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WEBINAR

ASSESSING IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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MODERATOR: NATAN SACHS

Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings

SUZANNE MALONEY

Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, Brookings

MAZIAR BAHARI

Founder, IranWire; Author, "Then They Came for Me"

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SACHS: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you very much for joining us for this event. On the meaning of the Iranian elections. I'm delighted, truly, to welcome two guests, for us, with us today. First, I guess, to Brookings, Maziar Bahari, who is a journalist and founder of IranWire. He's an award winning filmmaker, has made numerous films and has and, as I said, founded a very important website, IranWire, that has provided, invaluable information on Iran from a whole wide network, of journalists and others. He is a Canadian, Iranian journalist, currently speaking to us from England, from Britain and waiting for, the match, of course, between England and the Netherlands. I will not speak to who anyone else is rooting for. Maziar thank you very much for joining us again at Brookings. I'll say it's not the first time. And we're always very much delighted to have you here. I'm also delighted to be joined by Suzanne Maloney, our vice president for foreign policy, and also a senior fellow in Foreign Policy who specializes on Iran. Doctor Maloney has advised both Democratic and Republican administrations in the State Department and in other capacities, and has published more than one book on issues of Iran, the Iranian economy, running foreign policy and its history, and is really one of the most important voices in the United States, on Iran and the US policy towards it. So without further ado. Maziar, if I could turn to you and just ask us to bring us up to speed. Where are we? What? What happened? Who won? Why? What does this mean for us right now?

BAHARI: So, on May 19th, former President Raisi died in a helicopter crash. And he was a conservative. He was hard liner, and he was a murderer. He committed, atrocities in 1988, and he was a judge before that. After that. And as a president who was elected in 2020, he was quite inefficient as well. So from what we're hearing, from Iran, from different, officials, from different former officials, there was a sigh of relief in Iran that Raisi is not there anymore. It's not nice to talk about the dead like that, but unfortunately, that's what that's that that was the feeling. So, Iranian leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his cohorts and the people within the Iranian administration, they were, thinking about the election because it had to happen within 50 days after the president's death. So, there were a lot of people there were many people who were jockeying to be the next president of Iran, including former presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former speaker of the parliament Ali Larijani and several other prominent, officials. I mean, when you look at the list of the officials who, register their candidacy, they were like the who's who of the Iranian politics. And then at the end of the day, six candidates were selected, most probably by Khamenei, by the Council of Guardians, which is in charge of that. But everyone knows that the Ayatollah Khamenei and his office debate has the final say in that. And one name was really surprising. Masoud Pezeshkian who is a pro-reform, parliamentarian who was the Minister of health, about 20 years ago. And everyone was wondering how could the supreme leader allow such a thing? But when you look at it with the hindsight right now, it's not,

really surprising because after 45 years of being in power, Islamic Republic still seeks legitimacy, still wants to be a legitimate representative of Iran, even though there is an unelected supreme leader in power. Even though most of the powers are in the hands of the unelected officials, it's still an Islamic Republic. So they wanted to pretend that they are a republic. And with the after the disastrous and though number of turnout in the March 2024 parliamentary elections, Ayatollah Khamenei most probably, and the people around him, they wanted more participation of people and Masoud Pezeshkian among all the different, pro-reform, I would say, quote unquote pro-reform. Let's call him pro-reform because he's a reformist within the Islamic Republic. He was elected and people, but most people didn't know him. Most people didn't know him. In the first round of the elections, they voted for him. He had the highest votes and the most ideological person among those six people, say Jalili. He had the second votes. They went to the second round. And last Friday Pezeshkian had six more than 16 million votes. Jalili had more than 13 million votes. And now we have a quote unquote, reformist, president in power in Iran. What does that mean for the future of Iran? It means that someone like Jalili, who is even more conservative than Ayatollah Khamenei, is not in power. It also means that the president is not someone like Jalili or the, Speaker of the Parliament Ghalibaf or Larijani, who've been in power for such a long time, and they have their own power base as president. So when, I feel of Khamenei deals with, Pezeshkian, he is mostly [inaudible] Pezeshkian as an individual. He does not have a base that Khamenei has to be worried about. And most probably when they allowed him to run, they consider that fact that Pezeshkian is not someone with his own cabal, like many other, candidates who are running for president. And, I think Ayatollah Khamenei will have an easy time dealing with, Pezeshkian to a certain extent while he's alive. I mean, I mean, he's 85 years old, who knows how long he's going to live. But, Pezeshkian kept repeating his allegiance to him during the television debates and said that, you know, I'm going to work. Within the framework designed by the supreme leader. So I think that's Ayatollah Khomeini will have a relatively easy time dealing with Pezeshkian. One mistake that some people make is, to compare Pezeshkian with Mohammad Khatami, the other reformist president, who was elected in 1997. Why? That's a mistake, because 1997 was only eight years after Khomeini became the supreme leader. He was new to the job, relatively. He did not have the base that he has now. He does not have his network. And also high time he was one of the original revolutionaries and five time he was supported by many original Revolution is the acolytes of Ayatollah Khomeini. Pezeshkian does not have that base and at the same time Khamenei is a much stronger supreme leader in 2024 than 1997.

SACHS: Thank you so much, Suzanne. Why don't we pick up there and. Could you tell us a little bit about Pezeshkian? Who is he? How much is he of the system? How much of a reformer is he? Tell us just a little

bit about this character, because he's not been one of the gallery of names that at least we in Washington have been following in recent years.

MALONEY: Thanks, Natan. And it's really just great to be here with you and with Maziar. And I would wholeheartedly endorse everything that Maziar just said in terms of his own analysis of the election and its significance. But let me let me backtrack a little and talk a little bit about, Pezeshkian. The individual. He was the oldest candidate in the race, which I think was also probably a comforting factor for the supreme leader and the rest of the power structure. He is 70 years old. He comes from an A, you know, for Iranian high politics, maybe a little bit of an unusual ethnic background. He is from both a Kurdish and Azeri, family and grew up speaking both languages, and and represented Tabriz in the Iranian parliament since 2008. He served as Deputy and then Health Minister during the Khatami, reformist presidency. And in that role he at times took on important missions on behalf of of the government. For example, he was part of the, the team that was dispatched to Bam after the catastrophic earthquake there. In his role as Health Minister. And so he had, been trusted with, I think, significant, responsibility. But he was never part of the kind of insider, highest level of of the inner circles of the Islamic Republic's corridors of power. He, he turned up in many other, many other interesting moments for the Islamic Republic, in part because of his, his background. He was trained as, as a heart surgeon. And so both that and his service as Health Minister gave him a bit of a technocratic expertise in terms of engaging. But I think what is most interesting is that he, at various points in time, had put his name forward as a potential presidential candidate. As Maziar explained, Iranian elections are subject to a certain degree of stage management by the regime itself. And so applicants for, all elected positions, but particularly the office of the presidency, are heavily vetted by a small group of a small clerical body that is primarily controlled by the supreme leader. Pezeshkian had put his name forward in 2013 as a candidate, but later withdrew before, he was in fact judged worthy or not to run in that race. He he, withdrew his name at that time in favor of, then former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was in fact disqualified. That was the election that produced Hassan Rouhani as president and eventually enabled the intense negotiations that led to the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the major world powers. Pezeshkian, as Maziar said, attempted to run again, in 2021 when, the former president, the president who died, in the May helicopter crash, was elected and he was not permitted to run. So he was not considered someone who was, suitable for, the regime. And and another person with some at least reformist background and tendencies was permitted to run, but failed to gain any traction whatsoever. And so there really was no, I think, presumption going into this race when we saw the six candidates who were in fact permitted to run in 2024, that Pezeshkian would be able to, create a bit of a groundswell around him. He was largely unknown to the

wider public. He was someone who who, I think had the capacity to, you know, be charismatic on the campaign trail. But he really was not, you know, sort of a firebrand politician. He's not, someone who naturally, I think, just brought people to him the way that, say, a Mohammad Khatami managed to do in 1997. And so it was really there were no guarantees that he was going to be elected. I think that, to me is a big difference between this poll and perhaps the 2013 election that led to Rouhani's presidency. There it was very clear that the system was trying to engineer, a course correction and create the opportunity to, bring to fruition the negotiations that had started behind the scenes with backchannel discussions between American diplomats and Iranian counterparts in Oman in the years prior to that election. This time around, as Maziar said, no one anticipated that there would be election in an election. And it was pulled together very, very quickly under, somewhat unusual circumstances that Iran has lost for senior leaders in the past. But, not recently and not quite as surprisingly as as the plane crash that, the helicopter crash that killed, Raisi. And so, I think it was, you know, it was very much an improvizational, election in many respects, because there were two other candidates, at least, who I think were considered, possibilities in terms of where the regime would put its own influence and, and direct its own supporters. Maziar talked about Saeed Jalili, who was the candidate who made it to the runoff with Pezeshkian, whom he defeated last week. But there was another candidate as well Muhammad Ghalibaf. The speaker of the parliament, who's held senior Pezeshkians in the security bureaucracy as head of the law enforcement forces and other important positions. And he was in many ways trying to position himself potentially as a new Rafsanjani, someone who might, in fact, be able to be a strong man who could negotiate with the West but still keep the Islamic Republic intact. And so, I think, you know, the dynamics were very much uncertain as we went into the first round and even as we went into the second round, because I think there were many of us who presumed that the regime might in fact, push the the outcome in its own favor. As they did presumably in 2009 with the very disputed reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, which Maziar knows very well because he was covering it at the time and later detained, as a result of that coverage.

BAHARI: One other thing that I have to add, that's, is that, Pezeshkian's, sympathetic attitude, of Iranian people to Pezeshkian, you know, really surprised everyone. His personal story really surprised everyone that he managed to share it with people. The fact that he's he lost his wife 30 years ago, and he raised three children on his own. And I talked to some, friends and relatives in Iran and people who are not political. They just liked him because of that fact. And the other thing that I was, I've been talking to some Iranians about is the fact that they think he's, he's not a corrupt person. Every character that you saw was who was running for president has some sort of, corrupt background, especially Ghalibaf really that Suzanne mentioned. But,

Pezeshkian there is no controversy about him. So he has that, aura of cleanliness and, land of, you know, in, in an island off limits in a sea of dirt, corruption in Iran. And the other thing that the Iranians, many Iranians that I talk to like about him is this sense of justice, that he is fair, that he wants fairness for different people. He wants. And at least, you know, I'm not saying that he's not corrupt. I'm not saying that he's fair, but this is the image that he's portraying that himself. Because I think more than economic prosperity, more than democracy, Iranians are really seeking justice. And I think what, Pezeshkian promised them was justice. The fact that everything has to be shared equally, that everyone has to be treated equally. And that message really, really, attracted millions of Iranians who voted for him and many reformist, many, pro-democracy, prisoners, you know, or former prisoners who voted for him. They highlighted that, you know, that he is someone who is talking about justice. And that is very important in any kind of consideration of Iranian politics and what Iranians wants. They want justice more than anything else.

SACHS: Thanks so much. I'd like to I'm going to get back to the very important questions. I think of what this says societely about Iran, but I'd like to turn now to foreign policy, which, of course, is something that, many of us here are watching very closely. And the underlying question, I suppose, is, is how much does this matter? So, Suzanne, I wonder if you tell us a little bit about the regional kind of approach, and regional activity of Iran, through its various, bodies. And how much does the president actually affect this? Will this change much in terms of Iranian activity throughout the Middle East?

MALONEY: Well, as of course, you know, the Iranians have been very active, particularly since October 7th, in terms of managing the network of proxies that they've invested 40 plus years in developing and arming and training and coordinating across the region, starting with Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also encompassing, of course, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, groups in Syria, groups in Yemen, such as the Houthis, a network of Shia militias that extends to Afghanistan and Pakistan. And this is a major element of Iran's strategic depth. It has been, an investment, as I said, for decades, and it has been deployed in a way that has been, incredibly destabilizing over many, many years, particularly in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. But, especially since the October 7th, attacks and, Iran has used this, network of proxies, really to make its, itself felt and its power felt across the region in a way that, for the most part, with the exception of the exchange of fire in, in April, Iran itself has not suffered the direct retaliation for. And so, you know, this question of what happens with Iran's, regional power projection, I think is a very important one, as is the question of Iran's nuclear program, which has continued to expand, especially since the decision in 2018 by the Trump administration to withdraw US participation from that deal. Iranians began

ramping back up their nuclear program in 2019, and today are closer than they ever have been to nuclear weapons capability, with a significant stockpile of both low and more highly enriched uranium and significant advances in the technological level of the program as a whole. So this is a dramatic concern. The Iranian president has relatively limited direct authority over foreign policy. He will be he will have a seat at the table, for sure. But, this the nuclear program and the relationships with Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, the Shia militias in Iraq and elsewhere are largely run by the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Other elements of the security bureaucracy, with, of course, oversight and ultimate direction by Iran's supreme leader, who is, of course, the commander in chief of the military. That all of this is to say that there should be no expectation that, the the kind of change in the ideological approach, to some extent in the presidency. Raisi was a very, very hard line figure as, as Maziar said, he had a very bloody past and was responsible not just for the deaths of thousands, but also for the imprisonment and repression of millions of Iranians. That is not the track record the Pezeshkian brings. But he, you know, if he had a different view on, any of these policies, first of all, it's never really been expressed. His very first message as, as president elect was to Hezbollah. And that comes, of course, at a time where there is increasing concern about the possibility of an escalation between the exchange of fire that has gone on between Israel and Hezbollah since October 8th. And and so it was a very deliberate message to show continuity in Iran's policies. But I think there's also the possibility that, you know, Pezeshkian campaigned on the need for Iran to have a different relationship with the world. He will be surrounded by figures, including the former foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who campaigned in almost an antic way, on behalf of Pezeshkian, who are well known to the West, who have extensive ties and relationships, and will, almost certainly look for ways to be to enhance communications, particularly between Washington and Tehran.

SACHS: Maziar could ask you, to weigh in on this, but but also to explain a little bit. What is the role here of the president? What what say does he have? And following up on the point about Zarif, Pezeshkian is by now president elect where he should be inaugurated on July 30th. What can we expect of his cabinet? Who might we see? The foreign minister was also killed, of course, in the same helicopter crash. Who might be the next foreign minister? What kind of cadres should we expect facing the United States, diplomatically, at least at the front, with the supreme leader behind?

BAHARI: Well, Zarif has said that he doesn't want to be part of the next cabinet, but most probably he will be an advisor to Pezeshkian in the next, four years. But, going back to your question about the role of presidents, even though the president does not have a say in the macro, decisions in terms of foreign policy,

especially regional policies. There are certain decisions that the president can make that can affect foreign policy. And when you think about where Raisi was on the day he died, he just came back from, opening a dam between Iran and Azerbaijan, which was a very important, development for, for the two countries, because a few months ago, the embassy of Azerbaijan had been attacked, and then they managed to, normalize their relationship. And that, waterway water source was very important for Iran, which has been suffering from droughts for the past 3 or 4 decades. And also, Iran has certain, issues with the Taliban in terms of the water sources on the border of Iran and Afghanistan. So, Khamenei is not going to be involved in those kind of negotiations, but at the same time, it will affect foreign policy. And it's not only going to affect the foreign policy, the diplomatic relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan or Iran and, Afghanistan. It's going to affect many other countries in the region. And the other thing that the president can do that can affect foreign policy are the contracts or the, contracts that are going to give to different organizations, especially Revolutionary Guards, which parts of the Revolutionary Guards that can be carried out for the industrial projects. One thing that we have to understand is that the Revolutionary Guards, it's not, monolithic. And it's not also only a military force. It has many industries. It has many companies. It has many, universities. And in many cases, they have different interests. The Revolutionary Guards in one province may, may vie for the same contract. And they compete with for the same contract with another Revolutionary Guards in another, province. So, it's very it's very important for, Pezeshkian to understand which parts of the Revolutionary Guards he has to deal with. Which parts, the Revolutionary Guards he has to give the contracts to. And again, going back to the fact that we say that he's a clean person and not corrupt person, he cannot be, you know, a clean and uncorrupted person in the, you know, in a country where is run by corruption. So he will be corrupt one way or another. And I think that will affect many, many issues, both domestically and regionally and in terms of the power of the president. The president, has maybe about 10% of the executive power. That's according to the Iranian constitution. But Khamenei, the supreme leader, is 85 years old. From what we hear, he's quite paranoid. And the people are around people around him. They're quite paranoid as well. There is no roadmap to what happens after Khamenei's death. So it's very important to have different people in the room with Khamenei or as he, you know, people get older and people, you know, they, have to you know, they sometimes they have to rely on others for judgment. So it's very important to have either conservatives in the room with Khamenei or the reformists in the room with Khamenei. So, we may not be able to see the immediate effect of Pezeshkian and the people around him on foreign policy or domestic policy in the next couple of years. But eventually, as Hamid is getting older and as they're going to compete for more power, they're going to implement both foreign policy and domestic policy. Pezeshkians main obstacle at the moment is the Parliament, which is which has a high number of hardline, MPs. And it's a it's a

very conservative parliament, but at the same time it's a very divided parliament. But, whoever he's going to introduce as minister has to be ratified by the parliament, and he will have a very, very tough time in the next few months dealing with the Parliament.

SACHS: Thanks because I just, you know, the other major issue, of course, that Suzanne, you already mentioned, but the JCPOA, the the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in the nuclear negotiations, we've seen throughout the Biden administration an attempt by Washington to return to some kind of, diplomatic understanding, either to the JCPOA in full or to a less for less kind of approach. And one might expect, if there was another Democratic administration, another attempt to return to diplomacy. Where do things stand on that in terms of the Iranian leadership? Will Pezeshkian have any influence on this? But also regardless, where does the Iranians stand? I'll, I'll note, for example, that throughout these years, since the US withdrew from the JCPOA. There have not been any direct negotiations. The Iranians have refused to sit in the same room as the Americans in negotiations have been through intermediaries, Europeans or others. Is there any indication that that might be changing? Suzanne, Maziar. Please go ahead.

BAHARI: Well, one of the things that, all the candidates were talking about was that I am the president that deal with Trump. It seems that it's predetermined for them that Trump is going to win the November election in Iran. For many people, especially those six candidates. So they they think that, Trump will be in power. But and there are two different schools of thought about Trump in Iran. One is that he is the person who came out of JCPOA and tore it apart. But at the same time, they are saying that, you know, he's a businessman and, you know, he's like someone from the Iranian bazaar, and we know how to deal with the people from Bazaar and certain things that, former President Trump had said while he was president that, you know, I, I would deal with Iran. It only if they just, you know, stopped their nuclear program. That gives some hope to some people within the, within the Iranian establishment. But JCPOA did not. I mean, Suzanne may correct me, but I don't think that JCPOA was the result of Rouhani administration's, effort. It started the negotiations. It started during the, Ahmadinejad's presidency. And it was it started with the green lighted by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. And he did not do it out of the goodness of his heart. He did that because the economy was in ruins. And when you think about the Iranian economy, it's even in more ruins right now than in 2013-14, when, Rouhani came to power. So, I think there is a possibility that, the new administration, the Pezeshkian administration, will make some, overtures to the US administration, and they are going to be, you know, they will be, of course, not publicly. They publicly they will continue talking about the great Satan and the little Satan, etc.. But in the, you know, behind the scenes, they're going

to offer certain compromises to the US administration. And also when you think about, the Iranian attacks against US interests, we haven't seen that many attacks against US interests in recent months. So something must be going on in the background that I don't know. But, if you guys know about that, you know, you can enlighten us.

SACHS: Suzanne, enlighten us.

MALONEY: I don't know if I can enlighten anyone, but, I think that I would agree with a lot of what Maziar has just had to say. I think first and foremost that, you know, Iranians, like everyone around the world, is watching the elected electoral drama play out in the United States and biding their time because they're, you know, it's just a recognition that there is a high probability of change in the US administration in November, certainly no certainty, but at least the the possibility and perhaps even probability of change. And so, you know, any, any sort of overtures that were made to this administration might go to waste if in fact, there was a change in administrations. So I think that means that we're not likely to see anything very quickly, simply because of the sense of uncertainty about what will happen. Now, it's possible, it's possible that, for example, I believe that Pezashkian's team has, has, let, slip that he would be expected to come to the United Nations General Assembly meetings in September, as most Iranian presidents have over the course of the past four decades. And I could imagine, depending on who's in his entourage, that there would be a different level of openness to direct conversations, completely off the books, but direct conversations with American counterparts. He will have he will almost certainly have a retinue of officials who, who participated in the JCPOA negotiations in, in, under the, the Obama administration, and who, have a network of contacts among American government and former government as well as the media. So I think that, you know, we could expect that kind of engagement. But I think until we see what happens in November here in Washington and around the United States, it's just not a good bet to make, in terms of investing and trying to open anything up. What happens after November, of course, will depend on who, in fact, is going to be in charge in the United States over the next four years. As Maziar said, you know, there's a certain cynicism, I think, among many Iranians about the Trump administration. He was obviously incredibly disruptive for what had been expected to be a kind of smooth sailing around, the implementation of the nuclear deal, at least from the United States side. And, that, had catastrophic consequences for Iran's economic fortunes, hundreds of billions of dollars if Iranian officials themselves are to be believed in terms of the cost imposed to Iran, by the imposition of maximum pressure from the US starting in 2018, I would say in my engagement with Trump, former Trump officials, I think they take great pride in that and are, in fact, hoping that they can

repeat it because they believe that that kind of pressure is what is necessary to, in fact, extract the kind of concessions that, should have been, in their view, undertaken in the original nuclear deal and are even more necessary today because of the advancement in Iran's nuclear program. And so I think we would see an effort to ensure that Iran was no longer exporting, you know, upwards of 1.5 and even higher million barrels a day of oil, primarily, to China and primarily, using either smuggling or illicit channels to try to get it there. So they would look for ways to, to reimpose that, that maximum pressure. It would, of course, increase the friction between Washington and Beijing. That might not be a bad side effect from the perspective of those who might be in the second Trump administration. But the expectation would be also, I think that there is an interest in getting to a different deal. And that was what former President Trump said while he was in the White House. It is what other officials have said since that time. And I think that's something that the Iranians believe they can work with. It's not clear that it would be as, well-informed a negotiating team as the Obama administration put together. The Iranians have made such significant advances. I think there have no intention of moving backward. They have no intention of extending the the, the the timeline on any of the restrictions, many of which have already or are close to expiring or have begun to expire. And so they, you know, there may be many in Iran who think that if they could get another, a new nuclear deal with the Trump administration, it might be even a better deal for them in terms of what they were asked to concede, and what they, in fact, were able to preserve. I would say there are, you know, there's a different, different, factor, which is that when Obama negotiated the Iran nuclear deal, it was purely on the nuclear issue. Didn't even, obviously², take into account Iran's extensive missile capabilities and exports around the region. And that was a major criticism of those. But I think in the, the post 9, post 10/7 environment, it will be very difficult to conceive of any kind of US Iran agreement, either bilaterally or with a larger contingent of negotiating partners that doesn't address Iran's relationship with its proxies around the region. There's also the factor that the original deal was put together by the the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, including Russia and China, plus Germany. It's hard to imagine that kind of a coalition coming together again. So I think there are, under almost any circumstances, huge detriments, huge obstacles to getting to any kind of a new nuclear agreement with Iran, under almost any electoral outcome here in the United States.

SACHS: Okay. So look to follow up there. One of you mentioned before the I think you mentioned, the, the the emphasis Pezeshkian put on opening up to the world. But of course, the world is not one thing. And we've seen Iran in recent years come much closer to Russia with, dramatic and quite important, weapons exports from Iran to Russia. And Suzanne mentioned the, growing and very important relationship, economic

relationship in particular with China. That, alleviates to some degree at least, the sanctions, placed upon it by the United States. How much of that may change? And how do Iranians in general, in the, in the regime or elsewhere, view the world as we as we mentioned it before? Is it is it this choice between sort of the West and, the East, for lack of a better lack of a better term? Or is it a more general kind of approach?

BAHARI: Yeah. I think we've been talking about, for 36 minutes and we haven't talked about the majority of Iranians since, you know, the beginning. I think the majority of Iranians, the 50% who did not vote for Pezeshkian, they do not have any honeymoon period with him. And the 20%, 25% who voted for him, more than 25% who voted for him. They have a very limited honeymoon period for him. And whatever Pezeshkian does in terms of negotiating with the West, negotiating with China, they want to see tangible results in their lives in 20 1314. And the chasm between the public, the people and the government was not as wide as it is now. The root causes, the problems that brought people to the streets in 2018, 2019, 2020-22 have not gone away yet. And there you will see more, protest against, policies of the government, sometimes maybe the policies of the Pezeshkian of the government, might be at the national level at a, domestic level. And the intense -- and we cannot really foresee the intensity of those protests. And that will affect the Iranian foreign policy and economic policy. And at the same time, it's going to affect the Western attitude towards Iran because of the presence, presence of the large Iranian diaspora in different Western countries, because the Iranian diaspora have become more prominent, more prosperous, more vocal in terms of politics in the West. So it will not be as easy for Iran to have a JCPOA deal that they had in 2013, 2014, even if the next Biden administration or Trump administration wants to have that. Suzanne said the next deal with Iran will include its proxies in the region. It will include human rights, situation inside Iran. And Pezeshkian has very, very limited power over this. And also, unfortunately, what I can foresee in the next few months is more human rights atrocities in Iran, because whenever a reformist government has to come to power in Iran, whether, whether it was Khatami or Rouhani, the conservatives who are running the courts and the Revolutionary Guards, they have committed atrocities in order to teach the new government, the new, quote unquote, reformist government a lesson. Even now, even before, Pezeshkian's inauguration, we see that many university teachers are being dismissed from, expelled from universities. We are going to see more persecution of the Bahá'í minority. We will see more persecution of different political activists. A prominent female activist has been sentenced to death and there will be a, hunger strike for her, tomorrow in Evin prison by other female prisoners. So. So I think, whether we are talking about Iran's relationship with China, whether it's Russia or the West, the money that comes to Iran has to come to the people. Otherwise, it's going to be, very difficult for people to stomach more, too many years of the Islamic Republic, let's say,

whether it's a Pezeshkian who's power or as the president or someone else. So, and at the same time, we have this capricious 85-year-old supreme leader who has, was thinking about his legacy now. He's not thinking about, the governance of the country. He's thinking about the, you know, utopia that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wanted to create, and he wants to create whatever that is that I don't think he knows what it is, but he's thinking about that more than governing the country. So it's a very, very complicated situation. And I think, it will be a very confusing time for people in the West, New York in September to deal with the, American officials and officials from other European countries, from, other Western countries. But they will send different signals. And I don't think that there will be that Pezeshkian, or people around him will dare to shake hands with President Biden or any of the American officials because of their fear of what the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards may think back home.

SACHS: Thank you. So I'd like to turn a bit to the to the system and the society domestically. The Iranian system is almost unique in a sense that it is not. It is, on the one hand, repressive system and clearly ruled by an unelected official. And as you said, a capricious one now. But on the other hand, these elections are not a foregone conclusion. There was real competition here, and the result was a surprise. Or, it seems, at least to have been a surprise for the supreme leader. So what does this tell us about Iranian society today, which, after all, is a very young society? The official turnout, I believe, was in the 50s. I understand there's some contention about whether that's the real turnout in the election or not. But of course, all this on the background of recent years, I believe the last time you spoke with us Maziar was around the Mahsa Amini demonstrations in Iran, which really were very widespread and very dramatic. Where does all this stand now? Does this give us a sense of, that turmoil over? Does it hint to more trouble, as you said? Now, does it tell us so much about the resilience of the system at all?

BAHARI: You know, whenever I'm talking about Islamic Republic, I think about Jerry Seinfeld talking to George Costanza, saying that, you know, I'm thinking about my artistic integrity. And Jerry goes, what the hell you're talking about? You're not an artist and you don't have any integrity. So this is the same thing that, you know, this is not an Islamic government. It has no ethics, it has no morality, and it's not a republic. It's a government that came to power in 1979 with some ideals, maybe revolutionary ideals of, you know, creating a just Islamic society, but especially since 2009, it's a government that's just thinking about its survival, however it can, different. And and you see, the level of corruption since 2009 has increased astronomically, the number of rich Iranians who are coming to different countries in the West, Canada, in England and different Persian Gulf countries, it's, you cannot compare that to the period before 2009. It means that all

these rats, they're fleeing from the ship and taking as much money as they can. So this is a government that is really not, really secure about its future. And it's run by a group of mostly corrupt officials who are thinking about their immediate survival. And right now, the the thinking in Iran is that what happens when Khamenei dies? And as I said, Khamenei is 85 years old and, they are all preparing themselves for, when the Khamenei is going to die. And at the same time, life goes on in Iran. Startups, are growing in Iran. Young people, they have jobs, they have their businesses. It's not a very secure situation, but they are not, you know, not every young person in Iran who is educated, it's an increasingly, educated, country. And women are composing the majority of the university students in Iran. Women have many businesses. There are women who are in different parts of the society, much more active than before the Revolution even. It's not a very secure life for them. Of course, they don't have the freedom that they should have, but life goes on for many of them. And this chasm that we were talking about between the government and the people, that exists because people, at least 50% who did not vote for this, for the, for the in the presidential election, do not care about the government. They don't even consider this government as part of their lives. They just want to live their lives. And at the same time, while we are talking about the West, we have to talk about the opposition, the Iranian opposition in the past 45 years, since 1979 has not provided any solution for the problems that Iranians are facing. All they have had is, has been certain demonstrations, press releases, and many of them, they were just quiet. They did not have anything to say during their last presidential election. And some of them were just active, insulting people who were going to the embassy without providing any kind of solution. So I think, it's the failure of the, opposition as well that has made the majority of Iranians, 50% of the Iranians silent who want to go about their lives, and they don't want this government to be any part of, their lives. And it's a sad situation, but, if Pezeshkian I don't have any clue by their Pezeshkian is thinking about what is he thinking about in terms of attracting this silent majority? How can he use their talents and their energy in his future plans? But those are his best allies in the future. But we just have to see whether he has the chutzpah in order to be able to deal with the, deal with the Revolutionary Guards and rebels and the Supreme Leader's office. I know quotes by the, Hebrew chutzpah, but, you know, yes. But he has to use that in order to be able to deal with the Revolutionary Guards and the Supreme leader.

SACHS: Suzanne, I wonder if you take on the same kind of question, but in particular, keeping in mind and this is also one of the questions we got, from from viewers. The supreme leader presumably will not be around forever. What does this say about the day after and the possibility that the Revolutionary Guard also takes charge will Pezeshkian himself be in some kind of Pezeshkian of power? Do we have a clue about who would be the next supreme leader, in general, or given this election?

MALONEY: Look, I think the election exposes both the, the, some of the resilience of the system, its its ability to reinvent itself and its ability to kind of, flow with unexpected circumstances and, and react in a way that that actually preserves the system. But it also exposes some of the longer term weaknesses that Maziar has spoken to. You know, the fact that in the first round of the voting, only 40% of Iranians turned out, despite the fact that it is, you know, it is both an expectation and often, you know, sort of a requirement for Iranians to vote. They have to turn in an identification card. And so it's it's often important that Iranians actually do. And so by not showing up, that's actually a fairly powerful protest movement. And I think it was understood very clearly as that, that the turnout was as low as it was historically in, in, in, in relative, not to the United States, of course, and to other Western governments, but relative to the way that the Iranian Islamic Republic has managed elections. That low turnout tells you something, that I think we, you know, even even more significant than in prior elections, we've seen a downward trend, of course, in, turnout in Iranian elections. But this was, I think, a very powerful message. I think you also saw in terms of, the way the vote broke, in favor of somebody who was in fact speaking to, a different approach than has been taken over the course of the past several years under Raisi, and certainly a different approach to what we hear articulated by Khomeini and some of the others, senior leaders, a different approach to the world, a different approach to the economy, a different approach to the youth. Pezeshkian really leaned into those themes in during the one-week campaign between the first and second round. And in doing so, he was, you know, ostensibly, if we believe the statistics and of course, there's reason to to assume that there may be some, manipulation. But but he was able to bring out more voters to actually participate, number one. And he was able to essentially swing those other voters who had voted for other conservative candidates over to his side, and Jalili was not able to do that. And so I think we know now that there's sort of, you know, the base of the Islamic Republic is about 13 million out of more than 80 million people, 13 million who will vote for a candidate who is who was, you know, promising an Iran that would be more closed off to the world and much more repressive at home, and much more dogmatic in terms of its interpretation of of the theocratic framing of the regime in people's daily lives, 13 million are prepared to support that the rest of the country isn't. And that's a message that I think the regime really can't escape. And, and, and we'll have to find ways to try to manage, over the course of, of upcoming years. I think the other thing that's really interesting to me is that despite, you know, copious efforts to find, not just a successor to the supreme leader, which is which is, you know, I want to get to. But really, who is the second generation standard bearer for, ideal Khamenei forget who is actually empowered to succeed him, because that really does have a certain set of, require it has to be a cleric, but he hasn't been able to find, a conservative political figure or someone who supports the

original idea of Ayatollah Khomeini of, a state in which the clerics would rule supreme, who actually is popular with, with the wider base of the Iranian, people, whether it comes from the security bureaucracy, like [inaudible] whether it comes from the clergy, like Raisi, these individuals just aren't popular. Jalili, the the candidate who lost in the runoff, had been an acolyte, really a close aide to Khamenei for many years, and was seen as someone that Khamenei was investing in for the future. 13 million out of 80, are willing to vote for him. So. So to me, those are obvious failures. And and obviously show the fraying of the regime. But I think, you know, the fact that there isn't really an alternative pathway, there doesn't appear to be a strategy, that in fact, people are, you know, if Pezeshkian, could deliver on at least what, what the, you know, sort of broad themes that he campaigned around, in terms of a better life for Iranians and, and more access to, you know, the internet and things like this, this, you know, that Iranians seem to be prepared to put their hopes, invest their hopes in someone who can make their lives a little bit better, even if this even if they can't change the system as a whole, I don't I can't speak for any one person, certainly not for 80 million Iranians. I think that, you know, if given a free choice at the ballot, we would see something very different than the system that exists today. But I also, you know, it's it's astounding to me that despite the depths of dissatisfaction, despite the intensity of protests dating back, you know, at least to 1999 and, and really, in many ways, since the founding of the state itself, the state has found its way to navigate through these very deep economic, social, political, security crises and come out stronger in the end. And so I think, you know, much as we would like to say, this is a harbinger of of, of regime change or a harbinger of some future, better outcome. I don't see it. I do want to get to the question that the, the viewer, posed to you in Aton, about who are the candidates for, to succeed Khamenei. And I really want to hear Maziar on this because, of course, Raisi was was one of the more prominent names that was bandied about. He was seen as someone who Khamenei, who was assiduously trying to elevate, into different Pezeshkians, and as someone who could at least be a steady hand on the wheel, the only other name that gets frequent mention is that of, Khamenei's son Mojtaba, who has never really held a formal government position so doesn't have that kind of administrative authority. It doesn't have that popular legitimacy. It's very tightly, networked with the security bureaucracy. But also would would create the impression of a kind of hereditary leadership, which, of course, the Islamic Republic was explicitly founded in opposition to. So, I think that's very much an open question today.

BAHARI: Yeah. Thank you. Suzanne, I just want to emphasize the fact that the 13 million people that Suzanne mentioned, they are very active and they have a lot to lose if this system changes. So whereas the rest of the Iranians, the 67 million, they are, you know, they can be silent, they can't go about their own lives.

These 13 million who voted for Jalili, they came to vote for him because they thought that he could solidify the system in a way to that. They could it could. Protect their long term interest. And some of them are Revolutionary Guards who have very lucrative contracts with the government. And they are very rich, and some of them are poor people who only lives, who only live on despite the stipends provided to them by the Imam Khomeini's Committee. Amal Khomeini's Committee is a charitable organization that has expanded since Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, and it has millions of family, families under its protection, and it is providing help to, poor people. It, provides, stipends to people, and it's asking them to vote in the elections. So, these 13 million we although there are not the majority of Iranians, they are very powerful. They, they are in Pezeshkians of power. And they also many of them, they are willing to sacrifice their lives, as we saw in 2022 and we saw in 2019 for this Islamic republic to protect them. So, Jalal, so Pezeshkian has a very difficult time to deal with 13 this 13 million people and they are going to make his life hell in the next few months and few years as much as they can.

SACHS: Thank you. Our we're about to finish I wonder if kind of, I'll save the least fair question for last. Which is this in a lightning round style, could you tell us how how this actually should affect, thinking in among Western governments? Should should this election really cause, policy planning we in the UK or in Canada or the US, to think differently about Iranian policy or is this a detail? Is this something that, a detail in the Khamenei rule of Iran? I want everyone we start with you and Suzanne. You can speak to us.

BAHARI: I would say the main lesson for this election for different governments around the world and for different people around the world is that, the 50% who did not vote for in the election and the more than, 16 million people who voted for Pezeshkian, they are the best allies that the West and people around the world, can have in Iran. So whatever they can, in order to empower them, whether it is, satellite internet, whether it is free flow of information, whether it is, it help in terms of medicine and medical equipment, etc., they deserve it. And they still believe in the fact that the West can help Iran, that they they are westward looking, they are looking at, they want to communicate with the rest of the world. They are tired of being the a pariah for the past, let's say 40 years, 45 years or so. So they are the best allies. I think that is the main, lesson. There are many other lessons, but I would say that is the main lesson that the Western governments, especially the American government, can have.

MALONEY: I can't put it better than what Maziar just said. I will just add the the urgency. The urgency, which I think was underscored by the events of April 13th. The fact that the government of Iran, of whom the

president is not the ultimate authority, was prepared to undertake an attack for the first time, directly in an attributable fashion against Israel for the first time in 45 years, in a way that there was no guarantee of, avoiding a full-fledged war between the two countries. I think that is a very, very worrisome indicator about the risk tolerance of, the security bureaucracy as a whole. And it is why it is so important that even, one voice who might be a bit more circumspect and, as Maziar said, efforts to help the Iranian people themselves to be able to, express their, their will and, their preferences for the future of their country are so important.

BAHARI: I certainly think the same. And that is to curb the power of the Islamic Republic outside of Iran, because it's their influence through their proxies, the influence they have in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, etc., in Latin America. That gives them the confidence that to put pressure on people inside the country. So, the Western governments, especially the US, they should curb the power of the Islamic Republic as much as they can outside of Iran. And that will really help the Iranian people as well.

SACHS: I want to thank you both very much, Maziar Bhari of Iran Wire, thank you very much for joining us again. Suzanne Maloney of our own foreign policy program here at Brookings. This is, of course, just one of many public programs that we have. Please do sign up for alerts on [@brookings.edu](https://twitter.com/brookings.edu). And we look forward to having you join us online for our next webinar very soon. Thank you again Maziar, Suzanne. And thank you everyone for tuning in.