Scientist Confirms Iran Is Unbeatable | Dr. Patrick Ringgenberg

Western views of Iran are deeply distorted. Patrick Ringgenberg, EPFL lecturer and longtime Iran researcher, discusses media bias, Iran's social and religious complexity, failed regime change thinking, war misreading, internal power factions, and the gap between diaspora narratives and life inside Iran. Links: Patrick Ringgenberg Website: https://patrickringgenberg.com/home/ Academia: https://unil.academia.edu/PatrickRinggenberg Article: https://forumgeopolitica.com/fr/article/la-guerre-contre-liran-un-tournant-pour-teheran-et-lordre-international Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic) Merch: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Donation: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction and war assessment 00:03:55 Real life inside Iran 00:09:40 Wine tradition and private life 00:13:13 Military misread and war delusion 00:21:32 Media bias and missing experts 00:28:30 The mullah regime label 00:35:09 Minorities and national identity 00:40:03 Power factions and state structure 00:53:56 Closing critique of Iran coverage

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to *Neutrality Studies*. Today, for the first time, we have Dr. Patrick Ringenberg, a lecturer at EPFL in Lausanne—the Swiss equivalent of MIT—where he teaches and researches Iran. Patrick, welcome. Thank you. Hello. Thank you very much for doing this. I wanted to talk to you because you've written and expressed that you're quite unhappy with the way Iran is being portrayed, also in Europe, in the media. You've been researching Iran for a long, long time, and now we're in the second month of the U.S.–Israeli war against Iran. I just wanted to pick your brain about how you see what's currently happening, looking at this from distant Switzerland.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Well, actually, there's a lot to say. I think, first of all, it was a big mistake to start this war, because on a personal level, I never thought Iran would be attacked. When you know what Iran is—its history, its culture, its military expertise and strength—you realize that, no, you can't win a war against Iran. I've been visiting Iran, even living part of the year there, for about 25 years now—since 2000, and more precisely since 2002. Really, every year there were some articles about plans for military operations against Iran: special operations, bombings, or nuclear sabotage.

It was never a question of a grand invasion. But for years and years, there were plans to attack Iran. I never thought it was really serious, in the sense that, once again, given what we know about Iran, it's absolutely impossible to achieve any goal there. History is very creative. We're seeing

exactly the alignment of planets that created the illusion that Iran was weak, could be attacked, could be subdued. But we can see now that the analysis—and I'm not the only one who said this—the analysis predicting, even a few months ago, that it would turn into a quiet mire and a trap for the U.S., is happening right before our eyes.

And concerning the vision of Iran—yeah, my first... The first time I was in Iran was in 2000, and one big surprise was discovering a country totally different from the image or the representation we may have in the West—really, totally different. I don't mean that Iran is a perfect country, that everything is fine. No, not at all. But it's completely different from this kind of cliché, Orientalist-based vision of a country of fundamentalism and theocracy, with some sort of cross-culture. No, it's a very... First of all, it's a very big country with a long history and a sociology that's very diverse and complex. And life in Iran is totally different from what we can imagine, and from what I hear here in Europe in general. Can you give us a few examples?

#Pascal

How is it different? What's the reality versus how it's being portrayed? Just give us three or four examples.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, you know, from the West, you get the impression that it's a total dictatorship, a religious dictatorship. But when you live with Iranians, you realize they're free to move, free to gather, they have their own lives. The idea that it's a government that controls everything and that everything is religious—that's just not correct at all. Now, you have to understand that Iran is, again, a very complex country. You have sharp contrasts, for instance, between northern Tehran, with its cosmopolitan, very westernized, even Americanized culture, and regions like Sistan-Balochistan, which are very traditional, almost like another planet. And between the big cities and the villages, between north, south, east, and west, there's a great deal of variety. You can't just reduce Iran to a few westernized people in some big cities.

So the problem with the vision of Iran we have is that it's largely shaped by the diaspora in the West, which is, of course, liberal and westernized, and which sometimes has a kind of neo-Orientalist view of its own country. They know Iran only in a very partial way. I mean, they don't go to places outside the big cities, or they don't meet people who actually make up the majority—those who are more traditional or religious. And we have this idea that the government of Iran is totally detached from the majority of the people, which is actually not the case. But the main point, I think, is that we should acknowledge—or we'd like to acknowledge—that, yeah, Iran is complex, with a long history, and so on.

But in fact, we always want to see the mullah regime and religion everywhere, and that's not the case. Even Iranian Islam, or the way Iranians practice Islam, is totally different from what we see in

other Muslim countries. For instance, Iranian Islam is Shia, so it's different from Sunni Islam—and it's not only Shia, because there's a long tradition of mystical Persian poetry in Iran that has had a huge influence on people. Poetry is something you encounter in everyday life, and through it you find a lot of mystical thought, Sufism, which is also mixed with Shia Islam in Iran.

And there's—you know, I know some religious people, and I know many who don't practice Islam but are very interested in mystical thought. So you have a great variety of, I would say, spiritual ways of thinking and positions. It has nothing to do with the ideological or state Islam that we in the West think determines everything. No, that's not the case. But to realize that, you really have to be in Iran. And one striking thing—when I hear the analysts, the commentators—they're totally disconnected from the ground realities of Iran, I would say. They see Iran through a telescope, from very far away. They read reports, they read books, but they just can't imagine how life really is inside Iran.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again anytime. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's in the description below. And now, back to the video. It's a very Western thing to do, right? To project our views of what another society is and act based on our impressions of them instead of actually—well, it's not as if we didn't study. It's not as if you weren't a lecturer at a very important institution, a university in Switzerland. But it doesn't seep through, right? Also into public discourse. But let me just ask one thing, because I had this surprise about two months ago, shortly before the war started.

I coincidentally had dinner with two Iranian friends, a couple from the north—from Tabriz, the Azeri part—and they brought me a beautiful bottle of wine from, actually, Azerbaijan, not Iran, but, you know, same ethnicity, right? And he said, "Look, this kind of wine we also make at home around Tabriz." And I was like, "Oh, wow, I'm surprised, because isn't it an Islamic country? Are you allowed to make wine?" And he looked at me and said, "Look, Pascal, wine in Iran is much older than our relatively young religion." And I was like, "Oh, yeah, right. There are other things that actually define Iran than just the religion. And of course, the 1,500 years of Islam are not all-defining when it comes to Iran. Is that true?"

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, exactly. And concerning wine, it's very interesting because the tradition of drinking wine goes back to antiquity in Iran. When Islam came, it didn't disappear. Of course, the majority of people stopped drinking wine, but in the aristocracy, in some mystical circles, in literary circles, they continued to drink it. And nowadays, that's still the case. And, you know, maybe my Muslim friends in Iran will forgive me for saying this, but as a Swiss, I actually started drinking alcohol in Iran, because I was at parties where everybody was drinking something—vodka, wine—and I was the

only European not drinking. So it felt quite weird for me. Little by little, very responsibly, I have to say, I started to drink. But not all families are like that.

I mean, I also know many, many people who don't drink, or who really follow a religious practice. So you can find everything in Iran. And it's this diversity that we don't really understand from the West. Once again, when you only read books or articles about Iran, it's not enough to give you a sense of the organic life in the country. And yes, wine is everywhere. People make wine themselves—it's not always a great success, a matter of taste maybe—but alcohol mainly comes from Iraq. You also have some whiskeys, and I know people who have a collection of whiskey that's just incredible. Of course, it's something underground, hidden, private. But you realize in Iran that, in privacy, almost everything is possible.

#Pascal

And according to my friend, who's an anthropologist, he says that even winemaking is still possible—it's not too hidden. But I don't know how much that's really the case. Still, just the observation that the very famous Shiraz grape is actually named after the city of Shiraz in Iran—exactly that—was a revelation. It's like, okay, life is much more diverse than you think. But you said at the beginning that you didn't think the United States and Israel could be that foolish to do this, because all the factors speak against the success of a military operation. What are the factors you're thinking about that made you believe they wouldn't actually go through with this constant saber-rattling?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Well, just to look at the Iranian strategy—they have a multiple strategy: military and economic. They're using their central geographic position to harm the world economy, to harm neighboring countries that are helping the Americans bomb Iran. And Iran is not too far from Israel, which matters for the ballistic missiles. I was in Tehran during the 12 Days War. They were bombing Tehran day and night, but at the very end, Iranians were still firing missiles toward Israel. Eventually, Israel asked for a ceasefire. So all the speculation about the number of missiles Iran may have is maybe not the point, because obviously Iran has military infrastructure all around the country that allows it to retaliate for months and months.

And because they're really the heart of the Middle East, they can have an impact on the regional economy and on the world economy. All these data, all these factors, were very well known, because the shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz has been discussed for years and years. If Iran is attacked, it can retaliate in the Strait of Hormuz. So it's nothing new. And when you gather all these factors, you say, no, it's old—it's just not possible to really attack Iran without big losses and without a clear goal to achieve. And once again, when you look at Iran, it's actually obvious that Iran is too big to fall, too big to fail. And you cannot, you just cannot take it lightly.

And we think—well, in the media you can read that, yeah, maybe we can overthrow the government, or we can win over Iran, because they have this kind of delusional vision of the country. They think it's weak, that the population is backward, that it's some kind of exotic tribe—so you just kill the leader and everything collapses. Not at all. When you know Iran even a little bit, even as a tourist for two or three weeks, you can understand the size of the country, the mental strength of the people, the nationalism. And without being a military expert, I know that the Iranian army is quite strong and has multiple areas of expertise going back to the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s.

And even so, it's rooted in a very old military tradition. So when you look at all these factors, you say, no, it's just a foolish idea. And if this foolish idea ever turned into reality, into a war, it's because most analysts live in a bubble. They didn't analyze Iran as it is; they just created a projected image of Iran that matched their own desires. But reality always pushes back. So once again, I think Iran is a very interesting case study for me—how you build a vision or a representation of a country that has almost nothing to do with its many realities. This is something fundamental, because if you have a wrong conception of something, of course every initiative you take will fail.

#Pascal

In another talk, I once called this the Western Don Quixote approach—imagining that the thing in front of you is a giant, and then charging toward it. But even if you see the giant very clearly, if it's just a windmill, then you have a problem and you're going to hurt yourself. And I think this is another instance where the United States is fighting something that's different from what even their own analysis says it is. So I think that's the criticism, right?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, and I think the issue is that Donald Trump is ignorant of the region. Maybe he's living in a bubble, and the information he gets comes from his inner circle, which basically works for Israel. I'm also surprised by how much Israel doesn't understand that it really cannot win a war against Iran. The problem is that the U.S. has fallen into a trap, with American soldiers playing the role of mercenaries for another country—Israel—without any clear goal, plan, or way out. And now we see that it's absolutely impossible to win over a country that goes back to antiquity, with a cultural, military, and national solidity that we've always underestimated in the West.

And because we think that Iran is complex, that there's a divide between the government and the people—which is true to a certain extent—we assume everything is like a house of cards, and it's fine like that. No, once again, that's a bias, an Orientalist bias. But I'm surprised that the United States, with so many professors, faculty members, and universities studying Iran or Israel—countries in the region—still cannot understand that. So once again, it's a problem of knowledge. How is it possible that the people competent to understand a country have no power of decision, no influence

on decision-making? I think this is a big lesson for every level of decision-making and every level of, I would say, the academic approach to a country, because obviously there's a failure at every level.

#Pascal

You're in Switzerland. How did it go there? I mean, in terms of media attention—since you're an Iran expert and you're from the French-speaking part—did the French-speaking media in Switzerland reach out to interview you to understand what's happening? And, you know, the Swiss government has been, to my surprise—a positive surprise—quite critical. The foreign ministry actually put out a statement saying they do not condone, that they think it's bad that the United States and Israel attacked Iran. They even put out such tweets, which surprised me; they tend to be less outspoken. But how was the experience for you, as an Iran expert in the West, in Switzerland, now that this war was brought upon Iran? Did you get a lot of attention?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

No, not at all. Not at all. I can understand, in a very proactive way, that the media—not only in Switzerland, but also in France, for instance—invite experts or analysts who have a very strong, even ideological, perception of Iran. Or they're people from the diaspora, or clearly opponents of the Islamic Republic. So the idea is really to create a negative, dark image of Iran. Sometimes I have the impression they're just in line with war propaganda. It would be a wonderful study to do after the war—to analyze the different ways the media talked about the conflict.

Someone like me, who knows Iran, who has been living there part of the year for many years, who understands the society and the political dynamics—they're not interested in someone like me, because I would offer a much more nuanced and complex representation of the country. So no, I'm never invited. The people who are invited are usually from the diaspora, which is more or less disconnected from the country, or analysts who have, once again, a very oriented vision of Iran. And, you know, when they immediately start talking about the Iranian regime, the Islamic regime, regime change—you know they're operating within a very specific paradigm.

And, I mean, it's not even possible to counter this kind of massive argument, because they have a framework and they put all of Iran into that framework. And it's more ideological than anything else. So after that, you spend a lot of time explaining, "No, maybe it's more complex than that." You have to explain the history of Iran, you have to develop a bit. And of course, the media—they don't have the time, and sometimes they don't want to. Because it's something... You know, I've had experience with this construction of the image of Iran since, well, the early 2000s, and even before. But since 2000, I've really been studying on the ground. And what was very surprising to me was around 2015, 2016, because they had signed the JCPOA in 2015. And before that, when you had magazines or books on Iran, very...

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Very often you had some presentation of Iran as a kind of Islamic fascist country, with images related to nuclear weapons. Of course, Iran was considered a threat—they wanted to have the bomb, and after that they could bomb Israel or other countries. But when they signed the JCPOA, suddenly, almost overnight, everything changed in the media. Suddenly, on the cover of magazines, you could see beautiful young women with scarves, with titles like "Iran is back," "a great civilization," and so on. And once Donald Trump left the JCPOA, again we went back to the nuclear mushroom, the nuclear symbol, and the threat posed by Iran. So I really understood how easy it is to build—or to imprison—a country within a negative image.

And when there are some economic interests, when there are possibilities to do business or be wrong, suddenly you can change this image completely—once again, overnight. And then, instead of talking about the mullahs, the nuclear bomb, the Islamic theocracy, you have beautiful women and the many potentials of the Iranian economy. So it's a media game. But nowadays, the problem is that really most of the media—I don't pretend that I see everything—but most of the mainstream media, in Switzerland as well as in France, are just following a kind of war propaganda, a worst-case scenario. Or at least they're just repeating what we've heard for decades about the mullah regime, the religious oppression, and so on.

#Pascal

It's quite fascinating, isn't it? Because we're both Swiss. I mean, I wouldn't think that Switzerland has a guided press, that it's somehow centrally controlled, with guidelines coming down. Not at all. It' s a pretty free, liberal country where the press can more or less write whatever they want. But for one reason or another, this epistemic bubble we've created in Western countries leads different media outlets to report in only one way and to repeat certain key phrases. "Regime" is one for Iran, "mullah" is another. Can you explain that to me, by the way? I never understood why it's called a "mullah regime," because I don't— I mean, I know about the Ayatollah, I know about the government structure, including the power of the IRGC and the different branches of government—but the "mullah," can you explain that to me?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, a mullah is a cleric—a Shia cleric. It's someone who studies Islamic tradition, law, jurisprudence, and philosophy for years, even decades, and then receives a kind of certificate of competence. The Ayatollah is one of the highest ranks, but you also have the title *Alim*. "Mullah" is the common title for a cleric. You have to understand that the mullahs are the backbone of the Shia community, and not only nowadays—this has been true for centuries. Because Shia Islam, if we just recall a bit of history, is a branch that emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. There was a debate among the Muslims, after the Prophet's death, about who would be the head of the young Muslim community.

And for the Shia, there was only one person who could be the real heir of the Prophet—it was Ali, who had married Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. But the majority of Muslims didn't agree; they chose Abu Bakr, who became the first of the four caliphs. So the Shia decided that, in their opinion, Ali was the true spiritual heir of the Prophet. For the Shia, Ali is not the fourth of the four caliphs—he's the first of the Imams. Ali and Fatima had two sons, Hassan and Hussein. Hussein was martyred in Karbala in 680. And then, from father to son, you have twelve Imams, at least for the Shia in Iran. The twelfth Imam disappeared mysteriously in the 10th century, and he's supposed to return at the end of times.

It's one of the very important aspects of the metaphysics of history, of the eschatology of the Twelver Shia. So after the twelfth Imam disappeared, the question was what to do, because there was no guidance. And little by little, the clerics—what we call the mullahs—became more and more important, because in the absence of a great Imam, they were responsible for interpreting the Islamic heritage: the Quran, the Hadith, all the traditions of the Imams. And over the centuries, they really became the bedrock of the Shia community. What changed in the 16th century was that Iran became Shia—it became a Shia kingdom. And from that period onward, there was a world power that was really connected, sometimes intertwined, with a hierarchy of...

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Those who are responsible for interpreting the Shia tradition, the Islamic tradition, and the modernity of the Islamic Republic—well, we have this principle of religious guidance built into the republican system. But first, it's important to say that not all members of the government are mullahs—not at all. I mean, you can find mullahs in many different institutions, that's certain. But mainly, the political process and political decisions are made by secular people. And the other thing is that the presence of religion in the state is, once again, something very old. It's not something new. It's part of the culture, even part of the nationalism of Iran itself.

So, saying that it's a mullah regime really doesn't capture the complexity of the Iranian state. It's not only a nation-state as we know it, more or less coming from the 19th-century European model. It's a republic, it's a religious country, and it's also a country that's the heir of empires—because the first truly universal empire was the Achaemenid Empire, in the 6th century before Christ. From that period onward, Iranians were used to ruling and administering empires or kingdoms. So there's also something of this imperial tradition in the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran. To just call it a mullah regime makes no sense; it's simply a way of projecting onto Iran a kind of secularist, anti-religious, or anti-Islamic prejudice.

#Pascal

It just shows that the people who use that phrase, or those two words, really don't have an idea of how Iran actually works as a political entity. Can you tell me, though, about the religious part? We know there are Jews living in Iran. We know there are other religious denominations in Iran. How is

that working? And maybe—so, my friend, he very much disputes the legitimacy of the idea of ethnicity—but the different groups that together make up the Iranians, the Iranians today, how is that mix working? Because it seems that one of the misunderstandings in the West is that as soon as you drop a couple of bombs, the supposedly suppressed minorities will rise up and throw out the regime. And then they'll either build a new Western utopia in Tehran, or they'll break up into little constituencies and do their own thing, because everybody just wants to be free from the yoke of central suppression.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Well, you have some religious minorities in Iran—some very old ones. Yes, you have Jews, not many, I think less than 10,000 in Iran nowadays, though I don't have the exact figure. You also have different forms of Christianity: the Armenians, who are the largest Christian community, and the Nestorians, or what we call Assyrians. You have Zoroastrians too. Zoroastrianism was the religion Iranians followed before Islam, and with the arrival of Islam, many Zoroastrians converted or moved to other countries like India. But even today, though it's a really small minority, you still have Zoroastrians.

So these are communities that are fully integrated within the state. And because it's an Islamic republic, the irony is—it's an Islamic irony—that the non-Muslim communities Islam recognizes can live without any problem within a Muslim society. They cannot preach their faith or try to convert other people, but they are free to practice their rituals. They have their temples, churches, or synagogues. They can follow their own customs—for instance, to have alcohol, because Christians, of course, can have alcohol. And, of course, with the Islamic Revolution, there was a certain pressure on these non-Muslim communities.

But nowadays, you can find and meet many Zoroastrians or Christians—Christians who feel they are Iranians, just like Muslim Iranians. They're also nationalists, and they feel that when the U.S. or Israel attacks Iran, it's their country being attacked, not some government they want to distance themselves from. Not at all. And these non-Muslim communities are very old. I mean, there are Zoroastrians who have been in Iran for thousands of years, literally speaking. So have the Jews. Unfortunately, after the Islamic Revolution, many Jews emigrated to Israel. But the Armenians—they've been here for centuries.

And so they are really part of the country—part of the culture of the country. And there are many friendships between Armenians and Jews, as well as between Christians and Muslims. In everyday life, the religious question isn't really on the table, because at a certain point, everyday culture doesn't pertain to religion. It's a way of living—it's the food, the sociability, all these kinds of things that may, of course, have a religious dimension, but no, it's… You know, when you talk with people, you realize they feel Iranian, because even if they're not Muslim, they feel that the country's history is also their history.

#Pascal

What is your assessment of the political situation within the higher echelons of power in Tehran? My friend and colleague Heinz Gärtner, an emeritus professor at the University of Vienna, kept pointing out to me a couple of years ago that there are serious disagreements about how to conduct foreign policy. One of the examples he brought up is that whenever the Iranian foreign ministry gets close to achieving some success in its diplomacy with the West, what often happens is that the Ministry of Justice—run by much harder-line figures—will execute human rights activists. That then creates a storm of violent news coverage in Europe and the United States, which ends up sabotaging some of the diplomatic efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, do you have any observations about the different factions and the different types of people in Iran, and their ideas about how the country should conduct its foreign policy in the future, that you can share with us?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yes, first of all, there are huge divisions within the power structure in Iran. I mean, it's something that's been studied, and it's not a mystery. It goes back to the Islamic Revolution, because the revolution created a divide between—well, it's very schematic, but let's put it this way—between the revolutionaries who really wanted to pursue an anti-imperialist, anti-Western policy, and what we call the hardliners, and others who were more pragmatic, more realistic, thinking that, okay, there was a revolution, but after a few years we have to return to normal diplomatic relations. So, we have to normalize our relations with European countries or the West.

And that's how you can find this political positioning—whether reformist, pragmatist, or realist, whatever you want to call it. So there are two really strong positions, and of course, in the middle, there are all the possibilities. I mean, some people are—and this is also part of the complexity of politics in Iran—you may have a conservative, someone you think is a hardliner, but who's aware enough to realize that they have to be realistic about international relations. And you also have some reformists who, for some reason, are very strict about normalization with the West. So you have all kinds of interpretations of some fundamentals of Iranian politics. Nowadays, what changes everything is the war.

Because during the Iran-Iraq war, the first priority was to defend the country—the homeland—and to put aside political divisions. First, we defend the country, and then we talk about politics. Nowadays, I think it's more or less the same. The divisions, the tensions between the different factions, and sometimes very violent oppositions are all there, but the priority is to unite against the aggression. After the war, of course, all these divisions and issues will come back, because we'll again see a strong split between the people who really want to make a complete shift toward the East—with China and Russia—and those who don't want to deal with the West, or only with a very limited engagement.

And some realistic—maybe more realistic—analysts would say, no, we have to find a way to normalize relations with all the countries in the world, including the West. So for the moment, I think the divisions and internal oppositions inside the government are just silent because, once again, we're in a state of emergency, and the first thing is to finish the war on the best terms possible. After that, of course, there will be heated debates within the power structure—people saying, "Okay, what can we do now?" But it will all depend on how the war ends and what Iran will get from an agreement.

But yeah, anyway, you have to think that behind the idea—maybe the concept—that there's a kind of homogeneity of thinking inside the Islamic Republic, because everybody is obliged to accept the system, there are actually really strong divisions and hot debates. Each time I had a political discussion, and I had many in Iran, I mean, you cannot imagine—they talk about these things in very frank ways. There's no taboo. They know the country is divided on a political level. So it will depend on the end of the war, on the policy of the new supreme leader, on the political forces that emerge after the war, and of course there are many, many parameters we don't know yet.

#Pascal

Should we understand the role of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei—the new Ayatollah Khamenei now, who was his father before—should we see that role more like the supreme leader in, let's say, North Korea, where we imagine a dictator who rules with an iron fist? Or should we understand him more as a kind of balancer-in-chief, someone who has to play between the different factions that all matter for political power? I mean, we know there are all these factions. So what is his practical role within the system?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Well, the Supreme Leader has many functions. The idea is to have religious guidance at the top of the state because it's, once again, a very old Shiite tradition, even though the system of the Islamic Republic is very modern, even modernist. The idea is to have religious guidance so the country follows Islamic principles in its politics and society. Now, this is the theory. But in practice, it's much more complex. What we see when we observe politics sometimes has nothing to do with religion—it's a kind of political realism or imperial tradition, or just the politics any nation-state would follow. And it's not because a cleric, the Supreme Leader, says something or recommends doing this or that, that it's necessarily religious in its basis.

Sometimes what he says is just political stuff in a very basic sense of the term. It has nothing to do, really, with religion in the everyday life of the towns. The Supreme Leader, as you said, is at the top of the state. He's kind of playing the role of a balance of power between different factions. He's a symbol of unity. He's morally responsible for the Islamic orientation—or at least the appearance—of the country. And he represents what we can call the deep state. I mean, the awareness that,

fundamentally speaking, Iran—yes, it has a republican dimension—but its roots in history are at the same time a sense of religion and a sense of empire, because all the empires of Iran were.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Really deeply connected to a sacred dimension. It once again goes back to antiquity. So the deep state, in the case of Iran, is the awareness that religion is one of the fundamental identity axes of the country, and that there is also an imperial axis that's really rooted in history. The deep state is fundamentally that, and the Supreme Leader also represents this kind of deep state. So he has a function that's really multiple. Now, what will Mostafa Khamenei do? I don't know, because before the war, when I had some political discussions with people in Iran who knew the system from the inside, the very function of the Supreme Leader was being questioned. Do we keep it?

Do we transform it into something less political and more, say, religious or moral? Or do we change—do we transform this functional discipline into something that looks like a council with several people, not just one person at the top? So there were these kinds of debates. They were only debates, but they showed that the choice of Mostafa Khamenei was made in a very specific context—a context of war, of emergency. And because he was close to his father, a cleric, he knows Islamic jurisprudence to a sufficient level of competence. He has, of course, been trained by his father in political studies. So, obviously, they wanted to create a kind of continuity of allegiance and doctrine, so the unity of the country would be preserved in the circumstances we're in.

But after the war, no one knows, because, of course, Mostafa Khamenei is from another generation, and he's well aware that the country has changed over four decades—that his father's policy will certainly not be his, even if it follows in his father's tracks. So there are many more questions than answers at this point. But one thing is clear: despite the divisions, the internal oppositions—very strong ones—within the Iranian system, it's still a solid system, because Iranians know when they can fight each other within the republic's framework and when they have to unite against a common threat to the country.

#Pascal

I find this fascinating. On the one hand, there are certainly administrative capacities that go back at least 2,600 years to manage and sustain that kind of system. On the other hand, I find it really interesting that you're framing his role as basically the head of the deep state. I just had a discussion with Aaron Good, who also says that in the United States, it's naïve to think the political system is just the Senate, the White House, and so on. Of course, the political realities in the U.S. work hand in hand with all the forces that aren't directly part of the constitutional order, but they're still an essential part of how the American political system functions.

So if you're framing Ayatollah as just the visible head of another part of the state, that's quite valuable, I think, to think about—to figure out how political structures work. But maybe, you know,

we have about five minutes left, and I'd just like to ask you: is there something I didn't ask you, or something on your mind that you think is important, that could be added to the discussion we've already had, for people to better understand something you think is important about Iran or about the war that's now unfolding?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Well, you know, there are many things to say. But maybe I'd stress the fact that, once again, the way Iran is represented in the European media is really totally misleading. And once again, not because Iran is some kind of perfect country, a place of harmony or paradise—no, not at all. And, you know, as a researcher, my...

#Patrick Ringgenberg

My purpose, my goals, are to have the most complete, accurate, relevant, and, I would say, neutral vision of the many realities—sometimes contradictory—of a country. But what I hear, what I read in the media, is always a kind of bias in interpretation that wants you to see things this way or that way. And of course, I know the diaspora a bit in the West, and they have their own life trajectories. Some are economic immigrants, others were opponents of the Islamic Republic. Naturally, they took refuge here in the West, in the U.S., in Europe. And of course, they have a discourse of opposition, which is fully understandable. I don't have to judge that.

Simply, I have to say again that it's one voice, but there are many, many other voices in Iran. And as a historian, as an anthropologist, I can't just take into account one voice and say, okay, Iran is that—through the framework or the lens of the diaspora's life. Once again, the problem is the lack of understanding, and simply the lack of contact with Iran as it is—the living Iran. What's interesting to me is that many people who debate about Iran on television and in the media talk about Iran without Iran. As if, I mean, they decide, okay, in the new Iran, the diaspora will do this or that. I can understand that these people have ideas, and they think that when they can come back to Iran, they'll remove the government and create some kind of secular, liberal type of government there.

Why not? But it's just theory. And what about the more than 90 million people living in Iran? What do they think? What do they know about them? Almost nothing. Because they just assume Iranians should think like they do—in a liberal, secular, Western way. There are people like that in Iran, of course. There are many who are very critical of the Islamic Republic. But once again, the diaspora and the analysts we hear and read in the West are totally disconnected from the majority of Iranians, who think otherwise. And this is why the Iran they talk about is not a real Iran. It's a projected, ideal, theoretical, Orientalist Iran. But it's not the Iran that, I think, any tourist in Iran—even one there for just ten days—could discover.

#Pascal

Then let's hope that as soon as possible we're able to go and do tourism in Iran, and encourage everybody to go and see it for themselves, because you're absolutely right. I mean, the kind of stereotypes we in the West operate on are grotesque, while we think we're the enlightened part of human civilization, right? Anyhow, we've got to leave it at that. For everybody who's interested in your work, Patrick, you have a homepage where you gather some of your materials—that's PatrickRickenberg.com.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's it—patrickrickenberg.com. I also have a few articles and parts of books published on Academia.edu. And yeah, that's it.

#Pascal

And you told me you've got about ten books out on your own, right?

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Yeah, or maybe more. After ten, I stopped counting.

#Pascal

If you want to read something from a very modest researcher who stopped counting his books, go and find the work of Patrick Rickenberg. I'll try to put a couple of links in the description box below. Patrick, thank you so much for your time today.

#Patrick Ringgenberg

Thank you very much.