



Inside The Cauldron: Iran, America, Israel, and the End of Khomeinism

October 6, 2026

Featuring Simon Sebag Montefiore

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome back to *The Iran Breakdown*. I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz. My guest today is Simon Sebag Montefiore, one of the world's most celebrated historians and historical storytellers. Simon is a historian of Russia and the Middle East whose books have been published in more than 40 languages. He received his PhD from Cambridge and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His acclaimed books include *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, *Young Stalin*, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, *The Romanovs*, and *The World: A Family History of Humanity*. His work has won the British Book Awards, History Book of the Year, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Biography, and the Costa Biography Award. His new book is *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East*. It's a sweeping history of the region from 1900 to the present, from Morocco to Iran, told through Shahs, Ayatollahs, kings, presidents, dictators, revolutionaries, soldiers, poets, terrorists, and peacemakers who made the modern Middle East.

And Iran is not a side story in *The Cauldron*. It's one of the central stories from the Qajar and Pahlavi Shahs through coups and revolution to Khomeini, Khamenei, and Islamic Republic. That makes Simon an especially important person to speak with at this moment because one of the questions hanging over today's war is: where should we actually begin the clock? For Israel, one obvious starting point for the current regional war is October 7th, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, followed by war in Gaza and the opening of additional fronts involving Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iranian-backed militias, and eventually Iran itself. In June 2025, Iran and Israel moved into sustained direct warfare and the United States then struck Iran's most important nuclear facilities. But there's an even a longer historical frame: the confrontation between the Islamic Republic, the United States and Israel that reaches back to the revolution of 1979, to the seizure of the American embassy, the rupture with Washington, the new regime's hostility towards Israel, and the revolutionary project that followed.

So perhaps this is a war that began in 2023, or perhaps it became a direct Iran-Israel-US war in 2025, or perhaps we're watching the latest and most violent phase of a conflict whose origins go back nearly half a century. And that's exactly why I wanted Simon here. Simon, welcome to *The Iran Breakdown*.

MONTEFIORE: Great to be with you. That was a hell of an introduction. Thank you.

DUBOWITZ: Well, well deserved, Simon. Really an extraordinary book, extraordinary life work, and it's great to have you on *The Iran Breakdown*. I know you've done a lot of podcasts, spoken about your book in many venues, but I want to zero in on the question of Iran. But before we do that, let's begin with the title. You call this extraordinary history "the cauldron." What is the cauldron? What are the forces—empire, religion, nationalism, ethnicity, ideology, foreign invention—that keep colliding in this region? And why in your telling is Iran so central to the making of the modern Middle East?



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MONTEFIORE: Well, *The Cauldron*, I came out with the cauldron just off the cuff when we were talking about this with my publishers, Knopf, for the first time in New York just about two years ago. And the idea of the cauldron is a good one because in one sense, the cauldron is a bubbling, menacing, venomous, witch's brew of dark and noxious poisons and evil substances. On the other hand, the cauldron is—it can be a bowl of beautiful ingredients, enriched and nourishing and inspiring and delicious. And that is exactly what this book is about. It's about the Middle East, a very broad definition of the Middle East, really from Iran all the way to Morocco, from Turkey via the Levant down to Sudan and Yemen. And it's now 19 countries, more or less, depending on what happens in Sudan and Yemen among other places. But the concept is just to write a history that puts everything in its place, that, in as balanced a way as is possible, tells a story, really, without ideology and without a preset rigid framework to place everything in.

So, of course this is neither a capitalist history nor an imperialist history, nor an Islamist history, nor a Marxist-Leninist history, nor a decolonialist history, nor a Zionist history. It's just as close as I could get to the story. All of those "isms" are, of course, explained in it, as you suggest: pan-Arabism, Ba'athism, and many others. And it's also written to be read by people who aren't experts on this and who may never have read another book on the Middle East. It's also meant to be enjoyed. It's meant to be entertaining, and you can read it as an epic, sweeping saga of, as you put it, empires and shahs and ayatollahs and presidents. America's a big part of the story as well, of course, as is Russia, as is Britain and France and Greece and other countries. So that's the idea of *The Cauldron*.

It's a metaphor that works positively and negatively, and I think it always depends which bit you're reading. And the book is full of war and massacres and fanaticism, but it's also full of poetry and food and singers and has novelists in it, as well as killers. So, *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East*, is just a way of looking at the region. And of course, the whole point of it is—it's not just the Arab world, it's also the Turkish world, the Hebrew world, the Persian world as well. And that brings us to your subject. I mean, when I was writing this, I was looking for books that covered this, and there are lots of books on the Arabs. There are lots of books on the Jews. There are two brilliant books on both those, one by Eugene Rogan, one by Simon Schama. And of course, there are lots of individual books about different countries, Iran or Syria or Morocco or whatever, Israel. And of course, there is a huge industry of books on Israel-Palestine. And the most recent efflorescence of that has been "Gazaology," just endless books on Gaza itself, which now has its own "ology." "Gazaology" is a sort of new sort of literature, a sort of strange moral literature about Gaza. And so anyway, I looked around for a book that included everything, including Iran, and I couldn't find it. And as Benjamin Disraeli said, "when I want to read a book and I can't find it, I write it myself." So, I wrote this, and yes, Iran is absolutely central to it. Iran is one of the main players in this, as it has to be.

DUBOWITZ: So, let's talk about Iran, and one of the great turning points in *The Cauldron* is 1979. And Simon, how did an elderly cleric in exile in France manage to overthrow one of the most powerful monarchies in the region? And what did the Shah and Washington and Khomeini's secular Iranian opponents really fail to understand about this man, both as a religious figure and as a political operator?



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MONTEFIORE: I think the tragedy of the Shah was that when it comes down to it, the over-centralization, the intensifying autocracy is so often a very bad idea. It's such a temptation, but it's such a bad idea because ultimately, it puts immense pressure and blame on one person. And if things are going well, that's great. They get kudos, they have prestige and popularity. But as soon as things start to go wrong, no one else can make decisions. Everything in Iran was organized by the Shah so that no one had the initiative except him. And that was great when he was young and doing bold things like the White Revolution, which had some success and some failure. But when he'd been in power for decades, he lost his political awareness. And though he was incredibly effective in foreign policy right till almost the end, within Iran, he was in part a victim of his own success in terms of his agricultural land reforms, which led to enormous number of people, millions of peasants moving to the cities, where they found an appalling mismanagement, really.

And so gradually he also became more unwisely vain, if you like. The famous party to celebrate 2,500 years of Iranian Persian Empire, for example, was in a massive tone-deaf mistake, but there were others too. And so gradually, with no ability, with no access to any ability to perform as a legal opposition, gradually everyone looked outside the Shah's official system. And that was a great opportunity for Ayatollah Khomeini, who was a cleric who'd had an incredibly long career. He was sitting in the parliament in the Majlis in 1925 or '24 when they voted to create a new monarchy under the Shah's father. So, this guy had been around, he was a very young man there, but he'd been around for a long time, and he'd resisted the Shah's White Revolution in '63 and, in the end, been sent to exile in Iraq. And right before the revolution, Saddam Hussein rang the Shah and offered to kill Khomeini. And he even sent his half-brother, who was head of his secret police, to Tehran to offer again. And the Shah must have regretted that decision.

But anyway, the French took him in, and by this point, Khomeini had perfected a sort of moral criticism of the monarchy, but one which really avoided revealing any actual political program. Even though nine years earlier he'd published an ideological work, ideological, theological work, which proposed that an Islamic scholar should govern Iran as a sort of sacred monarch in the absence of the sacred Mahdi who had disappeared or been occulted for over a thousand years. And no one really took this seriously. And even his closest allies wondered if this was even a serious idea because of course that scholar would have to be Khomeini himself. And once he appeared on the world stage, while sending back eloquent and damning cassette recordings of his speeches and sermons, in terms of international affairs, and that means the Americans, I guess, mainly, he was incredibly subtle, and he really put into practice General de Gaulle's comment that the best art of politics is silence.

And this enabled him to hold together a coalition of really, virtually, all of Iranian society except the most devoted of the Shah's backers and followers of the regime. And this included everyone from obviously Khomeini's kind of devoted, devout Islamists, Islamist radicals, but then it included Islamist Marxists—they actually existed—moderate Islamists who probably would've liked to have a sort of democracy with an Islamist flavor all the way through to really democratic liberals like us. And all of these people believed that because he hadn't said exactly what he wanted, that he would deliver what they wanted. And the Americans were also guilty of this. There were secret negotiations with the Americans while Khomeini was staying in a village outside Paris, where he had made his headquarters. And he gave them the feeling that anti-Americanism was merely a vibe and that he would still sell oil to America.



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The only thing he wouldn't do is sell oil to Israel, which the Shah had done, of course. But otherwise, he implied that the regime would not be that radical. But what he asked for in return was a guarantee that the army wouldn't prevent his taking power. And the Americans were in close contact with the army, and they gave that guarantee. And sure enough, when he went back after some initial clashes, the army retired to their barracks and has never come out again since, effectively. But his genius was opportunistic, but also, privately, his absolute rigid and focused devotion to creating a new sort of country, a new sort of political entity. And he was helped in this by ethnic rebellions around Iran, by Kurds and Arabs and others, which allowed him to rally the national card, while at the same time, he really presented himself as an Islamist ruler, not just a Persian nationalist, Iranian nationalist.

And at the same time, the Saddam invasion worked extremely well for the... It almost destroyed the regime. But once they'd survived the initial attack from Saddam, it really rallied the regime in a kind of cult of martyrdom and passionate Islamism, and young people rushed to join the army and to offer their lives. There was the famous cemetery with the red fountains of blood. And the young men, among the young men who joined in the early '80s in that war, were the generals who rule Iran now.

DUBOWITZ: Simon, let's talk a little bit again about Khomeini and '79. I mean, is it ultimately such a central part of your book because it's really more than about Iran? Is it about a model of revolutionary power that changed political Islam and the entire trajectory of the Middle East? Is it fair to say that it was that seminal and that consequential?

MONTEFIORE: I believe it was. The fun thing about writing this sort of book is that perspective—stepping back a little bit and looking at a longer period and a wider panorama—gives you perspective that you don't have if you are just focusing on Iran today or Israel in a certain period or Egypt under Nasser, for example. And when you step back and look at this period, and I quite enjoy the luxury of doing this, and the book I wrote before this was a history of the whole world, which again enabled you to see things more clearly. And so, when I was writing this, I sort of realized that 1979 is such an important year. And in terms of the Middle East, the book starts in 1900 and goes right till this year. But people normally think of the fall of the Ottoman Empire as the key date, and that was a very important moment.

But this 1979, the Islamic Revolution of Iran, is important for exactly the reasons that you suggest, that this is much more than just an Iranian revolution.

Iran is probably one of the most important countries in the region, and it's gotten more and more important during the period of this book and more and more possessing the ability to destabilize the whole region. And one's got to look at 1979. And when you read the book and you look at the history, it's clear that 1979 really belongs up there with the great revolutions of world history. 1776, 1789, the French Revolution, 1917, the Russian Revolution and so on. It's right up there. And the reason is because not only did it turn Iran on its head and launch a completely new era 47 years ago, but Khomeini's incredibly shrewd direction of the revolution.

And by the way, the successor, Ali Khamenei, his successor, also was—though not so much the revolutionary statesman that Khomeini was, with the authority that Khomeini had—but over time he also gained great authority and was a cunning director of the different factions under the regime, in the end, backing the more extreme of them.



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But the clever thing that they did was to identify that this could be more than just an Iranian revolution. And as I said at the beginning, they deliberately eschewed Iranian nationalism, presenting themselves as Islamists first and foremost, and despising pre-Islamic history, where some of the great rulers of Iran had built great empires like the Achaemenids and the Sassanians, who was Zoroastrians and were pre-Islamic. But they understood that they needed to appeal to a wider audience, to a wider constituency. And by identifying anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, Jerusalem itself, the mission to retake the holy city of Jerusalem, they were able to tap into a much wider Arab Sunni constituency. And they realized that this Islamism, which is a kind of new ideology, really. It always presents itself as a sort of, "oh, we're going back."

It's a revival, a revivalist concept returning to the seventh century or the early periods of Islamic purity. But actually, the modern version, as practiced by the Iranians and their vessels and proxies, it's really a new concept with aspects of encompasses some nationalism, some fascism from Europe, from the West, and of course, some parts of traditional Islamic theology. But putting it all together, it's really a unique concept.

And it really appealed to Arab radicals who'd been disappointed by pan-Arabism and who were radicals but needed a new framework. And this Islamism served almost like pan-Arabism in the sense that it had no borders. And it offered a fresh version of the ideology, but with Islamism providing a broad borderless ideology that applied to the whole region. And in that way, it worked extremely well. But for it really to go into effect, they needed 2003, or they needed 9/11 and the Iraq war to happen.

DUBOWITZ: So that brings me to the war we're living through now, Simon, because as I said in the introduction, I think the starting date matters enormously. Do you date this from October 7th, 2023? Do you date this from June 2025, when Israel and Iran entered a sustained direct confrontation and the United States struck Iran's nuclear facilities? Or do you date it from the Islamic Revolution of 1979? And as a historian, when do you start the clock? Because I think choosing the wrong starting point will often cause us to misunderstand the current war itself.

MONTEFIORE: I think you've got to start it in 1979, and that's what I argue in the book. But for Iran to really be able to threaten Israel, something else had to happen. And that's why I mentioned 2003, because whatever you think about George W. Bush's Iraq War of 2003, those arguments are still going on in all sorts of directions. But in effect, from my point of view, it knocked out Iraq out of the game of the tournament of power in the region. The insurgency and the overthrow of Saddam meant that Iraq ceased to be a player. I mean, before 2003, even after '91, even after the first Gulf War, Saddam and Iraq still had the power to block and alarm the Iranians. And of course, since the independence of Iraq—and we need to talk about Iraq here—since the independence of Iraq from the British mandate period, when it became a Hashemite kingdom, and then various military coups after 1958, and then the Ba'athists, and then the emergence of Saddam Hussein as its dictator, this was a major Arab power, one of the major Arab powers, up there with Egypt, really.

And it had the power to hold back and block Iranian ambitions towards the Levant, towards the fulcrum of the traditional Middle East. And you've got to remember, when you look back at history, I mean, Iran had many times had great influence in that region.



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First of all, you can go back to the Achaemenids of Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great. You can go back to the Sassanians, who shortly before the rise of Muhammad had conquered the entire Middle East, all of it, including Egypt and Jerusalem and most of Turkey, before their own downfall and conquest by the Arab Muslims. And from then until now, the Iranians had never had the power to reach that region. And that really changed. When you knocked out Iraq out of the structure, suddenly there's this free corridor with no great power to stop the Iranians between the Gulf and the Mediterranean. And so, after 2003, this was the condition to reach the period that we're in now. Taking out, for better or for worse, of course, this is one of those unforeseen circumstances—consequences, rather—of a war. But the moment 2003 happened, the Americans were limited to trying to control the insurgency, and suddenly the Iranians were able to project this—what I call the informal empire.

King Abdullah II of Jordan called it the Shia Crescent. But basically, they managed to set up all these militias that really controlled the state in Iraq. They backed prime ministers like Malaki who were very close to Iran, and the Americans weren't able to do much about it. They were so keen to get out.

And of course, the Shias in Iraq became the dominant community in that state too. And of course, they had special links to Iran, obviously. And then they had a long alliance with Syria, with the Alawite Ba'athist dictatorship of the Assads. And that was based on your enemy's enemy, et cetera, et cetera. And so that was a long alliance because the Ba'athists of Iraq and Syria hated each other and were close to war at various times, but they managed to build on that relationship even more deeply. And then, of course, Hezbollah had been founded in the early '80s, not to resist Israel, but to actually promote Lebanon becoming or joining the Islamic Republic. And it was only when the Israelis invaded and the Israelis stayed in South Lebanon that they also encompassed an anti-Israeli war of jihad against Israel as a ruling mission of Hezbollah. So, this took them right up to the Mediterranean.

And then, of course, they had Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Gaza as well, who were Sunnis, but whose Islamism fitted very well with Iranian Islamism. And so, 2003 was essential because essentially until 2003, the Iranians really were a long way from Israel. And after 2003, they were increasingly on Israel's border. And once that happened, this war was inevitable, I believe.

DUBOWITZ: So, Khomeini builds this Islamist regional order. Khamenei extends it. Certainly, Qasem Soleimani plays a critical role operationally and militarily in doing that. Since the war started, this ring of fire in some respects has been doused. A number of these terror proxy armies have been degraded. And it gets me, Simon, to the next question about this war.

And I want to ask the question I think everybody asks, but you can answer it in historical terms than scoreboard terms: who is gaining, who is losing? What does Israel need to achieve for this war to have been strategically successful? What does the United States need to achieve? And what does the Islamic Republic need to preserve in order to claim that it has survived and prevailed? And so, measured against those objectives—what each side has gained, what each side has lost—what is your assessment so far in the Iran war?



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MONTEFIORE: Well, you discuss this all the time on this podcast and in your think tank, and it's a very, very difficult judgment to make because of the immense complexity and speed of the world today and the interconnected nature of this region and the way that this is no longer just Middle Eastern, but there's been, as I argue at the end of the book, there's been this convergence of theaters, which means that it's not just about Iran. I mean, China, Russia, India and Pakistan, everybody is now involved in this in some way. So, it is much more complicated. But the bottom line is for America is that, A, there can be no nuclear program in the future. And if it comes out with that, that would be successful. But obviously the second front is what we called in the '80s war the Tanker War, but the war for control of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

That's really about a blockade. And I would argue that the American administration would've done better to start with an armed blockade of Iran because that is the way that you turn their chief asset, Strait of Hormuz, into a liability for the Iranian regime. And that is what they're now trying to do with surprising discipline. And even though no one would call President Trump a shrinking violet, he has nonetheless been increasingly focused on this and on basically strangling the Iranian economy. Revolutions, when you look at revolutions, they need various things to happen. And one of them is that the guy in a middling Iranian city who works for the government, who's earning a salary, who's got children and a family, he's not going to really join the... He may hate the regime, but he's not really going to join any revolution while he's still earning that salary.

It's a sort of simple example, but there comes a moment when the government can no longer pay that salary. And when that happens, people of the middling sort, let's say, can join a revolution or will join a revolution. And of course that's what needs to happen, and that's what they're trying to do. They're stopping the Iranians sell their oil or even put their oil to sea, and hopefully they're blocking the northern exits as well, which are essentially road links. And if they succeed, then they will force the regime to negotiate, A, and B, they may bring down the regime, because when the shooting stops, the regime loses a lot of its advantages in terms of its image as a radical warrior regime that fits very well into Shiite theology, the Mahdist apocalyptic scenario that some of these top people believe in—we don't know how many.

But the moment the big shooting stops, the regime then has to start trying to govern the country. And it's done that extremely badly, and it's going to look very bad once they get back to trying to run it. The problem is that after the assassination of the supreme leader, who's ruled for 37 years, it's very hard for any leader to establish themselves with the credibility to negotiate it all.

I mean, this is a bit like the death of Stalin or the death of Mao, except in China with the death of Mao, you had Deng Xiaoping, who was this massive figure respected by all, who relatively easily assumed the leadership. But after the death of Stalin, no one ever replaced Stalin, or not for a long time. And that's the situation we're in with Iran. So, I mean, the blockade could ultimately bring down the regime. And as for Israel, Israel ideally wants to see the fall of the regime because the regime is always going to be a threat. But if it agreed to give up its nuclear weapons or put it on, if there was some sort of deal that effectively limited it, then that would be a success and allow Israel to finish off the rest of the proxies.



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But I think there is a sort of big challenge in Israeli strategy here because, of course, Israel, with its wonderful and spectacular air force and security services, can assassinate the leaders of these organizations. In Gaza, it can assassinate virtually every single one of the terrorists who invaded on October the 7th. Apparently, they announced today, I think they've killed 4,000 of the 6,000 who invaded, which is the work of intense intelligence gathering among other things. But it's also true—and this may sound like a kind of glib thing to say—but a state can't assassinate everybody, and it can't assassinate all its enemies, and enemies are replaced. And the assassination policy, I think, does it work? Has it worked?

Ultimately, Israel needs to build relations with the states around it. And by the way, the Iranian attacks on the Gulf powers, on the Arab moderate powers, it worked at first. Now it's becoming counterproductive, and it's actually helping the Americans. If you speak to the leaderships of the boutique powers of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, they are all desperate for America to be there. Doesn't mean they trust America, doesn't mean they trust President Trump. I think they're utterly realistic about the traditional inconsistencies of America over decades. But if you speak to them, they all say, "We just want America to finish this off now, and we want American protection, and we want America there," which is very different from what everyone was saying a few months ago. And secondly, they're all talking to Israel now.

According to people I've spoken to in the intelligence communities, apparently they are all in contact with Israel. So, Israel has become the hated but indispensable power of the region. And ultimately, this may develop into something much deeper. And of course, the challenge for Israel is: how do you turn these successes into something more stable? How can Israel cash in on these victories to build a more stable position in the Middle East, where Israel belongs, and the massive economic and cultural benefits are waiting for Israel to take. But to do that, the Israel needs a government that actually wants to develop these relationships. And that isn't the case now, or at least if there are people in the government that want to do this, there are others, Ben-Gvir and Co., who have in effect, a veto, and that is a big problem. And it could be solved by the election at the end of this month, which is going to be fascinating.

Eisenkot may form a government, Netanyahu may form a different sort of government. I mean, predicting Israeli politics is almost impossible, isn't it?

DUBOWITZ: Well, I'm going to ask you for some predictions as well, maybe not in Israeli politics, but let's get back to the Islamic Republic. So, let's imagine, without predicting when or how, that the Islamic Republic eventually disappears. I guess the question, Simon, is: what disappears with it? Would a post-Islamic Republic Iran necessarily abandon these regional ambitions that we associate with Tehran today or other Iranian interests: influence in Iraq, security in the Gulf, concern about surrounding powers, desire to be treated as a major regional state? In other words, are these products of geography and history rather than Khomeinism? Is it inevitable that Iran as a great power will be not just an influential power in the Middle East, but a problematic power?



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MONTEFIORE: Well, the last time Iran was a great regional power, before the Shah, was a pretty long time. It was really the 1790s. And before then, there'd been 40, 50 years of crazy civil war after the assassination of Nadir Shah in the mid-18th century. And Nadir Shah, who was an extraordinary character, sort of self-made monarch, self-made Shah, who created this amazingly powerful tribal Persian empire. I mean, he ranged far and wide westwards into Iraq and the Caucasus. Eastwards, he took Northern India, he took Delhi. And southwards, he controlled Oman and Bahrain and the Gulf. So, the history of Iranian power is strong. If you go back even further to 1500, the founder, the Safavid Shia dynasty, Ismail.

Again, Iran bid to be the Islamic power of the Middle East, challenging the Ottomans, and they lost that fight and were confined basically to Iran. But the point is, the answer is history.

History means that Iran is always going to be a major state with major regional ambitions, southwards into the Gulf and eastwards into Iraq, which, if you look at the history of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, you'll see that Iraq didn't exist. Iraq was divided up between them. Baghdad changed hands many, many times in many, many wars. But that's if Iran survives this process as a state and doesn't collapse. I mean, as you know, and you'll have discussed many times on this show, some calculate that 50% of Iranians are members of non-Persian, non-Iranian minorities, Kurds and Arabs and what have you. And Iran could disintegrate, and that has happened before very recently. We often forget very recent history.

After the constitutional revolution in the early years of the 20th century, Russia and Britain intervened, and the state really disintegrated. In World War I, the Ottomans, the Russians, the British were all fighting within Iran, which had ceased to function as a state completely. And out of that, the first Pahlavi Shah, the father of the Shah, Reza Shah, took power in 1925 and created a new monarchy and a new dynasty. In World War II, so very recently, really, in 1941, Reza Shah made a massive miscalculation trying to maintain neutrality between the allies and Hitler. And Churchill and Stalin just agreed that this was out of the question. They couldn't take the risk of losing Iran. So, they literally partitioned Iran and occupied it, which is why, in 1943, the first Big Three conference took place in Tehran. People sometimes go, "Why was it in Tehran?" They controlled Tehran at that point.

And after the war in 1945, '46, Stalin tried to keep the Azeris, the Iranian Azerbaijan, and he created a Kurdish state and an Azerbaijan state, which he hoped would allow him to keep control of Iran itself and Iran's oil. Well, that didn't happen because the Cold War started, and the Shah rebuilt it. But it's just worth remembering that, yes, there's always going to be an Iran. Iran is always going to have interests, broad regional ambitions and interests because of history, because of its scale, because of its mass, because of its geography. But a bad option is that the country just disintegrates, and that creates refugees, it creates civil war, and that would be a disastrous sequel to all this, that the regime fell and then there was total disintegration of the state. That would be a disaster for everybody. Though I guess for Israel, it would be unable to threaten Israel. But ultimately, it would destabilize the region in all sorts of ways that I think would work for nobody.

So, I think those are the possibilities.



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DUBOWITZ: Okay, Simon, so going to a closing question here. So, you've written about Shahs and Ayatollahs, revolutions, coups, empires that have vanished and regimes that everybody assumed would endure. When you look at Iran and the Middle East today, are we witnessing another violent churn inside the cauldron, or is something historically larger taking place? Is it really the end of this revolutionary cycle that began with Khomeini in 1979? And what would have to happen for you as a historian to really know the difference?

MONTEFIORE: Well, that's a very good question. One is always tempted to quote Zhou Enlai at points like this: "It's too early to tell." But the regime could endure for a long time as a damaged, immiserated regime. I mean, the fact is, in history, it's very unusual for people power to bring down dictatorships unless support disintegrates in their huge security organs. And the whole point in January is that that didn't happen. And though there were all these young people on the streets saying "down with the dictatorship. Long live the Shah," some of them were shouting. The fact is, when it came down to it, the regime had the loyal myrmidons of the Basij and the Revolutionary Guards and all sorts of militias to call on. And it looks like they didn't really hesitate to do what was necessary to massacre these people. And when you've got that sort of devotion, it's actually pretty hard to bring down a regime.

You've got a contrast with the Soviet Union. Well, first of all, the Soviet Union lasted 70 years, but secondly, by the end of it, no one believed in this. No one believed in communism, even the leaders, really. And that is very different from Iran, where, depending how you calculate it—no one knows—but it's 10 to 20% of the population is still devoted to the mission as far as we know, and that includes all the security forces. So, on one hand, this could go on for a long time. On the other hand, for reasons that we've discussed in this hour, you could see the whole thing collapse. But I wouldn't count on it. I think the ability for regimes to last longer than you think is surprising. And I think that's the challenge now is just to see how damaged the regime really is internally after the big shooting, after the big guns stop.

DUBOWITZ: Simon Sebag Montefiore, your new book is *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East*. Thank you so much for being on *The Iran Breakdown*. We're grateful for your time, and we'd love to have you back on as the cauldron turns, and Iran's centrality to the Middle East and its development remains.

MONTEFIORE: I'd love to come back and thank you so much for having me. Nice to meet you finally.

DUBOWITZ: Such a pleasure. Thank you, Simon.