

Transcript for Episode 5, “Domestic Politics, Nuclear Choices, and the Iran Deal”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

Morgan Kaplan: [00:00:18] Hello. And welcome to IS: Off the Page. I'm your host, Morgan Kaplan, and I'm the Executive Editor of *International Security*, a quarterly journal that's sponsored and edited by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by MIT Press. On today's episode of Off the Page, we'll be talking about an article from our Fall 2019 issue by

[00:00:36] Dr. Elizabeth Saunders titled, “The Domestic Politics of Nuclear Choices: A Review Essay.” To join us in this conversation, we have the author, Dr. Elizabeth Saunders, with us, and our policy expert is Dr. Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution, where she focuses on the politics of Iran and the Persian Gulf.

[00:00:52] And that's right. We'll be talking about the domestic politics of the Iran nuclear deal.

Morgan: We're coming to you from Washington DC, where we've recorded in the Brookings Institution podcast studio, so thank you very much to our friends at Brookings. Joining us is Dr. Elizabeth Saunders, who is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a key member of its Security Studies Program.

[00:01:20] She is also a nonresident senior fellow at the Project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. Thank you so much, Elizabeth Saunders for joining us on the show today.

Elizabeth: [00:01:28] My pleasure. Good to be here.

Morgan: [00:01:29] You've written an incredibly interesting article for *International Security* about the domestic politics of nuclear choices.

[00:01:35] Tell us a little bit about what is a nuclear choice and what have you learned from reviewing the existing state of the art on how we think about domestic politics and nuclear choices.

Elizabeth: [00:01:46] Well, this article surveys a whole wide variety of nuclear choices, and this is one of the really interesting trends in the so called “renaissance of nuclear studies” that's happened in the last decade or so. It used to be that the literature on [00:02:00] nuclear weapons was really focused on this basic choice to get a nuclear weapon or not, proliferate or not. One zero. And you had the nuclear countries and the non-nuclear countries, and we now have a much more nuanced understanding of the nuclear timeline even before proliferation.

[00:02:15] We've got a whole bunch of states that live in this gray zone called "nuclear latency." And that has all sorts of domestic and international implications. And I think Iran is a really good example there. And then you also have a lot of choices that get made after you acquire the bomb. How many are you going to acquire?

[00:02:31] Are you going to put them on missiles? Are you going to, how are you going to have command and control? And so how states think about the nuclear problem, it used to be so focused on just becoming a nuclear state or not, and I think we have so much more of an understanding, but the problem in this burgeoning literature is it's still being done one choice at a time.

[00:02:50] It's you got the proliferation literature, the strategy literature And that's appropriate because when you're doing an individual article on the topic, you want to hold as many things [00:03:00] constant in as possible. So it's not a critique, so much as now we've got a critical mass here, and the function of this article is not to critique this, but to take a step back and say, "okay, what have we actually learned?"

[00:03:10] What are the features that we have? We can see in common across all the different phases of nuclear choices, from pre-proliferation and latency to the choice to get the bomb to how many bombs are you going to get and how are you going to target them and command and control and so forth. And you can see things with that sort of approach that you would not see if you were going one choice at a time, or if you were looking only at democracies or if you only looking at autocracies.

[00:03:32] So it's very important that these studies all. Happen individually, and this is very different kind of article, but hopefully it's adding to the mix to give a broader perspective.

Morgan: [00:03:42] So what did you discover by taking this broader survey of the literature?

Elizabeth: [00:03:46] What I found was that across these different nuclear choices, the new literature has in common one particular feature, which is that [00:03:55] most of these arguments are in some way top-down, meaning that the domestic [00:04:00] political actors that they're talking about, whether it's the public or bureaucrats or scientists that make nuclear weapons possible, or nuclear targeting possible, they get their power in part because the leader grants them power.

[00:04:11] And this is true across regime types. So this is true in democracies, and this is true in authoritarian regimes. And so this new literature really highlights that leaders have different incentives about whether to open up the circle of decision making, and that really affects the number of people and the different types of political actors that have inputs into nuclear decision-making.

Morgan: [00:04:32] Tell us a little bit more about who the circle is opening up to, like who are these different actors that leaders can grant access to in terms of nuclear choices, and who are the leaders as well?

Elizabeth: [00:04:43] Well, usually when we think about leaders, we talk about the chief executive and their innermost circle, and most of the time we imagine that nuclear choices are made there in that very inner circle.

[00:04:53] This is after all the highest of high politics and international security. If you are a leader and you want to make a change in nuclear policy, [00:05:00] whether it's to start a program, to acquire the bomb outright, to increase the number, to have a ballistic missile program, to attack some other state's program, you need other actors in your [00:05:10] country to help you. You need scientists. If you want to have a functioning nuclear program, you need aircraft. You need the military to have a command and control structure to actually target these weapons and so forth. You may also want to institutionalize a decision, if it's contested, whether you're going to have a nuclear program at all.

[00:05:27] If you can make your decision stick and outlive you, that would be great, but you need other people to buy into that. Increase the stakeholders.

Morgan: [00:05:34] When would you want to keep it closed? I mean, what are the incentives to keep it closed?

Elizabeth: [00:05:37] Right. If you do, that's all the good part of it, right? But it comes with risks, right?

[00:05:43] And there there's a real trade off and costs and benefits of opening up. So what are the downsides? Well, if you give other actors in your domestic circle power, they can use it against you. They can impose political costs on you. That can happen at a democracy. They might use it on a campaign trail and might use it in [00:06:00] a bureaucratic food fight. If you're in an authoritarian regime, maybe you're worried about giving the military too much power and resources because they might use it to coordinate a coup, right? There's all kinds of reasons why there'd be downsides to opening up the circle apart from just a policy debate. So leaders' incentives to centralize or not, like how much political punishment might they get if they open up debate or they grant the military power like that exposes them to risk from the military and authoritarian regimes, [00:06:27] all that stuff goes into this sort of variable of what's the payoff? Like what do I get as the leader if I let other people into this decision-making circle, and what are the costs that I might, or the risks that I might run if I do that? So that's one dimension. The other is just how ambiguous is the threat that I'm facing because we all in IR know our realism, and we know that [00:06:47] states are in an international environment and they take huge amount environment, and sometimes those cues are really clear. It's not so much of a mystery why North Korea wants nuclear weapons, right? They live in an extremely dangerous neighborhood. They got a [00:07:00] lot of nuclear weapons in their neighborhood, and this is regime insurance basically.

[00:07:03] The geopolitics of that are not particularly complicated, but other countries, their threats are more ambiguous. They may have a big mountain range that protects them from conventional invasion, right. This is in Vipin [Narang's] book [Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict]. He makes this argument that India and China, they have a bit of a buffer, right?

[00:07:20] And so it's not as clear cut if a nuclear weapon, or what particular nuclear strategy, would be the most appropriate.

Morgan: [00:07:27] Is this type of dynamic, where it is so top-down focused, unique to nuclear weapons? And if so, why? Is it that there's something so important about nukes there, they're so destructive, [00:07:39] they're so important from a strategic perspective that leaders have to have such incredible control over them, and therefore that's why we see a lot of decisions around nuclear choices come from the top? Is that related to the fact of just what nukes are themselves, or do we see this in other areas as well?

Elizabeth: [00:07:55] Yeah, I think this is a really important point. So the typical view has been that basically [00:08:00] leaders are the ones who make the choices, and if you go full realists, then you would say, and they take their cues from the international environment. And it really doesn't matter if I'm a leader, or you're the leader, or Saddam Hussein is the leader, [00:08:10] the leader is the vessel for channeling international security threats, and we've long known that other domestic political actors can play a role in interpreting threats and making nuclear choices. But you're right that it has been long thought that leaders have more incentive to centralized decision making about nuclear weapons because it's just so consequential.

[00:08:30] It's, it's, it's, they're so deadly. They also attract other countries' attention and can make you a target of counter-proliferation efforts. These are massively consequential choices for every state. And so leaders obviously want to keep it close to the vest.

Morgan: [00:08:44] Can you give us explicit example of a case that fits this kind of pattern you're talking about?

Elizabeth: [00:08:49] Sure. So I think the Swedish case, which is maybe not the first one that comes to mind, is a pretty interesting one. And Sweden is known for being sort of a leader in the disarmament movement. And there's been some case studies of the Swedish case [00:09:00] that focus on its early decision to think about maybe having a nuclear program, and it was sort of caught in the middle between the Soviet Union and NATO, and maybe this would be a sort of deterrent, or an independent Swedish nuclear capability might be very useful as it tried to [00:09:16] maintain its neutrality. And as we've gotten more and more out of the archives, and there's been some people who've done some really in depth work in the Swedish archives, they've shown that there was this heavy debate inside the Swedish government and the prime minister was very careful to keep the debate restricted inside the government until the security situation became less ambiguous, became clearer.

[00:09:40] Sweden had the secret coordination with NATO that made it a little bit less risky to stay neutral, maybe not quite so neutral.

Morgan: [00:09:48] Why does that change the calculus?

Elizabeth: [00:09:50] Because they know that if they get in trouble, they actually will have military backup. And so it just means that they might not necessarily need the nuclear program.

[00:10:00] If they had a nuclear program, it might be the target of some sort of counter-proliferation attack. And that was also a risk. So it was not clear that what the costs and the benefits were that, and reasonable people could disagree about it. That's one of the things that ambiguity of threats does, is it opens up space for people to just look at a situation and disagree, which as we know from all this great work on political psychology, [00:10:24] that happens all the time. So once a situation becomes a little clearer, at that point, the debate opens up and that's when the antinuclear voices are kind of allowed into the debate and in parliament and in public. And so it isn't that the grassroots doesn't matter or that the public or the activists don't matter.

[00:10:42] It's that their moment is sort of opened up by the leader. And by the security situation.

Morgan: [00:10:50] Well, so that's a good place to kind of bring up the question that I think some people may ask when reading the article, which is, you know, how much is this focus on the top down, right? It's, it's leaders [00:11:00] deciding when to open up the, you know, sphere of potential people who can influence a nuclear decision.

[00:11:05] You know, this top-down idea. Is it really so top-down, and can't bottom-up factors affect when the top feels like it needs to open itself up? You know, what's, what's the kind of relationship between the two?

Elizabeth: [00:11:17] So this is a really fair question, right? And when you make an academic argument, you're trying to make it as [00:11:22] sharply as possible. And you know, in the real world, we know these things are messy and the best work acknowledges both. So I think of Nina Tannenwald's work on the nuclear taboo, and she's very clear about how it's both an elite phenomenon and a public phenomenon. And the interplay between them is very, very important.

[00:11:38] And I, I don't deny any of that. And I think that it's very important to note that neither. My article, nor a lot of this other work is denying the influence. The bottom up pressure that leaders are under. What this is intended to do is sort of be a little bit of a corrective, right? And to say, we have to understand that, for example, public opinion on nuclear policy may matter, but leaders are not passive.

[00:11:59] They're not just sitting there taking the temperature of the public and then acting according, like a puppet or something, or a marionette. They have their own agency and their own views. They spent a lot more time thinking about this, which is totally natural. That's what we pay them for, and they have the ability to [12:15] shape, maybe not what the public thinks directly, but the cues the public hears, the information the public hears. So it's not, it's not that the public doesn't matter, it's that we have to all, we can't think about it in isolation. And these top down pressures and these top-down forces are really important for understanding how much power and influence these actors have.

Morgan: [00:12:36] So what do we do with this from a policy perspective? How do we take this understanding of the domestic politics of nuclear choices? What are people in

Washington, which happens to be where we are, by the way, at the Brookings Institution. You know, what is the policy takeaway from this finding?

Elizabeth: [00:12:54] Well, one is that if you are dealing with a country that has an ambiguous threat [00:13:00] environment, you better pay a lot of attention to its domestic politics. But if you're dealing with a country with pretty clear international signal, then you might not need to. And North Korea is a very interesting case, right?

[00:13:11] They have virtually no geopolitical incentive to give up their nuclear weapons, and a lot of the commentary has already sort of priced this in. The other big sort of takeaway is to think about this tradeoff between when it's good to expand the circle, to institutionalize your policy versus not. So the form of the Iran deal is really good example of this.

[00:13:31] So partisan polarization, as we know, has taken over American politics, and President Obama probably would have loved to have gotten the Iran deal ratified as a treaty because that would have given it staying power. It's a lot harder done do. It's a bigger political lift on to withdraw [00:13:46] formally from a treaty, but when John Kerry testified in the house after the conclusion of the deal, when he was still secretary of state, he was asked, why is this not a treaty? And his answer was, you can't get a treaty passed anymore. It's, he called it "physically [00:14:00] impossible." Bob Dole couldn't get the disabilities treaty [the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities] over the line, even coming to the Senate floor and lobbying for it.

[00:14:06] What does that mean? It means that other countries don't necessarily know that, that any commitment the United States makes, any agreement the United States makes, will live past the president who made it. It is hugely important for policy to think about the fact that the United States has trouble making international commitments.

Morgan: [00:14:23] Right. Well, Elizabeth, I only have one more question for you, and that is, are you ready?

Elizabeth: [00:14:29] For what?

Morgan: To go off the page?

Elizabeth: Absolutely.

Morgan: [00:14:37] If you've listened this far, you must enjoy the engaging conversations we have here on "Off the Page." And if you'd like to hear even more of these conversations, please don't forget to subscribe on your favorite podcast platform, and while you're there, don't forget to leave us a rating and a comment.

[00:15:00] And now we welcome Dr. Suzanne Maloney, who is the Interim Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, and she's an expert on the politics of Iran and the Persian Gulf. Suzanne, welcome to the show.

Suzanne Maloney: [00:15:12] Thanks so much for coming here and having me on.

Morgan: Well, thank you for having us.

[00:15:16] So I thought we'd first start by asking for some of your reflections on the piece. How much of it resonated from your experience in the policy practitioner space and the analyst space?

[00:15:26] **Suzanne:** I think it's so interesting to have this discussion now because it's not just the conversation about the nuclear deal, but it's the conversation about the set of choices that the Iranians have had to make since President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal and began reimposing sanctions on Iran.

[00:15:42] And so I've been looking at the domestic politics from both the Iranian side and, of course, the American side since this all began. And it's very much caught up in those issues on both sides. I think what's so interesting in terms of the kind of framework that you laid out is the [00:16:00] way that the Iranians deliberately actually expanded the circle starting at least in a very public way in 2013 with the decision to essentially orchestrate an election in which they [00:16:12] discuss the nuclear deal for the first time, or the nuclear negotiations at that point, in a really open way. They made it a subject for public debate, which had not been the case, and at least if I'm understanding article correctly, that that was a sort of interesting calculation from our point of view of the regime.

[00:16:30] **Elizabeth:** Yes. I'm no Iran expert, but that was definitely my reading of the case. And I actually got really interested in this question cause there were a couple of pieces at the time that said, you know, isn't this interesting that Iran and the United States both have sort of domestic politics that they're facing as they try to work out this deal and how to get it, [00:16:48] at least in the U.S. case, passed or approved in Congress. And I think it's so interesting because, as I think back over the U.S. side, I think President Obama probably would have loved to expand the circle even more [00:17:00] and get this institutionalized as a treaty. And in fact, he couldn't do that.

[00:17:04] And you know, the real problem with that is that, as we've seen, it means that the United States can't make a commitment that's going to outlast the president who makes it. And so it's kind of ironic that you're suggesting that the Iranians were better able to kind of expand their circle than [00:17:19] on the U.S. side.

[00:17:21] **Morgan:** So if we're going to focus specifically on the Iranian case, how did domestic politics play a role in Iran and in the U.S. during the initial process?

[00:17:30] **Suzanne:** Sure. I'll start. I think that from the outset, Iran and the nuclear issue is always been a heavily contested political issue in the United States.

[00:17:40] The Obama administration latched upon Iran even during the campaign period as an opportunity to send a message to the American electorate about what kind of foreign policy President Obama intended to pursue. He talked about engaging with Iran on the nuclear issue at a [00:18:00] time when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was president.

[00:18:02] He was renowned for his really virulent antisemitism and anti-Israeli rhetoric, seen as someone who was essentially untouchable in terms of diplomacy. But President Obama, even during the primary, said he'd be willing to meet with Iranian interlocutors and that he believed in engagement. He was trying to send a signal to American voters that he

intended a very different kind of foreign policy than President Bush [00:18:27] and to differentiate himself in that way and to appeal to a different segment of voters. And he pursued Iran as a really high priority from the outset, which of course meant that when there was an opportunity or some evidence of real traction on this issue diplomatically, it became a very high profile target for all of his political rivals, particularly on the Republican side.

[00:18:50] From the Iranian standpoint, there's also always been domestic politics attached to this issue, but for Iran, it was really only in 2013 [00:19:00] when, as I said, there was this election and an opportunity to change the narrative about the way that the political establishment dealt with this issue and to engage the public in a debate.

[00:19:10] Iran is one of those authoritarian systems in which many things are in fact openly debated, whether in the press and certainly on the streets. The nuclear issue had been subject to a fairly intense rhetorical monopolization by the regime, but with the campaign for president in 2013 after several years of really intense economic pressure on the country, there appear to have been a recognition that they couldn't continue down the same path.

And what they needed to do was build support for a shift in their own approach.

Morgan: [00:19:41] So what does a debate inside Iran over the nuclear weapons program look like? Like what are the different sides that are being taken? Who's taking them?

Suzanne: [00:19:50] Well, I would say we should caveat that of course, the Iranians insist that they're not pursuing nuclear weapons, [00:19:56] they have both legal, under the [00:20:00] Nonproliferation Treaty, and ideological slash moral slash theological objections to nuclear weapons. We, of course, know that the preponderance of evidence around the program as it's developed, first clandestine for 18 years and then revelations over the past course of the past 18 years in public, we have every reason to believe it is in fact a program intended not simply for civilian power generation purposes.

[00:20:24] But what happened was this debate about the costs of the program in terms of Iran's position in the world, in terms of the opportunities for growing the economy. And it began to play out first in the presidential debates that are televised in Iran. But because this really hadn't happened in the past, because the press had talked about the nuclear issue primarily in terms of the regime narrative, [00:20:49] this was immediately noticeable. And the fact is that there had been within the establishment a real set of concerns about how this process was going. And so [00:21:00] it became clear that this was an officially sanctioned opportunity to sort of break the box open and engage the public in a much more direct way.

Elizabeth: [00:21:09] And that just goes to show that sometimes the public actors or the other actors in a polity that that put pressure on the leader, they're able to do that because the, the leader of the regime has allowed them to. And that's that kind of top down approach that I think is really different.

Morgan: [00:21:24] Who are the main leaders in this debate and what are the specific different sides?

[00:21:28] Like is this an argument over cost? Is this an argument over even the foreign policies of pursuing nuclear energy, right? Is it really worth the benefits to have this type of international pressure? I mean, we obviously have the sanctions regime that's worth talking about. You know, what is the debate actually over and how does it affect these choices?

Suzanne: [00:21:48] Well, the irony of the 2013 presidential campaign in Iran is that one of the candidates at the time, and he was presumed to be this favorite of the Supreme Leader, who of course has ultimate authority in Iran, was at that time, the [00:22:00] nuclear negotiator. And so this was the issue on which he was most vulnerable. [00:22:04] And so the debate primarily at that time transpired around, how have you conducted yourself as a diplomatic actor? How have we in fact engaged the world at a time when we're under this intense economic pressure? And so they went Saeed Jalili, who was the nuclear negotiator, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Commission [00:22:25] at that time, and really hammered him for his inability to prevent what they described as an onslaught of sanctions against Iran. And this came at him from almost every direction. There were a number of candidates who were debating this.

Elizabeth: [00:22:39] So I think this is a really interesting point, and it connects up with the trend in the academic literature on nuclear security, and that is that people have, instead of, as we talked about earlier, focusing on this [00:22:49] binary choice, go nuclear or not, people have really begun to look at the costs and benefits of being an almost nuclear state, this idea of nuclear latency. And Rupal Mehta [00:23:00] and Rachel Whitlock have some really interesting work on the cost and benefits of exposing yourself to international sanctions or other kinds of pressures just for even *maybe* [00:23:08] going for a nuclear weapon. This goes back to Etel Solingen's work, economic pressure and sanctions and nuclear weapons. And so I think the academic trends are much better placed to understand these kinds of dynamics in Iran than they ever would have been for this wave of literature.

Morgan: [00:23:21] Right. How does sanctions play into the influence of bottom-up factors in the decision to make the Iran deal?

[00:23:29] What brought the Iranians closer to making a deal? You know, how much did the sanctions actually matter?

Suzanne: [00:23:35] It really does depend who you ask on this subject. There's still a lot of debate among those who follow Iran closely and among analysts in Iran about the extent to which sanctions were the deciding factor, or the extent to which the offer that was put on the table by the Obama administration during back channel, [00:23:53] clandestine diplomacy with the Iranians, in fact, was killing enough, or if the Iranians saw it as simply an opportune [00:24:00] moment to move the needle on an issue where they had been under pressure. I tend to side with those who are convinced that sanctions played a significant role, in part because the Supreme Leader himself said, "We went to the table to see the sanctions removed."

[00:24:13] The sanctions were incredibly effective because they were not primarily the traditional trade sanctions, which have been studied and have been a subject to a lot of analysis over the years, and have tended not to be particularly effective, especially when

they're imposed unilaterally. What happened after 9/ 11 was the use of the role of the United States in the international financial system to essentially weaponize the banks and access to the U.S. dollar.

[00:24:40] And as a result of that, the point at which they decided to join in a more serious way in the nuclear negotiations had really been nearly severed from the international financial system, had difficulty making any types of transactions, repatriating the revenues for its oil exports, and that had an overwhelming economic impact.

[00:25:00] And there was clearly a debate among the elite about the limits to which they could withstand that kind of pressure.

Morgan: [00:25:07] So we get the Iran Deal. And then now we obviously find ourselves in a very different place. There's been some, you know, particularly some updates since the United States killed Qassim Soleimani in Iraq.

[00:25:18] So for our audience, for my sake, what is the current state of the Iran deal, because I feel like there's a lot of misinformation out there. People say the Iranians ripped it up. It's over. But that's not actually true, right? There's a lot of nuance into the most recent decisions that were made by Teheran in terms of what is still on the table or not, and what can be walked back.

Elizabeth: [00:25:38] So I think the first place to start with the question of where are we with the Iran deal is President Trump, because President Trump was the one who pulled the United States back much to his European partners' chagrin and the Iranians' chagrin, and a lot of the interaction that we've seen between the United States and Iran has been very interesting [00:25:55] in its deliberate calculation, at least up to this point, up until before [00:26:00] January 2020, a lot of deniable kind of lower-level, did they or didn't they interaction, the shooting down of the drone last summer and so forth. And there's sort of a, a sense on, at least on the American side, that the Iranians are saying, we aren't going to tolerate this, but we don't want to go so far as to completely blow up the deal [00:26:18] because of course the economic incentives are still there to try to get the sanctions re-removed, I guess. The Europeans, of course, didn't want the Iran deal to end, and it hasn't officially ended because it still exists between the Europeans and the Iranians, as a legal matter. But then from the U.S. side, at least the question is, President Trump has said, we're going to get a better deal.

[00:26:38] And there's so many reasons why that, even forgetting the Iran side, that's a difficult problem from the American side. It's not clear where the extra leverage would come to do that. So even if the Iranians want a new deal and President Trump somehow is able to conclude one, the mere fact that we've pulled out of the deal once just makes it so much less likely that these deals will leave in the future.

[00:26:57] And you may think the Iran deal is great, or you may think it's [00:27:00] terrible, but I think as an analytical matter, we have to grapple with the fact that partisan polarization and the general tendency to try to sort of distance yourself from your predecessor, which

has just gotten stronger and stronger and stronger in this era of partisan polarization just makes it so much harder to make a commitment that outlasts any given president.

Morgan: [00:27:16] What's super interesting about that is I feel like, even if it's a little implicit, is the idea of when we think of opening up nuclear decisions to the domestic public because it seems so democratic, it's this idea of like, this must be an entirely positive thing, but kind of what we're saying here, if the U.S. decision to walk back aspects of the Iran deal are motivated to some extent by President Trump, appealing to his base in some ways, seeding leadership to be motivated by the broader public [00:27:45] actually has some negative consequences, like you said, which is how are the Iranians going to trust the United States again, if a new better deal is negotiated? How do they know that a leader in the United States, whether it's a Democrat or Republican, is not just going to walk that [00:28:00] back again because, hey, [00:28:01] not everything is responsible at the top?

Elizabeth: [00:28:03] And I think it's also important to remember that the roots of this predate President Trump, right? So why was the Iran deal not concluded as a treaty? It was partly because, as John Kerry said, it's physically impossible to get a treaty through the Senate anymore.

[00:28:15] That means that it's much easier as a political matter to undo it. And it's important to think also about the particular political pressure that President Obama would have been under as a Democrat. The brand of the Democratic Party, for better or for worse, has always been that they're less [00:28:30] trusted on national security issues, this idea of the Democrats as kind of wimpy doves if you want a quick shorthand. That may be wildly inaccurate, but that is sort of a political reality and it makes it a lot harder for Democrats. And there's a lot of really good new empirical research on this, [00:28:43] looking at the public opinion side, suggesting that Democrats have a harder time making peace agreements, as a political matter, than Republicans. And the polarization only exacerbates that. So the price that a Democratic leader has to pay to get their deals through has gone up because of partisan polarization, those [00:29:00] incentives to differentiate yourself or attack your political opponents.

[00:29:03] So that's not Obama's fault versus Trump's fault. It's just a political reality. And President Trump was able to take advantage of it.

Suzanne: [00:29:09] It really does create, I think, some concern about where we go from here. Because if you think about the arms control agreements of the seventies and eighties, could they have been concluded if they were held under the [00:29:23] kind of public microscope and debate that the Iran negotiation was subject to? I've never experienced a kind of foreign policy issue in which there were advocacy groups on both sides offering to pay experts, scholars, opinion leaders to go out and sit in the hotel where the negotiations were taking place so that they could put their argument into the press to try to influence the coverage and the public debate about this issue.

[00:29:48] It was completely bizarre. I'm told this happens around environmental negotiations, climate talks, but it's certainly not something that we'd ever seen before when I came to negotiations over even the Middle East peace process, which is certainly a

[00:30:00] contested issue, so it was a unique set of circumstances, but I suspect [00:30:04] that we're going to see more of this simply because the level of polarization is so deep. It really does make it difficult to imagine that we're going to be able to get to a responsible foreign policy, specifically around Iran, in the near future. And it's ironic because the real concern about the nuclear deal and the way that it was constructed was to try to insulate [00:30:24] the terms of the deal from political pressures within Iran.

Elizabeth: [00:30:30] There was an expectation, certainly on the part of the Obama administration, that critics and rejectionists and hardliners within Iran would try to take aim at the deal, would try to force their own government to walk away from their obligations under the deal.

[00:30:41] And ironically, we found ourselves in a situation where it was the United States that stepped out, and that Iran, at least for the first year after the U.S. withdrew and began reimposing sanctions, the Iranians continued to adhere for the most part to the obligations that they'd made under the agreement.

Morgan: [00:30:57] And so now, at this particular point in [00:31:00] time, and I don't know if we can talk about the recent back and forth in the United States and Iran exchanging kinetic acts in Iraq, what is the current state of affairs now in Iran? Because I mean there's, there's so many ways to cut at it. Part of it was the accidental downing of the Ukrainian jetliner. It really complicated ways that the average follower of world events could anticipate how the average Iranian would think about it.

[00:31:34] It suddenly went from an interstate dispute that played out over the course of a week to suddenly now there's a very highly domestic issue with regards to the downing of the jet. So what is the state of affairs in terms of the domestic politics with regards to the JCPOA and Iran?

Suzanne: [00:31:50] The Iranians have been, as Elizabeth was saying, responding to the U.S. withdrawal in a much more direct fashion since May of [00:32:00] 2019 when President Trump announced that he would [00:32:02] up the ante on the economic pressure and try to drive Iran's oil exports and revenues down to zero. The Iranian strategy seemed to flip on a switch. Suddenly we saw a series of what appeared to be calibrated and precise attacks on oil infrastructure, on U.S. interests and partners across the Persian Gulf meant to send signals of Iranian capability and will, and this was also a testing process to try to understand what American tolerance, both for risk and for retaliation, might be.

[00:32:34] And I think the Iranians drew some conclusions up through the attack on Abqaiq and Khurais oil fields in Saudi Arabia in September [2019], which took out about 5% of Saudi oil production for a short period of time and briefly spiked oil prices. This was a really significant infrastructure attack, and there was very little public response from the Trump administration, and so the Iranians continued to push back.

[00:32:59] I think they saw that these attacks help generate some diplomatic urgency around the state of affairs on the nuclear deal that it created some effort on the part of the Japanese, on the part of the French, the Swiss, the Qataris, the Omanis. Everyone around

the world was looking to try to mediate and negotiate some kind of a deescalation between the two sides, but they weren't seeing a deal that was [00:33:25] appealing enough for them to in fact accept and back down. And they continued to escalate, I think, hoping to drive a better price. And what they found, of course, was that the Trump White House has a red line, and it's the death of a single American, and that provoked a series of back and forths that led to the drone strike that killed Qassim Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, and brought the two countries, I think, closer than we have been, at least in 30 years, and possibly at any time in modern history, to direct, bilateral war.

Elizabeth: [00:33:56] Watching it as we did in the U.S., the [00:34:00] striking thing was certainly the night of all this sort of kinetic exchange, or kinetic acts as you say, we were all focused on the details in the military exchanges, but there had also been people in the streets in Iran [00:34:11] sort of protesting the killing of Soleimani, and it sort of seemed like more anti-American protests. And then after the accidental downing of the Ukrainian jetliner, it sort of flipped on a dime to being back to what had been in the months leading up to that, protest against the Iranian regime. And it really highlights, going back to this issue of what does a leader get from opening up the circle, [00:34:31] if you're an authoritarian regime, you take a big risk when you do that, right? Democratic leaders, they open up the circle, maybe they get voted out of office, the worst-case scenario. It's not great, but they're not probably not going to be killed. And the regime is not going to suffer, it's not going to be overthrown.

[00:34:48] The autocratic regimes we've got, we've had a tremendous explosion of study of them in IR. And we know that they can generate constraints, and there's real politics in countries like Iran, but there are limits to what they can do in terms of [00:35:00] domestic politics and opening up the circle, and that moment where the [00:35:03] the protest shifted so quickly from being anti-American to being anti regime just highlights how what those risks really are.

Morgan: [00:35:10] So what are the big signposts that everyone should be looking for a potential, hypothetical change in the current state of affairs, both within the United States, in Europe, or in Iran or in the region [00:35:21] more generally? What are some signs that we may see some change? Otherwise, can we can anticipate more of the same?

Suzanne: [00:35:28] Yeah, I think that the incentives, unfortunately, on both sides will continue to drive new rounds of escalation, possibly with at least some degree of deescalate literary pressures from some of the regional states, which have suddenly realized that perhaps they don't have quite as much invested in seeing a full-fledged shooting war between the United States and Iran.

[00:35:49] From the Trump administration's perspective, the strike on Soleimani was a big political when they took out a bad guy. There was some retaliation, but it didn't really have any blowback in the sense of economic [00:36:00] consequences to oil markets or the global economy, and that it didn't produce any fatalities, [00:36:05] though we now know that there were a significant number, I think the number's crept up into the 60s now, of Americans who were wounded enough to require medical attention outside of Iraq as a result of Iran's ballistic missile strike against Iraqi bases where U.S. troops are housed. From

the Iranian side, [00:36:24] I think there's also both domestic political incentives and incentives around the nuclear deal and the economic situation that will drive further retaliation. They have a strategic doctrine, which essentially has always been conditioned on the idea that the best defense is a good offense. They will want to drive home the message to President Trump in a personal way, if possible, as they have in prior cases, that they don't simply take an attack on one of the most important figures in the regime without pushing back in a really strenuous way.

[00:36:56] They will want to continue to try to galvanize [00:37:00] international diplomacy to try to end the economic siege that they're facing today. And so this is what I think is the biggest area of concern, that if Trump sees a political win in punching Iran, and Iranians have political drivers to punch the United States, that one side or both, they're going to bring us back to that point of that very scary night.

Elizabeth: [00:37:20] I think from the U.S. side, a very interesting question is what the incentives and preferences of the Democratic candidates would be. And if a hypothetical Democrat were to win the 2020 election, what would that change? And I think the experience of President Obama is going to be very instructive to any Democrat who might win.

[00:37:37] One could imagine that a way out of this would just to be, to have a new president who could start fresh and have a diplomatic blank slate, but if it's a Democrat, they're going to come back to this age old question of whether it pays politically to make these kinds of deals. And I think that the debate that happened right after the killing of Soleimani and the response by the Iranians, there was a debate in Iowa, and you heard a lot of the same kind of pretty similar, you know, it was a good [00:38:00] thing to take out Soleimani, good that he's dead, [00:38:02] not great the way it happened, it was too rushed, but it's all process-based kinds of critiques, which don't really get that much traction. And I think it shows that the Democrats are still have these incentives to try to look tough. And the political blow back on President Obama for making the JCPOA is going to really be a problem.

[00:38:18] And it might mean that a Democratic win in 2020 won't actually change as much as one might think.

Morgan: [00:38:23] Suzanne, we have a tradition on the show, which is when we bring a guest on the show, we like to conclude by asking them if they have any advice to give to junior scholars, junior policy analysts, practitioners based on your experience.

Suzanne: [00:38:38] It's a great question. And uh, you know, the pipeline is so important. You know, for me, what was most useful at the earliest stages of my career where I was trying to find an issue that I thought had some growth potential. I started my dissertation work on Iran. I wrote a proposal in 1996 and presumed I wouldn't be able to travel to Iran. [00:38:58] And in fact, less than two years [00:39:00] later, I was on a plane as part of the first post-revolutionary academic exchange between the two countries facilitated by both governments. It came as a surprise, and I think being able to both look for something that

had perhaps been understudied, but also then take advantage of change when it happens, was the most useful thing in my career.

[00:39:20] For others, I would say reach out, find mentors, find good academics who are willing to work with you are willing to support out of the box thinking they're out there. You just have to look.

Morgan: [00:39:32] Fantastic. Well, thank you so much, Suzanne. Thank you, Elizabeth, and thank you, of course, of the Brookings Institution for hosting our podcast in person today.

Julie Balise: [00:39:46] “Off the Page” is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at the Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. [00:40:00] The associate producer and technical director is Benn Craig. Digital communications by me, Julie Balise. [00:40:05] Thanks to our intern, Kendrick Foster, for additional assistance. And special thanks to Hilan Kaplan for composing our theme music. Upcoming episodes and additional material for “Off the Page” can be found online at belfercenter.org/offthepage/. All articles from the journal can be read at mitpressjournals.org/is/.