Confronting hybrid warfare inside Iran: a voice on the ground

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#Max

Welcome to The Grayzone, it's Max Blumenthal. Earlier this January, protests erupted across Iran, led by merchants suffering from a sudden, manipulated currency devaluation. While this initial round of protest was peaceful and met with no government repression, a seemingly coordinated wave of rioting and paramilitary violence soon descended on the country. Among the possibly thousands of dead were hundreds of police officers, unarmed Basij guards, seminary students, and average citizens. Hundreds of mosques, fire stations, emergency response vehicles, bank branches, and educational centers were severely damaged by the rioters as well. Yet the Western media and leadership predictably placed the blame for all deaths on Iran's government, wildly inflating the death toll to set the stage for another possible round of warfare aimed at regime change.

When Iran's government imposed an internet blackout, the rioting suddenly stopped. Meanwhile, millions of Iranians have taken to the streets to condemn the violence, to show support for the Islamic Republic, and to mourn their dead. To get a sense of what life in Iran has been like since the riots began, I spoke to Nahid Pourreza, an analyst of West Asian and Chinese affairs whose perspective strongly contrasts with the pro–regime change voices familiar to Western media. She’s covered the massive pro-government protests, visited mosques that were set on fire by rioters, and lived through the crisis in her hometown of Tehran. She spoke to me from inside the offices of the Iranian broadcaster Press TV, one of the few places in the city with reliable internet. Check it out. Nahid Pourreza, welcome to The Grayzone.

#Guest

Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

#Max

Absolutely. What have you experienced over the past two weeks or so? We were told here in the U. S. that Iran has experienced a, quote-unquote, “freedom movement,” but we've seen videos showing violent riots and even the militarization of some of these anti-government elements. What

have you seen, experienced, and been able to cover from inside Tehran? What's actually going on there?

#Guest

Well, to begin with, what I witnessed with my own eyes was truly horrific. We can start from what we were expecting to see long before, and then get to what actually happened on Thursday and Friday night two weeks ago. We were expecting such riots to break out across Iran because the 12-day war didn't bring any achievements for the Zionist regime or for Donald Trump. The next step seemed to be, "Okay, if we can't do this from outside the borders, maybe it's better to start riots, build on that situation, and then bring the real war into Iran."

And we do remember what Hajj Qassem Soleimani was saying to everyone back then in Syria—which you guys reported so well—that if we don't fight Daesh, ISIS, in Syria and Iraq, we'll eventually have to face them in Tehran, in Hamadan, in Isfahan. What I saw those days and nights was exactly that—it was like Hajj Qassem right in front of my eyes. I was telling you guys that. And clearly, it was very ISIS-style, nothing else. What I saw, what I asked people to tell us, and what I read—everything was ISIS-style. I remember we went to a mosque to do a report, and our cameraman said his colleague, around 1 p.m. in Tehran, was like, "Excuse me, it's not dark."

It's okay, it's daytime. They went to an area to do a report, and someone came at them with a knife, saying, "You're not allowed to do any reporting here." When he told us that, I literally couldn't believe it. I started laughing, and he said, "I'm serious. This happened to us two days ago." I mean, it's over now, thank God. It didn't take too long for the security forces to take control of the situation, but it was really scary. Seeing people, even in very small numbers, when I saw them—and they started chanting about the King, the Shah—it was ridiculous, to be honest, to see Iranians just talking like that.

And, you know, many of these people are actually deceived. They have no idea what's really happening. What they do is go home, turn on the TV, and watch Iran International for hours—just emptying their soul and their brain, selling it off to the Zionist propaganda. And it's real, it's so real. Like, you tell them, "You know what will happen if you support this person?" and they're like, "Yeah, at the end Mossad is coming. Let them come and destroy this country." And you're like, "But where were you in the 12-day war? You didn't want to die back then. You ran away from the situation. So you didn't want to die."

#Max

There's a highly propagandized sector of the Iranian population. But these protests began with protests focused around the bazaars over the collapse of the value of the rial, and there was a legitimate component to that—very legitimate, of course. There's been a lot of criticism of the economic policies over the years, and some complaints that the policies were too neoliberal. And if

there's a sector of the population that's highly propagandized, it often plays off a grievance they have—whether it's lack of individual freedoms or the fact that maybe they don't understand what sanctions are. They just know that they're suffering, which is kind of the point of sanctions. So how did this actually begin? And then how did it morph from something that everyone I spoke to, in and outside Iran, considered legitimate into something that was violent and focused on regime change?

#Guest

Definitely. Look, maybe a week before these terrorist attacks—or maybe a bit longer—I wrote an article on the Press TV website about the strike by workers in the south of Iran. We talked about their legitimate demands and how important it is for the decision-makers to see this situation and listen to the workers, to the workers' union. They're there; they're not doing anything against national security. They're demanding the bare minimum. They're holding pictures of Iran's leader—no problem. They're raising the Iranian flag. And what they're saying is, "Okay, we are a very legitimate trade union of workers in Iran's oil industry," which is one of the biggest ones.

So it was very obvious that such decisions were going to make the lives of Iranians harder. Because, I mean, over and over, Iran's leader—no need to mention critics—he himself said many times, "What is happening with the devaluation of Iran's currency?" That's one question. The other question is the link between the devaluation of the currency and inflation. Maybe you have devaluation, but it doesn't have a direct impact on prices or people's purchasing power. Those are two different things. But unfortunately for Iran, that wasn't the case. So people were angry, they were agitated, and they were demanding and questioning.

But the problem is that the period between legitimate protests and turning them into riots—using them as a platform and hijacking people's voices—was so short. So people were like, "Okay, what is happening? I was asking for something else. What is this? I'm not going to burn down a mosque. I'm not going to behead a police officer. I'm not going to do that. I don't know what's happening here." So the division was very clear from the very beginning. Many people were like, "Okay, we're done. We're done for now." And this is the problem. One of the reasons social movements in Iran are not very successful is because every single time they try to do something within the framework of the Islamic Republic, with the freedom they already have, it gets hijacked by the enemy.

Like, somehow people in Iran aren't allowed to actually have a civilized and peaceful protest—to demand something, have a platform, and see the result. Like, "Okay, I demanded a pay raise, I demanded an increase in the minimum wage, and now I got it." As a union, as very basic trade union activism, people can't do that here simply because the regime—the Zionist regime—sees it as an opportunity. And I read somewhere that they compared what happened in Iran over those two days with the pager attacks in Lebanon, the way they actually carried out the terrorist attacks in Iran. They were trying to elaborate on the details of the similarities between the pager attacks and what happened here, and we can talk about that.

#Max

Yeah. So how do you think the transition was made? Were people just given instructions? Some of the violence seemed very organized—very organized. How did this take place? What did you see as the transition point, and who were the people carrying out the violence in the streets that we've seen on video—where mosques were being burned, fire stations were being burned, banks were being burned? There were these mob attacks on unarmed Basij guards and seminary students. This is all on camera. Who were those people?

#Guest

Well, in the 12-Day War, what we know is that almost 70% of the operations were actually carried out by Mossad agents within Iran's borders. So it's not that they were sending the best missiles into the country—it was actually being done by collaborators here. And I see the same case in this situation. I see the same people, the same nature at least, but with different kinds of technical skills. So this time—if that time it was about drones—this time it was more about, like, I remember I went to a mosque to ask how that attack started. And the guy who was in charge said they brought a very big motorbike, and they were very chill, very relaxed. Then they poured lots of petrol on it, set it on fire, and threw it into the mosque.

And some others, at the same time, were also very chill, very relaxed, very organized. They tried to use big scissors to cut through the iron bars of the building so they could get inside. These people were definitely organized long before, and they even said so. When you watch the interviews, you see that person saying, "Yeah, we thought it was over. We thought the Islamic Republic was finished, so now we can be the new leaders, and people are going to appreciate what we're doing for the country—and for Mossad and for Trump." And you can see, first of all, some of them have no real feeling for the country or for the people. They say it. They said, "We needed to kill more people so we could make sure our employer, our boss, our master, would be more satisfied with our work."

Because here's the thing: you do the work, you upload it, and the whole thing is such a performative operation. Only in those two days when they shut down the Internet—when the government decided to shut it down—there was nothing else. Like, I remember around 6 or 8 p.m., that was the time Pahlavi asked people to come out, and when the Internet was off, no one came out. First, some people tried to use their windows to shout a few stupid slogans, but even that was reduced significantly. Why? Okay, you guys couldn't go out and do your terrorist attacks, but what happened to that sense of solidarity among those people—which was definitely a copy of what, in 1979, people were doing back then at 9 p.m., when revolutionary people would go out and say "Allahu Akbar"?

And these people, they're not even creative enough to come up with an alternative—to say something else or do something else. So, 9 p.m., they were supposed to do it. On Saturday night, everyone was waiting for them—like, "Okay, do something." And it was significant, I'm not saying it wasn't, but it was significantly reduced. Which shows a very simple, direct connection between what

was happening in the streets and what the orders were. Okay, you go out to that specific square, you do this, you come back, you upload it, and I'm going to show it on Iran International so other people will see it, Trump will see it. You kill people so we can use the murder as a tool, as a pretext to wage another war against Iran. And if that doesn't happen, other people aren't going to join this kind of campaign.

#Max

So you're saying there was a direct connection between the Internet and the transition from economic grievance to violence. And when the government shut off the Internet, the violence immediately stopped. What we saw here in the U.S. was this sense being created that the protests were growing, that it was turning into another kind of Arab Spring. But I knew—because I have sources in Iran and can follow what's actually happening on the ground instead of the Twitter/X social media propaganda—that there was nothing in the streets. It basically ended. And actually, I think in northwestern Iran, in places like Kermanshah, there were armed battles—gun battles—that weren't even riots. It was straight up PJAK, Kurdish separatist forces battling with security forces. So it just became an information war after the Internet went out.

#Guest

Yeah, but I also have to say, it was kind of funny—I read today that all these Kurdish separatist groups announced, "We're not going to initiate any sort of attacks or anything for now, because if we do, we don't have much power and the Islamic Republic is going to destroy everyone." So they ordered everyone, "Stop right now, because we're not in that position." So what happened? A week ago, everyone was like, "Yeah, it's over, the regime change is happening," and they were celebrating it. Then all of a sudden, you can see how fragile and how—well, not stupid, let me use a better word—how superficial it all was. Very few people, with a lot of violence. If you want to make it into the news, you have to use great violence. And then you have Trump saying, "I need blood, so bring me blood." So then the bloodshed is on the way.

I mean, many people have lost their lives. I don't know how I'm just sitting here, smiling and talking, but this is a very stressful situation. My friend's brother lost his life only because he was wearing a keffiyeh and had certain beliefs. He just went out to the street to see what was happening, and he was killed—beaten to death. This is the situation. And you think to yourself, this is exactly what we were hearing before in Syria. You can't believe that so close to you, it's the reality right now. Thank God it's over. But that 12-day war was something that happened within the borders. This is another incident that some people even compare to the MEK operations back in 1979. Many are saying the scale of the violence was much greater.

#Max

They compare it to the operations of the People's MEK.

#Guest

Yes, and they say it's much higher. It's much higher because it happened over a decade—almost 10 years. Many people died, of course; they killed so many. But only in two days? Only in two days? This is exceptional. That's why, again, the comparison between the Peshmerga attacks and this terrorist war, to me, makes more sense.

#Max

So, how many do you believe were killed in those two fateful days? And how many would you say were killed by rioters and anti-government gunmen, and how many by state security? I mean, do you have any idea of the death toll?

#Guest

I don't have exact numbers, but I know it's a large one. Just look at what happened during the funeral in Tehran. I was there when the martyrs came—it was over 105 in just one day. And we can see on TV every single day that many cities are holding funerals. So it's many, unfortunately. I wish I could say, "Oh no, the casualties are very low." But no, they're not. Unfortunately, they're not. It was horrific. And if you just count the cities and the martyrs, it shows the scale of what Iran just went through—great in scale, not, of course, in what we experienced. It was everywhere, across the country.

It wasn't just Tehran or Isfahan. It wasn't just the capital. It wasn't just the cities near the borders—it was everywhere. And now, today, this morning, when I was coming to work, I looked at the traffic—all the cars were in the streets, everything seemed so normal. And I was like, is this the same city? How can I believe it? The transition back to normal is so fast. What happened last Thursday—well, the Thursday before last—and what's happening right now… people are busy shopping, talking about the Persian New Year, talking about the heavy snow Tehran has right now. It's something I still can't adjust to.

#Max

Let me try to play a—go ahead.

#Guest

Sorry, I just wanted to say, I was at the funeral, and we were trying to get the best spot to record. There was a woman behind me—it was awful. She was whispering, saying, "My son was alive last week. My son was alive." She just kept repeating it: "My son was alive last week. And now he's

coming, he's coming." I was speechless. I just looked at her and thought, damn right, yes, your son was alive last week. And during this Daesh attack, during this Mossad attack, you lost your son. And yes, we're waiting for him to come back.

But also the patients—they were very respectful. They said, "We don't regret it." That level of steadfastness… I don't have a son. I don't know what would happen to me if such a terror struck my family. I don't know how I'd react. But seeing her steadfastness, I felt like I was no one. She could have broken down so easily, but instead she said, "It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. We're over it now." So when I compare that pain with what I saw in the big protest against the riots on Monday—it was huge. I mean, we can talk about it later, but it was a very, very powerful experience for me.

#Max

You sent this to me, and you can tell me what's being said, because there's a narrator—it hasn't been translated—but it shows some very harrowing footage. If you're troubled by images of violence, don't watch this; just fast-forward.

#Speaker 03

Can you hear it okay? Yes, perfectly. Alright, so if you can translate and tell us.

#Guest

So, yeah, he's saying that families are looking for their loved ones, hoping they can find them here, because there are so many there.

#Speaker 04

She's saying that what they can see from the bodies is that many of the cuts are on the back.

#Guest

With cutters, with big knives—you know, the kind carpenters use? Yeah, the big ones. And she says many women had cuts on their chests. Oh my God.

#Speaker 04

She's showing the head.

#Guest

She’s saying the head looks like a sheep’s head because the brain was all out from the cut. It was so deep that the whole brain was out, and it looked like a sheep’s head.

#Speaker 05

Now, in the past—for example, you can refer to the history of the Mossad. In the sixties, who came to take the people to that sheikh?

#Speaker 04

He’s saying what I mentioned before.

#Guest

He’s comparing the terror attacks with the MEK back then, saying it reminds him of that time. She’s saying there was a mother who went to a pharmacy to buy medicine for her daughter, and she was shot. I’m not sure if she was killed or if she’s still alive, but the nurse is explaining that.

#Speaker 04

There’s a rumor that the bodies were taken away. What does “taken away” mean? It means the bodies were removed.

#Guest

This is very important. I’ve cited many other places as well. The bodies looked shocked—their eyes were wide open, like they were terrified by what they saw. It means they weren’t expecting to die, that it happened in an instant. She says this is very common among the bodies they received. She also repeats what the other nurse said—that many of the bodies were cut from the back with knives and other tools. And look, this is something that now Iran International and even Reuters are reporting. I saw they said 12,000 people were killed. And of course, when they say 12,000 were killed, it means the one responsible is the government of Iran.

But… what kind of police officer—this is very important—what kind of police officer would allow the rioters to kill him if he can defend himself? There are many videos showing that he’s surrounded by, I don’t know, maybe 10 or 15 rioters, and he has nothing. And that video—they’re actually uploading it, saying, “Look at the rioters, look at how much power we have.” Okay, you’re contradicting yourself. No one is there to actually tell you if the police of Iran have killed 12,000. So how come you can find them alone, with no guns, nothing—they can’t even defend themselves—and they’re killed, they’re beheaded?

There are many of them now in the hospital, saying, “They came at us with a big knife, and I couldn’t defend myself.” And they’re not even police—they’re from the IRGC. So the ones we’d expect to at least have guns are the ones being beheaded by the terrorists. For anyone paying attention, I expect them to see the contradictions in the whole narrative. I’m not here—honestly, I’m not here—to defend or to say, “Oh, no one has been killed.” If they were killed, they were terrorists, and there’s no problem with that. But what I’m saying is, I wish the terrorists had been stopped before such horror came to the country.

#Max

Well, let's continue with this report, since we're having some technical issues.

#Speaker 06

Someone’s smashing a bus station—I mean, that’s the voiceover. Yeah.

#Guest

The voiceover is different from what we’re seeing. He’s explaining that there was a guy who had a shop, just standing by, you know, observing what was happening—and he was shot dead. He was shot dead. That’s what he’s saying. The issue isn’t only that this person died.

#Speaker 06

Yeah. You can see a Basij guard being beaten to death here by a mob.

#Speaker 03

The scene you saw was the father of the martyr, Mohammad Ghiagat, when they came to identify his son. He wasn’t in a condition to talk to them. Mr. Mohammad, can you tell us what happened?

#Speaker 06

They told us he was shot in the back of the head, toward his eyes. He was shot in the back of the head, toward his eyes.

#Guest

He’s saying he’s the father of the one who lost his life. And again, the shooting was from the back, and the bullet came out through his eyes. Yeah, that’s what he’s saying.

#Guest

Can I say something here? Yes. The big terrorist attacks already happened, okay? There are many martyrs here. Many people have lost their lives. But the other issue is that they're stealing the people who have died—they're stealing their stories. They're saying those people… for example, there's a football coach, Milad Arsalani, something like that. And the IRIB, Iran National TV, went to his father and did a full report. The father had to explain everything, saying that this man wasn't a rioter, he wasn't a protester, he wasn't doing anything wrong.

He was just passing by, and he was someone who held ceremonies for Imam Hussain. He was a very religious person. And then, at the same time, you have Iran International saying that this same person died for the Pahlavi revolution—for the king to come back, for the king's son to come back. For me, this is next level. You have so many people who've died in the terrorist attacks, and then you also have to prove that these people were killed by the terrorists, not by the Iranian security forces. Yeah, um…

#Max

I suppose it'll take a few days to understand who was killed and how. But the way human rights groups—so-called human rights groups like Amnesty International—are reporting it, it's as if every single person who was killed was killed by the government, by state security. But here's another document of the violence that I think is important, because it comes from an opposition, or anti-government, account on Twitter that claims to be from an eyewitness. And here's what they're saying—you can just read the first two paragraphs.

So a Basij member who was beating people in Zeynabiyeh, Isfahan, was caught, tied to a power pole, and they cut off his genitals and stuffed them in his mouth. In Khomeini Shahr, they set fire to the Meskot Seminary, killed two clerics, and also killed five security forces. They shoved a rebar up one seminarian's buttocks. And then it goes on and on. I mean, he justifies it by saying, you know, the government has done all these horrible, repressive things that justify that. And then he says they basically took over.

#Guest

And he's actually, as you said—I just wanted to highlight that—he is anti-government, and this is what he's saying.

#Max

Yeah, and then in the market, they beat someone they called a collaborator—someone who I guess was pro-government—and they beat him almost to death, set his shop on fire. A special unit arrived because they were about to burn him alive inside his own shop. This time we were really very close to freedom, but with empty hands it just couldn't be done. We took over three streets, blocked every access route. The repressors—referring to the government—came in from all sides. They couldn't

even get in. We did whatever we wanted. But in the end, around 11 p.m., people got tired and started heading home. One of the sidewalks was quietly opened by a plainclothes guy, and from there motorcyclists poured in and attacked people with tear gas, paintballs, pellets, and a few live rounds.

The people didn't even have a final goal. So it was kind of just a wild orgy of violence and… ultimately broken up with what would be referred to in the U.S. as mostly—well, according to this account—less-lethal paintballs, which is what ICE was shooting people in the face with in Minneapolis, tear gas, and then pellets, which can really damage your eyes, as we saw in Chile. But the opposition is boasting about sodomizing seminarians to death with rebar and, I mean, really ISIS-like violence—chopping off genitals and stuffing them in people's mouths, burning people alive. I mean, where does this come from? It isn't just—I can't say the Mossad is providing instructions to cut off genitals and so forth.

It's really an element in Iranian society that holds this tendency. From my own impression—after spending several weeks in Iran in May—there's a segment of society that hates the Islamic Republic so much that they hate Islam itself, and any symbol of Islam. They even hate Palestine because they associate it with the Islamic Republic. And obviously, that's the group that watches Iran International constantly. But it seems so surprising for people in the West to see an element inside a majority-Muslim country like Iran burning so many mosques. Where exactly is this coming from? This kind of violence—where is it coming from? Because part of it is organic.

#Guest

Well, why are they choosing mosques? In my opinion, it's because mosques were one of the primary places back in 1979 when the revolutionaries wanted to organize and mobilize people. They know there's a lot of power there, and it's organic—it's rooted in the culture that Iranians come together as a community at the mosque to do many things. Like the one we visited last week—the guy said there are many classes happening there for Muslims, like English lessons and other activities. They go to the mountains together; different sports happen there. So the attack, in my opinion, was definitely a very organized attack against the community. You are not allowed to go to the mosque.

Even the mosque, as the core of Iranian ideology, isn't safe anymore. You can't go there and pray, because it's going to stay there as a symbol—and everyone will mock the Islamic Republic, saying it couldn't even protect the mosque. It's meant to showcase their power, to encourage others: "See, we even burned the mosque." So it's a message for other rioters to come out, to activate their violence, and to show the leadership that if mosques can be burned, then hospitals can be burned too. They even burned a nurse alive. So there are different reasons, I think. And actually, to be honest, I had a conversation at the train station with some people who were pro-rioter.

And they were like, "Oh, no, no, no—no Iranian could do that. No Iranian could burn down a mosque." And I was like, "Yes, they did." They said, "No, no, it can't be possible." So some of them

are in denial, saying, “No, that’s not possible, this is fake.” So why? A bunch of real news stories are easily ignored by people simply because it’s not in their comfort zone to face reality and see where they should stand. And about your question regarding their skills—I have to say, Iran has experienced many terrorist attacks over the past 47 years. Our leader, Iran’s leader, is one of the survivors of those attacks. We even lost our president in terrorist attacks.

So, the prime minister... Many people have died from terrorist attacks within the borders. I have to say, there are many groups trained outside the country. And we know, for example—let me give you one example. In the north of Iran, in Rasht, the marketplace was burned down. When I saw it for the first time, I thought it was Gaza. Honestly, I was like, “What is this? This is not Rasht.” But it was Rasht. I’m not going to name names, but one of my friend’s friends was there, and what they heard—the accent—was Persian, but very, very different. She could tell exactly where that person was coming from.

#Max

This is the marketplace in Rasht.

#Guest

Yes, yes, that one. And the one who carried out the operation—I’ve heard that the accent they were speaking with was very, very different. It wasn’t normal Persian. So what I’m saying is, how many neighbors do we have? We have 14 neighbors. Iran has 14 neighbors. And all the borders, thanks to U.S. imperialism, are vulnerable to separatist terrorist groups. Each of them has their own skills. Again, because it’s about a unified Iran, I don’t want to name them all here, but we do know how this expertise and how these groups come into play. Some of them may not even be directly linked with Mossad, as you mentioned, but many of them are, and they also have their own organizations. They don’t need Mossad to teach them—they are enemies of Iran themselves.

#Max

And this is the marketplace that was totally burned. It takes, I would assume, a little bit of planning and some manpower to be able to do that. What I saw in Mashhad was a whole lot of fire on the night of the 9th as well, and apparently about $18 million in damage to that city alone, according to local authorities. I don't think people in the West understand the scale of the damage that was done, but there was a backlash inside Iran against this violence that you witnessed. You went to one of the major—well, I guess we could call it a pro-government protest—but what I saw was more of a public display of indignation and outrage against the violence, against terrorism. Who did you see there? Was it Hezbollah types and the typical supporters of the Islamic Republic, or was there more of a nationalist feeling with different sectors of society?

#Guest

Well, first of all, when you were talking about the damage in Mashhad, I remembered something funny that I want to explain here. The total damage in Tehran was calculated—though I can't convert it to dollars—it's a lot of money anyway. But the funny thing is, there's a café in Tehran that thought it would be a good idea, a good opportunity, to actually join the Thursday riots. They announced proudly, "We're closing down on Thursday." The name is Sayediniah. And it's very funny—activists went and calculated all the assets they had, and it turned out to be exactly equal to the amount of damage in Tehran. Now what's happening is there's a campaign saying, "Okay," and also the café is shut down now because of joining the riots.

They thought, okay, it's over, now we can do whatever we want. All the capital they have comes from the Islamic Republic—excuse me—and they thought it was a good opportunity. It's shut down now, and there's a big campaign demanding that the governors say, "Okay, it's equal. Get the money and fix the damages in Tehran," because this guy is apparently very close to the Pahlavis, so maybe he can afford the damages that Tehran had. Going back to your question, I remember two days before the protest I was, to be very honest, terrified. I was telling my friends, if the population and the crowd that come to that protest on Monday are close to, or maybe a bit less than, what we saw at the funeral of Haji Qasem Soleimani, then we can say we're okay.

And everyone's like, "No, it's okay. It's only Enghelab Square, just one square." And I was nervous, thinking, why only one square? Why didn't they set it for the whole street, since they're all connected? They could've chosen a longer street, a better one. When I got there, I was like, "Okay, this is exactly what I was hoping for." Actually, I wasn't even hoping—I thought it was just imaginary. Because there was no internet. Of course, the system has its own ways to let people know to come, but still, the internet was cut off.

And when I got there, I was like, "Okay, I'm all right now. I have to say, it's over." The choice of Enghelab Square wasn't really important because the whole road was filled with people. It didn't matter where they chose as the location—it was the heart of the area, but the entire area was packed with crowds. And about your question—if it was only Hezbollah people, only Basij-type people—no, it wasn't. Interestingly, I met many people with very minimal hijab, I'd say, and from lower-middle-class or working-class backgrounds. One guy told me, "I'm a maintenance worker," and he was wearing his work clothes.

And he was like, "I just came here," and in a very interesting way of talking, he said, "I just came here because I'm angry. I have to go back to work, but this is bullshit. I can't tolerate it. I just want the situation to go back to normal so I can have my life back, because my demands are lost." I don't want to interpret too much, but I think that's what he meant. It was very interesting because, again, I was expecting not many people would come, since everyone was scared. Daesh had been there two nights before. So it made total sense to me if people were like, "Okay, I'm not going to come to show solidarity with the Islamic Republic."

Maybe next time I can. Many people even wanted to come, but they were terrified. But many people did come. I talked with a teacher. She said, "I'm getting the minimum wage in this country. Still, I came here, and this is my first time, because what else can I do? When I saw what happened after Thursday night in the streets, I was like, okay, I have to do something about this situation." And what I saw Friday morning was terrifying. Everything was cut off. I managed to get a taxi, and when I got in, I was looking out the window, thinking, "Is this Tehran? Where is it?" Everything was so messed up.

#Guest

I saw masks. I saw all the people at the bus stops. It was different.

#Max

Yeah.

#Guest

I can hear you.

#Max

And so... can you hear me now?

#Max

Yes. What's the Internet situation now, and what kind of damage has it done to the country's economy to have this Internet blackout? And what's it like just not having Internet? Could you hear that?

#Guest

No, I couldn't. Sorry, you'll have to repeat that.

#Max

What is the situation now inside Iran with Internet access? And what kind of damage has it done, economically and socially, to not have Internet—understanding that the Internet was obviously being used as a weapon against Iran from the outside? Of course.

#Guest

Sure. I mean, for anyone who's not very familiar with Iran, a lot of things are done online here. For example, when you get a taxi, you can transfer money to the driver and it goes to their account in less than a second—something I haven't seen in Western countries. So just take this as a basic example, and you can imagine how difficult it is for people to manage their daily lives when there's no Internet. I mean, maybe until Sunday—or maybe I'm mistaken, maybe it was Saturday—we had no Internet at all. Then gradually it came back. The reason I have Internet right now is because I'm at work and using the Wi-Fi, which isn't very reliable or great either. But there are many online businesses that, of course, are suffering from this situation.

The Internet itself—many companies rely on it, so the loss is huge. What we heard from the government is that in a couple of days everything will go back to normal. But there are two things here. First, we should not allow the terrorists to use this issue as an excuse to come back into society. We have to prioritize safety. This is very simple and sensible for people to understand, and they do know what's happening. They know that right after the Internet was cut off, the situation started to return to normal. So the relationship between the Internet and violence—and I have to say this is my triangle: sanctions, Internet, violence—is very clear now. But at the same time, people are also right to ask for the full Internet back. And what does "the full Internet back" mean?

This is my point here: Iran has to localize its Internet. China doesn't have Google; China isn't relying on Google to run its economy. And this is the issue. First of all, going back to the first point we made about the dollar and the relationship between the various economic systems that rely on the dollar—and the inflation related to the dollar—and now the "normal Internet." What does "normal Internet" even mean? If we had our own local Internet, then companies could easily use the national, indigenous Internet with no issue. But now, because everyone has their online shopping on Instagram—the very platform that the Zionist regime and Donald Trump are using to mobilize people, to mobilize rioters, and to teach terrorists—it's also the platform people use for online shopping.

So there's a contradiction here—a paradox that has to be solved, has to be addressed. I'm sitting here, and I have no idea how we can handle this issue with the least damage to ordinary people. But also, like we have Eitaa now, we have many applications as alternatives to WhatsApp. Still, there are many issues with that. Many people don't have access to them either. I think right now is a very good time—it's late, but still okay—for Iran to think about fully localizing the Internet. So next time, God forbid, if anything happens, ordinary people won't lose their income just because there are terrorist attacks happening in the country. That could also be another reason for people to be angry about the situation, and it could become a platform for the enemy to exploit.

See, there's no Internet. You have issues. Now, maybe it's another time for you to come out to the street. But I also have to say, the great disappointment for the writers is—what does that even mean? "This is the last battle, Pahlavi is coming back, so just come this time, it's over." So this very last time, they didn't do anything, because Trump was promising them. They thought if they killed, if they came out, then Trump would come. This is a great disappointment for them this time. And I

don’t know how, next time, they’re going to fill them with some fake promises and excitement or hope that this time is going to be the last time again. Because for 47 years, they’ve said they’re not going to see this Persian New Year. Every single year, they say the governors of Iran are not going to see this Persian New Year—and they have.

#Max

Now Reza Pahlavi has called for the U.S. and Israel to bomb Iran—a position he hadn’t previously taken openly. So it seems almost like a confession of failure, as well as a revelation of just how inhumane he is toward Iranians, to wish that kind of violence on them. At the same time, we heard a very defiant speech by Iran’s leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who took aim directly at the United States and blamed both the U.S. and Trump. The former—well, I almost called him the Israeli ambassador, but I mean the U.S. ambassador to Israel—I had trouble determining which country he was representing—Daniel B. Shapiro, under Obama—said that the Ayatollah had marked his own death by defying Trump so angrily. But we can see the Danes kind of cowering before Trump, and the more they cower, the more Trump moves in on Greenland. So what’s the thinking here with this defiant speech by Khamenei? Will it deter the United States and Trump, or do you think it could invite action?

#Guest

Okay, a couple of things. In that interview, the king’s son also said, “Yeah, just bomb Iran.”

#Max

You’re referring to Pahlavi.

#Guest

Yeah, Reza Pahlavi. Yeah. He also said, “Yeah, let’s bomb Iran. I don’t care how. How you’re going to do it is not my business. Just do it. Just kill people, as many as you can. Just bring regime change and make me the king. That’s it, that’s all I want.” Because his whole life has been based on the money his father stole from the country. You know that, right? They stole money—the whole family. They haven’t had jobs in 47 years, and all they have is the money their dear father stole. And now he’s talking about bombing, and he has no idea how they could even do it.

But in terms of the war with Iran—okay, I don’t—what we see right now, there are many analyses saying that the Saudis and other puppets in the region were trying to say, “Okay, we’re not here to afford the consequences of an attack on Iran.” And the Israelis are saying the same thing, because the 12-day war was enough for them to start rethinking their decisions. What I think is that it might all be a scenario, a plot for us to get drawn into their game and think, “Okay, they’re not going to attack.” But the reality is that every single interview we see from officials says they are fully ready.

Even people in the streets are still asking about the possibility of having a nuclear bomb. So the situation is that people keep asking the same question: "Okay, this time is different, so what's going to happen?" Many people have asked me, like, "Do you know? Do you have any information?" And I'm like, "No, we don't know." So from the very grassroots to the very official class, I have to say everyone is fully prepared. Back then, it wasn't the case. Iran was shocked—the attack wasn't expected by the whole country. Maybe some were expecting it, but this time, from what I see and from all the interviews I've read, there's full preparedness.

What Ali Khamenei, Iran's leader, said is very important, because it's very easy for the narrative to change over time. Some people just come and say, "Okay, this is about Mossad, this is only about the Zionist regime, it's only about Israel," and we have to see who the real enemy is. It's very interesting—I have to say, I've never seen Iran's leader say the name Donald Trump. He always refers to him as "the U.S. president." He never actually says his name. I think maybe since the martyrdom of Haji Qasem Soleimani, he's always said "that person," "that guy." And in Farsi, he uses some very interesting words to describe him—like "this idiot." Anyway, what we see as the consequence of Iran's leader's speech about Trump is that it definitely brings deterrence for Iran.

Because we've seen over time that whenever Iran has taken a very strong position on national security—including how it deals with the rioters—there are always consequences. Right now, they're saying things like, "Oh, 800 were supposed to be hanged," but we know that's not the case. It's more about not allowing terrorists to feel confident enough to carry out more operations later. Now the entire system is saying that those who killed people will face what they deserve, meaning they'll be executed. So, in the end, I have to say the position Iran has taken—and more importantly, the position of Iran's leader—is definitely bringing more deterrence to Iran's national security, rather than inviting the enemy to decide on war or anything close to it.

#Max

And going back to another question I asked earlier about the internet—what is the role of Starlink in destabilization operations inside Iran? This is the technology developed by Elon Musk's company, which has been smuggled into Iran by State Department–backed organizations. The New York Times referred to them as a "ragtag band of internet entrepreneurs," but they clearly had ties to U.S. intelligence. They said they got 50,000 of these terminals in, which allow a workaround if Iran blacks out the internet. So how did Iran manage to neutralize these Starlink terminals?

#Guest

Well, based on what we witnessed after Thursday and Friday—I mean, on Saturday—and based on what the officials claimed, they managed to cut all the Starlink internet terminals, find them, and find the collaborators. And I'm not limiting what I'm saying only to what they said. Based on what we saw, if they had been successful in continuing with Starlink, they would have been successful in continuing their terrorist operations as well—because why not? But they couldn't. They couldn't send

messages, they couldn't get new orders, they couldn't upload. For two or three days, Iran International was uploading the same thing from Thursday night, just repeating and repeating.

BBC was very, very upset—BBC Persian was super upset—that they weren't receiving the new videos. So if Starlink was actually operating in Iran, they could have received more videos. My logic would say no. And it's very interesting, because now that I mentioned BBC Persian, during the Woman, Life, Freedom time, there was an anchor there—I think her name was Rana Rahimpour—and back then she had a conversation with her family. Someone recorded it, and it went viral, because she was with BBC Persian and was talking about the terrorist attacks, the provision of weapons for those attacks in Kurdistan outside Iran, and smuggling them into Iran.

And she was saying, "I'm so worried for Iran, I'm so worried about the security." And everyone was like, wow, she's a traitor, she's not a regime changer. And now she's working at the BBC. That was huge. And in the end, they sacked her. Can you believe that? Really—they fired a journalist. Yes, they had to sack her. She was attacked on Instagram, on her page. I just remembered it now. Maybe it's not relevant, but she was attacked badly just because, on the phone with her mom, she said she was worried—she'd heard or got some news that weapons were coming into Iran. And now she's not working at the BBC. I don't know where she is now. Anyway.

#Max

From my point of view, based on what I know here in Washington, the main factor was that Israel's air defenses were not prepared for another day—or another series of days or weeks—of Iranian ballistic missile barrages, and that Iran had rebuilt and restored its ballistic missile capacity to the levels before the 12-day war.

#Guest

And also the defense system we're hearing about—the S-400 from Russia. Again, we don't know how reliable this news is, but the defense systems we're reading about, the ones Iran has imported from China and the S-400 it's gotten from Russia, are significant. I've also heard that Israel is a main factor in my analysis too. But some analysts in Iran are saying there are very important messages from Iran, through the Persian Gulf countries, that they're going to target American ships and all the energy infrastructure in the region connected to the U.S. So, based on their view, Iran's main target is the U.S., and Israel was the second threat that made Donald Trump reconsider his decision.

The first one was about the energy sector and oil—specifically, oil prices, which could have risen to 200. Maybe he thought he couldn't afford to let that happen. But this, I think, is fairly reliable: the message from Iran. Qalibaf, the parliament speaker, said last week that if the U.S. attacks them, they're going to target not only Israel—that's a given—but also all the energy sectors, which is new. So now they're talking about activating the Hormuz potential.

In the 12-day war, everyone was expecting something to happen there. Nothing did. But this time, the stakes are going to be higher. I think one of the primary battlegrounds for the Islamic Republic—based on what Qalibaf actually said—will be chosen carefully. But there are also other analyses saying Iran has sent a message: it's not only about Israel or your military bases in the region; it's also about energy. They're saying, if we're going to suffer, you're going to suffer even more.

#Max

I don't understand what China's military relationship—what the military relationship between China and Iran—is, or whether it has escalated or improved since the 12-day war. I keep hearing about Chinese anti-aircraft systems, the same ones used to take down Indian aircraft in the skirmish between India and Pakistan in 2025, that have been imported into Iran. Is that the case? And how would you describe the military cooperation between China and Iran? Is it a factor in Iran's deterrence?

#Guest

Basically, I have to say, we don't know. There's no official news confirming that this has been imported or that anything specific has been done between China and Iran. What I can say is that Iran held joint drills after the 12-day war with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, including Russia and China, in the northwest of Iran, near Tabriz. There was also another one in the Persian Gulf. So, based on that, maybe we can say there are some indications suggesting a higher level of collaboration between Iran and China. But officially—well, I hope so.

#Max

And back to, I guess, where this conversation started—Iran is under thousands of sanctions. Israel has a plan to destroy the Islamic Republic through "death by a thousand cuts," as they call it. How is the currency doing now? How is the economy doing after days of an internet blackout, which obviously did a lot of economic damage? And does Iran have a plan, do you think, to survive this period?

#Guest

Well, from what I saw in the news this morning, there was a slight decrease in the price of the dollar, which is good news, but very minor—same with the price of gold. To answer your question about Iran's plan, I have to say that back when Raisi was president, the "Look East" policy was very strong. It was the main framework for the Iranian government to pursue de-dollarization of the economy. So it's not just, "Okay, let's deepen our ties with Russia and China, and with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS." It's more that Iran needs this de-dollarization more than anyone else, because Russia, after the war with Ukraine, actually managed to increase the value of its national currency. That's not the case for Iran, which still has to.

They were successful in strengthening their currency, the ruble, and now it's in a better, more powerful position. But Iran's currency has been in decline, especially after the 12-day war. The plan is very clear—it's been discussed many times—and I think there are important implications of the "Look East" policy that you can see especially in the relationship between Iran and Russia. The way I see it, what started during Raisi's time was a shift toward relying on the BRI, BRICS, and other eastern countries rather than western ones, instead of giving people the false hope that sanctions would be lifted and that this would automatically lead to a better livelihood and well-being for Iranians.

Let's change the whole question. This is not about removing the sanctions. Let's see the sanctions as a permanent factor that's going to remain in Iran's economy. It's not like we're going to convince the enemy tomorrow to be nice to us and remove the sanctions because the well-being of Iranians is being affected. That's the reason the sanctions are there—so that you get exhausted, you get agitated, and you feel you have only one option: to go out into the streets and join the plan the enemy has written for you. Instead of that, let's try this version. Let's consider the sanctions as a permanent factor and now see what our alternative is—how we can speed up de-dollarization. It's very simple: it means our economy shouldn't rely on the price of the dollar.

I'll give you one example. Many companies in Iran—especially the big ones, the huge ones related to the energy sector—when they want to sell their products, they check the price of the dollar and set their prices based on that. This is the first step Iran has to take if we want to make sure that the basic needs of people are provided based on our own currency. We shouldn't take the dollar into our calculations. That would be a very positive step. There are many steps Iran has taken, but it should have taken them much faster and in a more efficient way.

I'll give you another example. We talk about dollars—the price of the dollar increases, the devaluation of the currency is high. And then you start comparing the price of, let's say, petrol to what Americans pay in the United States, or what Germans pay for gas or any other energy source. And you're like, okay, they pay three dollars, and we're paying only fifty cents or whatever. This is the wrong calculation. It's a complete miscalculation of reality, because what people are earning as a salary is not based on what people in the West earn.

So we have to work within the same framework, where the price of energy is connected to what people earn, to the energy sector, and to inflation that's defined by the daily life of ordinary Iranians—not by this crazy, headless dollar that's just moving around without any oversight. The government, I think, has to manage it in a way that the free market isn't the one deciding how much the people of Iran are going to suffer, especially when we're already under sanctions. The government has to handle it in a way that other countries can't interfere.

What I see is that there are many issues that have to be addressed as soon as possible. If we don't want, as Iran's leader has said, if we don't have wounds, we're not going to have infections, and we're not going to let the enemies enjoy and invest in the pain we already have—which can be fixed. I

don’t accept that all the economic issues Iran has are because of sanctions. Many of them were manageable by our governors. There were many alternatives we could have chosen by relying on, as I said, Rouhani’s policy, much earlier and much faster. But there’s still time to do so.

#Max

And one of the solutions to the, quote-unquote, “problem” of the Islamic Republic from the point of view of Washington and the West—there’s the hard regime-change approach. The Wall Street Journal even published an op-ed calling to balkanize Iran and split it into many pieces, which I think would be the ultimate effect of the policy of allowing Israel to take over Iran. But there’s this other path being pushed by, for example, an Iranian diaspora organization called NIAC in the U.S. They’ve had many meetings with Democrats in Washington to advance this strategy. I think it’s a strategy the European Union might also consider, and it culminated with the Iran deal: to put the reformist camp in charge and begin whittling away at the vestiges of Islamic Republic control through the reformist camp—specifically through a kind of moderate clerical figure like Rouhani, and behind him, Javad Zarif.

I think there may have been a misreading there from the point of view of the West, but that seems to be part of the strategy. There’s a reformist president in Iran right now, Pazesh Gyan, who’s under enormous pressure and had to step into the void in an emergency after the death of Raisi. Where does the reformist camp stand today? Has it changed since the 12-day war and the betrayal they experienced with Trump shredding the Iran deal and then supporting Israeli strikes in the midst of negotiations? After this traumatic period of riots, is there a future for the reformist camp in Iran that could advance the strategy of the Democrats in Washington? Or have Iranians, across the entire spectrum of the Islamic Republic, united under a kind of banner of nationalism and sovereignty?

#Guest

So after the war, we had the ten days of mourning for Imam Hussain, which happens every year—it’s the annual commemoration of his martyrdom. He’s a very, very important figure in Shia Islam and in Iranian culture. The night before the tenth day is especially significant; it’s the final night of the anniversary. Every year there’s a tradition where some people go to a place called Beit, where Iran’s leader usually gives a speech. No one was expecting him to actually attend this time because it was right after the ceasefire, but people were hoping to see him. And then he just came in—he entered the ceremony without any prior notice.

And it was a really great moment for all Iranians after the 12-day war, because it was a sign of safety. It brought a sense of security—people felt, okay, we’re safe because Iran’s leader is here. On that very important night, during those commemorations, the leader said he didn’t have a speech prepared, but there was someone there who asked him if there was something specific he wanted him to read or recite. And he said, “Recite the Song of Iran.”

And in that poem, the whole thing is about unification—it's all about Iran. It wasn't about Imam Hussain. So I want you to picture this: it's the night, the very night when all Shias around the world are mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the night before the martyrdom. And Iran's leader comes in, and what he wants people to hear is a piece that's all about the unification of Iran. And it spread—I can't even say "went viral," because it was much more than that. Everyone was talking about it. I remember I was in the streets when they announced it; it was a big deal that Iran's leader had attended the event.

So I just explained this phenomenon because I wanted to show it from the point of view of Iran's leader. He actually said again in his recent speech that right now there's a great danger—both internationally and nationally—because of the terrorist war. What we have to focus on now is the unification of the Iranian people. It doesn't matter which side you see yourself closer to; it's all about national security and the national sovereignty of Iran. As much as we can, we have to explain and elaborate on the danger of the Zionist regime.

If the genocide in Gaza for two and a half years wasn't enough for people to understand who the enemy is, and if the 12-day war wasn't enough for people to see who is there to defend them, who is actually protecting their lives, and who is the one attacking them—who doesn't care how many of you are killed—then it's on us this time to make sure it's not about reformists or Hezbollahis or whoever. It doesn't matter. As long as they're denouncing the riots and the terrorist attacks, they have to be supported, and they have to be made to understand that this is the situation, and every single one of you has a duty.

In my opinion, as long as we take care of the economic situation and recognize the danger of neoliberal decisions made by the governors, and as long as we make sure the parliament has the freedom and space to question whichever ministers they think need to be questioned—because why not? People voted for them, and they have to answer the parliament members about why a decision was made, why it hasn't been changed, and what's happening, especially in terms of the economy. That's the main issue for the majority of Iranians right now that needs to be addressed. And if that's addressed, maybe the reformists will have a chance next time, maybe not. But I really think that taking care of the economic situation right now is the main focus for everyone, for all ordinary people, because they have to afford their daily lives.

And if they can't, many things are going to be questioned. It doesn't matter how much I explain to them that in 47 years the Islamic Republic has built a lot of successful infrastructure. It doesn't matter if I say that in medicine, in the medical system, Iran is one of the best, or that the education and health systems are strong—many things, many achievements. It doesn't matter to explain to them what they already have. What matters is what they don't have, which is a safe, secure future where they can go to work from nine to five, come back home, have a roof over their heads, food on the table, and be able to feed their families. That's what they want to see. And I think that's the main focus for the head of state, the leader of Iran.

#Max

And Nahid, is there anything you think we've left out, or anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

#Guest

No, I already talked about this. I just wanted to say again that it's utterly painful and hard to explain to people that those who were murdered by terrorists—it's double the work to explain to them that we have the same enemy. It's not that the security forces did this. It's all about trying to explain, to conceptualize, the terrorist wars happening in Iran. I think that's the hardest thing right now. I don't care about the Davos conference, who boycotted Araghchi, or the international economic forum where they said, "Oh yes, Pahlavi told us there's a lot of oppression in your country, so Arafat cannot come." So what? We have nothing to lose on that front. I'm very glad, and we should boycott it back.

I mean, we had to initiate the boycott first, and we shouldn't have been going anywhere that Trump or Netanyahu is. But the reason I said that is because I'm not relying on the Western powers to understand this. What's important is that the people who support the cause of Palestine—the ones who protested for two and a half years against the genocide in Gaza—those are the ones I want to talk to. Don't be fooled by the mainstream propaganda about what happened in Iran. Don't trust what they say, because you didn't trust what they said about the genocide. You didn't trust them. It' s the same case. They want to root out the only nation-state that's supporting the cause of Palestine.

There are many groups they're supporting, but there's no state truly backing the liberation of Palestinians. In my understanding, that's the main reason the Zionist regime and Trump are attacking Iran right now. So, if you're part of the Grayzone audience and you care about the Palestinian cause—if you believe the liberation of Palestine and stopping the genocide are your focus—then understand the link between Iran, the resistance of Palestinians, and what's happening right now with the attacks against Iranians. Don't think you have double standards if you have doubts or hesitation about the news coming from Iran. It's super complicated, it's multi-layered, and there's a lot you need to learn before deciding what stance to take on Iran.

#Max

Nahid Paresa, thanks so much for joining us from Tehran here at The Grayzone. Excellent insights and analysis, as always.

#Guest

My pleasure. Thank you so much.