



Is Iran Unraveling?

November 20, 2025

Featuring David Patrikarakos

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to “The Iran Breakdown.” I’m your host, Mark Dubowitz. Today we’re joined by someone who’s been on the front lines of wars for more than a decade – wars in the kinetic and in the information space. Journalist and author David Patrikarakos has reported from Tehran to Donbas in the Ukraine. British, Iranian, Iraqi, Greek – He brings a rich family background and a reporter’s sharp eye to understanding the Islamic Republic. He’s the author of “War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the 21st Century,” And even more relevant to this podcast and something we’ll spend some time digging in today, his book, “Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State.” With the Islamic Republic entering a new and volatile phase at home, across the region, and in the information space, David brings an important perspective to help us understand what’s real, what’s spin, and what’s coming next. So, let’s break it down. David, great to have you.

PATRIKARAKOS: Thank you for inviting me, great to be here.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it turns out that you came to Washington and reached out to me and we were going to have a casual meeting, and I roped you into a podcast.

PATRIKARAKOS: You did, but I’m pleased and it’s great. I don’t know if people can see it, you’ve got these wonderful action figures over here of what appears to be a muscle-bound Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden in combat fatigues. I love it. It’s just fantastic. You’ve got your American flag above it, got everything.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. And behind you’ve got “The Iran Wars” by Jay Solomon and a number of other good books. And you are an author, you’re a journalist, and a real expert on many conflicts. I sort of describe it as you’ve been covering beleaguered democracies, so you’re at the Foundation for Defense of Beleaguered Democracies –

PATRIKARAKOS: Beleaguered democracies, yes.

DUBOWITZ: FDD, and that’s exactly what we cover. But before I jump into the conversation with you on Iran specifically, we start these podcasts on who are you, your personal story leading to your professional story, and then we’ll talk about the subject at hand.

PATRIKARAKOS: Sure. Well, it’s a deeply existential question, but I’ll answer it superficially. I’m British. I’m half-Greek. I’m half-Iraqi-Iranian. I’m Jewish. It’s a bit of everything, really. Londoner as well, I guess you’d put into my identity. I grew up in Northwest London, which I guess is like growing up in the East Side of New York or something. What’s the equivalent Jewish area?

DUBOWITZ: So you were in Golden Green?

PATRIKARAKOS: I was in Hampstead, slightly up the road.

DUBOWITZ: Hampstead.

PATRIKARAKOS: But, yeah, pretty much there.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, Upper West Side.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, Upper West Side, yes. And that was all fine, and because that’s where I came from, obviously I needed to be a doctor, which I hated. I hated all sciences, a banker, I’m financially illiterate, or a lawyer. So I decided I was going to be a lawyer. I always loved writing, so I did English literature and then you can change, you can do a conversion course to law. In the States, law postgraduate anyway, and I did that. And in Britain we have barristers, which you’ll be familiar with, and you wear a wig and you go out in court, and I had this vision of me striding around court, cape billowing behind me.



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But then you go to do commercial law and it's not really like that. And look, I have always say it like this, Mark, I have a great respect for the law because I spent a lot of time in places where it was noticeably absent, but I was temperamentally ill-suited to just sitting in an office. And I got a job, I wasn't even a full lawyer there, I just a paralegal essentially, with a friend of my mother's, an Iranian guy actually. And I spent six months there and I was so bored. It was awful. I just got fat because I was eating all the time because I was miserable. Hey, do you remember a game called Minesweeper?

DUBOWITZ: Of course.

PATRIKARAKOS: I got really good at Minesweeper. I just played Minesweeper about six months. It was nice.

DUBOWITZ: I'm a recovering lawyer myself, so I completely identify with everything you just said.

(LAUGHTER)

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. And, look, it's a great career. I'd certainly be a lot richer if I was a lawyer, but it just wasn't for me. As I say, I was temperamentally ill-suited to it. And so I decided to, I guess, go back to university and I studied in Middle Eastern studies. I'm half Middle Eastern. I always had an interest in it, and my focus was Iran because my family, to explain, they were Iraqi Jews. And obviously when Israel was founded, this was very problematic for lots of Jews. And it's a very interesting thing because when everyone calls Israelis white settler colonialists, people don't realize how many of them were Jews in the Middle East like my family, and it is interesting.

DUBOWITZ: And you're a pretty famous family, right?

PATRIKARAKOS: Well, I don't know, but it had some people in it, the great scholar Elie Kedourie.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Tell our listeners a bit about him.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, well, Elie Kedourie was, so I'll tell you one thing, he's so good. Elie Kedourie was regarded as right wing. He advised Margaret Thatcher on the Middle East. He came to London. So there's a famous story where he was at Oxford and in the 50s, and I think his supervisor was Arnold Toynbee. It's a great story. He might not have been, but he writes this thesis in the 50s, the height of decolonization. Britain is leaving, or some might say fleeing, from the Middle East. He writes this thesis saying, "Britain should never have left the Middle East because it turned the Iraq," and the famous phrase, "into a wilderness of tigers." They're like, "You have to change this. We are not going..." And fair play to him, he had integrity, he said, "I'm not going to change it." And he didn't get his doctorate and he went to the LSE [London School of Economics].

DUBOWITZ: By the way, I always say that advantage of having a British accent is it's almost like an audio equivalent of having a PhD.

PATRIKARAKOS: Brilliant, thank you.

DUBOWITZ: You do like that.

PATRIKARAKOS: Well, thank you.

DUBOWITZ: You've got that.

PATRIKARAKOS: But, yeah, so he went to the LSE and he became one of the great scholars of the Middle East, and he's so good that he was considered right wing, even people on the left, people like Perry Anderson, a very outspoken communist, liked Elie Kedourie, it's amazing. And he was, I say, Conradian in the sense that English was his third language and he wrote better than most. It was beautiful. And he was proved right about so much, and Oxford being



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Oxford, obviously, when he became who he is, they now have the Elie Kedourie Memorial Lecture at Oxford every year that someone comes and gives. So yeah, he was great. And I had ancestors further back, one was a big rabbi, and actually my great-grandfather was the member of parliament for Basra, so the beginning of –

DUBOWITZ: And they were there for generations.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, this is what I want to say. Look, we can trace it back, I think, to the 16th century. Now it's possible that they were there before even the advent of Islam, right? It's possible. We don't know, but centuries. And yet, when Israel was founded, it didn't matter. It didn't matter that my great-grandfather was a member of parliament. It didn't matter, all the stuff, within three, four, five, six, seven years, they had to go. And that I think is a salutary lesson. And it's something that I internalize, and it's like, "I'm sorry, this is why as Israel must exist." There's so many reasons, okay? There's so many reasons. We're not going to get into the Balfour Declaration now. I'm sorry, but it didn't matter. They were Iraqis for centuries, possibly before even this Islam.

DUBOWITZ: I don't know if the statistics are correct, but a large percentage of Baghdad was Jewish, right?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: A quarter or a third?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yes, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: It was a huge Jewish influence on that city.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, and then when they left –

DUBOWITZ: And now basically gone, zero.

PATRIKARAKOS: It is. Look, this is a great tragedy because Baghdad was one of the great Levantine cities of history, and it was Jews, it was Christians, it was a center of commerce, a center of learning, and it just degraded into a sectarian hellhole in many ways. It's a real tragedy. Whether or not you're Jewish, it's a tragedy for Iraq. And even now, there's two, three Jews left, and there's still lots of Jewish. I went there. I went and I looked around the Jewish quarter trying to find where my family had lived, couldn't quite do it. It was quite a powerful trip.

DUBOWITZ: That really is the story of the Middle East, right? Whether you go to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, even Iran which obviously is the subject of this podcast and we spent some time talking about the Iranian Jewish community, there still is an Iranian Jewish community.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yes, 20,000.

DUBOWITZ: But nowhere near the size that it was historically, they live in fear. Every so often the regime targets that community.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, it does accuse them of being Israeli, I suppose, and that's what my family became. So they had to leave Iraq and they went to Iran. And my mother was born in Baghdad. I think she left when she was two or three. She was the most Iranian woman in the world. So for years I would say I'm half-Iranian because even genetically I'm half-Iraqi, whatever you want to call it, but that was the influence on me. *[foreign language]* a Persian accent. You know what I mean, all my friends were Iranian, all the guys who were coming out of exile, they set up BBC Persia, and they were with the BBC back in the day in the seventies. It was a real diaspora community, and I grew up in this great love of Iran, and did loathing. You have to split Iran and the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic is an awful theocratic murderous regime



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that, above all else, brutalizes their own people. Iran is a wonderful ancient civilization that's given so much to the world. You just have to separate the two.

DUBOWITZ: And on this podcast we often say that the only place in the world where Iranians don't succeed is inside the Islamic Republic, because the diaspora communities are extraordinarily successful. I was born in South Africa, but I grew up in what is affectionately known as *Tehranto*, with a huge Iranian diaspora community, incredibly successful. You go to LA, you go to Great Neck, New York, you go to the UK, you see very successful Iranians. Tell me a bit about your mom then, so she moved from Iraq to Iran?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, with her family. So our family moved from Iraq to Iran because it was getting bad.

DUBOWITZ: That was in the 1950s?

PATRIKARAKOS: 50s, yeah. And my great aunt was in the pogrom.

DUBOWITZ: The pogrom in Iraq?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, in Baghdad. Yeah, she remembers. I interviewed her about it, she was 97 or something. And so then they moved to Iran and they lived in Shemiran, which was near where the Shah was. And Jews, it was different. There's pictures, which I think are long gone, of my grandmother playing on the throne with the King of Iraq as a child because they were friends with him. And when they were leaving Iraq, I think there was an arrest warrant out for her because of her relations with the former king, who was obviously overthrown by, well, that eventually produced Saddam Hussein. I think maybe it was one of the young people that did it. I don't quite remember. So it was different. The Jews were very integrated. They were part of elite society as they became in Iran as well.

DUBOWITZ: And what was the family story in Iran? They were there from the 50s to the revolution?

PATRIKARAKOS: To the 70s, so before the revolution. I think they got out early because they'd been through it in Iraq so they saw the writing on the wall. But I think they had a big house in Shemiran, which is the extension of the Shah's Palace compound, I guess. It wasn't like they live in it but around it. I think at some point the Basij was sitting in that house, at some point I think. So, yeah, and then they came to London. It's a very Jewish story, really, in a sense of exile and being in the diaspora.

DUBOWITZ: And it's a very Iranian story.

PATRIKARAKOS: Extremely.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, given the huge brain drain from Iran and the millions of Iranians that have left the Islamic Republic and have gone all over the world.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, it's very, very sad. And it's sad, as I always say, above all for Iran itself, and the Iranian people. Let's not forget this is a regime that spreads terror across the world, but the primary victims are always the Iranians first, and then everybody else, not to denigrate what everyone else experienced, but let's not forget that. Look, and Iran, in many ways, it's the opposite of many of the Arab countries where you have a population that's rabidly anti-Western, but a government that has relations. Iran is the opposite. I was studying for my degree Persian, we call it Farsi, technically Persian, in Iran in Dehkhoda, 20 years ago in central Tehran. It's the only place where someone has asked me to teach them to speak English in an American accent, which was a great insult to me as a Brit. But there's real pro-Western feeling in Iran.

DUBOWITZ: Well, as they call those, two countries divided by a common language.



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PATRIKARAKOS: Exactly, exactly, yes. And I was like, "No, you want to learn to speak English in an English accent." No, no, no, America, America." So, yeah, there's a lot of, this is an educated people, right? The Shiraz, one thing, and we'll get onto this, one thing the nuclear program tells us, they're very good scientists. This is a country that is rich in human capital, that has a good education system, that has smart, driven, dynamic people, generally. And, yeah, it's just a shame on so many levels.

So I went to Iran, it was lovely. It was overlain by this awful regime, but you go to Isfahan, you go around the country. I went to Alamut, where the word assassin comes from and they all smoke hashish. And you look out at the history and you see the geography, it's absolutely astonishing and it's—

DUBOWITZ: I'm jealous. I've always wanted to go to Iran, can't go because I was sanctioned in 2019.

PATRIKARAKOS: That's a badge of honor, my friend.

DUBOWITZ: It is a badge of honor. Unfortunately, it pretty much ended my opportunity to go to Iran. In retrospect, I should have gone there before I moved to America, before I became American, and before I joined the FDD and I still had a Canadian passport. But, yeah, it's always been a dream of mine to go, and I know I sort of share that dream with lots of Iranian Americans. Yeah, and a lot of Iranians in the diaspora who were born outside of Iran and never been able to go back because of the threat. So what a unique opportunity for you.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, and I—

DUBOWITZ: As an Iranian, Iraqi, British, Jew.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, exactly.

DUBOWITZ: How exciting.

PATRIKARAKOS: And Greek. Yeah, it was. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

PATRIKARAKOS: No. It was a real opportunity, and I regret not maybe going back again before it was too late, but life got in the way. It was when Ahmadinejad came. Do you remember him? Who, funny enough, fell out with the regime. It's really interesting. I don't know. I remember I was at university, and you had the old Iranian ambassador to the UK and he came to my university, and this is an obeyed man. He had a PhD from MIT or something. I don't know. That's when Ahmadinejad replaced everyone, and the new guy came and he didn't speak English. He was like the ambassador to Britain. I was looking at this guy with his nylon shirt. Speaking to him was like having a Persian exam. He was like, that grin. I was like, "My, God. Where is this distension to? This idiot now is coming." It's embarrassing. I feel embarrassed for the Iranians.

DUBOWITZ: It's an interesting question. I want to talk, David, a little bit about Iran and the UK. It's actually not something we've talked about on this podcast over two seasons, and you mentioned the ambassador in London. Give us a sense of, knowing what the Iranian community is like in the UK, but British-Iranian relations. One of the things that struck me, I was just recently in the UK speaking to Iranians, is actually the fear they have, living in London, about Iranian assassinations and death squads. I know *Iran International*, for example, had headquarters in London, had to move to Washington after one of its correspondents was stabbed.

PATRIKARAKOS: I know.



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DUBOWITZ: And almost killed, and that correspondent is not living in the UK. He's not even living in Washington. He's had to move somewhere in the Middle East to be safe.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. I know. It's extraordinary. So, this is a really good question mark, because Iran-British relations are very unique. There's long history between the two countries. Everyone talks about this, and I'm sure you've talked about it on this podcast before, but "Uncle Napoleon," so you know what this is. It's a very famous book. It's a satire, and this man's uncle Napoleon uses his trousers and he claims the British, and it's this thing that they think, honestly, I mean, as a Brit, it's really good for the ego. When I was in Iran, it's the last place on earth they think Britain still runs everything like, "Oh. No, no. You manipulate the Americans. You are already pulling all the strings." You're like, "Ah."

Although it was quite funny. I had an Iranian friend, and after Brexit, he called me and went, "Yeah. You know what? I think you're right when you said Britain aren't controlling everything, because you can't even control your own country, can you?"

I was like, "This is what I've been telling you for years."

But there's this long history, and the Iranians, God love him, I used to go and see a man, I'll segue into an answer like this, called Ali Asghar Soltanieh. Now, Ali was the Iranian ambassador of the IAEA, the Atomic Energy Agency, so he was in Vienna. He was a charming man. I'd come in. He'd be so charming. He'd sit down. He'd just lie to me for an hour. Very charming. He'd just lie, "We have no intention of getting a nuclear missile," but every little thing would start the same with every Iranian diplomat I'd ever met. First of all, there'd be like ten minutes of boasting. It was like, "We are an ancient civilization." Then, there was a 20-minute litany of all the grievances that Iran has suffered. This is the thing, it's like, "The British, you did this to us. You did that to us," because Iran was never colonized by the British, but us and the Russians came in '41.

I mean, we essentially told Reza Shah to go, and we were looking for the Qajar. We were looking for the heir to put him on the throne. It turned out he was in London. He couldn't speak Persian. He was calling himself Lieutenant Drummond, so it was like, "Well, we can't do him," so we put his son on the throne, essentially. So, they're still annoyed about this. Then, the famous 1953 coup. We still seem to get most of the blame, which I think is very unfair, given the leading role of the CIA. So, it is in the Iranian psyche, it still exists. I don't know. I'm sure some of your listeners will remember; when you had the Green Revolution in 2009, and Khamenei did that big speech, he blames the BBC, not CNN not know. He blames the BBC for a lot of this, so it's still –

DUBOWITZ: By the way, we all blame the BBC for lots of things.

PATRIKARAKOS: Well, we blame the BBC. He's the whipping boy of the world, and some of it, unfortunately, is deserved.

DUBOWITZ: Very well.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, but there is this, in the Iranian psyche, Britain does lean large. So there is a particular –

DUBOWITZ: As sort of the American whisperer?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Like sly, MI-6.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yes, and it's just Perfidious Albion. Yeah, Perfidious Albion, but it's not just the American whisperer. It is now, but before it was like, "You did this to us. You did." There's the Anglo-Iranian oil company. It's all of this stuff," and as I say, it's all there. Tick it off this litany of grievances. It's always the same. It's, "We have never invaded a country since."

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Fair. "We have never been aggressive to any country." Eh. You know what I mean? And it's the same thing, and it's just there in the psyche, and they feel it very strongly. They have this very toxic mix of a superiority complex combined with a persecution complex, which is very—

DUBOWITZ: That's an interesting way of putting it, and yet they have an embassy in London.

PATRIKARAKOS: They do, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: A large embassy. Clearly staff, not just by diplomats, but by Ministry of Intelligence, and they're using London as place, not only for diplomatic warfare, but also to threaten Iranian dissidents.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. So, I did a piece, which I'm going to show you the picture, I did a big piece, I called it like a dispatch from little Tehran. In this grid of Central London, you have several Islamic Republic buildings. One is a school, excuse me, where they caught them singing, "God bless the Martyrs. God bless Soleimani," or whatever. Another is some kind of centre that's essentially Khamenei's office in London, and there's a grid of streets and you have all of these buildings. During COVID, they got furlough money. It was ridiculous, right? I went there with an Iranian. Well, he's British, but a British-Iranian dissident, and there was a guy hanging outside who followed us for a bit. You're thinking, "Look, this is in London. This stuff needs to be shut down," because there's absolute space for Iranian cultural centers, and they don't have to agree with everything we say in the West, but you can't have people praising suicide bombers and getting government money during COVID. It's ridiculous.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, you've covered the Ukraine War.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, for 11 years.

DUBOWITZ: And the Russians. I mean, certainly, that regime in Moscow has seemingly free rein in London as well, going after anti-Putin dissidents or those who have fallen out with Putin, former FSB [Russia Federal Security Service] assassinations that have taken place.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, assassinations. Yeah, yeah. Sure. I mean, look, we're getting tough on that. The problem is the City of London, so I want to show you this fair. The City of London was just cleaning everyone's money. It was long done, so there was clampdown on that, and the Roman of Brevenich Putin's bag. Man, he ran Chelsea Football Club. It's a very British way of hoofing him out the country. There was a problem with his visa. Very British, and so he left, and they took Chelsea away from it, because it was getting too much, and Ukraine was just too much for everybody. So Britain was always and London was always a place for people to come in a good sense, exiles, diaspora, because it was very seen as very stable.

It's a good place to park your money. It's the only country that's never been a revolution. We killed the king, and we put his son back on 20 years later. It's always a safe place to sort of put your money, but that was exploited. It was exploited and weaponized by corrupt people. So yeah, but Salisbury, where they tried to kill, basically, a guy who defected to Britain, and then they trolled Britain by, Elliot Higgins found their GRU [Russian Federation] identities, and because Putin put them on TV in Russia, saying, "No. We were just looking for this famous, Salisbury Cathedral, these two GRU assassins," and that really got to everyone. My Ukrainian sources will say that's when the support from Britain really ramped up. It's great.

DUBOWITZ: No, it's strange. I mean, I think, as you know, David, I was sanctioned by Iran in 2019.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. Badge of honor, Mark.

DUBOWITZ: Badge of honor. Again, badge of honor.



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PATRIKARAKOS: Badge of honor.

DUBOWITZ: But I got to tell you, London's a place where I don't feel safe.

PATRIKARAKOS: That's interesting. That's interesting.

DUBOWITZ: Where, actually, I take security when I go to London.

PATRIKARAKOS: Really?

DUBOWITZ: And it's quite extraordinary, because I've spent a lot of time in the UK, I've played rugby in the UK as a teenager in my twenties, and it was always a place I felt perfectly safe, and I was always such an anglophile growing up in the Commonwealth. When I go to London today, I mean, that's the photo.

PATRIKARAKOS: I look like the mullah of the mosque though. Do you see what I mean?

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. It's a great photo. We'll have to put that on our YouTube so viewers can watch that, but it is not a place where I feel safe anymore, and I know a lot of my Iranian friends don't feel safe anymore. But let me switch –

PATRIKARAKOS: Wait, can I? Sorry.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

PATRIKARAKOS: When did you start feeling that?

DUBOWITZ: Well, I started feeling that, personally, after 2019, just because it was at that point that I got sanctioned and the threats started coming in. I don't know what to date it for Iranians. I think, for Iranian dissidents in London, it's been a number of years. Clearly, I mean, there was a whole wave of assassination, assassination attempts right after the Islamic Revolution when Khomeini and the Guard Corps, the Ministry of Intelligence, just started hunting down former members of the Shah's government. They even killed somebody in Bethesda, Maryland.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, yeah. I was going to say, you've had it here as well.

DUBOWITZ: Just blocks away from here, yeah. But it was particularly acute for me after 2019. It sometimes just feels, when I go to London, and this is all, separate discussion, but there are areas of London where you walk in and you feel like, "Am I really in England? This doesn't look like England anymore," and I'm sure you've had that feeling as well, not only growing up there, but having traveled throughout the Middle East. It's a place where I worry, you and I have had this discussion offline, I worry about the future of the UK, but I want to get to some of your books, because you were writing about Iran's nuclear program 13, 14 years ago, right?

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. Look, I got lucky. I decided, when I was in university, I wasn't going to go and be a lawyer. As we said, I want to be a journalist, and it just so happened I decided to do my thesis on Iran's nuclear program. This was 2006, 2007. No one really knew anything about it, and I came out just as it really blew up. I was getting the front cover of magazines, not because I was any good, but I just had this knowledge that no one else had, so it was very important in launching my career, and then kind of got stuck in a bit of a dead end mark, because then I was writing, I feel like, three years, I just wrote the same article about the latest round of nuclear, and I was going crazy. Then, actually, I was on a fellowship at Yale and I was sitting there watching TV, and I saw this stuff going on in Ukraine. I don't know why, but I was like, "I want to go there," just into mind, and then that charmed me off in a different direction, but it was just really interesting.



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I just look back at my book now, and I read it the other week, the other year now probably, but now there was an updated version. I'm like, "Well, what was good in this? What was bad?" We've all come on a bit of a journey, I think, with Iran. Back then, I was the tail end of Khatami, and there was hope. I feel something for Iran, emotionally, and then as the years went by, it became plain to me that this regime was un-reformable. It just wasn't going to reform. And the nuclear program is interesting, because what I do with my book is I use it to chart, it's a history of modern Iran. I threw the nuclear program, because it means different things to different regimes. What it means, you can extrapolate what does it mean for the Shah says a lot about the Shah's self-image, what he wanted Iran to be. What it meant for the Islamic Republic was all about its insecurities, about what it wanted it for, so you can extrapolate out.

So, in that sense, it was interesting, because you look at the way that Iran has changed under this regime. You look at what it's done. In the beginning, I was for the Iran deal, because I was like, "Okay. We just cannot have these people getting a bomb." Now, either the Americans are going to bomb it, and only they really have the technology, and this is what? 13 years ago? Or it's just going to keep pushing and pushing and pushing, but someone has to either get on the pot, but if there's not going to be anything to stop it, then we have to try and limit it. Even though it was imperfect, right? But in the end, I mean, I don't think Trump drilled down on the granularities of the situation, but he was probably right to do what he did, and then the action came, right? Because before the action came, if you're going to not have a deal, but let it keep doing what it's doing, that's not a solution, right?

A lot of people are like, "Well, there can't be a deal."

"Well, what's the solution?"

"I don't know, but there can't be a deal."

It's like, "Well, it's just going to keep going and going. If you're not going to do anything."

And I was speaking to diplomats back then, and they're like, "Look, if Iran," and this is under Obama – The Israelis were desperately trying to get the Americans to do it for years. We all know this. The bar was so low, we're not going to do it. And I was like, but what if they do in North Korea? If they leave the NPT and then they're like, then we'll just bomb the towns, and the Iranians know that. So I was like, okay, well, we've got to do something. Because I was looking at this year after year, I was looking and I understood it. Then I was reading the IAEA reports. I was like, you got to do something. Okay. For me, the big model here, Mark, is Pakistan. Right now, Iran has a big problem with fundamentalism. Pakistan, in my opinion, is worse for many reasons, like Iran, maybe now it's getting ungovernable, but parts of Pakistan up in the Northwest are just ungovernable.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I think the difference, maybe I'm not an expert on Pakistan, so please correct me, but the vast majority of Iranians, first of all, despise the regime. Second of all, are not Islamists. If anything, they are secularizing.

PATRIKARAKOS: Exactly.

DUBOWITZ: Huge numbers.

PATRIKARAKOS: Exactly.

DUBOWITZ: The mosques are empty.

PATRIKARAKOS: Pakistan is far more rancidly antisemitic than Iran by orders of magnitude.

DUBOWITZ: It seems to me Pakistan has embraced Islamism in terms of the population.



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PATRIKARAKOS: And this is my point. It's a great mistake that they were allowed to get the bomb. And the Iranians, this is the thing that, look at the model. They were like, when the US decided to go in to Afghanistan after 9/11, they decided to go in and take out a regime that had harbored and funded the Taliban, but they called Pakistan a great ally on the war on terror, a regime that harbored and funded the Taliban. And sorry, that harbored and funded al-Qaeda. Yeah. There's been a lot of fun. And the Iranians were like, well, hold on. Why do they do this? Oh, they've got nukes.

And I just would look at Pakistan thinking, this country, if this regime gets nukes, you're never going to get rid of them. So I was like, there has to be something. There was nothing. But then it became clear that wasn't probably really going to stop them anyway. And I was worried about it and then we had this 12-day in exchange, I'm not going to call it a 12-day war because the war is not over. The ayatollahs are still there. It was far from over. And so action was taken. The degree to which it set back the program, I don't know. There was a lot of people going, "Oh, it hasn't done much." I knew that was nonsense.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, I think the technical assessment that I trust the most is probably from the Israel Atomic Commission, which has got real serious experts who are not going to exaggerate to help Netanyahu or Trump. And I think they think technically it's about two to two and a half years. So I would add onto that the three years that Trump has left remaining in his term, because I don't think, I might be wrong, but I don't think it's wise for the regime to once again, try to rebuild its nuclear weapons capabilities under Trump, having seen President Trump order military strikes and back Israel's military strikes. So you could take three years in the political calendar, two and a half from a technical calendar, and maybe that's five and a half years. So maybe we bought ourselves five and a half years into 2030, which by the way, I would just, I'm sure our listeners are very much aware of this, but 2030 is essentially when most of the restrictions expire, would've expired under the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action].

PATRIKARAKOS: Sunset clauses.

DUBOWITZ: Right. So 2030 under the JCPOA is all the provisions gone. Restrictions have sunsetted. Iran can build an industrial-sized nuclear weapons capability, and they have over a trillion dollars in sanctions relief under the deal.

PATRIKARAKOS: They wouldn't have been able to legally build the weapons capability on the NPT, but yes, you are right.

DUBOWITZ: But there was nothing precluding them from going 90%.

PATRIKARAKOS: Sure, but they weren't meant there in any way before.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's right. Under Biden, they went to 84% certainly are comfortably at 60%, but they would've had about a trillion dollars worth of sanctions relief. Now they get to 2030 enrichment capability destroyed, plutonium reprocessing capability destroyed, and they're broke. They got no money. So I think at least given those two alternatives, I think we're better off having gone out of the JCPOA.

PATRIKARAKOS: We are, but you understand that it was not a given that he was going to do this, and no one thought that the Americans would strike, they surprised so many people.

DUBOWITZ: Oh, absolutely.

PATRIKARAKOS: So that's my point, right? You had to do something if you were not going to try and restrict them anyway. But even you say now and you say, you use the phrase, "We bought more time," just until you solve, and the problem is a regime problem. Okay.

DUBOWITZ: Right.



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PATRIKARAKOS: That's the problem. It's about buying time, however you do it.

DUBOWITZ: Let me ask you this, David, and then I want to get to your other book. I think it's very pertinent to this topic, is about the regime. I mean, I've long held a view and have certainly been criticized a lot in Washington for holding this view that we need to change the regime in Iran. And there should be a fundamental pillar of U.S. policy to provide maximum support to the Iranian people to bring down this regime in the way that Reagan provided maximum support to anti-Soviet dissidents during the Cold War, while putting maximum pressure on the regime using economic, diplomatic, and selective military power when necessary. That is not a popular opinion, I would say today in Washington, though, it's a very popular opinion amongst listeners of this podcast.

The Israelis, I think have turned the corner after October 7th, where I think they have made toppling the regime and Iran a central pillar of their strategy after many years of not actually including that as part of their strategy against Iran. Because I think ultimately they thought Iran's too big. We're too small. We can't do this without the Americans. We don't necessarily have these capabilities to undermine and weaken and bring down the regime in Iran. Where do you stand on the question of what I guess is regime change? Though I also caution people that phrase tends to mean 500,000 mechanized troops invading Iraq.

PATRIKARAKOS: You don't want that.

DUBOWITZ: Or Afghanistan, that's not what anyone's talking about.

PATRIKARAKOS: It's a very good question. I think it's questions of timing, right? First of all, when you say regime change, you're talking about supporting the Iranian people is what you're talking about. So I would always think about this in this way. So when I was at university, Iran was a big subject of my study, and I studied the Iranian Revolution. And so as you will know, Ayatollah Khomeini was in exile in Paris. And what they would do, his supporters, is they would take these cassette tapes of his sermons and they would smuggle them into Iran. And it took about two years for those to percolate around. And the Shah was doing things that pissed people off as well. But it took two years to build that groundswell for then this uproar. And then he was overthrown.

In the Arab Spring, Facebook as it was then. Social media technologies were able to diffuse information, mobilize people so quickly, they could get those same numbers of people, hundreds, thousands of streets in hours. But here's the difference, Mark. The Islamic Revolution was built around the architecture of Ayatollah Khomeini as soon as the Shah fell, Khomeini was there, okay, there was nationalists and company that they then pushed aside, but he was there to step in because social media was so diffuse, there was never any leaders of the people. So Mubarak fell, he resigned, and then they were like, well, what do we do? And into the void step, the Muslim Brotherhood. And now you have Sisi who is in many ways worse than Mubarak if you're looking at being an autocrat. So what does this make about Iran? There's no Khomeini amongst the opposition now. There's no leader, right? So I think what it is now –

DUBOWITZ: Of course, listeners to the show are going to say to you, "Well, David, I mean, that's not true because Reza Pahlavi has enormous support inside Iran and outside Iran. He's been able to mobilize social media in quite an effective way." And I know your book "War in 140 Characters, How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the 21st Century." And I want to tie in that book, clearly, social media as a catalyst for revolution has some extraordinary potential.

PATRIKARAKOS: And look, social media, when you strip away everything, what does it do? It mobilizes people and amplifies messages. And the two are obviously syncretically linked. Anyway, so he's very good at doing that. Look, we can go back and forth about Reza Pahlavi. He's a very nice man. I've met him. I mean, Iranian politics is a snake pit. I mean, let's see. Certainly when I was there, or the people I speak to, they didn't see him as a future leader, but fine. What I'm



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saying is he's not on the ground yet. And I don't see people in the streets chanting for him as they were for Khomeini in the years running up to it.

DUBOWITZ: I think they are chanting his name. The question that we have to ask ourselves, because it's very difficult to know, is how big is the support? I mean, are these millions of people chanting his name?

PATRIKARAKOS: I'd be surprised.

DUBOWITZ: Or only tens of thousands.

PATRIKARAKOS: I'd be surprised. But look, the point I'm making is this, is that I think now there's a more fertile ground for it within Iran, right? This is all about what do the Iranian people want, right? It's not about trying to put in some guys, it's not trying to put in some Ahmed Chalabi that the Iraqis, they just didn't want. So when I was looking, and we talked about this, and when I was looking at the footage coming out of Iran of the night vision of all these people, wondering out, commandos, those, a lot of people seem, think this was scores and hundreds of Israelis. They weren't.

DUBOWITZ: This is during the 12-day?

PATRIKARAKOS: Sorry, during the 12-day exchange. These were Iranians, right? I'm sure there was some Mossad people on the ground coordinating. But that said something to me, Mark, that there is so much hatred in the regime that Israel had a freedom of action to operate on the ground that it didn't have even five years ago. And so when you talk about regime, when we talk about helping the Iranians to realize their own internal regime, let's put it like that. Then I think now there is fertile ground for this now because the Iranians clearly want it. So that I think is an important thing. And I'm not into any country going and changing anywhere else's regime, but if there is such brutality, if you see such uprising from the people inside, that you can assist them with that. Absolutely. I still question that there's an organized, forget the leader, there's an organized movement, yeah, but that can grow.

Now let's, we've got to look at this analytically, right? Israel is far better at kinetic warfare than the Iranians, but the Iranians are much better at political warfare. The strength of Hezbollah, actually, yeah. It's not the rockets. It was the schools, the social thing. I don't know how good Israel is at political warfare. We've got to be very good at taking stuff out. I don't know. So let's see. But I think there's more fertile ground now for Israel to help those on the ground who want to remove the regime that's brutalizing their own people. How competent Israel can do that in terms of more political warfare and stuff like that, and helping them, I don't know.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I know.

PATRIKARAKOS: It's tough, right?

DUBOWITZ: It's an open question. I think the Israelis have finally turned the corner, as I said, and have sort of made toppling the regime a central pillar of the strategy.

PATRIKARAKOS: 100%.

DUBOWITZ: The question is, do they have the same extraordinary capabilities that they've demonstrated on the kinetic side to run those patient influence operations and political warfare as you've called it.

PATRIKARAKOS: Exactly.

DUBOWITZ: The other thing that I think is important, I was just recently doing an Iran International panel, and this is being beamed into Iran, and we were talking about a range of issues. And one thing that I wanted to foot stomp on that panel and wanted to ask your opinion of since you were in Iran, is this question of regime competence. Because I think there's a

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huge amount of attention paid to regime brutality, corruption. We can talk about the economy, rolling blackouts, massive water shortages. Regime has also shown militarily that they're not as competent as people thought they were.

PATRIKARAKOS: I know.

DUBOWITZ: And I think that's a theme worth digging into. Yeah, how competent is this regime?

PATRIKARAKOS: But this is the thing, Mark –

DUBOWITZ: Because if they're not competent, if they're grossly incompetent, then I think there's an opportunity to bring them down. I mean, I think that's ultimately what brought down the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union showed itself to be demonstrably incompetent and therefore susceptible to pressure from the outside, as well as pressure from the inside.

PATRIKARAKOS: You've hit the nail on the head. Look, the sad thing is if the Iranian regime was really brutal, but really competent, it would probably be actually okay. I'm sorry to say, but it's so incompetent. And you've got to understand the Iranians, again, they have access to news. They are furious. Why are you spending hundreds of millions in Gaza? In Lebanon? We have no water.

DUBOWITZ: Billions, actually.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. Billions. Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, billions actually. So no, they're not. And that's the thing they are grossly – Saddam Hussein was an awful, awful man. But I went to Baghdad and they were like, look, the electricity was there, streets were clean. It was chaos after. He could at least do that. Iranians can't even do that. I mean, they're not competent at all. And everyone's also aware that they had so much, I mean, because of the sanctions, there's a struggle.

They had a lot of money. And they pissed it away. Excuse my language. No, they're not competent. They're incompetent. Look, even the things we thought they did well, it turns out that Israel had mastery of their skies in hours. In hours. And there's something else. Khamenei and I, look, I spent years studying Iranian nuclear rhetoric. The amount of national pride and regime credibility, they invested in this nuclear program is in ruins in a week. The Iranian's not stupid. They see this. So it's like, okay, you brought down international isolation, you brought down sanctions. You brought down all of this on us for this, basically yeah, for this program. It's gone in a day. You couldn't even defend it. So it's completely incompetent. And that's the problem. I mean, for the Iranians and for the regime.

Now, we need to be careful as well, because countries do stupid things. Not when they're powerful, but when they're weak. And if they are desperate and they think they're going to fall, and they do have, look, I'll tell you something, being in Israel during those 12 days, those, but listen, Israel, they're not a joke. And they were getting through, some of them were getting through at the end. And Israelis were tired and they're fine, they're tough and whatever. But don't, let's not kidding, I'm not even saying this, not kid ourselves that they were nothing. No, no. They have capabilities. They're still there. This regime is wounded and it's desperate and it's going to do something else. It's why I say that 12-day war is a misnomer. The war is not over. Something else-

DUBOWITZ: By saying that, David, I mean I think, and I agree with you, is another round is coming.

PATRIKARAKOS: Has to, I cannot see any other way. Now the thing with the Israelis, you now know what they got up their sleeves. The pages operation was extraordinary. You don't know. But there's also something else. And then this is a more general point. As my Israeli friends always say, "Israel's disease is arrogance." I had so many friends saying the week before October the seventh, we were all watching stuff about the Yom Kippur War. They all say, "Oh, we got caught with our pants down. It's never going to happen to us again." And October the seventh happened. So I caution anyone



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against thinking this war is over, it's not over. And the Iranians, only a very foolish man thinks his enemy is foolish. And the Israelis, I don't think the Iranians are foolish, but there's a ways to go yet.

And Khamenei is going to die. Okay? He's so old now. He's sick. He was going to put, he looked like a Mojtaba, but his son was going to be put forward, which by the way, goes against everything the Islamic Republic stands for. This hatred of domestic succession. When that happens, there's going to be a lot of people jostling for power. It might be the Israelis are thinking that's when they might strike or that's when they might help the Iranian people. I don't know. But it's all very much to play for. And something else we've discussed, Iran is a geopolitical ordering principle of the Middle East. The resources it has, look where it sits, between the Caspian base, Persian Gulf. It controls the Straits of Hormuz. There's 90 million people, a lot of human capital, huge markets. Iran falls, that is genuinely something that will change global politics without hyperbole. So there's a lot to play for here.

DUBOWITZ: It's also from an American perspective, I mean it's the weakest member of what we at FDD called the Axis of Aggressors, which is China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea.

PATRIKARAKOS: Sure.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, China's a multi-generational struggle, nuclear weapons, power, massive economy. Russia, smaller economy, very aggressive nuclear weapons. North Korea, tiny economy, but nuclear weapons building ICBMs and obviously a huge threat to South Korea and Japan. Those are three problems from hell for American policymakers. But Islamic Republic of Iran is the weakest member. Certainly that was our perception before the 12-day exchange.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: And that has been demonstrably –

PATRIKARAKOS: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Proven by what Israel and then the United States was able to do. So I'm skeptical of the extent to which the Chinese and the Russians are going to help the Islamic Republic survive. They certainly were not there during the 12-day exchange. They're coming back. I mean, the Chinese are trying to sell them air defense systems, but not even their top models. The Russians have their hands full with Ukraine. Of course, the Islamic Republic has done much to help the Russians –

PATRIKARAKOS: Of course.

DUBOWITZ: – slaughter Ukrainians with drones and missiles.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So there'll be some tactical alliances, some exchanges. But I think the Islamic Republic is truly isolated.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: Doesn't really have a great power willing to really come to its defense. And today, it sort of reminds me of the Soviet Union and kind of the mid-80s with Brezhnev and Andropov.

PATRIKARAKOS: Successive geriatric leaders.

DUBOWITZ: Geriatric leaders, ideologically exhausted, economically bankrupt, militarily stretched. It took Gorbachev to come in and try to revitalize the Soviet Union with Glasnost and Perestroika, but he didn't quite understand how deep the Herat was. And that's what it reminds me of. That's why I'm hopeful that the Islamic Republic is coming down.



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PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: I just think British American and other Western policymakers, we've done so little to support the Iranian people who've been on the streets repeatedly since 2009. And most recently in the Woman, Life, Freedom protests where Iranian women, unbelievably courageous, stood up to the mullahs and the Guard Corps and the Basij, and took off their hijabs to end gender apartheid, got killed, imprisoned, raped, and it took chemical weapons attacks against Iranian schoolgirls to finally break the back of that protest. And yet here we are in 2025 going into 2026 and the videos of Iranian women on the streets of Tehran not wearing hijab. I mean, that is ultimate defiance.

PATRIKARAKOS: Sure. I mean, if the morality piece can no longer enforce their barbaric laws, then the regime is done. Look, I agree with you. It's funny, there's a couple of things I've learned over the last few years. I mean, the first is sometimes you've just got to have the courage. I remember when Soleimani was killed and all these people on Twitter, who I knew Mark, the day before, didn't have a clue who Qasem Soleimani was, didn't have a clue. "Oh, we can't do anything." "It's going to be World War III." I tweeted this and I've been wrong about stuff, but I was right. And I said, they're not going to do anything. No kind of way. They're not going to start a war with the United States. Come on. So I've learned.

The other thing I've learned is this great quote from Abba Eban, typically dry and he said, "It is not, in our experience, leaders do not always say the opposite of what they mean." Putin told us who he was for so many years, we're like, "no, he doesn't really mean it." He wrote this insane screed about Ukraine and Russia being one country. Like, no, no, he doesn't mean it. He was telling us who he was. And Abba Eban was right. He said it in a very dry British way. And if someone tells you who they are, believe who they are. And in the end, I was guilty of it as well. I mean, we had Khatami who came at the tail end of him and he was saying the right things. And look, there were people in the regime who tried to reform. Reform was always relative. Right. We weren't talking about people advocating for trans rights here, but anyone who ever tried to reform their regime from within was either imprisoned, sidelined, or killed.

DUBOWITZ: Or deceptive.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. There was some who were deceptive, but people who were genuinely trying.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, I think that the Rohani, Zarif years were years of two men who were masters of deception and mendacity who managed to try to persuade Western negotiators that they were actually serious about constraining their nuclear program. They didn't want a nuclear weapon. They wanted to reform the system. Hatami is an interesting case study, and I think there's good arguments on both sides. But I am convinced to this day that Rohani and Zarif had no intention of fundamentally departing from the goals of the Islamic Republic.

PATRIKARAKOS: No, but they weren't.

DUBOWITZ: And no intention of stopping building nuclear weapons. They knew that they could take patient pathways to nuclear weapons. They could sign a deal. It had sunset provisions. They could emerge with this massive nuclear program. They pocket a trillion dollars, which would fund the Axis of Misery, the Axis of Resistance, what I call the Axis of Misery, these terror proxy armies. And they could have in the choice between guns and butter, they could have guns for terrorists and butter for the elite. And that was the JCPOA. And no need to revisit it or re-litigate it because it's dead and buried, especially with –

PATRIKARAKOS: Literally if you look at their nuclear facilities.

DUBOWITZ: Exactly. But I never –



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PATRIKARAKOS: I know. I know.

DUBOWITZ: – never believed them.

PATRIKARAKOS: What was also –

DUBOWITZ: Always thought they're liars.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. I mean, look, I know. I don't think they ever pretended they were going to depart from the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic, but I think they were looking just to try and sign accommodation because they knew how screwed they were financially. But anyway, it doesn't matter now. Another thing that's really interesting is that I would look at ways in which mainly the Americans because they were the one that say, well, okay, we'll release this money and we'll make sure it goes to sort of – we're going to do what we, well, even like we can make sure that it goes to sort of humanitarian causes inside Iran. And I use to think like, do you not realize that money is fungible, right? This basic point, that even if you actually insure, if I give you 100 pounds and I make sure that it goes to your hospitals, all it does is free up 100 pounds that you're going to spend, that you're going to spend it.

So I mean, the ability of, I've seen that, we've seen this with trans, and also to be crept by collective madness is really instructive. And I go back to Putin again. I talk about what I got right about Soleimani. I was wrong. I was covering the game for 11 years, and I was on the eve of that all out invasion, people say the war, the war started in 2014 okay, when he went into Eastern Ukraine. I was there, but the all out invasion, I was like, okay, look, Putin, why would he invade Ukraine? Right now, he's summoning Macron to Moscow where he makes him sit at the end and driven that ridiculously long table like a supplicant. Joe Biden, the most powerful man was going, hey, I'll meet you anywhere you want. Zelenskyy going, won't join that. He was getting to act like the head of a superpower, which Russia is not. But you know what, Mark? I forgot. I forgot that history is moved by madness and hubris. It just is. And what Putin did still didn't make any sense, but he did it, right?

DUBOWITZ: Wow. So history is moved by madness and hubris.

PATRIKARAKOS: So often. Not only. There's some progressive things as well.

DUBOWITZ: No. That's a great –

PATRIKARAKOS: It is.

DUBOWITZ: That's a great way to say it. Great way to summarize it.

PATRIKARAKOS: It's depressing, but we have –

DUBOWITZ: David, thank you. Really, I highly recommend your book on Iran, “A Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State.”

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: There's a lot of great history in there.

PATRIKARAKOS: Thank you.

DUBOWITZ: And “War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century.” I know you're also working on a third book.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah.



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DUBOWITZ: Which I think is close to our heart at FDD, about the threat to beleaguered democracies.

PATRIKARAKOS: Yeah. It talks about how Ukraine and Israel are garrisoned states for the West now. And yeah, I mean, we see, you talk about this Axis of Misery, which I like. These are states, they don't have very much in common ideologically, but what they are doing, I believe, is they are all anti-status quo, and they're seeking to punch holes in the Western led order, whatever you want to call it, the Pax American or whatever you want to call it, wherever they can. And we see the flashpoints in Ukraine, in Gaza, and in Taiwan. And that's why it's important for us to keep supporting all of those countries.

DUBOWITZ: Amen to that. And you're in the right place.

PATRIKARAKOS: Absolutely.

DUBOWITZ: Foundations for Defense of Democracies for that. David, thanks so much.

PATRIKARAKOS: Thank you.

DUBOWITZ: Such a pleasure.

PATRIKARAKOS: It really was. Cheers, Mark.

DUBOWITZ: My thanks to David Patrikarakos for sharing his sharp insights and frontline experience with us today. We'll be back soon with new episodes and deeper dives into the Islamic Republic, its proxies, its ongoing battles shaping the Middle East. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz, and this has been "The Iran Breakdown." Until next time when we break it down all over again.

END