

**MICHELLE
ENGLISH:**

Greetings, everyone. And welcome to this evening's Starr Forum. We're thrilled that you were able to make it. And before I introduce the event and our speakers, I just wanted to go over a few housekeeping items. I wanted to remind everyone that we are selling books today. So please, if you want to get a book, purchase it in the back, and we will be doing a book signing up here on the stage after the event.

Also for those who haven't already, to sign up to receive future Starr Forum event notices. We have places to sign up in the foyer for that. And if you're one of our regulars, we're doing a different format for Q&A. We will have Q&A at the end of the talk, as usual, but we'll be bringing the mics to you and asking you to raise your hand. We're thinking it might go a little more smoothly and more quickly so more people can get their questions asked. And during the Q&A, as always, I wanted to remind everyone to ask one question to leave time for everyone else who also wants to ask a question.

I'm thrilled to introduce our event today which is "Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic." Today we have with us Narges Bajoghli. She is author of the book *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* and is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. She is the director of the documentary *The Skin That Burns*. Her academic research focuses on the intersections of media, power, and military in Iran. She is a frequent commentator on NPR, PBS, and the BBC. And she received her PhD from New York University.

Joining today's talk as a discussant it is Mahsa Rouhi who was a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Nonproliferation and Nuclear Policy Program. She is also an Associate of the project on Managing the Atom and International Security Program at Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Her research primarily focuses on nuclear policy and security strategy in the Middle East, particularly Iran. She received her PhD from King's College, University of Cambridge, UK. And now please join me in welcoming our guests to the podium.

[APPLAUSE]

**NARGES
BAJOGHLI:**

I'm just going to grab some water. Thank you so much. Thank you so much to Michelle for inviting me, to MIT for hosting this, to the Starr Forum, and to Mahsa Rouhi for being the

discussant. I'm really looking forward to speaking with her after the talk.

So I was sitting in a production meeting with a group of commanders of the Revolutionary Guard who were in charge of media production in Iran. About 20 minutes into the meeting about the films that they were going to be funding for the year, one of them said, this youngest generation in our country doesn't understand our religious language anymore. They don't care about what we make. We're wasting our time with what we make. That's why so many of them were in the streets protesting against our system last year.

It had been just over two years since the 2009 Green Movement Uprising, the biggest mass demonstrations in Iran since the 1979 Revolution. I had joined these men in numerous meetings since that movement. In each, they contemplated what had inspired so many young Iranians to come out onto the streets and to protest the regime and the numbers that they had. The demonstrations went from "where is my vote" to "down with the dictator." And the slogans of the 2009 Green Movement were almost identical to the slogans of the 1979 Revolution in which many of the men who were in the room with the Revolutionary Guard had been a part of themselves.

In that same meeting, one of the commanders of the Revolutionary Guard whose wife and children had been a part of the Green Movement protests said, these kids don't care about the revolutionary stories we've told them the past 30 years. And that's our fault. We can't blame them. We haven't properly communicated our stories to them. We need to bring them back to our side by telling better stories.

What does it mean to have the commanders of Iran's most powerful military apparatus, the very force in charge of defending the revolution, admit that the majority of the population no longer understands the regime's religious and revolutionary language? My book starts with the classic paradox of any successful revolutionary movement, namely how does the commitment to a revolutionary project get transmitted from one generation to the next as historical circumstances change.

To answer this, I did fieldwork for over a 10-year period with the Basij paramilitary organization and the Revolutionary Guard in Iran, particularly among their cultural producers, to understand how they envision the future of the Islamic Republic as it enters its fifth decade. What can we gain from understanding the Islamic Republic from those charged with communicating what the regime stands for?

I started my research thinking that most of my time would be spent with Revolutionary Guard media producers as they tried to figure out how to create stories to target the youth who were protesting against the system. And while there was a lot of that, the discussions behind closed doors focused much more around heated debates among the different generations of the Revolutionary Guard and Basij siege, particularly between the vanguard of the Revolutionary Guards, meaning those who fought in the Iran-Iraq War and who are now at the helm of power within that organization-- though, keep in mind they're mostly in their mid 50s to early 60s, so they're not that old-- and their debates with the third generation of the Basij who are mostly in their 20s and early 30s by this stage.

So a big part of my book is looking deeply at generational changes in revolutionary systems. A revolutionary state has the dual project of appealing to citizens while simultaneously defining what the revolutionary project will mean over the long term. How to achieve this goal without losing the revolution altogether is a contentious question.

There's been such a wealth of scholarship on areas of resistance to the Islamic Republic, but our understanding of the regime remains two dimensional. And our notions of those who make up Iran's armed and paramilitary forces are caricatures. By shining an ethnographic lens on media producers of the Islamic Republic, I found a state, much like any state project around the world, that is in the constant process of becoming.

The concerns of the men who helped create the Islamic Republic's vast media output were not confined to religion and Islamic politics. Rather, they tended to focus on class, generational differences, and social mobility. So as much as this book is about new media strategies, it's also about deeper social phenomena. Those who viewed Iran's politics over the past 40 years exclusively through the lens of Islam have overlooked important social dynamics that undergird the regime.

My findings led me to question not only the existing depictions of these men but more generally the predominant frame of analysis when it comes to understanding Iran. Since 1979 when revolutions swept through a country that just one year earlier Jimmy Carter had toasted in Tehran as the island of stability, American policymakers have scrambled to understand an upheaval that not only blindsided them but expressed a deeply felt anti-imperialism as Iranians demanded independence from Washington.

US news media described Iranian society as possessed by madness and Iranians is blinded

by religious fervor and seeking martyrdom at all costs. Such explanations may have answered an immediate need to understand on simple terms and, ultimately, to undermine the revolutionary government and the aging Ayatollah at its helm. In essence, it had the effect of rendering the Islamic Republic as an irrational force. But this framework, unfortunately, has not evolved much in 40 years. And it's left us ill-equipped to understand the Islamic Republic today.

What happens if we reframe our analysis of Iran from the vantage point of the supporters of the Islamic Republic? If scholarly and public culture analysis has failed to understand the supporters of the Islamic Republic in all of their complexities, what happens if we take a different approach to contemporary power in Iran? One that insists, as anthropology demands, on an actual curiosity about the positions and world views of the Islamic Republic on their terms.

So a bit of a quick background for those who may not know. Iran has a bifurcated military system. So what that means is that there is the formal military, or in Persian it's called the [PERSIAN], which is a remnant of the Pahlavi regime. And when the revolution came to fruition, Ayatollah Khomeini believed that there might be a coup staged by the formal military. And so he created the Revolutionary Guard to be the bulwark of the revolution, to sort of defend the revolution from within.

And in the first few years, the idea was that the [PERSIAN] would continue to defend the national borders of the country while the Revolutionary Guard would be what would protect the revolution from within. And in effect, what it ended up doing is in the first two years, they were involved in suppressing movements in the Turkoman and in the Kurdish regions of the country.

But with the invasion of Iraq in 1980 into Iran, the Revolutionary Guard over that eight-year period mushroomed into one of the biggest institutions in the Islamic Republic. And the Basij paramilitary organization was created to recruit volunteers to the war front during this eight-year war.

Now the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, for those who don't study Iran, it's a war that many tend to forget about. But it continues to have large and very wide reaching reverberations into the Middle East today. It was the longest conventional war of the 20th century. And it completely transformed the geopolitics of the region from that point forward.

Although Khomeini banned the involvement of the military into formal politics in his will, shortly after his death in 1989, the Revolutionary Guard not only got involved in politics, but it also became the main contractor for rebuilding the infrastructure of the post-war country. This turned it into the wealthiest independent institution in the Islamic Republic.

Today, 75% of the population is under the age of 40, meaning that they do not remember the revolution or the war which are the two founding stories of the Islamic Republic. And for those of you who are social scientists in the room, you know how important founding stories are in the stability and sort of continuation of power.

Masoud Dehnamaki-- who's the man with the megaphone in the middle-- he's one of the founders of Ansar Hezbollah in Iran. And he's turned into the most commercially successful filmmaker in Iran from the sort of pro regime side. He started making films in the early 2000s. He said in an interview, during the Iran-Iraq War, we had to shed blood for the revolution and we did. Later we believed we should publish journals and books for the revolution, and we did. Today we think cinema best expresses our goals so we make movies.

Dehnamaki represents a shift away from the blunt propaganda of the first two decades of the revolution to creating new entertainment to attract younger audiences. It was actually his films and especially his first feature fiction film, *The Outcast, Ekhrājīha*, which sort of set me on the path to this project because that became a huge commercially successful film at a time when war films really weren't garnering much attention in the movie theaters in Iran. And he started writing on his blog after that he was going to be setting up workshops for young Basij members to learn how to make more entertaining films. And so that's what sparked my interest in this project. And I started to go after those workshops and try to understand how were they training this new generation of paramilitary folks into making more entertaining media.

Now first off, every government creates propaganda. Some are just more savvy at producing it than others. And second, national militaries can be intimately involved in media production. A prominent example that scholars have long studied is the very close relationship that the US military has with Hollywood studios. There are more recent studies out now that look at the ways in which the Israeli and Colombian militaries, for example, are also active media producers. In the study of revolutionary governments, scholars have done lots of work on the Soviet and Cuban cases, for example.

And although there is a lot of great scholarship on media in Iran, but one gap remains-- media produced by the state, which spends the most money on media production in the country. Given how long it took me to gain access for this research, and what an inhospitable place Iran can be for long-term social scientific research, it's not surprising that we don't have much scholarship on pro regime media producers.

I'm going to briefly talk about the methods because of the nature of this research. So as an anthropologist, I sought to do long-term research. I knew that I didn't want to rely on interviews with those who are in the military and paramilitary in Iran, because like state elites the world over they would give me formulaic answers. They would sort of stick to their messages. I wanted to know not only about their work, but to see them produce it and present it as their projects evolved over time, because that's where the rich data is. But doing long-term participant observation in this project was not straightforward.

Prior to this research, I had been working with survivors of chemical warfare for about four years. I directed an oral history project of chemical warfare survivors. And I also directed a documentary film *The Skin That Burns*. It was only because I had worked closely with veterans exposed to chemical warfare for four years that I was later able to even get my foot in the door in order to do this work with media producers. In my earlier work with the veterans, I got to know the main doctors and veterans involved in the care of the war wounded. And I showed them that I could be empathetic towards them as human beings even if I did not agree with their world view.

Once I had decided on this research, I mentioned it to them. And one of them in particular, a veteran turned physician, introduced me to some key media makers in the regime world. He told them that he trusted me. And it was only through this introduction from someone so well trusted within their ranks that I was able to start this research. Coming from what the regime considers a counter-revolutionary background with my father as a leftist activist and my mother's family who was split between high level members of the Shah's government as well as Mosaddegh's government. And as an Iranian American-- which we know that the state sees as potential spies-- it took another two years of constantly showing up at events and trying to set up meetings that I convinced them to trust me.

I knew my social media presence, my writings, and even my cell phone conversations in Iran were being monitored during this phase. Over time, I was granted full access, but I also knew full well that the doors could close on me at any moment. And what I came to later expect as

the norm, not only was it difficult to gain access within Iran, but the US government put me through a nine month period in which I had to get OFAC license, but not only just an OFAC license because Iran was under the sanctions during the Obama administration, but also a very lengthy process with the State Department. And my university ended up having to pay over \$50,000 in legal fees in order to be able to even allow me to go into the country. So issues of being a researcher in national security spaces is not just one endemic to authoritarian regimes over there, but very much to systems over here.

I stood out in that environment, because I was the only female. Even though I had spent a decade living in Iran prior to this research, there is no way that I could have blended in in this crowd. Not only is the world of the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij masculine, but the media world is especially masculinized. Although women Basijis do exist, no women work in regime film making in Iran. And I'd be happy to go into the gender politics of why that is during Q&A if anyone is interested.

Methodologically, I was a participant observer in editing rooms, production meetings, funding meetings, on film shoots, and during the subtitling of films. Since I was trained as a filmmaker myself, they took me more seriously throughout the whole process. But not only that, I was able to actually get involved during the film shoots and be useful in the studios, which meant that, eventually over time, they could kind of in some ways forget that I was there because we were all working together. And that's where so much of the rich data came from. I also went on many domestic and international trips with the different filmmakers and producers as they presented their work in order to figure out how they were presenting it to different audiences.

Now we tend to think of the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij as these homogeneous groups of men who, when the Supreme Leader gives an order, they listen all the way down. However, what I discovered is men who work in ad hoc ways, who fought over resources, and who disagreed with one another all the time. In other words, they were far from uniform or cohesive.

One of my main interlocutors, who I call Mr. Ahmadi in the book, joined the 2009 Green Movement with his family. He's a veteran of the war. And both of his legs had been blown off during the war. He and his family look very much pro regime.

Now what do I mean by that? Because of the way in which revolutionary citizenship was regulated based on dress in Iran following the revolution, sartorial choices end up mattering

not for reasons of fashion per se, but because they signal revolutionary belonging. The friend-enemy divide, which has been written a lot about in the Soviet case for example, in Iran, it's classified based on [NON-ENGLISH] or "us versus them."

So when Mr. Ahmadi and his family joined the protesters in 2009, because they had supported the reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi and they were very much against the incumbent, Ahmadinejad. The first two days nothing happened to them. On the third day that they joined the protest-- and his wife fully covers on a chador. His son was pushing him in the wheelchair-- when the Basij at that point on that third day had begun to crackdown on the protests. And they saw him and his family. And they single them out. And they came over and they started to beat his son first. And then they began to beat him.

If the Green Movement was supposed to be anti-revolutionary as the official stance was, then people like Mr. Ahmadi and his family could not be part of it. That day when he got beaten, he couldn't believe that the very organization that he had joined with such passion as a 15-year-old during the war had now begun to turn on his generation.

Eventually, he was pushed out of the place in which he worked, which was the Avini Center, the Revayat-e Fath Center, for those of you who know, it's one of the main sort of pro-regime centers in Iran. Him and his cohort who many of whom were the original filmmakers with Avini in *Revayat-e Fath*, many of them were fired after 2009. And some of them ended up going in sort of self-imposed exile into Lebanon to work with Hezbollah media makers and then eventually made their way back to Iran during the Rouhani administration.

But Mr. Ahmadi decided to stay in Iran. And so he began to create a small production studio. And this sort of became the norm over time in which it went from these very large, prominent regime cultural centers into these smaller, freelance production studios. That's also sort of relates to the neoliberalization of the arts in Iran, which is again something that we tend to ignore when our focus is so much on just Islam as a political tool in understanding Iran.

But by forefronting these issues, I'm able to show how contestation in the Islamic Republic is not just between the regime and the people, or the old generation versus the young generation. Instead, through an ethnographic lens on the supporters of the regime, this book illustrates how contestation in Iran today involves conflict over the very boundary of what the regime is.

Now let me illustrate just a bit further what this intergenerational divide within the Islamic

Republic is that I write about in the book. One afternoon in central Tehran, I was at the Art University at a weekly meeting organized by the university's Basij Students Association, which is among the most hardline elements, if not the most hardline elements on university campuses. In these meetings, the Basij Students Organizations would invite regime filmmakers to come and discuss their work with students.

So very much sort of like a setting like. It was in an auditorium. The students would be sitting. The regime media producers would come. And they would screen their work. And then there would be sort of lively debates about what they had done.

That day they had invited someone I call Mr. Hosseini who's a leading regime filmmaker and a captain in the Revolutionary Guard. Mr. Hosseini was a leader in the first generation of the Revolutionary Guard who was trying to build new media strategies to engage with youth who were protesting in the Green Movement. During the meeting, he told the students in attendance that regime media needed to work harder towards projecting a more inclusive vision of the Islamic Republic, one that could reach portions of the population that had become disillusioned since the Green Movement. The leader of the Basij students got up, pointed his finger directly at Mr. Hosseini and said your generation may be tired of confrontation, but not ours.

When we left, Mr. Hosseini turned to me and said, these young Basijis don't realize that distancing ourselves from the general public is what got us into this mess that we face today. We need to reach out to the other side that's protesting us, not alienate them as these kids want. You know what their problem is? They don't know what it's like to be marginalized in society. They don't remember because they were born after the Revolution. All they've ever known is a system in which our side has been in power.

The leaders of the Islamic Republic's armed forces have more at stake even today than the defense of a political system. These men and their families did not command respect in Iranian society pre-1979. The monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi formerly marginalized religious families. And the Iranian intellectual elite of the time looked down on them.

The creation of the Islamic Republic gave pious Iranians of Mr. Hosseini class and generation a sense of purpose and a place in society. I often heard them wonder aloud anxiously if circumstances in the country changed, would they be driven to the periphery again. This is the central issue at the heart of protecting the Islamic Republic in Iran today among its supporters.

It is about having a place in society, about counting and not being marginalized. Now, of course, in this endeavor, they have ended up marginalizing large sectors of the population themselves, often through this [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] insider outsider divide. That often changes very fluidly within the system, depending on the political situation at the time.

Mr. Hosseini continued to me after that meeting, "The younger Basijis don't know that if we don't take care of this revolution, we'll be relegated back to the margins. They don't know how quickly things can change." And this was a central dilemma always in which the older generation, because they were a part of the Revolution, they understood how quickly regimes can come and go. And the younger generation, because they had grown up in those positions of power, did not necessarily.

Yet, interestingly, Mr. Hosseini and his colleagues-- almost all of them in that first generation of the Revolutionary Guard-- none of them allowed their own children to join the Basij, the very organization that they had joined as teenagers in the 1980s. That for me was-- I didn't expect that. And part of that was that it would be a step down on the social ladder that they had already scaled. So while this is about maintaining their place in society, deeper social phenomenon such as class, and social, and cultural capital, have now led to divisions among the supporters of the Islamic Republic.

So who are these younger Basijis and why is there such a divide? I slowly got to know the student leader of the Art University's Basij organization, the one who got up and pointed his finger and yelled at Mr. Hosseini in that meeting. His name is Mostafa. Younger Basijis, such as Mostafa, feel that the Revolution has gone astray because the older generation has lost touch with its values. Like many of his classmates in the university Basij organization, Mostafa hails from a pious, working class-- sorry-- from a pious working and lower middle class family that migrated to Tehran from the smaller provinces.

When as a teenager, Mostafa wanted to pursue filmmaking, his family couldn't afford the expensive equipment. And they didn't have a wide social network in the capital that could help them. His father, a supporter of the Islamic Republic, encouraged his young son to join the Basij organization in his high school and see if they could help. One of the leaders of that organization had worked in film and photography previously and was able to provide the resources and social network that Mostafa's family could not.

Mostafa eventually ended up going to the Art University. And once he graduated with a degree

in film, he easily found a job at a production house run by Basijis that made documentary films for state television allowing him to be a full-time filmmaker and provide for his wife. And this was generally what happens, they would constantly talk to me about how because they didn't come from families with money, they would always, constantly project that the independent filmmakers-- that those were the rich kids and they were not the rich kids. So they had to end up going into these programs and being employed in these places. And even though they really disliked making films for state television, because they thought it was boring and not good filmmaking, it actually allowed them to have a middle class lifestyle.

So the Revolution had offered Mostafa and his friends a social mobility to which they saw the corruption of the older generation of revolutionaries as a threat. "They're the ones who are soft, not us," he said to me. "We appreciate their sacrifices during the war, but they've become corrupted by money and obsessed by making themselves like the secular elite."

So they're contending within themselves about how to tell their stories and who can tell it. In other words, these fierce debates were about how to define the regime going forward and who belongs within the revolutionary collective. In the book, I offer a range of media strategies that I observed them undertaking.

For example, strategies of dissimulation meaning that they would oftentimes burn their movies onto CDs and distribute them to the men who would sell illegal films in Iran so that people would buy them thinking that these were underground films that had been made and not being able to tell that the regime had actually produced these. And then today with the internet, they're creating a lot of internet television stations, as well as things on social media, that it's very difficult for people to know that this is coming from regime production studios. They've also begun to reframe their stories through stories of nationalism and putting religious symbols much more in the background.

Yet, again and again, my conversations with members of the Revolutionary Guard and Basij turned back to issues of corruption, social and cultural class, and generational differences. Often, my interlocutors turned their ire on one another much more than on those who were not supporters of the Islamic Republic. Their vast and nuanced disagreements revealed a complicated political reality that could not be contained in the familiar binaries of reformists versus hardliners or anti-regime versus pro-regime.

As the Islamic Republic enters its fifth decade, keeping the revolution alive will depend on the

ability of its image makers not only to appeal to a younger generation that wants change, but also to build consensus among members of their own younger generation within their ranks. The task before the Islamic Republic is to win over a broad cross-section of citizens while simultaneously defining what shape its revolutionary project and its state apparatus will take over the long term. In this dynamic, how best to achieve this goal without losing the Islamic Republic's founding vision altogether presents a reality in which everything becomes both a possibility and a problem.

The men who appear in the book, as well as their families, challenged everything I thought I knew about Iran, revolutions, and states. The book is not only about state media, but about the men who produce this media and what it means to doubt what they have fought for, not know what is to come, and be wrought with anxiety about the fact that they may be relegated back to the margins of society if their political project fails. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

MAHSA ROUHI: Hello, everybody. It's a pleasure to be here, particularly with Narges and her amazing book and with all of you to discuss her book. I actually want to start with what you ended with, and then I go on of a few questions and sort of prompting discussions that I had in mind to talk to you about.

So this is something that actually keeps me thinking all the time as well that you mentioned this dilemma that they're facing about how should they adapt, to perfectly move this revolutionary project forward. And I'm thinking every time people talk about the prospect of regime change in Iran, whether through another revolution, or uprising, et cetera, the one thing that I think about is exactly what will happen. How will the society incorporate or deal with the Basij and the IRGC? And that's exactly what you told us that they think about and keeps them sort of awake at night.

And I think it's something really important that we tend to ignore. That imagine there's a magic wand. And then tomorrow there is a totally different secular government running the country. Then the situation is reversed. How are you going to incorporate these communities into society? And how are you going to break that cycle that has been going on, as you mentioned, pre-Revolution until now, and basically have more empathy and sort of understanding for the other group and allow them some space in the society?

Which gets me to-- one thing that I really found fascinating about this book is Narges kind of takes us with her through her journey of research. So it's not a book about her findings of her research, but you really go with her to these meetings. You feel like you're part of these conversations that she's part of. And what it does, and what was fascinating to me about it is that, as she said, it changes this black and white picture and painting that you think about when you think about Iran.

And it paints this colorful this people that you always think about, OK, these hardliners, as she said, or Basijis, or you know. And then you see them as humans with families, with emotions, with fears, with ambitions, with love for their country, for their kids. And it's sort of once you start relating to them at a personal level and then they become humans rather than this box of IRGC people or Basij people, then you have a lot to think about in terms of who they are, what they want, and how they can be engaged with.

So I'd like you to sort of talk about how you see the future. I mean I know none of us have a crystal ball. But moving forward, do you think that this gap and divide between one part of the society that is marginalized by, now, the IRGC and the Basij while they're in power compared to how it was prior to the Revolution, do you see this sort of back and forth and this gap sort of just widening moving forward? Or do you think there is some hope with what you saw in terms of how they're acknowledging this problem and trying to sort of bridge this gap? Is there hope that there is some sort of more reconciliation towards the society from their side that will then, hopefully, pay off in the future of the country as it sort of moves through reform?

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

That's a great question. So social scientists hate thinking about what the future may bring because we like dealing with what's either happening now or history. But one of the things that surprised me quite a bit was how much their children are actually challenging them. So part of what I began to realize over a long period of time is how those in the first generation, it's not like all of a sudden they're thinking we need to reach out to the other side, part of it is because their teenage children and now who are in their early 20s, come home every day feeling and experiencing in their schools the very real division that exists between young people in Iran and their contentious relationship with power.

And so their kids are in these same schools. They're in these same environments. And because, again-- and I go through this in the book-- the ways in which dress was sort of regulated in Iran and all of that. There are visual ways in which people can tell who might potentially be more pro-regime than the other. And so their kids have come home day after

day for years now challenging their fathers. Why is the system like this? Why, especially, those who have daughters, they, for me, were some of the more surprising conversations for me to have. Because their fathers would tell me, at the time of the Revolution when we put these regulations into place, they were very abstract for us. But now that our daughters come up against these regulations that we helped put into place, now I understand why. Now it's tangible for me. It's not an abstract idea.

In that sense, I think that this is part of why you see the older, the first generation and the second generation, sort of have a little bit more flexibility in their stances. But the third generation, part of the reason that they sort of are a little bit more hardline is because during the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997-2005, there was this sense that a very large portion of the Revolutionary Guard had voted for reform. And for the Supreme Leader Khatami, that was something that, in order to keep his power, he thought that he needed to do something to stem that sort of tide of reform that was happening in the country.

And so one of the main things that he did was he began to completely refigure the Basij. And they began to refigure out the entire curriculum of active Basijis. And so that's why so many of the young Basijis who are in the university spaces are very much in line Khatami's politics and his stances.

However, among them, I also found that as the years went by, and as I continued to stay in touch with them, and they got married and they had children, they also began to sort of level out their ideas. And the reasoning was that they would constantly talk to me about how now that they had kids, they wanted an Iran that would be stable for their children. They wanted an Iran that would not constantly be in confrontation or in the danger of war with either Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States.

In that sense, potentially generational changes over time may lead to what you're asking. Although I think because of the very real ways in which divisions have been structurally regulated and informed within the Islamic Republic in which in order to have certain positions, you have to be somehow tied to the regime. I think those are going to be things-- and because of the very real repression that the system has employed on the rest of the population, especially in times of protests, I don't know whether we can, in the future, get over this [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] equity divide. Because also, to simplify things, that exists on this sort of secular end as well. There is a very real division on the non-regime end of also seeing things in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] way, and so on an insider outsider way.

And so I think eventually whatever happens to the Islamic Republic going forward, the reality is that many of these people are not going to leave Iran. Right? The Islamic Republic has a good number of supporters within the country. It's not a large number, but it's a good number that ensures their stability at least for now. And we have to contend with that if the system does change. And this [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] divide will continue if it's not really dealt with in that way.

MAHSA ROUHI: This actually gets me to the second point I wanted to discuss with you which is your chapter on the outsiders. And there's a meeting that you describe about a movie by one of the intellectual, or they call them outsider directors. If you can talk about that movie, if you like. And that they invite the journalist from the very hardline magazines and sort of different journals in Tehran to attend, and watch a movie, and engage in a debate with this outsider.

And their reaction and feedback that I read in your book was really fascinating to me. And it gets to this idea that I think this [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] or outsider is also multilayered and is not as simple as who's in power and who is not. Because if you think about it, going back to even pre-Revolution, yes the Shah was in power and the religious families and groups were marginalized.

But at the same time, if you went to the level of different families, if somebody were to marry into a religious family who was not coming from a religious family, they were also being looked down on even though the religious people were not in power. But there was this social dynamic of outsider and insider between the religious and non-religious at the time. And now it's like pro-regime and non pro-regime. And that still exists.

This was my personal observation growing up, but reading your book it also reconfirmed that there's always been this feeling by the religious groups and factions, as they said the Basijis here that they're being looked down on by the secular part of the population and they intellectuals. And I think they feel like that would have been the case even if they were not part of the regime. But they feel they have that kind of protection and power and access, because there is a Islamic Republic. And if that goes away, as is you said, they're marginalized again. And in society, they're going to have to deal with a lot.

And so I want you to talk a little bit about that conversation that you write about in your book. And the fact that almost all of the hardline newspaper journalists when they see the movie, their reaction to the movie is not necessarily about the content of the movie, but about the fact

that, oh, you think we don't understand or you think you see us as an outsider, too. And when you make the movies, you make them as such that we will seem to people more so that way. So I want you to elaborate on that a little bit.

NARGES

Yeah. So, OK, because I was dealing with filmmakers, they desire to have-- just like

BAJOGHLI:

filmmakers anywhere-- to have their films shown abroad, to have their films shown in film festivals, and things like that. But that brings a certain kind of cultural capital to them, right? Even though they have formal power in Iran today, they don't hold cultural capital necessarily. That part of that is because of, in general, the way in which the intelligentsia in Iran had developed over years and sort of was always tied to the secular notion of what an educated elite would look like. But beyond that, it was also because the Iranian diaspora plays such a large role in elevating certain stories and not others.

And so for many of the non regime filmmakers, they had access to be able to show their work outside of Iran. They had access to credit cards. Because Iran is a sanctioned country, also very small things like paying submission fees to festivals and things like that are things that if you don't have family abroad or friends abroad who can help you get a credit card number or lend you their credit card number in order for you to be able to submit to these film festivals, it's very difficult to do so.

So in this chapter, there was this meeting that was taking place for this one film called *Ashghal haye Doost Dashtani*, *Desirable Garbage* which was specifically about the 2009 Green Movement. And so the Fajr Film Festival, which is Iran's main film festival, at first they said that they were going to show this film. And then they said that they were going to ban this film and not show it. And so the filmmaker, who sort of was an apprentice of some of the major filmmakers in Iran, like Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, and such, he came to one of these Revolutionary Guard cultural producers and said to him, can you please help me out. I want this film to be seen.

So he called a meeting with the major regime journalists of the day from Fars News and all of these other newspapers and screened the film for them. They became outraged with the film that they saw, because they thought that it showed them in a very bad light and it showed them repressing the Green Movement. And what they wanted to be communicated in the film was that they had a reason for suppressing the Green Movement, that they weren't just being illogical in doing so. And so this screening turned into a censor. Like it turned into a meeting where they were trying to tell him what parts of the movie he had to take out in order for them

to not write anything bad about this movie so that it could eventually be shown. Now these guys have a lot of formal power in Iran, right?

But in this debate that was-- it went on for five hours. And in this debate that went on for five hours, he, the filmmaker, kept saying to the writers in the room anything that you write will have an effect on me. And the writers in the room would say to him. But whatever you guys make is what people watch. People respect you all. What we write, no one listens to. And it was this really interesting interaction between people who held very formal power who could actually not allow this man's film to ever be screened in Iran, which eventually they did, and a man who the writers thought that no matter what they wrote, it didn't matter because the rest of society didn't take them seriously anyways and they were going to take the filmmaker seriously no matter what.

So it was this really interesting dynamic about power and what does power mean in society. There's formal power, but then there's also social and cultural power. And who holds what? And how is that being wielded? And so that's part of the things that I tried to really look into. Because even though within a revolutionary system like Iran, formal power is sort of codified in a specific way. There are other levels of power that ends up mattering.

And those are things that even though the Basij and the Revolutionary Guard have been in power for 40 years, they don't wield social and cultural capital, that kind of power in Iran oftentimes. And that is something that they actually call the secular intellectuals "Hezbollahese." They've turned the word against them. And they say, you all don't allow us to be in that world. And it's this very sort of-- they're constantly fighting with each other over this. And who has the rights? And who should be the one who should be telling these cultural stories? And this is sort of where that divide comes in from.

MAHSA ROUHI: So I want to take us to something, actually, more recent that I found interesting. And I think you also talked about it a little bit on Twitter-- I think, if I'm not wrong-- which was the new series *Gando* on state TV. And I actually watched that series. And I thought that was a-- I try to follow kind of state media once in a while to see how things are changing, even though media and communication's not my field. But I feel like I'd like to know what the other part of the society is thinking.

And what was very interesting to me was that this TV series took their media production, in my view-- and you're the expert on that-- to a different level completely. And from what I heard

from my friends and family back in Iran, people watched it. People found it very interesting. People, without even noticing, got a lot of political messaging that was intended to be transferred to the public.

Things like there was a sentence in it that said the leadership in Iran-- or the Westerners or the Americans don't understand that the leadership in Iran is not an individual. It's a concept or it's an institution. And sort of that to me was very much in line with a messaging that there is a whole system. And it's not just the Supreme Leader, whether he's there or when he passes away everything still will be the same because the Supreme Leadership is much bigger than one person, and a lot of that.

But the main thing was how openly they criticize a sitting government and the president and the foreign minister. And again, this might not be-- well, from what I heard, they actually used government budget at least for part of that series. And they did a messaging that completely undermined what the government has been doing, the efforts towards the JCPOA, the negotiations with the Europeans and the Americans. And this was a series about the case of espionage as they presented it of Jason Rezaian, the journalist who was imprisoned in Iran. And after the JCPOA was signed, he was released and sent back. So the series was about his case and some side cases of espionage that they discussed.

And this was one of some other TV series and movies that I've recently encountering that I feel like there has been sort of a noticeable shift in the ways that they're conducting themselves and in the ways that they're reaching out to the public. So if you can elaborate on that a little bit.

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

So they talk a lot about-- they say the first two decades we produced propaganda. But we had to produce propaganda, because there was the war. And any country under war produces propaganda. And so part of what made them try to make this shift after 2009 was because their bookstores were empty. People weren't buying their films. Besides the films of Dehnamaki, many of the other films were sort of not working.

And so they were trying to figure out how can we make entertaining films, films that people want to see. In the first two decades of the revolution, they were really looking at and studying Soviet films. In the last decade, they've shifted their focus to Hollywood. And they began to think about-- and they would say to me-- Hollywood is a great example. Hollywood films about American wars are great, because it makes people feel very sympathetic towards American

wars. And they don't even realize that they're watching propaganda. And so for them, it became about understanding and studying the US military's relationship with Hollywood studios.

And they have tried this in the past 10 years multiple times. Many of the films that they made in the post 2009 period about 2009 in this spy, espionage way fell flat. People were not watching it, partially because of the political realities of the time and people feeling, understandably, very mad about the repression after the 2009 movement. However, the political situation today is very different. And *Gando*, I'm not sure if *Gando* had been made before if it would have had this sort of popular response that it has now.

But in this situation of today in which Iran was abiding by the Iran deal and Trump ends up pulling out of it, ripping the deal apart, and putting all these sanctions on, you have to understand that for years, the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Republic would tell Iranians in various different ways that the US is an imperial power. Young Iranians, for the most part, who had been born and raised after the Revolution, because of their relationship with the state, did not accept that line, wanted engagement with America. They got engagement with America under the Iran deal. Trump pulls out and acts very much like an imperial president and imposes sanctions even when Iran was abiding by the JCPOA.

So in this circumstance, you now have a situation in which an entire generation of Iranians who were raised in the Islamic Republic in the post-war period are glimpsing on a firsthand basis what the Supreme Leader and the system has been trying to say. They're capitalizing on this now. And so part of that capitalization is creating this very, very popular-- and it's not just popular in Iran, it's popular amongst the diaspora, too, which I find very fascinating-- a very popular series called *Gando* which is about the imprisonment of Jason Rezaian and other stories.

And basically, the story boils down to this. Iran is under attack in various ways. And the Revolutionary Guard is able to keep stability within Iran and not have Iran turn into Iraq or Syria or any of Iran's neighbors, because it has such an effective intelligence arm to it, right? In this situation in which not only is maximum pressure from the Trump administration sanctions, but there have been covert operations underway from the Stuxnet attacks in 2012-- so pre-Trump even, during the Obama administration-- onwards. And all of these different kinds of media wars that are being fought over the airwaves, over satellite television, over social media, the Trump administration being close to groups like the Mujahidin Ahad, an

Islamic, Marxist cultish, Iranian opposition group, all of that plays into this atmosphere that we're in today.

And because of technology, it's a lot easier for filmmakers around the world to make movies now that look more like Hollywood movies. You don't need all of that expensive equipment as much anymore. The equipment has become more manageable. It's become cheaper. So you can make things that look high production values, which *Gando* does very well. And because they're now focusing on making things entertaining, it is communicating with the public.

And this is part of one of the things that I try to get across in the book is because so many people think the Islamic Republic has made such bad propaganda for so many years and, therefore, this is a losing game and all of this. But first of all, propaganda can work, right? Even if it's not good. Advertising-- I mean like just think about advertising. Don't even think about government propaganda. You see Coca-Cola and Coca-Cola and Coca-Cola. You stop even noticing when you see Coca-Cola. But when you go in someplace, you order Coca-Cola because that's just what you're seeing all the time. People who study advertising understand this. The same thing happens even on sort of state level communication.

Now take that and then make it entertaining. And over time, some of the products-- and again because of the Revolutionary Guard spends so much money on media production. Some of their projects fail, but it doesn't matter because some of the projects succeed. And they sort of work in this trial and error fashion over time. So some of them just don't do well. But when it sticks, it sticks well.

And so *Gando* is one of those things that sticks. And in this political environment, it is able to provide a certain form of understanding that the Revolutionary Guard is there to protect Iran. And this sort of goes in line with some of the more nationalistic things that they've been producing anyways in the past 10 years since the Green Movement in which they've been reframing themselves as not protectors of the Islamic Republic, but protectors of Iran. That's a subtle but very important difference, a subtle but very important change that they've done.

And that change they've been doing over and over again. I observed the media arms of those who were working on Qassem Soleimani's-- he has a very vast media arm. He's the commander of the Revolutionary Guards blitz forces which is they're the forces that work outside of Iran, so in Syria and Iraq. And they've been messaging him as this national leader. And he's become popular because of the way in which that media sort of portrays him in that

way.

MAHSA ROUHI: So you touched up on my last question yourself. And I think the audience will have questions about today and US policy towards Iran and what are the implications of the maximum pressure? And how is IRGC basically capitalizing on that and all of that?

But to just end before we start taking questions, this was really interesting to me because I worked on trying to get the perspective of the Islamic Republic on their strategic thinking, and their foreign policy, and their nuclear policy for years. And I also did fieldwork research in Iran a few years before you did. And so I completely sympathize with the difficulties, especially as a woman, conducting fieldwork research on these issues.

And for me, it's interesting to see when I think about the Qassem Soleimani, or IRGC, or the Supreme Leader, or the establishment and their foreign policy outlook, now I've seen what's their domestic politics and their revolutionary outlook. And sort of the two pieces together seems fascinating. And it's interesting to try to see what they see themselves in terms of what are their objectives. What are their strategy in order to achieve those objectives whether in terms of the revolutionary ideals, and the goals, and the revolutionary project, or whether it's about what the role of Iran will be in the region, or what is the future of Iran's nuclear program?

And I think it's critical for more research to try to understand what and how they're thinking rather than what we think they should be thinking or doing. And so I hope that more work like this on different aspects, whether it's media, whether it's their politics, whether it's even intelligence, security studies, any aspect of it, it's important to try to understand them from their point of view rather than sitting and thinking what I would be doing or what I think they should be doing. And I think that will have a huge impact hopefully on the relationship between Iran and the rest of the countries, and, hopefully, for us to avoid a war.

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

Yeah. And if I can just say something really quickly, I never thought I would do this research. I went into starting my PhD thinking that-- I had worked on the women's movement in Iran and the student movements. And I thought that that's what I was going to continue to do. But I read some things very early in my graduate career by these anthropologist Laura Nader, Lila LaHood, and others who wrote about-- social scientists and especially anthropologists, because we have to spend long periods of time with the people that we research with, we tend to focus on those groups of people that we sympathize with, because it's just easier and also

because we want to, right?

But by doing that, we have a very nuanced perspective of those groups but we don't know the power that they are up against. And so what if we take the tools of our methodology and our trade and try to understand power in that way? Why don't we make power nuanced and try to understand what are these groups fighting against?

And I was a political scientist before I became an anthropologist, before I saw the light-- I'm just joking.

[LAUGHTER]

And part of reading political science over and over and over again on Iran was that it just did not match the reality I was seeing in the country. It was not able to capture the complexity of the Islamic Republic. So whatever I think personally about them or not, or whatever you all may think personally of them or not, by ignoring their complexity is not going to make them go away. And by ignoring their complexity is not going to make any of those very brave people who are fighting on the ground against them sort of make their fight better or worse.

So for me, it was really important, at the beginning when I started this research, to understand power in that sense. But then the more I started to do the research, the more I began to realize that power is extremely complicated. And once we actually see them as human beings, we can understand a multilayered way in which power functions. And when we can begin to see that-- hopefully, my hope is-- then we can work towards that future of Iran that you're talking about. And I don't know what that's going to end up looking like. But sort of in response to your question, I do think that even with power structures that we don't agree with, that's sort of one of the things that we have to understand is that we have to take them for what they are, and try to understand it as much as possible.

[APPLAUSE]

PRESENTER: We have some time for questions. And we'll bring a mic to each one. This is the first hand mic. Michelle? We're going to go to Ken. OK.

AUDIENCE: Oh, yes. OK. My name is Ken Oye. I'm a professor here. And I just returned from a year on sabbatical in Europe. And my experience there meeting Iranians confirms a lot of what you were saying-- a younger generation whose narratives-- the narratives of imperialism were

confirmed by Trump's policies. On the other hand, we also ran into a middle-aged Iranian lady who was a strong supporter of President Trump, believing in regime change. She lived in Tehran. Her teenage children were rolling their eyes as she was talking about this as we were sipping coffee in Ankara.

I mention this because the complexity that you've pointed to is there, very much so. Always surprised by what you run into in practice. But we're sitting here with an administration that is edging towards war, away from war, maximum pressure, violation of, abrogation of the agreement. And if you look ahead here-- and the hardest thing may not be predicting Iranian politics, but American policies-- what American policies do you believe might improve relations, and in what ways? Has Trump created a situation that is irretrievable? Is the damage irreversible? Or are there things that you could imagine being done, perhaps not in the next few weeks, but in the future, that could restore at least some sense of normalcy to this complex relationship given the complicated domestic political picture that you painted?

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

That's a great question. So the conflict between Iran and the United States is an institutionalized conflict. And it's institutionalized in various ways from the military to media from within the United States as well as within Iran. What Trump did was a gift to the Revolutionary Guard and the Islamic Republic.

However, the new project I'm working on is actually looking at-- so I did all this research in Iran. And for me, I have been spending so much time really focusing on power in Iran. And after writing this book, I realized, OK, that's only one half of the picture. I really need to understand American power now. And I need to understand American media, actually, in the ways in which it has depicted and framed not only Iran but the Middle East since 1979. I don't think that we can have better or different policies when it comes to Iran until we move past this framework. And that framework developed in 1979 in response to the hostage crisis in Iran.

And I'm just going to tell a really short story here. So when the hostage crisis in Iran began, ABC News-- which was the lowest-- there were only three networks at the time, right? For all of us who don't really remember that time very well, there was only three networks on television-- ABC, CBS, and NBC. Of the three, ABC News was the lowest ranking one. But ABC sports was extremely competitive and very, very profitable. And so they were trying to figure out a way to make ABC News like ABC Sports.

And so the executives at ABC brought over the person who was in charge of ABC Sports, this

man by the name of Boone Arledge. And they made him the president of ABC. And they told him focus on our news section, make our news section profitable. And this was a few months before the hostage crisis.

And so he came there. And he was the man who created Monday Night Football in order to create more advertising revenue. He was the man who created slow mo. So he really changed the way that we see television, right?

He came on to ABC News and he said, we need a story that has legs. Because his idea was he had a hunch that at the time there was only half an hour for local news and half an hour for national and international news, that was it. But he had a hunch that there was an appetite for prime time news. Like there was an appetite to make news entertaining, but he needed a news story where he could convince the executives at ABC that we could take this hour in prime time and make it something that people would watch.

So when the hostage crisis happened, they thought it would be over in a few days. Obviously, it wasn't. By the second week, Boone goes to the executives in New York at ABC. And he says I'm going to create a special called *America Held Hostage*. And they began to create this special. And after about two or three days, the journalists, Peter Jennings, Ted Koppel-- those names that many of us know now-- said to Boone, listen, we don't have anything more. Like there isn't much more news coming from Iran. And he said, I don't care. Make news. We need to keep that hour.

And so over time, what they began to do-- "*America Held Hostage* eventually turned into *Nightline*. And *Nightline*, eventually, two years after *Nightline* came on television, Ted Turner who's the founder of CNN looked at the success of *Nightline* as providing huge advertising revenue and ratings to ABC, and he said there is a model here. And that model eventually became CNN and our 24-hour news cycle that we have today. So the coverage of the hostage crisis is the precursor to our 24-hour news cycle.

Now what is interesting in this is that the coverage of the 1979 and 1980 hostage crisis is one in which they begin to make news for filling an hour of time, right? And eventually it becomes filling 24 hours of time. So they begin to make coverage of what's the difference between a Sunni and Shia. Who is Ayatollah Khomeini? Is he a maniac or is he senile? I mean I'm like using real words. And Ted Koppel eventually says Iran is no longer a crisis, Iran is an obsession.

At the same time, because of the way in which the Revolution unfolded, both on television and in policy circles, and from the Carter administration, they began to refer to what is happening in Iran and in the wider region as the new Cold War. So this is the moment in which Islam versus the US begins as a framework. It's the moment in which-- remember, the Vietnam War ended in 1974. The hostage crisis and the Revolution is in 1979. In that five year interim period, the Pentagon was not getting much money from Congress because of the way in which the Vietnam War had happened.

Iran kicks the US out of Iran. It kicks the US out of Iran. But because of the Soviet Union and because of the Cold War ideology at the time, the Americans need, in their view, a presence in the Persian Gulf. And obviously, the Soviets also had invaded Afghanistan at this point.

So an entire process begins to unfold in which money starts to flow into the Pentagon. The very first warships, US warships, move into the Persian Gulf in January of 1980. And they stay stationed there up until today. And this entire process develops over time.

And now I'm looking at all the media coverage and US news of the 1980s. And it is incredible to me how this notion of Islamic extremism, Islamic fundamentalism, Muslim men who sort of go martyr themselves in order to reach heaven, all of that begins in this time period. And those are the tropes which then after 9/11 become easy to tap into, right? Because they had already been in our popular culture and our media culture for so long.

So until we get to a point where we can break through that framework-- because that framework continues to define our understanding-- and now that I work in a policy school in DC, I see this in reality on a daily basis and it blows my mind-- that this is our lens of looking at Iran in the Middle East. So until we can break through that lens, I don't see how our relationship with Iran is going to significantly transform. And so I think it's a longer term process than that.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

AUDIENCE: So--

MICHELLE OK. Go ahead.

ENGLISH:

PRESENTER: Oh, you already began.

AUDIENCE: Sorry. Thank you so much. I really learned a lot. This is great. Moving way away from what Ken just asked, so when you were talking about the Basij earlier, you talked a lot about age and generational differences. And you touched a bit here and there on both class differences and gender differences. Could you talk a little bit more about support for the regime and then the sort of splits within the Basij itself or supporters more generally? It's a very broad question, but--

NARGES
BAJOGHLI: So, yeah. I mean, there are ways in which-- look, the older generation says that the younger generation is just opportunistic and that's why they're in the Basij. They're in the Basij order to get better jobs, in order to get better positions into the university system, and all of this sort of stuff. Some of that is true. Because they would often tell me this gives me a middle class lifestyle, or being a part of the Basij allowed me to have access to this filmmaking equipment and not others, for example, and things like that.

However, it's hard for me to conclude from that that were things to change that they would like immediately jump ship and go the other way. I can't conclude that, I don't know. That's not something I can draw and conclude from the fieldwork that I did.

They do believe in the system. Again, because the system gives them a place and because of the way in which they, on a daily basis, are sort of coming up against this reality of the insider outsider. They don't think that they will have much of a place if the system ends up changing. And so how much?

I actually think there is a lot more disagreement between them and the Supreme Leader than they ever let on publicly. I could tell through conversations over time that a lot of them really do not necessarily agree with him. But that is not something that any of them are willing to sort of publicly act on or say at this moment at least.

AUDIENCE: Hi. Thanks so much for your talk. My name is Sean Widlake. I'm an Administrator at a nearby University at Northeastern. I'm also an independent scholar. I work on issues related to diaspora and things like that in respect to Iran and reading in social practices of PhD students in STEM fields in this area. And my question is kind of related to that.

I know you talk a lot about state media and their byproducts and stuff. I'm actually very interested in what are some of the dynamics of non-state media and how they've played out since the Green Movement since [INAUDIBLE] and the impact of hashtag #IranElection. More specifically, I'm really interested in the ways in which non-state media is sort of reacting,

circulating, sort of outside of the control of individual actors viz-a-viz media outlets like Telegram. And I'm wondering how the Basij reacts to that. What are some of the dilemmas that come into play with like meme culture and the ways in which transnationally people are communicating with each other?

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

Yeah. OK. So there is a lot of internet penetration in Iran. Iranians have been on the internet for a very long period of time. During the height of the blog blogosphere, there's the statistics that goes around that Persian was the third most used language on the internet at the time. Whether that's actually true or not, but there was a lot of Persian on the internet. And that came from all different sectors of society, including sectors from the state as well as the non-state.

In the conclusion of the chapter, I write a lot about this sort of digital world and how that is producing anxieties, not just for the Iranian state but for states more generally. And we know that from all the conversations and debates that are happening here. So they are actively trying to figure out how can they control what is happening on digital and social media. They have very active presence on these spaces.

But Iran also is a society that has a very, very active activist culture in the media sphere against what the state is doing. And so it is constantly a game of cat and mouse. And that's another one of the things I talk about in the book is the way in which they are constantly responding to one another. So even though, for example, satellite television is formally banned in Iran, although not really, and many of these sites are formally banned in Iran, although not really, in all of these regimes studios, they were constantly watching satellite television, Iranian satellite television, in order to understand what people are watching but really in order to then copy and sort of create shows. And if you watch state TV now, there's a lot of shows that are similar to what Monato puts on and all these other stations. And also at the same time, they would get a lot of their news from these banned internet stations.

It's one of these things-- and this is why I think media is such a fruitful thing to study, no matter what society you're studying, because it breaks down all of these boundaries that we have between states and non-states, between different sectors of society. And it allows us to see how things bleed over into one another. So in the conclusion, I talk about how this is an issue for states more broadly.

Right now, many states around the world are dealing with the Whatsappification of politics.

Meaning whether real or fake news that is becoming viral on Whatsapp, for example, and causing real violence on the streets in some countries. Like for example, what's happening on YouTube when it comes to Brazil. These are things that now states are having to contend with how can we maintain the attention of our population when our population has so many other things sort of vying for their attention. So these are sort of bigger political issues that I think is not just the singular or unique to Iran by any means.

AUDIENCE: Hi. So thank you very much for this talk. My question actually branches off a bit from the previous one. You've spoken quite a bit about how the state has affected the media. I'm a bit curious about the other way around. What effect has Iranian media had on the state? I know you've mentioned plenty about the cultural power and like the dynamics that's been played, but do you ever see any kind of tangible effect that the media, whether state run or not, has had on Iran in general?

NARGES On the Iranian state?

BAJOGHLI:

AUDIENCE: I was thinking in a more general sense, but, yeah, I guess on the Iranian state.

NARGES Sorry. I don't understand. What do you mean what effect has media had on Iran?

BAJOGHLI:

AUDIENCE: Well, I mean to say that-- because you've mentioned a lot about how the Iranian state has affected the media, how a lot of what's been posted-- or not posted, what's been recorded has been affected by the limits of what the state is allowing and even talking about the previous question, the more recent things like what's banned but not really. I'm wondering if the other way around has any effect where what's been published and what's been recorded and produced has any effect on the state as well? Do you see anything like that or no?

NARGES Yeah, of course, yes, very much so. Look, Iran has a really complex and rich media

BAJOGHLI: environment in which multiple different sectors, in which the diaspora, in which different sectors within Iran are all involved in it. And part of what I try to do in the book is to paint this really complex picture in which the state media is a component of this larger media world that exists within Iran and the Iranian diaspora, so sort of Iranian media writ large all over.

They're constantly responding to non-state media all the time. And they know that non-state media is actually, in a simplified way, the more powerful media because that's the media that

people are tuned into. That's what they're watching. That's what they're engaged with. So they're constantly trying to compete against that which is why they're watching it, why they're being informed by it. And, yeah, it's a complete symbiotic relationship that that exists.

AUDIENCE:

Hi. My name is [INAUDIBLE]. I'm an Iranian American. I've been living here for a while. First of all, thank you for your interesting talk. It was powerful.

I'd like to know how long and when you were in Iran recently, the most recent one, in terms of your experience. I'd like you to share your experience with us about sanction. As you know, the members of the young generation have been born and lived under sanctions their entire lives. And as someone who's been living and being in touch with Basij members, and if you have a better understanding about what's happening there. Thank you.

NARGES

BAJOGHLI:

So, yeah, Iran in one form or another has been under sanctions for 40 years. It's both a country that's become adept at it, but also a country that's been worn down by it. And especially among-- look, sanctions are both a blessing to the regime, because it allows them to blame so much of mismanagement and other things on sanctions. And this is not just Iran, again Cuba, the same thing. Anywhere in which there's been long regimes of sanctions, it actually ends up serving the state in many ways.

But in practicality and in reality, it also means-- I was doing most of my research during the height of the Obama sanctions which were also pretty comprehensive, not as comprehensive as a maximum pressure, but also very comprehensive. There were shortages of medicine. But in each of these different realms and iterations of the sanctions, the system becomes better at dealing with parts of it. And so it ends up having very real economic consequences as far as the ability of people to purchasing power, from little thing-- not little things, but from things to be able to attend scientific conferences and to be able to sort of travel abroad and all of that, sanctions are another form of warfare. I don't know how else to explain it.

And I think if you haven't lived through it, it's not only another kind of warfare but it also is something that drags on into the aspirations of people about what even becomes possible in a system in which it has been sanctioned so much, and on top of that then economic mismanagement, and on top of that then state repression. It's really difficult to isolate any of them in one way. But the sanctions definitely exacerbates. And yet, they further entrench the system.

So as a policy, it is not a policy that works especially on these revolutionary systems definitely.

And academic research has shown that US sanctions only work in systems in which the US actually has a relationship with the opposing government in which they're sanctioning. In situations where they don't have any sort of relationships, like Iran, like Cuba, sanctions don't work. And so I can go into sort of the intricacies of it. And I'd be happy to talk with you afterwards about that, but, yeah.

AUDIENCE: It's not for me. I know about it.

NARGES But I also know we have a ton of other questions and the time is almost done.

BAJOGHLI:

MICHELLE ENGLISH: Yes, unfortunately our time is up. I wanted to remind everyone that Dr. Bajoghli's book is for sale in the back, that she'll be doing a book signing. And I wanted to also take the time now to thank our speakers for a wonderful discussion. Thank you so much.

NARGES Thank you.

BAJOGHLI:

MAHSA ROUHI: Thank you.

NARGES It was a great discussion.

BAJOGHLI:

[APPLAUSE]