Assassins Abroad: Iran's Global War on Dissent

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Featuring Roya Hakakian
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

HAKAKIAN: Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris was promising to be a humanitarian leader who wanted to bring democracy and equality to Iran. And six months later, when he was in power, he was asked, "But you had said something completely the opposite of what you're saying now. What gives?" And he looks straight into the camera and he says, "I lied."

DUBOWITZ: Roya, such a pleasure to have you on “The Iran Breakdown.” Thank you for joining me.

HAKAKIAN: I'm delighted.

DUBOWITZ: Roya, I want to start with your personal story, a fascinating story about your life in Iran under the Shah, and then after the Islamist Revolution of '79, and then your immigration to America. I know you're a proud and American immigrant and obviously contributed so much to our great country. So tell us a little bit about your story, Roya.

HAKAKIAN: Well, I have three books as you mentioned it, in your introduction. So the first one deals with the first 10 years of my life, or first 15 years, but from the time that I become aware of living in Iran under unusual political circumstances. This is during the Shah in the late '70s when I become aware of the fact that everything is good and we seem to have a lovely life, except that there are things we can't repeat, words we can't say, books we can't openly read.

DUBOWITZ: And how long has your family been in Iran?

HAKAKIAN: I don't know. I did a DNA test, and it traced my ancestry back all the way to the late 1500s in Europe, in Spain. So I assume that I belong to some Jewish community in Spain that was driven out and then trickled down into the Middle East and then Iran. So there is no one in my ancestry that didn't live in Iran.

DUBOWITZ: And you were born to an Iranian-Jewish family?

HAKAKIAN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Okay.

HAKAKIAN: Yes. I should also add that all of my relatives, including my dad, were Jewish educators in Iran and ran Hebrew day schools.

DUBOWITZ: So you're living under the Shah, Jewish family. And as you say, life is pretty good. There are some restrictions, there's censorship, certainly not living in a liberal democracy, but living in Tehran. Then things change. Tell us about that.

HAKAKIAN: Yes, it was very exciting before we knew the details. Right? It was very exciting when you heard demonstrations, you could hear that people are talking about pretty grand notions, which I had only been introduced to, until then, in poetry, in literature. And so to be a preteen or teen girl, boy, young person in Iran and be exposed to the ideas of why freedom is grand and why we need equality and all those things, they were very, very exciting thoughts. And they were also completely abstract from the actual political operators who later on moved into the scene. So initially, prior to 1997, in the months that led up when we were hearing the sounds of people on the streets and all that, it was an exciting time. And I have often been told by various people who are very disappointed by the fact that I paint a portrait, an exciting portrait, of the Iranian Revolution, that, didn't we know what was coming? And no, we didn't. And revolutions are exciting.

DUBOWITZ: Well, and it's important. I mean, it's important. Many of our listeners know this, and certainly we've covered some of this in previous episodes, but it wasn't initially, or at least it didn't initially, look like an Islamist revolution. I mean, it was a revolution, as you say, for freedom, for human rights, for democracy, number of self-described left-wing groups who

were united with the clerics, with the business community, all against what was perceived as being a repressive authoritarian regime.

HAKAKIAN: Completely.

DUBOWITZ: Not by the Shah.

HAKAKIAN: Even Ayatollah Khomeini, who at the time was in France and Neauphle-le-Château, gave interviews talking about egalitarian values, and freedom of speech, and not wishing to be in power, but allowing a democratic process to take place. I mention this because there are new negotiations with Iran over the nuclear development in Iran. And people always say, "Well, they'll sign a contract and they'll stay true to it." Well, Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris was promising to be a humanitarian leader who wanted to bring democracy and equality to Iran. And six months later, when he was in power, he was asked, "But you had said something completely the opposite of what you're saying now. What gives?" And he looks straight into the camera and he says, "I lied."

DUBOWITZ: "I lied. I lied." Well, certainly regime mendacity has been with us for decades, and that actually is a great warning to U.S. negotiators as they sit down with their regime counterparts over the coming weeks.

HAKAKIAN: That deception is a strategy.

DUBOWITZ: Deception is a strategy. Right. And there's nothing shameful in lying–

HAKAKIAN: No.

DUBOWITZ: –according to the regime and the way that it operates. So the revolution occurs. You're swept up, at least in the initial hopefulness of the–

HAKAKIAN: I should add, at the age of 12.

DUBOWITZ: –at the age of 12. Very precocious.

HAKAKIAN: Right.

DUBOWITZ: Very precocious. Then what happens?

HAKAKIAN: Well, actually March 8th happens, which is really one of the most memorable moments of my life, in addition to one of the most memorable moments of the country's life. I remember vividly sitting in our living room looking at television news, and women have taken to the streets on March 8th, 1979. And why is that important to mention? Because it's only barely three weeks after the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini to power. He at the time was indisputable, indisputably powerful, that he was somebody that nobody stood up to, either out of fear or out of love.

And there were these women on the streets of Tehran and elsewhere chanting, "We didn't make a revolution to go back in time." And I was shaken up. I was stunned. And even as they were demonstrating, the commentary by the correspondent on television news was that– allusions to the idea that these were not really good women, that good women would not be out on the streets demonstrating, and good women just abide by the terms or the rules that they're dictated, and these are somehow rotten or bad. And I remember thinking to myself, "How do I feel? Do I really believe that? You know, they look like me." So, I think that was very important moment, but in many ways, the writing on the proverbial wall was that there is opposition, number one, and that he, meaning Ayatollah Khomeini, is already alluding to notions that would limit our freedoms and our notions of equality.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting. I mean, it's been a theme throughout this podcast and will continue to be, about the power and the courage of Iranian woman. And, I guess, you can draw a direct line from March 8th, 1979, and that moment that you had of blinding clarity about what maybe the Islamist Revolution portended, and just over two decades later, Woman, Life Freedom, when an Iranian woman, maybe the daughters and granddaughters, the people that were on the streets in March 8th are back on the streets protesting against the gender apartheid of the Islamic Republic.

HAKAKIAN: I have traced this line from March 8th to 2022 and other moments, climactic moments in between. I think that was the moment that the Iranian gender opposition was born, March 8th, 1979. I think it took a while for women themselves to recognize that no, they weren't a political opposition, so to speak, but they were a powerful opposition within the country. And that opposition was defined by gender, by a group of people whose rights were quickly being taken away. And I think that's where it all began. It was the beginning of women's movement. It wasn't the beginning of Iran's democratic movement, but it was the beginning of the time when women realized that they are face-to-face with the new order.

DUBOWITZ: And your life changes. I mean, you're a young Iranian woman. I assume at that point, everything changes: how you dress, how you're treated, what happens in school, what happens to your family, what happens to your friends. Not only what happens to the Jewish community, but what happens to the broader Iranian community of which obviously, you're an integral part. And then you make a decision or your family makes the decision to escape.

HAKAKIAN: Five years later.

DUBOWITZ: Five years later. So you lived in the Islamic Republic for five years?

HAKAKIAN: During the years that I believe are its darkest years because it was insecure, and as a result of its insecurity, it was rabidly violent and there was a very serious war between Iran and Iraq. So that made our circumstances many times more difficult than they would've been under a little less unusual circumstances.

DUBOWITZ: And this is going to connect to the Mykonos case and trial in your book, but I mean, it's at that point that you understand that the Islamic Revolution is becoming violent, and Khomeini is now starting to target his one-time allies, now opponents, both inside Iran and abroad. Want to say few words about that?

HAKAKIAN: Yeah. I actually think, and I'm sure I'm thinking this retrospectively; I wasn't thinking that when I was in Tehran at the age of 13, but I think that what facilitated Khomeini's rise to political power to the degree that he initially went to Qom, saying that all he wanted to do was to stay as a seminary and do his religious studies, but then he moved to Tehran and really took the leadership, the political leadership very overtly. But I think what further catalyzed this process was the takeover of the American embassy because the world's attention was so focused on the 52 hostages and the events at the American embassy that there was a complete oblivion as to what was domestically happening.

Am I paranoid? Will I say that they created those circumstances in order to annihilate the opposition? Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. I think it happened haphazardly, but eventually that was what paved the way for annihilating and obliterating all the internal opposition in Iran because nobody, nobody in the world was paying attention to anything else but the gates of the American embassy and what was happening inside.

DUBOWITZ: Right. And the regime has done this many times in the past. And since then, created a distraction, what I often call a weapon of mass distraction so that it could hide, for example, its weapon of mass destruction. And we've seen this over and over again, but Khomeini goes after his domestic opposition, obliterates it. Now hundreds of thousands, I think, of Iranians escape in the years after the revolution, including your family, I believe in the mid-1980s, is it?

HAKAKIAN: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: '85 or so. And including members of the Shah's government and the Shah's army and security forces and prominent business people.

HAKAKIAN: The ones who are not executed.

DUBOWITZ: The ones that aren't executed inside Iran.

HAKAKIAN: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: They escape to Europe and some to the United States, around the world. But Khomeini is not satisfied with just going after his domestic opposition inside the Islamic Republic. He's on the hunt for his opposition outside the Islamic Republic. Can you say maybe a few words about that?

HAKAKIAN: More than a few words. Yeah. The ambition to go after the enemies outside of Iran wasn't just an idea about exerting control. It was also part of a grander idea, which had to do with exporting the revolution and creating or exercising Islamic hegemony. So it wasn't enough to– he wasn't looking for a Cuba-style leadership where he would create his own rule within the boundaries of Iran. He was interested in exporting, whether it was the terror, the fear that others had to feel about his power, or the ambition that this ideology was going to be sent out to all sorts of corners of the world.

And so I think the assassinations become really important in that larger way. And I think that's where the Europeans made a mistake, because initially when Khomeini's henchmen were hunting down Iranian opposition, and this isn't just political opposition. The people they were hunting down included singers, and artists, and writers, and all sorts of people. You just had to cross the line, freedom of speech, exercise your freedom of speech to land on the assassination list. And so the Europeans didn't really deal with these assassinations very seriously because they did think that Khomeini was getting rid of its own enemies, Iran's enemies, forgetting that once they had done that, they would move on to bigger, better plans and operations, which is precisely what happened.

DUBOWITZ: Let's turn to your book, “Assassins of the Turquoise Palace,” where I will say this, and you would think you would say this to every guest who writes a book, but I don't. I found your book to be one of the most gripping, and compelling, and exciting books I had ever read in my life. I mean, I remember reading it, and it is obviously a work of nonfiction, but you can combine incredible detail with just a gripping account. And even if you know the ending, you still remain on the edge of your seat. So I just want to put it out there for those who are listening to this. Please go right now online and buy a copy of that book. It really is, it's a tremendous book. Tell us why this young Iranian woman comes to America. You write the first book, which is your account of growing up in the Islamic Republic. I would note as well, I think I've got this right, Roya. I mean, you arrived in the United States, you spoke English?

HAKAKIAN: No.

DUBOWITZ: No English?

HAKAKIAN: None.

DUBOWITZ: So you hadn't learned any English in Iran?

HAKAKIAN: No.

DUBOWITZ: It's quite just a remarkable immigrant success story. I often say that the only place where Iranians aren't successful in the world is inside the Islamic Republic. You're just another example of this extraordinary Iranian immigrant who comes to America, doesn't know English, and within a short period of time is writing these brilliant books in English. So it's a remarkable personal success story. But how did you come about this story? Was is it through deep research or

connections to the victims, or was this by happen chance that you came upon the story and decided to pursue the threads?

HAKAKIAN: My editor asked the same question because after the relative success of my memoir, she was very excited and she turned to me and said, "So it's time for a sequel." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "So-and-so who published a memoir, then went on to do a sequel. And so-and-so another Iranian author who published a memoir is now doing part two. So you should do the same." I said, "I'm not interested in telling more of my personal story, but I am interested in this other story, which in a way is an extension of my personal story."

So I tell her, sort of give her the synopsis of this book, and she says, "This has nothing to do with you." And I had to really convince her, and she wasn't convinced, that in a way I saw the story of these assassinations abroad as an extension of my own story. When I came to the United States, 18 and 19, and I spent a year in between in Europe as a refugee in first Switzerland, and then in Austria, I used to try to find any Iranian intellectual gathering where people were discussing big ideas. And who knows, I could've ended up at a restaurant called Mykonos in Berlin where a group of Kurdish leaders were discussing the lives of the Kurds and their circumstances and the Iranian-Kurdistan and the future they envisioned for their people. I could've been there.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, you would've been at that meeting.

HAKAKIAN: I would've been at that meeting. I mean, if they allowed an 18-year-old to be there, I surely would've been there. I was curious. I was interested. And so, if several killers walk in with machine guns and other weapons and they start spraying at the whole crowd, I could've been among the people who were dead or certainly wounded. So I did see this as our communal memoir, that we couldn't disown any part of our own history, the ugly parts of our past, the ugly parts of what was happening to us. It was all personal and it was all part of our national memoir. And so I really thought it was very important to make that point to say, "It's all us." Whether it's the personal story of Roya Hakakian or the story of our community suffering, it's all us.

DUBOWITZ: Right. And when this occurred in 1992, there had already been over a decade of other assassinations that had occurred in Europe–

HAKAKIAN: In America.

DUBOWITZ: In America.

HAKAKIAN: Next door in Maryland.

DUBOWITZ: Literally minutes from where we're sitting, as Khomeini and his thugs went after Iranians like you who had left the country to pursue a better life for them and their families. I don't want to spend a whole lot of time on that terrible day and the gory details. I've heard you say in other venues that you are not fascinated by crime, you're not fascinated by the gory details, and you usually change the channel whenever some crime thriller is on TV. But I think our listeners who are all going to read your book and are going to read about it in the detail that you write so brilliantly on, maybe just summarize what happened that day. Who were these Iranian-Kurds? What were they doing in Mykonos? And what happened at the end of that bloody period?

HAKAKIAN: So there is a restaurant in Berlin where a lot of the Iranian oppositions in exile come together and discuss ideas on a relatively regular basis, usually on Thursdays, once or twice a month. And there are various people who organize these get togethers. But on that particular Thursday evening in September 1992, three Iranian-Kurdish leaders have come to attend a conference of a Social Democratic Party in Germany. And so the group that usually gets together at the restaurant decides that this is a perfect opportunity to bring these Kurdish leaders together to hear from them, just

listen to what's going on inside Iran. One of them, the leader, Sadegh Sharafkandi, who was there that evening, had come out of the mountains in Iran to attend a conference. So it was a perfect opportunity for everybody to hear them out.

Now, among the mysteries and the riddles of this assassination is the fact that the meeting had actually been organized for a different night, not a Thursday evening. And then it was canceled and it was postponed, rescheduled for Thursday evening. Now, did the killers do that because they wanted to control the number of people who were at the restaurant that evening because it would make it easier for them if there were less people in the room? Possibly. So because then there were a smaller crowd that came eventually, there was only the three Kurdish leaders, one of their close friends who often served as an interlocutor between them and German officials who needed a translator. He was an Iranian opposition leader himself. So it was a very disappointing get-together because they had expected tens of people to show up, but instead, they were less than a dozen.

And then sometime after dinner, past 10 o'clock, three men come into the restaurant, one of them stands guard at the door. The other two, one with a machine gun and one with a handgun, walk into the back room where they were having their own private event and sprays everybody with bullets, but they make sure to get rid of, first and foremost, the three Kurdish leaders. And then the second guy just puts into them the coup de grâce and then–

DUBOWITZ: The bullets to the head, just to make sure they were all dead?

HAKAKIAN: Yes. And then the fourth person who was the Iranian-Persian-speaking interlocutor dies later on in the hospital. So that's what happens in the restaurant. And so there are some survivors who later on become key figures in just keeping the story of the assassination alive, and then others who just disappear and retreat into their own lives.

DUBOWITZ: And do I have it right that you met one of the survivors of the Mykonos murders by chance? Your husband had invited him for dinner?

HAKAKIAN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And I remember hearing that your husband was late from work, and you were just making dinner and chatting to this gentleman, and he was quite a raconteur and was telling stories?

HAKAKIAN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And began to tell you the story of the Mykonos killings?

HAKAKIAN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And it really seized you for the reasons that you've described, and that really was the genesis for what became then your own investigation, flying over to Germany, flying to Berlin, meeting–

HAKAKIAN: Many times.

DUBOWITZ: Many times, meeting these people and finding out more and more details. So tell us a little bit about– okay, so after this, there's an investigation. Tell us how this was handled by German authorities, both political and judicial.

HAKAKIAN: It's very interesting. It takes the Germans quite some time, several weeks, if not months, to really take the investigation in the right direction, meaning that the first suspects for the Germans are not the Iranian officials or the Iranian government. The first suspects are a slew of other possibilities, including Saddam Hussein having a long-standing enmity with the Kurds, and also internal Kurdish strife, various groups trying to outdo and undo the others.

So that's what the German judiciary, the German police, is focusing on, trying to unravel which one of these two groups it could possibly be. Meantime, the Iranian opposition and the Iranian diaspora who were there in Berlin and have seen several similar assassinations take place, know for a fact that this is the work of the regime. And so there is this tension between those Iranians who themselves are refugees in Germany, who are pretty much voiceless but know the truth, and the German officials who are powerful but are following the path of this lie, which the Iranian regime couldn't possibly do this. Part of the reason the Germans couldn't believe it was because Iran was engaged at the time with Germany in a series of dialogues to create understanding and harmony between Iran and Europe.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

HAKAKIAN: So, the German–

DUBOWITZ: Also, to facilitate German-Iranian trade.

HAKAKIAN: Right.

DUBOWITZ: Right. I mean, there were strong economic interests at play in Germany.

HAKAKIAN: Precisely. And so the Germans had taken the part of spearheading and facilitating conversations and dialogues, they called it dialogue, constructive dialogue between Iran and Europe. And so the Germans thought that they were the interpreters of the Iranian regime, that the Iranian regime was somehow a misunderstood entity, and that other European countries thought of them as violent and terrorists, and the Germans were going to make the way and make it possible for them to return to the bosom of the West and be part of the civilized world.

DUBOWITZ: And for that reason, I mean, the regime would never have the audacity to execute people on German soil.

HAKAKIAN: Precisely. Exactly. And so because the regime knew that the Germans would never suspect them, that they felt that they could not only operate in Germany because they were safe, and even if the Germans suspected them, they could make a deal because this was Germany, but secondly, operate the largest assassination of its kind in Germany. So in all other assassination cases, you had one person here, one person there. This was several assassins walking into a restaurant, a public space, and killing several people in one shot. And this had never happened before, and has, as far as I know, has never happened since. So the friendship that Iranians forged with the Germans only reassured the Iranians that they would be safe to kill.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, so the German politicians are, that’s to say, deluded about regime intentions and regime operations, and there's these political national security and mostly economic interests at play. What changed? I mean, who in Germany sort of stood up and said, "Wait a second, I don't buy the conventional narrative here. There's something else going on"?

HAKAKIAN: So who knew that the Germans, at the time in the attorney general's office, had a prosecutor who was the equivalent of a German Atticus Finch, a guy who just wouldn't settle or bend to any pressure. And his name was Bruno Jost. Bruno Jost gets this investigation. Initially, he goes down the rabbit hole of it's an Iraqi plot or it's a Kurdish plot, but very quickly it becomes clear to him that those are dead ends, that that doesn't explain what has happened. And additionally, he travels to Vienna to speak to his counterpart who had investigated the assassination of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the previous Iranian-Kurdish leader in Vienna. And so once he speaks to his counterpart in Austria and learns the story of that previous assassination, he is no longer in doubt that this is part two of the same effort to basically annihilate any semblance of Kurdish leadership or the presence of any Kurdish opposition inside Iran.

DUBOWITZ: So, the German prosecutor realizes that the regime could be complicit in these murders, and he opens up his own independent investigation. Is it fair to say, without the full-throated support of his German political masters?

HAKAKIAN: This is very interesting. I mean, my God. As a writer, I always look to find stories that, first and foremost, really intrigue me. And this profoundly intrigued me because here's this guy. He really believes that he's doing the right thing, and he is just a very staunch adherent to the German law. He's not doing it because he has a beef against Iran or he has particular sympathies to the Kurds or the victims, none of that. He really believes that his job in this world is to execute the law to the best of his ability. And that's what he's doing. And he has, at the time, a very unusual attorney general, the fellow who has appointed him to this, and he is a rising star in German politics, and he has to approve the idea that this is what the prosecutor is going to do. That the prosecutor in his initial findings impresses and articulates that he suspects that Iran's leadership, Iran's regime was responsible for these assassinations, and this is what he wants to go forward with.

And the attorney general who could have nixed it, who could have replaced him, who could have said, "No, no, no, you don't need to go that far. Reduce it. Bring it down. Just keep it limited to the number of the people that we have in custody," doesn't. His name was Alexander von Stahl. And Alexander von Stahl said to me in an interview in Berlin that he really was not going to reduce the scope or bend to political pressure from above from the justice ministry or–

DUBOWITZ: Chancellery.

HAKAKIAN: Or chancellery. Or anybody. And the point that he made over and over to me was, "I was not going to allow my country, my city to become the playpen of thugs." And I love that. I thought it was such a beautiful and so simple, that it wasn't about any sort of animosity with any political group. That his job as the attorney general was to defend his country. And that's what it took. It took to go all the way if it took him and his staff to the leadership of Iran. So without him, it would not have been possible for the prosecutor to do what he did. And he was the one person who was completely cast out of German politics after this case.

DUBOWITZ: Let's talk a little bit. There's an investigation. There's a trial. You described this in detail in your book, and obviously trial features a number of witnesses and the Iranian community, people flying in from all over Europe, maybe other places in the world to be at this trial because as you said earlier, I mean, for Iranian dissidents who've left the country, or just ordinary Iranians who now live outside of Iran who have been voiceless, maybe this is finally their opportunity to have a voice. And so a very emotional period of time for Iranians. What eventually happens in the trial? And you talked about courage of the prosecutor and the attorney general, not to limit the scope. Say that a few more words about what it meant to broaden the scope?

HAKAKIAN: There was a great deal of pressure on the German government to A, not allow the court to even begin its proceedings. A week before the start of the trial in October of 1993, the minister of intelligence of Iran flies into Berlin. His name was Ali Fallahian. He's one of the most evil, smartest people the regime ever produced. And he goes in to meet with his counterpart in Germany and he says, "Shut it down." And his counterpart says, "But in Germany, we can't do that sort of thing." And he's stunned because he says, "I'm the minister of intelligence. If I want to shut something down in Iran at trial, I can. Why can't you?" And he says, "Well, this is not how our democratic system operates." And so he storms out of that meeting really disappointed. But what his German counterpart promises, and that was Bernd Schmidbauer at the time, promises Ali Fallahian is that, "We will do whatever we can to help control or limit the consequences, the media fallout or other consequences to whatever degree that we can."

DUBOWITZ: And also limit the scope of who would be implicated in this murder?

HAKAKIAN: Investigation. Yes, exactly.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Not to the highest levels of the Islamic Republic, but those who were actually responsible for perpetrating the crime directly.

HAKAKIAN: Right. Even though they, you know, in the prosecutor's initial submission to the court, there had been the mention of possibility of the Iranian regime having ordered this, but no names, no individuals or anything. But over the span of three and a half years where hundreds of witnesses were called to the stand, including Iran's first post-revolutionary president, [Abolhassan] Banisadr, and a special witness that he managed to introduce to the court who had fled from Iran into Pakistan and was brought in to Germany, and then later on entered into witness protection program to testify in the trial. But it wasn't limited to the two of them. These two were two of the most important witnesses, but they were a slew of other witnesses. And of course, the attackers, the killers had been very sloppy. They recovered the guns. They traced the guns back to the Iranian regime with all the whatever forensic data that they could gather. And so it became very clear that this had been coordinated from inside Tehran. And then, on the day of the verdict, I don't want to undermine whatever question you wanted to ask.

DUBOWITZ: No, please. I was actually going to get to the verdict because I mean, the verdict clearly sends shock waves.

HAKAKIAN: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And those two very special witnesses who came in, I assume came in to testify that a murder like this could not have occurred without the very highest levels of the regime, from the supreme leader to the president at the time, it was Rafsanjani?

HAKAKIAN: Yes, supreme leader, president–

DUBOWITZ: Head of the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps].

HAKAKIAN: –head of intelligence, head of IRGC, foreign minister, and then a slew of other people. But names were named, and it included the supreme leader who's still supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, in that verdict. So it was really, shock waves is an understatement for that, because it not only just shook the court. Iranians were jubilating outside of the courtroom. All these disarrayed groups of people who would never come together were all dancing outside of the courthouse together.

But I think what was even more important, and I continue to think, that there are stories in this world like the Greek myths that still have wisdom to dispense on the rest of us if only we listen. This story too is legendary in that way, because what happened that day as a result of this verdict and the decision that Europe made as a union to deal with this assassination and how to respond to Iran, brought about the sort of success that we have never seen as a Western body in trying to deal with Iran, that it was as effective as so many other strategies that the world has tried to test with Iran.

DUBOWITZ: Roya, specifically after the verdict, my understanding is that Germany, and then joined by a number of other European countries, expelled Iranian ambassadors, recalled their own ambassadors for a period of six months. It's of note that the, I believe this is right, and please correct me, but that the Iranian ambassador at the time of the assassination at Mykonos was a guy named Mousavian, who was there at the embassy. The embassy obviously included a number of Iranian intelligence officials operating out of that embassy. Hard to believe that ambassador would not have either known or been forewarned about this assassination. But at the very least, if he didn't know about the assassination, he was very much involved in the media effort to cover it up after the assassination. Just parenthetically worth noting because we may want to talk about this at some point, he currently is at Princeton University.

HAKAKIAN: Has been for a long time.

DUBOWITZ: Has been for a long time.

HAKAKIAN: And I should just add, as a postscript to your description of Iran's embassy in Germany, that at the time, according to the findings of the court, that embassy was the headquarters of all Iranian assassination operations throughout Europe.

DUBOWITZ: It's quite incredible, and yet he's at Princeton University. But the verdict led to at least about six months of a deep freeze in diplomatic relations between Iran and multiple European countries.

HAKAKIAN: Almost all.

DUBOWITZ: Almost all European countries. So, this was a real blow to the regime, and I assume for just at least for a brief period of time, they stopped their assassination campaigns in Europe and–

HAKAKIAN: For several years. But something else even more important happened. Now, if you ask me to– I don't run a political laboratory, so I can't make a cause-effect relationship or prove causality here. But the verdict came in April of 1997. That was a presidential election year in Iran. Mohammad Khatami, who was running in that election, was way behind in the polls even in April of 1997. And then suddenly, after April 10th, which is the date that the verdict was issued, slowly but surely, he starts to shoot up. And by June, which is when the elections took place, he is installed to the office of presidency in Iran.

Now, do you want to tell me that there is no relationship between the fact that this historic verdict that caused the entire Western world to cut its ties with Iran didn't have any effect to the rise of Khatami in Iran? I highly doubt it. So I do think that once enough pressure had exerted on Iran, they quickly realized that they had to really change the window.

DUBOWITZ: Change the face.

HAKAKIAN: Change the face, I think.

DUBOWITZ: Change the face of the Islamic Republic.

HAKAKIAN: Exactly. And that's the birth of the reform movement, that there was no reform prior to Khatami, and there was no Khatami prior to Mykonos.

DUBOWITZ: It is interesting. I mean, some listeners might be thinking, "Well, that's great. I mean, there was a democratic election in Iran, and the guy Khatami, who promised better relations with the West, won that election and promised to turn the page on global assassinations and terrorism and nuclear development and all the things for which the Islamic Republic has been notoriously known, as well as domestic repression of Iranian women and Iranian opposition and Iranian minority groups.

I'm a little more cynical than that. I think you're hinting at this as well. And that is, I think Khamenei understood that he needed someone like Khatami to be the face of Iran, to be the president of Iran. And this whole reformist movement was not actually a genuine attempt at reform. It was a smokescreen, again, a weapon of mass distraction in order to hide Khamenei's actual agenda, which was to continue, by the way, beginning and expanding on his weapon of mass destruction, his nuclear program, but also, moving into the early 2000s and beyond, to continue to export the Islamic Revolution, continue to build up this axis of resistance, or “axis of misery,” as we call it on the show. And was just another perfect example of regime mendacity at play. Would you agree with that?

HAKAKIAN: Yes. But let me qualify that I think the impetus, the public impetus for reform was real. And there was a sense of hope that Khatami infused among the public, and the desire for young Iranians to change, to have free expression, to

see new publications spring up, and for Iran to temper its ways was real. So that wasn't a smokescreen. That really was as genuine as could be, but I do think that the rise of Khatami to the top of the presidential ticket a few weeks before the June elections was a decision that the regime made in order to reconcile with his presidency, because they recognized that they needed to present to the world a new, more moderate face in order to salvage themselves.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And we've seen Khamenei do this again and again, and we did this with Hassan Rouhani. He's done this in the previous Iranian selection. I prefer not to call it an election because it's really fraudulent, but in previous selection of the current Iranian president. So he's very apt and adept at playing this game.

Let's talk about, I mean, the aftermath of Mykonos, again, at least a temporary message to the regime that their global campaign of assassinations came at a serious political cost. And yet it was shortly after, or a few years after, they got right back at it, and they've continued it. And we certainly now know that it's full steam ahead. We had Masih Alinejad on this show, a friend of yours who the regime has tried to assassinate three times on American soil. Talk about audacity. This isn't Berlin. This is Brooklyn. And even beyond that, the regime has tried to kill the President of the United States, Donald Trump, as well as top administration officials like Brian Hook and Mike Pompeo and General Milley and John Bolton. So the regime has now seems to have no compunction about going after not only their Iranian opponents, but going after Americans, including political and military leaders.

Is that how you see it? I mean, today is the assassination instinct or tool that the regime uses, is it now full throttle without any measure of deterrence? Are you as an Iranian American concerned living in the United States?

HAKAKIAN: I've been visited by the FBI a few times, and as have many other Iranians living in diaspora.

DUBOWITZ: Yes. As have many people at FDD.

HAKAKIAN: As have you.

(Laughter)

DUBOWITZ: We are in close touch with the FBI, given the threats against our institution and I guess us individually. So it seems as even as Americans, Roya, living here, you're Iranian, I'm not, but I'm certainly a vocal opponent of the regime. They seem to be– at least they believe they can operate with relative impunity.

HAKAKIAN: Yes. Well, because they've spent the last quarter of the century creating a public opinion in this country that would be sympathetic to their positions and to who they are, and as a result to their survival and continuity. So I think many things have changed. When I first came to the United States in the late '80s, it would be impossible for anyone to walk in densely populated Iranian immigrant areas in the United States, whether it's LA or elsewhere, and see Iranian women walk around in Islamic dress code. Because you knew that if you wanted to dress in the Islamic dress code, you lived in Iran and when you came out, this was the territory of those who had fled that order, and so you took the stuff off. Or you would never see any signs of sympathy, be it a poster or a banner or a photograph of any of the Iranian leaderships displayed in public places, in stores. But I've seen that in Toronto oftentimes.

So my point being that at some point in the '80s and '90s, assassination was the only tool they had in their toolbox. It no longer is.

DUBOWITZ: That's interesting.

HAKAKIAN: They have infiltrated the American public opinions through a slew of lobby efforts, indiscreet lobby efforts. They have also infiltrated the ranks of the Iranian diaspora and divided it to smithereens. So what was at one time

assassination that really terrified the rest of us of the regime, is no longer just that. That assassination is one of many other tools that they have successfully used to their advantage.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting because I mean, I grew up in Toronto, known as “Tehranto.” I mean, you could actually see it there, as you've noted. And it also is based on the waves of migration to Canada. I mean, the people that came right after the revolution despised the regime. They were fleeing the regime. There are people like you and your family. But as people came in the '90s and the 2000s, 2010s, '20s, people were coming in, by the way, with a lot of money. One of the reasons that Toronto real estate has skyrocketed. And one has to ask–

HAKAKIAN: Regime sympathizers.

DUBOWITZ: Well, this is it. I mean, how do they make so much money in the Islamic regime? Of course, they had deep connections to the regime and in many cases were sympathetic to the regime. And so they were more economic migrants than they were political refugees in that sense. And so they've retained both their connections to the regime and their sympathies for the Islamic Republic. And you see that manifested in places like Toronto, but in the United States, certainly in Europe and Australia and other places.

I want to wrap up, but in a more hopeful way. We've talked a lot about the dark side of the Islamic Republic, but there is that bright side of Iran and the Iranian people, and we certainly began our conversation talking about an incredible Iranian woman, Women, Life, Freedom, successive protests since 2009. As many of our listeners know, FDD actually tracks the protests weekly and they continue. They get no news coverage, but they continue. One thing that really struck me, Roya, I saw just a couple of days ago, which I posted on X, there was a photograph of a wall somewhere in Iran. I wasn't sure where. It was authenticated by people I trust. And there was graffiti on the wall and it said, "President Trump..." Something along the lines of "President Trump, please don't betray us."

HAKAKIAN: "Don't sell us out."

DUBOWITZ: Don't sell us out. Exactly. And is a sense, Roya, I don't know if you share this, but as the United States once again engages with the regime, once again enters into nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic, there's I think a fear amongst Iranians that I talk to, that once again, the United States is going to sell out the Iranians for some nuclear agreement. Whatever you think of the agreement, whatever the agreement looks to be, whether it solves the problem or doesn't, that there seems to be a backing off from a commitment to support the Iranian people against the regime. Do you share that fear? And if so, what can we do about it?

HAKAKIAN: Looking at it both as an Iranian, as an American, and as a citizen of the world who wants to see the continuity of rule of law, democracy, democratic aspirations everywhere, I think this is a very tragic moment. If we, as the United States, give in to Iran, we're not just selling out the Iranians. We are opening the way for Iran, in a way by reaffirming it. By reaffirming that whatever bad it was doing, it was okay, it can continue to go on, create instability, carry out assassination operations, it could go anywhere in the world, nab its opposition members. It could do whatever else, but not just this one thing. It would be the continuation of everything that we have been– all the mistakes that we as an administration in the United States have made across Democratic and Republican. And I think what is even more tragic is that Iran has never been weaker.

In 1997, Iran was weak because Europe cut ties with it. And the United States didn't have ties with Iran. But in many other ways, it was in okay shape. Rafsanjani had come to power, the world somewhat believed that this was a new face, Khomeini had died. They were trying to recycle themselves. And in some ways, they had, and they had attracted new investments into the country. Right now, Iran, at the lowest it's been since its inception in 1979, it's– for a variety of reasons I don't need to enumerate them to you. Hezbollah has been weakened. The air defenses have been taken down.

We have seen as a global community, the existence of a robust movement within the country against the regime that, unlike the Green Movement in 2009, is not only asking for its votes to be recounted, it's asking for the regime to go. This is a huge leap. This is a huge change within the span of 10 plus years. So to think that at this moment, without Assad, to prop it up–

DUBOWITZ: Without Assad, without Hezbollah, without Hamas. The Iraqi Shiite militias are terrified of getting to a fight with the Israelis. The Americans are pounding the Houthis. Their ballistic missile production capabilities has been destroyed by 93%. Their strategic air defenses are taken down.

HAKAKIAN: Why would at this moment–

DUBOWITZ: Why now?

HAKAKIAN: –when you would think that with a little help, the regime could really transform? Now, would there be a revolution? No, but probably a transformation meaningful enough to bring about some major changes. And why would, at this point, we would give them a lifeline? For the sake of the Iranian movement, the Iranian people, but more importantly, for the sake of the region and the rest of the world.

DUBOWITZ: And American national security. I think you and I are both old enough, I'm maybe a bit older, but to remember Ronald Reagan, to remember the Cold War, to remember the Soviet Union, which was a much more formidable enemy than Islamic Republic of Iran. And Reagan's great insight was that maximum pressure on the regime, maximum support for anti-Soviet dissidents behind the Iron Curtain would crack the Soviet Union, but crack it politically, economically, ideologically, materially and militarily. And from the time that Reagan announced that plan, it was basically seven years, the Berlin Wall came down. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed. I mean, it is a longstanding theme of this podcast, and it is certainly a much longer standing theme of the work at FDD that maximum support for the Iranian people has to be a fundamental pillar of maximum pressure. And I think we were absolutely in agreement that this was the wrong time to be throwing the Islamic Republic a lifeline because that lifeline comes in the form of hundreds of billions of dollars, if not over a trillion dollars in the sanctions relief. It's not going to end up helping Iranians, but it's going to end up in the pockets of Khamenei and his henchmen to rebuild their strategic air defenses, their ballistic missile production capability, their axis of misery, and will be used to repress Iranians, not to enrich them.

Roya, thank you. Thank you for your phenomenal work over a number of decades. Three wonderful books that must be on everybody's reading list. And mostly for your commitment to not just Iran and not to the Iranian people, but to the United States. As I said earlier, your just incredible immigrant success story to come here not speaking any English, to end up as a best-selling author in English and to devote your life to democracy, to defending democracies, and not just abroad, but at home. We appreciate it. Thanks, Roya.

HAKAKIAN: Thank you.