made, John, but also we make in the book that the meta narratives are what they are, as we've articulated. But within, that the relationship itself is constantly evolving, and there are shifts and narratives everywhere.

North Korea has a different history with the United States, and it is in a different neighborhood and a different historical memory when it comes to the key flashpoints between the United States and North Korea. And it has neighbors that are highly invested in the diplomatic process that has brought direct talks between the United States and North Korean leadership.

In the case of Iran, none of that has been in place. In fact, up until the face-to-face meeting between Iran's foreign minister and John Kerry, the Secretary of State in the Obama administration, there were virtually, for 40 years, no face-to-face meeting between high level principals between the two countries. There were no diplomatic missions in either country. They have their intersections represented in other embassies.

And for all those reasons, the narrative of US-Iran relation is so much more untethered from the day-to-day conduct of diplomacy as is the case with North Korea. And the dynamics of the North Korean nuclear program also highlights what we said about narratives, is the narratives are borne out of events.

The narrative of US-Iran relationship will shift if Iran gets its hands on a nuclear weapon. I mean, that's one of the things that all administrations, European governments have warned is that yeah, it will put the two countries on a far more different, perhaps alarming trajectories because this narrative now is weaponized in a way that we've never seen before.

JOHN TIRMAN: OK. We have a question here that I am particularly fond of. So I'll take it myself. It's the comparison between Iran and the Soviet Union, and that is that they were both born in revolutions and both are in need of reform or in the case of the Soviet Union, was in need of reform. And will Iran suffer the same fate as the USSR?

It's an interesting question because the Iranian regime has been very sensitive to this idea. That's why they have been so opposed to-- the talk about the Velvet Revolutions in Eastern Europe and clearly have been worried about civil society turning into a revolutionary force and therefore, suppressing civil society as we knew it in those heady days, 1989 in Eastern Europe.

So the Iranians clearly are worried about it. And what's, I think, particularly interesting in the question is they didn't reform and therefore, they fell, in the case of the Soviet Union. Would the same thing happen to Iran?

Well, I think the same thing could happen to Iran, but it's not that they failed to reform. The Soviet Union tried to reform, and that's when things went south for them. And so the lesson that Iran could take from that experience is if you reform, you're doomed. This is an old argument, debate goes back to de Tocqueville, actually. Raise people's expectations through reform, and if you can't deliver, then you may be toast. Let me get a couple more--

MALCOLM Can I add to that, John?

BYRNE:

JOHN TIRMAN: Yeah, sure.

MALCOLM Can I add a point just quickly that what struck me about that question was that where there are really close parallels between the two stories of US Soviet and US Iranian relations just in terms of the narratives that many of the same, exact same narratives applied in terms of-- if I just take the American side for starters-- in terms of American thinking about the Soviets.

There was just abhorrence for, . In that case, the idea of godless communists and the birth of the neocons, essentially, was built around this notion that we should not morally have anything to do with these people.

Another example is the depths of distrust of Soviet decision makers and policymakers, that no treaty that we could possibly sign would be worth the paper it was written on because we can't ever rely on them to fulfill them.

And then a third example is this absolute conviction that naked aggression in the region and in the world was the Soviet modus vivendi, modus operandi, and therefore, we needed to tailor our policies accordingly. All of those ideas were held and propounded by a particular group and influenced American politics and the way Americans treated the Soviet Union. And I think you see similar kinds of dynamics with the situation with Iran.

JOHN TIRMAN: Exactly. Here's one. I guess it'll have to be our last question. Please discuss the Israeli influence in regard to the US-Iran stand off. Who would like to discuss that? I'll say one thing and then you can add to it. The Israeli influence has been very profound in the United States. I don't think there's any question about it.

The pro-Israel lobby is famous for being extremely well organized and leveraged its influence quite effectively. I think that Ahmadinejad had made things much more toxic by his comments-- sometimes disputed about the translation-- but the idea that Israel should be wiped off the face of the Earth.

But the Israeli government has gone perhaps too far, I think, in its policies. And what I mean by that is that the JCPOA was something that would have been good for Israeli security. And we can argue about that, but I think it's pretty apparent that if you slowed down the nuclear program in Iran to a near stop, it's good for Israel.

And by conducting assassinations and sabotage and so on, Israel really just upped the ante on their hostility with Iran and really have not done anything diplomatically to correct that. Any additions from either of you?

HUSSEIN

BANAI:

I'll chime in. Just in terms of a point of interest, one of the things we learned in one of our earlier conferences on the Iran-Iraq war, which I think surprised many of us, was the extent to which the Israeli-- early in the decade after the revolution, how much Israel was trying to lobby the United States, the Israeli government, to, in fact, not put all its eggs in the Saddam basket and, in fact, engage in dialogue with Iran, which was quite remarkable for us to hear, from someone like Tom Pickering former ambassador to Israel. This is the-- it's [INAUDIBLE] during-- at the time in this [INAUDIBLE] was Secretary of Defense.

We had testimonials from people in the Reagan administration saying how he would force consultation with his American counterparts, would fly to Washington and say, the Iranians have a longer historical compatibility in terms of their culture and national interests than the strategic interests of the United States in the region with Americans and Israelis as compared to Saddam.

So that kind of variation, I think what tells you is that the extent to which the Israeli narrative over time has been especially hardened by someone like Benjamin Netanyahu and the hard right tilt in Israeli politics that not just Likud as a political party has taken, but different coalitions have banded together to present that.

And we saw this that during the negotiations, for instance, in 2014, 2015, how much Israeli national security officials were far more cautious and signaling in fact their approval of the process over something like Netanyahu, who was clearly trying to weave an entirely different narrative.

One other thing, John, I think we'd be remiss not to take this on the Biden administration by Professor Moghaddam. I think when it comes to the Biden administration, clearly the momentum has been lost. The way in which the Iran file was handled once the Biden administration came to office, I think, placed too much time period in terms of reviewing the file for things to snap back into place, especially since the Rouhani administration was still in power.

But in fact, I think what's happened as a result is that we see now there is almost a concerted move by this new Iranian government to really use every tactic at its disposal to perhaps disentangle itself out of the JCPOA process over time, which, yes, would be against their interests, but the narrative around it in Iran has now shifted.

And we see a whole bunch of other factors that were not part of the parameters of the negotiations during the Obama period have now entered the fray for the Iranians. They are linking it to their regional aspirations. They are linking it to their support of all sorts of causes in the region. And they now want the United States to account for all sorts of historical grievances, not just the Trump years where the United States withdrew.

And so that's a very troubling development, and I think the Biden administration-- I still can't make sense of why it is that they've proceeded in such a slow manner.

JOHN TIRMAN:

I couldn't agree more. Well, thank you to my colleagues Huss and Malcolm. Thank you to the audience for sticking through. And again, we encourage you to buy the book and get the discount, and we'll see you next time. Thank you so much.

HUSSEIN Thank you.

BANAI:

MALCOLM Thank you.

BYRNE: