

# **THE ISRAEL PROJECT**

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN: HOW IS THE REGIME  
RESPONDING TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EVENTS**

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EITAN LIVNE: Hello, and welcome. My name is Eitan Livne and I am the director for Iran research and content at The Israel Project. On behalf of our entire team, I am very pleased that such a prominent group of journalists could join us today to hear from our Iran expert, Dr. Eldad Pardo.

Now, for those of you who don't know, The Israel Project is an international, nongovernmental, independent and privately funded organization dedicated to providing journalists, officials and the public with accurate information about Israel and the Middle East.

Now, without further ado, I would like to introduce our speaker for today. Dr. Eldad Pardo is an expert in strategy, culture and politics in the Middle East covering topics pertaining to Iran, the Arab world, Turkey and Israel.

Dr. Pardo earned his doctoral degree in history at UCLA and holds a master's degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is a senior analyst at the Hebrew University's Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, where he has led two research groups: Religious Actors in Conflict Areas and Iran in Global Perspectives.

Dr. Pardo is the head of the IMPACT-SE's Iranian Research Group – that is, The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education. Dr. Pardo is an experienced commentator, speaker and writer on Middle East affairs, and has been interviewed both in English and Arabic by all major Israeli outlets as well as the foreign press. He gives regular briefings to foreign diplomats and scholars.

His latest book, "Predicting Revolutions: Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution" was published last year.

Now I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Pardo for a short introduction. After that, we will have questions.

Dr. Pardo, over to you.

ELDAD PARDO: Hi, and good day, good evening, here in Israel. Let's start with the point of view of the Iranian regime towards the wave of revolutions that we have seen in the Arab world. From the Iranian side, there is a hope, and there has been a hope all along that the United States would lose its allies in the area. Moreover, as we heard today from Ahmadinejad and all over throughout last week, one should include this wave of revolutions within the paradigm of GMR. GMR is the Great Mahdi Revolution.

There is a belief within a core of people, within the circle of Ahmadinejad that we are heading towards a larger global revolution with the advent of the Mahdi, and that will include

also an extremely powerful Iran. And they speak often about a great change which is about to come. Now we are witnessing a great change. And this really can support this view.

On the other hand, the Iranian regime also sustained some heavy blows with this wave of revolutions. First of all, these revolutions are nationalistic; Arab, to a degree; very liberal in their framework, calling for good governance and democracy.

This is really contradicting Iranian ideology of the last three decades, which focuses on an Islamic revolution. We heard Khamenei, the supreme leader, saying again and again and again that all election campaigns in the Middle East would end up with the rise of Islamist groups. And in the end of the day, the entire Middle East and the entire peoples, the Islamic peoples of the Middle East would unite.

This does not seem very likely right now. A second blow was that the conflict in Israel and the conflict against imperialism did not play any role. We heard first via WikiLeaks that the leaders of the Middle East are not very much interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Now, with these revolutions, we see that the people, the masses are also not interested. This means for Iran that they lost much of their soft power.

Beyond that, this means that Iran would need to use much more hard power, as we have witnessed in Lebanon, with Hezbollah, in regards to Hamas, and also in Iraq where Iran lost its soft power. It has to deliver more weapons and supply more armaments and also rely more on its nuclear program. All of the above has much influence inside Iran.

We see today that Iran, but also Hamas and maybe Hezbollah as well, are part of the group of the authoritarian, dictatorial regime. They are not part of the liberation movement, as they saw themselves for many years. This means that there is a paradigm shift in Iran.

According to the research that we have conducted at the Hebrew University in the recent 10 years at least, we reached the conclusion that the Iranian people in general did not want a revolution in Iran, but opted for reform. The reason was that they wanted a system that is more spiritual as compared to the West – this is A; B, they didn't believe in a revolution because their own revolution was about an authoritarian, dictatorial regime.

So what we see is that – I will repeat them at my last words – that the Iranian people, Iranian masses, Iranian elite did not want a revolution. They wanted a change, a reform. They wanted to keep the same regime, but they wanted to reform it. And part of the reason was cultural: They wanted a different system from the West, and second of all, they did not believe a revolution can deliver a democracy.

Now, what happened now are two paradigm shifts. First, among the ranks of the reformists – Egypt particularly, but also other examples have shown that a revolution can bring about a democracy. They also showed that democracy is not against Islam; one has to also remember the Turkish example. So a revolution can bring a positive, new kind of regime. This is a change, a paradigm shift in Iran. And we heard that, you know, this idea, we try again. There is hope in change.

Second of all, also inside Iran, I am talking now about the government itself, or the elite groups within the regime. One can see that there is possibly, there must be a change also among the Revolutionary Guards because stationing, positioning the regime as part of the authoritarian, oppressive regime should be a very difficult stance for many within the regime, particularly the Revolutionary Guards, but also others. Look what happened in the army in Libya – something along these lines.

So we have two dangers ahead. First, if the regime will be totally hopeless, the regime may resort to difficult decisions if it sees the revolution in Iran developing further. This means resorting to force, to arms. If Iran has, let's say, two years or three years down the road a nuclear weapon, and then we see a revolution, this nuclear weapon that could be connected to some apocalyptic visions, may be used as a last resort. Also, Iran may try to have some foreign crisis to divert public attention from the problems at home.

If Iran, on the other hand, could be able to – if the Iranian regime succeeds in overcoming the revolution or the opposition, we may see in the future a country that is more closed, that is more – a little bit paranoid, that believes in apocalyptic dreams, maybe a little bit like North Korea developing a culture of enclaves which will make Iran a very different polity altogether.

Another point that I see is the Iranian calculation that nuclear power or the possibility of having a nuclear project helps the regime to fend off foreign pressure. We already have seen it in 2009 with the hesitation of the American administration to pressure Iran. And we see it further today.

So I think that instead of the nuclear project being a cause of trouble for Iran, it shows itself to be very useful. So this project will probably continue.

MR. LIVNE: Okay, thank you, Dr. Pardo. Now, we've received many questions. Several people have asked about the two Iranian warships that passed through the Suez Canal yesterday for the first time since 1979. Israel has called the move a provocation. How do you see this move in the light of the recent developments in Iran and Egypt?

MR. PARDO: First of all, I think this move originally is not connected to the current situation. It is part of Iranian Islamist-slash-imperialists. There is much more talk in the Iranian – inside the discourse about the imperial heritage. Iranian presence in the Mediterranean is part of Iran's self-view as a new Islamic empire. I think it's also a symbolic gesture towards the United States. You guys have your fleet in the Gulf; we will have our warships in the Mediterranean. So this is, of course, one side of the issue.

Another side is, of course, Iran takes advantage of the weakening of Egypt. And it is at least a temporary weakening of Egypt as a regional rival. And perhaps the Iranians are hoping that down the road, they will have better relations with Egypt and be able to enhance their might in the eastern Mediterranean.

MR. LIVNE: We now move on to discuss the recent unrest in Iran and across the Middle East. First, several people have asked what are the chances for success for Iran's opposition?

MR. PARDO: This is very hard to predict. Revolutions in general are a phenomenon that is very difficult to predict. There is a great potential for change. There is no doubt that the regime was extremely surprised by the fact that the Iranian opposition went out to the streets first on February 14<sup>th</sup> and then on February 20<sup>th</sup>. The Green Movement is still alive and kicking.

To what extent this will continue is hard to tell. But as I said earlier, I think the paradigm shift is extremely important there. The Iranian people, large segments of the Iranian people, including within the regime now see the possibility of regime change as something that is achievable.

MR. LIVNE: Iranian opposition sources reported that Lebanese Hezbollah fighters took part in suppressing demonstrations in Tehran alongside the Iranian security forces. Is this a common practice? Why would the Iranian regime use Hezbollah for this purpose?

MR. PARDO: I also heard such news from people – that came from Iran. This is actually natural. One has to remember that from the point of view of the regime, the regime is not Iranian, but Iran is heading an Islamic global revolution.

For example, if you go to the site of Iran's supreme leader, you will see that his title has no "Iran" in the name. He is the supreme leader – the supreme leader of the Islamic revolution or in Arabic, the leader of the Muslims in the world and so on.

So actually, Iran and Hezbollah are part of one revolution. One can see also in southern Lebanon the pictures of Khamenei and Khomeini everywhere and so on and so forth. So naturally, there are Hezbollah operatives training in Iran. They are present there. They are part of the regime. One can say that Hezbollah and Iran – this current regime in Iran – are just one political body.

MR. LIVNE: Thank you. We've also received a few questions regarding the Iranian demonstrators -- those people taking to the streets across Iran chanting, "Down with the dictator." Who are they and what is it exactly that they want? Are they united under one goal and one leadership? Or do they actually represent various groups with various agendas and goals?

DR. PARDO: Definitely they represent various groups. First and foremost are young people, women, secular people, people who are not secular but who'd like to see a reform in the Islamic revolution. There are also people from lower classes. We also heard about beginnings of strikes in Iran.

So this is actually a pretty wide movement. The demonstrators on the side of the regime are very much similar to what we've seen in Egypt. These are people that are organized, that are bused into the demonstration areas. And it's hard to tell to what extent the regime has a large body of people to rely on.

MR. LIVNE: You mentioned some labor strikes. Is the economic situation in general and sanctions in particular an issue in this protest?

DR. PARDO: They are probably a background. I would say that they are not something really that one hears or sees in the demonstrations. Of course, the information is scarce and it's very hard to know exactly what's going on.

But we know that the slogans were, for example, "We don't want Gaza, we don't want Lebanon -- we want Egypt, Tunis and Iran," meaning, we don't want to be involved in wars in the Middle East, but we want change at home. Or, "Death to the dictator," meaning that they want a more liberal, democratic Iran. Or there's another slogan, "Mubarak, Ben Ali -- now it's the time of Seyed Ali," meaning that after Tunisia and Egypt, the time of the current supreme leader -- of Iran's supreme leader -- to go -- it's his turn to go.

We also heard these slogans at night, "Allah hu akbar" -- God is great -- and so on. So I would say, this is part of an ongoing strategy to change the regime towards a more democratic Iran. However, the personality of Ahmadinejad is extremely hated by people, both among the opposition but also in the Revolutionary Guards and in other places. And this includes his economic policy and in the background, the sanctions and the isolation of Iran that many, many people in Iran hate. They would like to see Iran as the center of the world, not as an isolated country.

MR. LIVNE: Several people have asked, what are the two main opposition leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, aiming at? Are they seeking a real regime change -- that is an end to the Islamic regime -- or simply to replace President Ahmadinejad or Supreme Leader Khamenei, but still within the system of the Islamic republic?

DR. PARDO: I would think that they would like to keep the Islamic republic intact but change it dramatically from within.

One has to remember that the Iranian Revolution, in general, is an answer to the American Revolution and other Western revolutions such as the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution in the sense that the Iranian Revolution aimed at reintroducing God into politics and creating a kind of a people's regime that is also spiritual and includes the wishes of God.

In that sense, many Iranians see their regime as more advanced than the Western regimes that are based on materialistic and anthropocentric tenets. Now, if Iran can change itself into both democratic and open society and at the same time spiritually elevated, then this would be the dream of the revolutionaries and particularly those who are among the reformists, such as Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi.

MR. LIVNE: If Mousavi or Karroubi do come to power, how will that affect Iran's foreign policy? Will they halt Iran's nuclear program and stop its support of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza?

DR. PARDO: If one studies the Iranian foreign policy since the beginning of the revolution one can see a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, there was always the supreme leader that draws the general lines of the policy. This means in the case of Iran of today, continuation with the nuclear project and definitely enmity towards Israel and so on.

However, we also have seen changes among various presidents. Be it in the first decade, Khamenei, then came Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ahmadinejad. Each of these four presidents had different styles of foreign policy: more confrontational, less confrontational; more use of international terrorism, for example, in the times of Rafsanjani; more soft talking in the times of Khatami, trying openness towards the United States, trying openness towards the Gulf states.

Over in Khatami's time, this policy was blocked pretty soon by the supreme leader. Ahmadinejad – we know about Ahmadinejad. So in case we have the reformists coming to power in Iran, this means that the style will definitely change but possibly the main guidelines of the policy will not change.

But it is very hard to predict, because Iran needs a change desperately, and maybe there will be a change for the better. It also depends a lot on the resolve of the rest of the world, particularly the West, in the nuclear issue and on human rights. Both issues must be confronted vigorously.

MR. LIVNE: Many are wondering who really calls the shots in Iran. Because some analysts, Dr. Pardo, some of your colleagues, claim that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards – whose political and economic power increased greatly over the past few years - have in fact marginalized Supreme Leader Khamenei and have become de facto rulers of Iran.

What is your opinion? Who really calls the shots in Tehran today?

DR. PARDO: It is hard to tell. I tend to think that Khamenei is still calling the shots. I think that he uses Ahmadinejad and also the Revolutionary Guards. Khamenei – as long as he's healthy, he's a very good administrator. He knows the details very, very well. He's very smart, very balanced. And I would say that he's still in control.

On the other hand, there's no doubt that as the soft power or the image of the regime diminishes, it must rely more and more on the security apparatus and on the – on, actually, the Revolutionary Guards that also have become a very important economic power in Iran. And they stand to lose in case of both reforming the state or, definitely, from a regime change.

So all these elements suggest that the parts of the regime work together under Khamenei. On the other hand, there is much animosity among some segments of the Revolutionary Guards vis-à-vis Ahmadinejad. He's seen as unstable and he doesn't have a record of a real fighter for the revolution.

MR. LIVNE: And what are the implications of this strengthening of the Revolutionary Guards, both politically and economically?

DR. PARDO: The implications are that the Revolutionary Guards is an extremely important power in Iran. And to a certain extent, one can compare it to the position of the military in Egypt. But we also have to remember that there is also an army in Iran. I'm not sure that all members of the Revolutionary Guards would join violent attacks against civilians in Iran.

We've seen that the regime is very careful to use police and the Basiji people that are kind of a militia when it comes to the demonstrations. And they keep the Revolutionary Guards behind. On the other hand, the Revolutionary Guards, as I said, they have a lot to lose if a change – a major change occurs in Iran.

So it's really hard to tell how all this will unfold.

MR. LIVNE: So let's move on now to answer a few questions regarding the region and Israel. What implications does the recent fall of Arab regimes have on Iran? Mubarak's Egypt, for example, was an important counterforce to Iran in the Middle East. In what way will Mubarak's fall affect the power balance in the region?

DR. PARDO: It is very hard to tell at this juncture. If Iran moves towards a regime that is more liberal, more democratic, more Egyptian and more open – and this is the optimistic scenario – I would guess that in that case, Iran stands to lose a lot from that.

If, on the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood manages somehow to have much more influence inside the Egyptian government – and this is also a possibility – in that case, both Iran and even Turkey will have much more influence in Egypt. And it would play to their side.

MR. LIVNE: We're seeing the return of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, maybe the most influential Sunni cleric today and considered the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. He returned to Egypt after decades in Qatar. What do you think this means?

DR. PARDO: I would say that there are two dimensions to that. First of all, Qaradawi is seen as a voice of revolution and change in the Arab world and he is popular among large segments.

On the other hand, I would say that he tries to save what is still possible for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Egyptian upheaval and revolution was a dramatic surprise in the sense that this revolution did not come from the Islamist groups in Egypt. They lost much power and much popularity.

Now the people of Egypt have to choose between a more democratic regime and going back to some kind of an Islamic or Islamist dictatorship. So it seems that there are a lot of groups and powers in the army, outside the army, in the society that would not like to see the Muslim Brotherhood come back to power in Egypt.

Qaradawi tries to save the situation; he tried to show that actually, the Muslim Brotherhood had an important role there and he tried to minimize the roles of seculars and also to

minimize the role of the Copts. He directed his talk to the Copts, but we know that the Muslim Brotherhood and also mainstream Islamic figures were very much against the Copts. The Copts now gained a lot of power within the revolution.

MR. LIVNE: Let's return to Iran. Regional states repeatedly accuse Iran of meddling in their internal affairs. What is Iran's role in the recent uprisings in the Arab world?

MR. PARDO: I would point mainly to the role of Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera is a television network that is based in Qatar, but when it comes to both its Arabic service and its English service, they often work in coordination with Iranian interests. This is a part of the policies of Qatar.

And definitely, Al Jazeera worked very hard to help the revolution happen in Egypt and in other places in the Arab world in what seemed to be at the time a move that would be pro-Iranian.

We also see Al Jazeera in English covering the nuclear project and the nuclear crisis, as well as the revolution with – or, let's say, not revolution, but the protest movements inside Iran in 2009, and also now in a very sophisticated way so to downplay what is unhelpful for Iranian policies. So I would say this is one important vehicle.

Iran has also connections, definitely, with Shiites and Muslim fundamentalists across the region, but we've seen that these were not extremely instrumental in these popular uprisings.

Actually, it's just the other way around. Look, for example, Hamas in Gaza is a very good example of a pro-Iranian regime that would not allow the people to demonstrate in support of Egypt.

So Hamas is now being portrayed or being seen as part of this ring of dictatorial regimes. And I wonder, what is the situation in Southern Lebanon? Also there, Hezbollah is actually ruling in a dictatorial style. And it may be that not all Shiites are extremely happy with the role of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

MR. LIVNE: And this brings us to questions regarding the situation in Bahrain. Bahrain, of course, is the home of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. And there, we have Shiites, which are the majority of the population, demonstrating against a Sunni royal family. What is Iran's role there?

MR. PARDO: Well, definitely, Iran has much influence among Shiite groups in the Gulf; in Bahrain, in Saudi Arabia, in Kuwait, and so on, and even more so in Iraq, southern Iraq.

However, I would say that, generally speaking, the division between Persians and Arabs is much more enforced and much more assertive than the division between Shiites and Sunnis in the Arab world.

I do not see, I do not think that the Shiites would become automatically subservient to the Iranian interests. We see that in Iraq, both Maliki and Allawi are both Shiite, and they are not just loyal to Iran, even though some Arab leaders may be afraid of that. So I think the same is true to the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain. They have their own grievances.

By the way, Bahrain is comparatively more democratic than many Arab countries. So there is a lot of tension there, but I don't think that Bahrainis would like to return to Iran. There are claims in Iran that Bahrain actually belongs to Iran – it used to be, at a time, one of the Iranian provinces. So from time to time, one hears these claims both by more extreme people like Shariatmadari, the editor of Kayhan, but also Khatami mentioned it when he was president, and after that. Of course, he said, no, we don't want anything, but let us not forget that these territories were once ours. So this is the Iranian, Persian view. I don't think that Shiite Arabs would like to be ruled by Iran.

MR. LIVNE: Okay.

Let's go back to another Israeli angle. We have received several questions regarding the possibility of Hezbollah attacking Israel to divert attention from Iran's problems. As anti-government pressure in Iran grows, do you think Iran might attempt to use one of its proxies, Hezbollah or Hamas, to attack Israel in order to divert attention from its domestic problems?

MR. PARDO: Well, everything is possible, but I don't think this would be a very wise move on the side of the Iran-Hezbollah axis. I would tend to think that they would not do it. The reason is that the situation inside Iran, particularly in light of this paradigm shift that we've seen and the fact that there are revolutions all across the Middle East – it would be very hard to convince the Iranian people that the Americans and the Israelis are threatening Iran by attacking Lebanon and that is why some kind of emergency situation or unity is needed.

If the situation deteriorates in Iran, from the point of view of the regime, one will see these emergency actions and the argument that – anyway, we already see these arguments, by the way, in Iranian press, that all these opposition leaders should be hanged, that they are representatives of Israel or of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq or the United States or whatever – you know, you hear this kind of argument. You see them, you hear them; they are there.

However, attacking Israel from Lebanon would threaten the existence of Hezbollah. This is something that I hear not from Israel but from Lebanese friends. Israel is seen as potentially very aggressive in its attitude.

If Hezbollah attacks Israel for any reason, there will be a counterattack by Israel itself which may lead to the destruction of Hezbollah. This is the way it is seen from Lebanon.

Because of that, I do not think that Iran – as long as Iran exists and is not being destroyed, there is no reason to lose this strategic advantage of having this very powerful Hezbollah that is loyal to Iran. To just lose this card for short-term propaganda considerations inside Iran – I don't see it. But everything is possible, you know. It's not impossible, but it's not highly probable.

MR. LIVNE: And the top story in the news lately, and has been for a couple of days now, is the situation in Libya. What is your assessment on that?

MR. PARDO: It is very hard to tell. I am not a Libya expert, but what I hear from Libya experts here in Israel is that because of the tribal composition in Libya and because of the position of Gaddafi, the fact that he is leading a revolution and he has no alternative and he hundred percent identifies his own personality with the regime that he created, the situation in Libya is doomed to deteriorate into a civil war. But again, this is not based on my own research.

MR. LIVNE: Okay, thanks so much to our guest, Dr. Eldad Pardo, for taking the time to join us, and thanks to all of our guests who participated in today's briefing. For more information about Israel and the Middle East, please be sure to visit our website, [www.theisraelproject.org](http://www.theisraelproject.org). Our team of experts and former journalists is always ready to help you get the facts you need to cover the Middle East and Israel. So please, do not hesitate to contact us if we can help you in any way.

Thank you again, Dr. Pardo, and thank you all for listening.

MR. PARDO: Thank you.

(END)