

Demetri Kofinas: What's up, everybody? Welcome to this week's episode of Hidden Forces with me, Demetri Kofinas. My guest for this episode is Hooman Majd, an Iranian-American writer and NBC News contributor who has written for publications including the New York Times, The Guardian, the New Yorker, Vanity Fair, The Financial Times, GQ, Time, The Washington Post, and [00:00:30] Newsweek among many others. He is the author of the New York Times bestseller *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, as well as *The Ayatollah's Democracy* and *The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay*.

He joins us today to talk about Iran, its culture, and its politics amid the ongoing protests which have delivered the worst scenes of unrest witnessed since millions took to the streets over a disputed presidential election in 2009. What do they express about the current state of Iranian society, its economy, [00:01:00] and its politics? How do they fit within the western oriented framework of thinking about Iran? How much of what Iran is experiencing today, economically and politically, is a reflection of forces that are shaping not only this country but the broader, oil reliant, historically contested, and politically volatile region that westerners conceptualize as the Middle East?

Hooman, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Hooman Majd: Thank you very much.

Demetri Kofinas: It's great to have you here.

Hooman Majd: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Demetri Kofinas: Are you a resident [00:01:30] of New York City?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: You've been here for a long time?

Hooman Majd: I'm trying to figure out how long. Yeah, decades.

Demetri Kofinas: You were born in Iran, right?

Hooman Majd: I was born in Iran, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: All right. We're going to get into that, because your background's really fascinating actually. It's much more colorful and I'd say romantic than most of my guests.

Hooman Majd: Really?

Demetri Kofinas: Well, you're from an area of the world that has a certain fascination, certainly historically for Americans, and that Americans have fetishized in a way.

Hooman Majd: Sure, the Middle East, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah, absolutely. Why don't we start a little bit with a context for our conversation? [00:02:00] There are these protests that have sort of, I don't want to say erupted. I don't want to use dramatic language, but there's some unrest in Iran that has grown up in the last few days with these protests that are happening in the country. Kind of give our audience a background for anyone that hasn't been following or that has and is a little confused.

Hooman Majd: Sure, sure. I mean I think erupted is actually not overly dramatic. There have been protests that have erupted. The size of the protest is nowhere as big as we've seen in the past, such as in 2009 in the aftermath of the presidential election [00:02:30] when President Ahmadinejad won reelection, and most people, at least in the big cities, a large number of Iranians didn't believe the results, and they came out and protested. That time they were protesting, it was largely middle class to upper middle class protest against the vote result. That's what they were protesting then.

Today, what's erupted is a protest against, what started as a protest against the economic malaise that exists in Iran, and it is a malaise. It's [00:03:00] taken now President Rouhani over five years, or five years, almost five years to try to sort out the economy in the face of debilitating sanctions, mostly imposed by the United States but also by western Europe and other countries prior to the nuclear deal that was signed or agreed to in 2015. The recovery from that deal has been okay. The recovery from those sanctions I mean. The aftermath of that deal has been okay [00:03:30] for the government of Iran, but hasn't trickled down, is not okay for the people, the average person I should say. Oil exports are up. Income is up for the Iranian government. Foreign exchange is up for them. As President Trump points out, we gave them a lot of money. He doesn't point out it was their money to begin with that we just released out of being frozen. They got 1.7 billion dollars on the day that the deal went into effect in 2016.

The people of Iran, the average person, [00:04:00] felt that they should be seeing the benefits of this deal. Perhaps the president and his administration had over promised that if we do this nuclear deal it's going to be great. The economy's going to move ahead. We've got to get out from under these sanctions.

Demetri Kofinas: Do you think that was the case?

Hooman Majd: I think it was over promised, sure. I think it was based on believing that the United States was going to be a little bit easier in terms of looser on the sanctions I should say. What happened under Obama was that sanction were lifted, and John Kerry actually, the Secretary of State, went around [00:04:30] the world telling banks they should be okay investing in Iran and so on and so forth. Then of course, two years later, or a year later, we had the presidential election here and Trump was talking about tearing up the deal. People are very nervous about Iran, so the investments that were supposed to happen, or at least in the minds of the Iranian administration were supposed to happen, haven't happened.

Demetri Kofinas: Were the sanctions not lifted until 2015?

Hooman Majd: Sanctions were not lifted until 2016.

Demetri Kofinas: 16.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Okay, just basically barely.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, but a little-

Demetri Kofinas: [00:05:00] Before the election.

Hooman Majd: Yes, exactly. During the election, we're talking about, "Oh, we're going to tear up the deal. It's the worst deal ever." A lot of American businesses were nervous. I mean as an example I'll give you, Boeing made a deal with Iran to sell them 80 airplanes, jets, and not a single one has been delivered. I don't think they've even gone into production, because even though Boeing wants to sell-

Demetri Kofinas: Commercial airliners?

Hooman Majd: Commercial airlines. Even though I think Boeing wants to sell the jets and I think that they have the waivers for a certain number of jets, [00:05:30] because everything has to be waived by the US administration, any kind of transaction, I think there's a certain nervousness in actually putting deals into place. What's happened is that there's a huge problem with unemployment, especially youth unemployment.

Demetri Kofinas: I've heard that it's as high as 40%.

Hooman Majd: It's as high-

Demetri Kofinas: Like 50% of the country is under 30. Is that right?

Hooman Majd: More than 50%. 60%.

Demetri Kofinas: More than 50. 60%.

Hooman Majd: Some people think 70% is under 30, but it's a huge youth population.

Demetri Kofinas: Wow. That reflects the demographics of the Iran-Iraq War.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, [00:06:00] partly that. I think it's also during at the time of the revolution, the mullahs said go forth and multiply.

Demetri Kofinas: Right, right, right. That's actually the much bigger, yeah.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. People did go forth and multiply over the years. There's this huge youth population. The official government numbers on unemployment are about 12%, 13%, but most people think that doesn't take into consideration the youth, and that could be as high as 40%. Then there's underemployment.

Demetri Kofinas: Okay. You're saying 60% is total unemployment, [00:06:30] youth unemployment is up to as high as 40%?

Hooman Majd: Youth unemployment potentially as high, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Potentially as high as 40%.

Hooman Majd: Then that doesn't even count underemployment. There are people, and I've witnessed it myself, there are people with PhDs driving cabs in Iran part-time, not even full-time. That's an underemployment problem. People expect more. What's happened in recent weeks is a budget that the government had to put forth was leaked. The details of that budget was leaked. [00:07:00] By whom, we don't know exactly, but it was leaked. In that budget, there was a large allocation for religious foundations and a cutback in social services. There's a lot of anger among people who are poor, who don't see a future for themselves, don't see any benefit for the nuclear deal, and they came out and protested the economic situation. It turned into something bigger than that, as demonstrations tend to in places like Iran where there's anger over other issues, not just economic [00:07:30] issues, freedoms, certain freedoms, human rights, et cetera, et cetera.

Demetri Kofinas: How important is that? I mean you're saying that the economic situation is driving this but that there are other issues that are exacerbated.

Hooman Majd: There are always going to be issues, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: How important are those relative to the economic issue?

Hooman Majd: They're important. It's hard to say. It's hard to say. I think economics is always going to be number one.

Demetri Kofinas: Has inflation come down in Iran in the last year years?

Hooman Majd: Yes, it has.

Demetri Kofinas: It has. Substantially?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, substantially.

Demetri Kofinas: They had major issues with inflation.

Hooman Majd: Yes, they did.

Demetri Kofinas: Because of the sanctions, correct, largely because?

Hooman Majd: Partly because of that, mismanagement of the economy. Yeah, inflation's [00:08:00] always been a big problem, but it has come down. Rouhani has been able to bring down the inflation rate, but it's still high. By US or western standards, the inflation rate is high. There's been some spikes. For example, there was an avian flu issue in Iran and they had to cull the chicken population in Iran, so the price of eggs went up by 50%. Now, that may sound like not very much, but for a family living barely on the border of a poverty line the price of eggs going up-

Demetri Kofinas: You have another great story in your book, which I should tell our audience [00:08:30] you have three books, which I mentioned. I booked you over the weekend. You were very kind to come on such short notice. I had a chance to read your most recent. Not your most recent book, your book from 2009, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*. I really loved it. There's this one scene that you talk about tomatoes, the price of tomatoes and Ahmadinejad telling people that ... This was when, 2009?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, 2008 maybe.

Demetri Kofinas: 2008. Ahmadinejad, who was president at the time, his presidency ended in 2013, right?

Hooman Majd: Yes, exactly.

Demetri Kofinas: He suggested that people shop at his corner bodega [00:09:00] where the price of tomatoes was lower than other places.

Hooman Majd: Where the upper class were shopping, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Which also speaks to this other thing, which are there are huge class differences in Iran.

Hooman Majd: Yes, which the revolution was supposed to do away with. You know, I'll give you an example. At the time of the revolution, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, people who owned Mercedes Benz or BMW cars in Tehran hid them, because they didn't want them to be either vandalized, stolen, or they didn't want to be beaten up for owning them.

Demetri Kofinas: They were also associated with the Shah.

Hooman Majd: They were associated with being wealthy, and if you were wealthy you must have been corrupt. [00:09:30] If you're corrupt, then you're associated with the Shah family.

Demetri Kofinas: And the Americans.

Hooman Majd: Exactly. Many years after the revolution, even the wealthy kept their wealth quite hidden, didn't show it off in any way. Today, you see young kids driving Maserati's on the streets of Tehran.

Demetri Kofinas: Really?

Hooman Majd: Porsches, Maseratis. I've seen myself a Bugatti Veyron, which is a 1.2 million dollar car, on the streets of Tehran. I have never seen one in New York City.

Demetri Kofinas: I actually haven't either.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. I think you can spot them occasionally in Beverly Hills, but I've never seen one in New York City, and I've seen [00:10:00] one in Tehran. I haven't been to Tehran in four years. I'm talking about five years ago I saw one in Tehran.

Demetri Kofinas: Wow. Lots, is that the name of the mafioso characteristic?

Hooman Majd: Kind of, yeah, the wannabe mafiosos. Yeah, Lot. Lot, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Is that associated with the Lot thing in the book?

Hooman Majd: What, the rich people? No, not really.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, okay. No, I meant like a Bugatti. I mean the audacity to drive a car like that.

Hooman Majd: The audacity, sure.

Demetri Kofinas: do you need to exhibit some-

Hooman Majd: You need to have some, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Okay.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Anyway, that discrepancy in income, and especially in the aftermath [00:10:30] of the nuclear deal where there was supposed to be this trickle down, is very glaring. Now, some people argue, again it can't be proven, that the demonstrations on the economy were not started spontaneously by people but they were started by the hard line opponents of President Rouhani to bring him down, to say that you haven't delivered as president, and then they got out of hand.

Demetri Kofinas: Didn't they start in the rural areas of the country?

Hooman Majd: Well, they started in a big city actually, the second largest city, but in one of the most religious, in fact the most [00:11:00] religious city other than Qom, which is where all the clerics go to study. Mashhad is a pilgrimage site for Shiites, and it started in

that city. It's actually the only city that Rouhani lost in the last election. But it started in a big city in a very small number of people. That's why many people believe, including the New York Times correspondent in Tehran, various people believe and have been able to verify to their own satisfaction that the protests were encouraged or started by hard line opponents [00:11:30] of Rouhani basically who are now kind of like preparing themselves for the next election to bring him down a few notches.

Demetri Kofinas: Rouhani is seen as much more progressive.

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: He is more progressive obviously than his predecessor, Ahmadinejad.

Hooman Majd: Much more so, yes. I mean he may not personally be very progressive, but he has taken a progressive stance.

Demetri Kofinas: When are the next elections in Iran?

Hooman Majd: 2017. We just had one seven months ago, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Presidential elections?

Hooman Majd: Yeah. It'll be 2021.

Demetri Kofinas: Okay, all right.

Hooman Majd: It's a ways away.

Demetri Kofinas: Because the mood, I was just going to say the mood could potentially [00:12:00] change or is changing as a result also. That's actually a good point. Americans tend to see the world through the eyes of America.

Hooman Majd: Sure.

Demetri Kofinas: I think perhaps overestimate the importance of their issues domestically when they look at other countries. I was going to say basically that the stance of the United States, the Trump administration, the Iran nuclear deal would have some meaningful effect on the politics in Iran. Am I overestimating the impact of the [00:12:30] United States on that?

Hooman Majd: I don't think you're overestimating it, no. I think that first of all, the nuclear deal, yes, that was going to have a huge ... I mean there's one reason why people voted for Rouhani in the first election in 2013 was because he basically promised, "I'm going to fix this. I'm going to fix these sanctions. I have to make a deal on the nuclear issues. We will make a deal," and he came through. Two years later, he came through with a deal,

or at least his administration came through with a deal, and it was wildly cheered by most of the population in Iran because burden was lifted. These sanctions [00:13:00] were lifted arguably, were supposed to be lifted, and they were to a large part lifted, at least nuclear related sanctions were lifted. There was supposed to be investment, and jobs, and stuff like that. Obviously not all of that has happened.

The nuclear deal was very important, and then what the US president does is very important. Yes, unfortunately for many people across the planet, what the US president does and says is going to affect their lives. It affects our lives here, but it also affects lives internationally because the US has the ability [00:13:30] to change people's lives, whether through war like in Iraq or-

Demetri Kofinas: Or through not going to war.

Hooman Majd: Or through not going to war, or through supporting certain groups like supporting the Saudis against Yemen, various issues. The US has the ability. Sanctions is another example, being able to sanction a country, and being able to basically block their exports, and block medicine and food from going into a country. Yeah, the US president has a tremendous amount of power. Because of the economic power that [00:14:00] the United States has, it can sometimes drag along other countries.

For example, during the sanctions regime against Iran, the US Treasury Department basically went and fined many of the big banks in the company, 8 billion dollars here, 10 billion dollars there for during business with Iran, and said, "You do business with Iran. You can't do business with us." If you're a bank, an international bank, do you want the American market or do you want the Iranian market? Which one do you want? Also, the dollar is kind of the world's currency. Everybody has to deal in the dollar.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:14:30] That's a huge thing.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: That's actually something that the Iranians, the Russians, and the Chinese are looking to change, which is the petrodollar regime that has required a country like Iran, which is out of favor with the United States for so many years, to be transacting in dollars.

Hooman Majd: Absolutely, absolutely. On the international level, what the United States does and says affects the rest of the world. What Iran does and says hardly affects you as an American citizen, me as an American citizen. Well, it affects me more because I'm Persian as well, but hardly affects the average [00:15:00] American. It's practically impossible for the Iranians to affect the daily life of an American citizen.

When you talk about terrorism, because that's what Trump talks about and banning Iranians from coming here, Iranians have not committed a single act of terrorism against Americans in America. The reverse is not true. Iranians consider that Americans have

committed acts of terrorism in Iran. When there's for example an assassination of a nuclear scientist, nobody in Iran, whether it's true or not, is going to believe [00:15:30] that it wasn't the Israelis with the green light from the United States.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, I mean on a cyber warfare episode we did on this show, we discussed the Stuxnet attack against the nuclear reactor in Najaf. Is that where it was?

Hooman Majd: Not Najaf. Najaf is in Iraq. In Natanz.

Demetri Kofinas: Natanz, yeah. All right, so of course the United States has basically taken the place, took the place after World War II of the British, gradually but then in totality, of the British and the French. That has been a contested region of the world for reasons of trade [00:16:00] and then later of oil and resources for a long time, and I want to get into that as part of a larger conversation about history. Before we do, I did say I wanted to acclimate our audience to you a bit. Why don't you also, and for my purposes as well, what is your background? I mean you've said in your book that you're 100% or your friends describe you as 100% Iranian and 100% American. I told you or I allude to before we began recording that I could relate to that as a Greek who-

Hooman Majd: Came to America, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Has spent so much time [00:16:30] in Greece but is also an American. Give us a little bit of your sort of background, and life, and history, and bio.

Hooman Majd: Well, I was born in Iran, but I left. My father was a diplomat under the Shah. We left when I was about eight months old, and I grew up abroad, mostly in the United States, because back then the Iranian diplomatic service wasn't very big. If somebody was fluent in a couple of western languages like English and French, which my father was, they tended to keep them abroad instead of bringing [00:17:00] them back home or sending them to places that didn't speak English and French. They used the ability of someone to speak French or English to send them to those places. We ended up my father constantly being basically between the US, England, and like North Africa, where they speak French.

Demetri Kofinas: But you grew up in the US during the 1960s here in New York?

Hooman Majd: Not in New York, no. San Francisco and then in London. Then I went to American schools in places like India.

Demetri Kofinas: Very cosmopolitan upbringing.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah. I had an American education, and then partly [00:17:30] at high school in England, and then back here for college. My father was posted to both San Francisco, where Iran had a consulate prior to the revolution, and to the embassy in Washington.

Demetri Kofinas: I don't know if Americans realize how many Iranians and also many of the sort of higher echelon part of society in these countries and other countries around the sort of post-colonial world are actually stationed abroad, live abroad, grow up and speak multiple languages. If you go to a place like a city like London, [00:18:00] especially London, you find so many people from different parts of the world that all speak English.

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: That grow up there, that identify with their home country and this kind of diasporic relationship that is not the classic immigrant.

Hooman Majd: Right, right. At the time of the Shah, there were far fewer immigrants from Iran. They were the Iranian elite. I don't want to necessarily say I was an elite, but I guess the Iranians would consider us, my family, the elite as my father was an ambassador [00:18:30] or whatever. I mean we weren't tremendously wealthy or anything like that. It was basically a question of the elite sending their kids abroad to be educated.

Demetri Kofinas: Right.

Hooman Majd: In my particular case, my family and myself and my siblings, we never got educated in Iran, as opposed to most people who like lived in Iran, and they were the elite, and their kids would be educated until they were ready to go to high school, and they'd then try to send them to boarding school in America or England.

Demetri Kofinas: Christiane Amanpour is also Iranian.

Hooman Majd: She's half Iranian, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Half Iranian, okay.

Hooman Majd: Her father's Iranian. Actually, she lived in Iran more than I ever [00:19:00] did. I think she left when she was about 11.

Demetri Kofinas: What does it mean to be Iranian?

Hooman Majd: Well, I think you can identify. Well, there's Iranian culture, which that's a whole other issue to talk about.

Demetri Kofinas: Right. It's fascinating to read your sort of explanation of it. What is the one word you have, taarof?

Hooman Majd: Taarof, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Taarof.

Hooman Majd: I mean there's a politeness, this social contract that you have, which is that you're always going to be [00:19:30] self-deprecating, you're always going to be extremely polite, with sometimes a sinister kind of aspect to it as well where everybody recognizes that you're not being completely sincere. It's this game of one-upmanship in that regard. Yeah, it's a complex form, and it exists in many societies, not just in Iran. The Chinese have it. The Japanese have it. The Iranians take it to an extreme though. They tend to. Even Japanese and other cultures have said, the ones who know the Iranian taarof, that it can go to an absolute extreme.

[00:20:00] What it means to be Iranian, I think I guess I'm first generation American. What it means to be Iranian is to have this sense of not belonging 100% in any place, in any one place. I feel like a New Yorker. I belong here. I feel American. If I'm in Iran, I feel Iranian at the time, but also there's always this nagging part of me that feels like I'm not 100%.

Demetri Kofinas: Right, right, right.

Hooman Majd: Even though my friends describe me as 100%, I'm not 100%. It's like there's some [00:20:30] piece of me that is not quite there. Whether it's Iranian, Iraqi, Greek, Italian, when you're first generation, you're always going to feel there's a piece of you left somewhere.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah.

Hooman Majd: In my particular case, having never lived in Iran, I'm not even sure where it was left. Probably somewhere in the air on a Pan Am flight.

Demetri Kofinas: Did you visit often as a child?

Hooman Majd: Not often.

Demetri Kofinas: Interesting.

Hooman Majd: Not often.

Demetri Kofinas: Interesting.

Hooman Majd: Sometimes summer vacations, yeah. I'm go to my grandfather's house summer vacations, but that was it. Very, very seldom.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:21:00] Let's talk a little bit, and we'll get more into these sort of issues of culture. I certainly hope that we'll have the time to do that. We're kind of touching on this. You mentioned Greece and Iraq. These countries have ancient origins.

Hooman Majd: Correct.

Demetri Kofinas: One of the things that you write about in one of your books is the insecurity that comes from having such a long history that involves greatness. The Persian Empire reached all the way to the Mediterranean at its height. There's this sort of how do you [00:21:30] maintain your past while at the same time moving forward. How has that influenced the development of Iran and how has that shaped its relationship to other countries including the United States?

I say that because I want to just pause at one example, which is I was listening to the foreign minister of Iran, Zarif, and he's not the only one that does this obviously. I see it everywhere, but there is this indignation in the way that Iran is referred to or spoken to. One example is speaking with Charlie Rose, [00:22:00] who is a friend of his, on an interview and Charlie said that quote, "Iran is behaving badly." He spent an unusual amount of time taking issue with the language there, which of course makes sense. I don't think Americans think about that. I don't think they recognize what it would sound like if another power in a position of dominance is able to or would say that Americans are behaving badly and they need to be sort of-

Hooman Majd: Scolded like a child.

Demetri Kofinas: Put in their box and scolded, yeah.

Hooman Majd: Scolded like a child, yeah. No, I think that's absolutely ... I mean, [00:22:30] yes, the problem with ancient cultures, and I think this is true of all ancient cultures, if they don't continue on a path of greatness and they're interrupted, their greatness is interrupted like Iran's is, like Greece is, there's always going to be this sense of just think what we had, you know? It's kind of like Marlon Brando, "I could have been a contender," you know? Iran's like, "I could have been a contender."

This sense of like almost inferiority/ [00:23:00] superiority complex, which I talk about in that first book of mine, that we were so great. Why doesn't everybody respect that? I think that sometimes stops you from progressing. If you look at a country like the United Kingdom or like France, their greatness started post the ancient cultures like Egypt, or Greece, or Rome, or Iran, but once it started, it kind of didn't stop.

Demetri Kofinas: They were also traditional nation states.

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: I mean they came out of the Westphalian Order. [00:23:30] Greece was an artificial construct, the modern state of Greece.

Hooman Majd: The modern state of Greece.

Demetri Kofinas: I don't know to what extent that's true for Iran.

Hooman Majd: Iran was a nation state, absolutely. Has been actually, if you look at the borders, not that different from what it was. I mean other than the statute.

Demetri Kofinas: It's not like the Arab countries.

Hooman Majd: No. The Arab countries are artificial constructs.

Demetri Kofinas: Artificially created.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Iraq for example, perfect example.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. That's completely artificial, yeah. In fact, even the leaders of those countries were. Like the leader of Jordan is a Saudi for example today, to this [00:24:00] day.

Demetri Kofinas: There are these regular talking points, and there are too many for me to write them down in preparation for this conversation, but they're coming to my mind as we speak. One of them is this reference to Iran's ambitions in the region, and that they have larger ambitions, and that the United States has to contain them, allies have to contain them. How accurate is that? Maybe that's another way of asking how much of Iran's nuclear program, its military, its foreign policy is driven by a sense of insecurity [00:24:30] as a result of the foreign policy of the great powers, and its history with Iraq, and the Saudi especially? I mean that's a really big thing.

Hooman Majd: Right.

Demetri Kofinas: How much of it is actually driven by their own ambition to have a larger place and a larger role?

Hooman Majd: I think it's both. I don't think they're separable. At first, at the time of the revolution, certainly what Ayatollah Khomeini, who is the founder of the Islamic Republic, said was that he wanted the revolution to spread throughout the Muslim world. That freaked [00:25:00] out obviously many of the Arab countries. Soon that became not really a factor for Iran, but within a year the Iraqis attacked Iran and every single countries in the world backed Iraq other than Syria. Syria was the only country that backed Iran in that war. The United States helped Saddam Hussein. The Saudis funded the war against Iran. They really wanted to destroy Iran if they could.

With that eight year war and that history and use of chemical weapons against Iran, the Iranian [00:25:30] system, the regime if you want to call it the regime, decided that they have to be strong, and they have to be self-sufficient. No one's going to help them. No one sold them any missiles. No one sold them any arms when arms were being sold to Saddam Hussein. They went to the UN begging for the UN to condemn Saddam Hussein for using chemical weapons on their people. The UN refused to do that. Actually, the US-

Demetri Kofinas: The US actually-

Hooman Majd: Vetoed it.

Demetri Kofinas: Vetoed it. Well, they didn't veto it. They didn't let it come to a vote.

Hooman Majd: Come to a vote, exactly. I mean that history [00:26:00] says, "Well, nobody likes us." To be fair to the west, I mean it's partly Iran's fault too. taking hostages at the American Embassy in 1979, that didn't exactly endear the Iranian system or this government to the rest of the world, and various other acts that Iran had done over the years. Shouting, "Death to America," stomping on American flags, and stuff like that doesn't make for friendly relations with the United States. There is some blame. You can't completely [00:26:30] absolve Iran of blame in terms of how the west has looked at Iran, at least the Iranian government.

In terms of their foreign policy, sure. I mean Iran has always, like every country in the world, wants to have influence with its neighbors. It can't live without having influence with its neighbors. Whether it's trade influence, it's not so much about having a muscular presence in my opinion. It's much more about having some soft power with these countries, and in some cases some hard power, [00:27:00] which they need to have because they border Iraq. They were close to ISIS coming across the border to Iran even potentially. Their foreign policy is very much a defensive foreign policy. If you look at their expenditure on arms, it's not even a tenth of what the Arab states-

Demetri Kofinas: The UAE.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: The UAE spends a tremendous amount of money.

Hooman Majd: Tremendous amount of money. To have influence, it's kind of weird that other countries talk about Iran, "Oh, they want to have influence in the region." When I say that, I mean weird that Saudi [00:27:30] Arabia or those. What, Saudi Arabia doesn't want to have influence? You know, Iraq doesn't want to have influence? The US doesn't want to? Do we not want to have influence in Southern America, which is our neighborhood, or Central America? Of course, we do.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, the Saudis seem uninhibited. I mean they have much less inhibition, at least in the way that I interpret their foreign policy. It's far less inhibited than the Iranian.

Hooman Majd: Well, today they just go to war if they don't like what you're doing.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, so their influence, I mean they're much more, I would say, open about their ambitions to [00:28:00] influence all the Sunni Arab states. Qatar is a perfect example. Qatar didn't do what they wanted them to do, so they instituted a blockade against the country. I mean it's astonishing how fast. Yemen, they started bombing right away. Bahrain, they sent their troops into. It's kind of ironic when people talk about Iran wanting to spread. This is not a defensive Iranian system.

Demetri Kofinas: Sure, sure.

Hooman Majd: Just saying we have to be fair I think and say, "Well, it makes [00:28:30] sense for them to want to have influence in the region."

Demetri Kofinas: Well, I do want to get into that and sort of the human rights in Iran, the rights of liberalism, everything else, but I do want to stick a little bit more on this. What you're getting there is this reference to survival, the fact that Iran has managed to survive. I think there's some pride there that obviously is not just in the political class but across the board. But something else came to me as you were talking. You were talking about the revolution of 79 and the taking of the hostages. You said Iran taking the hostages. It was sort [00:29:00] of a spontaneous thing that the hostages were taken, right? It wasn't directed, right?

Hooman Majd: No, it wasn't directed. The way it started was, yes.

Demetri Kofinas: That's I think an interesting thing. I mean the first thing that came to my mind was exactly that, that it was this spontaneous sort of thing, and that the revolution wasn't this highly coordinated event. It also speaks to the cohesion of the country. It made me think. You take that and you compare it to Iraq, some of these other countries that have been more artificially carved up. When you have instability and chaos, [00:29:30] it can quickly lead to anarchy and this sort of total civil war, but Iran doesn't have that. Iran was able to go through a revolution and actually turn it into a government, which I think speaks to the cohesion of the country. I do think that for Americans that's something that is generally not understood, really the distinction between Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

Hooman Majd: Right.

Demetri Kofinas: I mean I think that speaks to it. But in this sort of focus on the Iranian Revolution, what influence does the living memory of that have [00:30:00] for the people that experienced it? Then also for those that didn't experience it, symbolically what does that mean in Iranian society?

Hooman Majd: Well, I mean it's hard to say. For the people who experienced it, obviously it was the defining event of their life. They went from one extreme-

Demetri Kofinas: The defining event?

Hooman Majd: I would say for the people who experienced it as adults at least. For those who still believe in the revolution, it was certainly the defining event in a good way. For those who don't believe in the revolution anymore, and there are plenty of people who [00:30:30] I wouldn't say regret it necessarily but say, "Yeah, well, we were wrong. We were wrong to do the things we did."

Demetri Kofinas: What does that mean to believe in the revolution? What was the sort of core idea?

Hooman Majd: To believe in the fundamentals, the fundamentals of the revolution as they were articulated after the revolution was successful. Initially, prior to the revolution being successful, not everybody believed that the Ayatollahs would be the supreme leaders, would be the final say, would be the top officials of the country. They thought that, as [00:31:00] Khomeini had promised, some people claim that he would just lead the revolution and then go and retire to Qom, and just be a cleric, and kind of be this guide to help people. People didn't believe necessarily that they were going to be, in fact there weren't in the first few weeks of the revolution being successful, compulsory hijab rules for women to be covered, stuff like that.

There were a lot of people who joined the revolution as it were, came out in the streets and were supportive of getting rid of the Shah, which was the big impetus for the revolution. [00:31:30] Get rid of the Shah, the corrupt American, US puppet stealing the wealth of the nation, and just doing America's bidding, and so on, and having a secret police and no political freedoms.

Demetri Kofinas: They were very brutal from what I understand.

Hooman Majd: They were. From what most people understand, they were brutal, and probably no more brutal than many other secret polices, maybe perhaps even including the current-

Demetri Kofinas: In Iran.

Hooman Majd: In Iran.

Demetri Kofinas: Which is the revolutionary guard.

Hooman Majd: Well, they're not really a secret police in the same way, but there are intelligence [00:32:00] agencies that could be viewed as being brutal, sure, as I've seen from reports whenever there's protests and people are arrested.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, speaking of which, I didn't mention this, but we're recording this on a Wednesday. This is going to go out on a Monday five days from now. Currently, the estimates, there are roughly 22 dead from these protests.

Hooman Majd: Correct.

Demetri Kofinas: Are we talking people that have been killed-

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: From the government forces?

Hooman Majd: Not necessarily, no. There's actually lack a policeman, a revolution guardsman killed. I believe six of the people according to the reports of state TV [00:32:30] who were killed were attacking a police station trying to steal the guns, and they got into a fire fight. There's been some of that stuff too. Yeah, it's been a very violent set of protests.

Demetri Kofinas: There's heavy gun control in Iran. You can't have-

Hooman Majd: Yeah, it's almost impossible to own a gun. I think one policeman was shot with a hunting rifle in one of the villages or towns. Yeah, that includes all deaths. Very sad, very unfortunate. It's unfortunately violent. Now, by the time this podcast comes out or weeks [00:33:00] later, I mean who knows what's going to happen? There's already indications that some of the protesters are petering out and the Iranian government's sort of in control as it were of the situation. They staged some counter protests today.

Demetri Kofinas: I saw that.

Hooman Majd: In Iran.

Demetri Kofinas: In Tehran.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, in Tehran, a few thousand people loud. It'll be interesting to see on Friday, which is the day of Friday prayer. It's an Iranian holiday day, the equivalent of Sunday, when the government [00:33:30] can indeed get probably way more than a few thousand people out in the streets to demonstrate. There is still quite a bit of support in Iran for the system, the regime if you want to call it. Unrest like this is unlikely, as much as we would like to see it be, from the American perspective would like to see a democratic republic come out of this, it's unlikely to happen. Hopes shouldn't be too high that it's going to happen. The regime is both powerful and has support.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:34:00] Castro and the Cuban revolution has been on my mind as well when I was thinking about this story. That was in 1959. This was in 79. America has had a difficult time resolving its relationship in both cases, and I think that's more because of the transgressions, events that occurred after the revolution in both cases than actually the revolution itself. I was thinking just now about how when Castro would get interviewed about democracy [00:34:30] and he'd say, "We have a different kind of democracy," or a better kind of democracy. It was really him basically saying that it doesn't matter. The vote's not what's important. What's important is the quality of life and everything like that. Is democracy, and I should also ask what is sort of the conception of a democracy for an Iranian, is that the goal politically in Iran? Is that sort of the-

Hooman Majd: I think for a lot of people it is, certainly for the educated classes.

Demetri Kofinas: For the younger people?

Hooman Majd: The younger people I would say that, but democracy, as you just [00:35:00] pointed out, is defined in different ways by different people. The ancient Greeks thought democracy might be the rule of the mob, and not every Greek philosopher-

Demetri Kofinas: They had direct democracy and a hierarchal type of slaves.

Hooman Majd: Exactly, exactly. The democracy that is viewed as democracy in the west is probably not what many Iranians, many Iranians, I wouldn't say all Iranians but many Iranians would consider the kind of democracy they want. I think they want their culture [00:35:30] to be preserved within that democracy. Their culture also means taking into account, for many Iranians, I'm not saying all, but for many Iranians, particularly the more rural Iranians, taking into account Islam. A purely secular democracy is probably not something that many Iranians think of. Although, again in Tehran and places like that, I'm sure many would welcome a purely secular democracy.

One of the problems the Shah had and his father had was this notion [00:36:00] that there was a disrespect for Islam. Not just that it was a secular country, but it was actually disrespectful of Islam. For religious people, that became very easy for them to rise up against that concept of disrespect for their faith.

Demetri Kofinas: During the time of the Shah, you're saying that there was a wide sentiment that the Shah and the Shah's government was disrespecting the faith of Islam?

Hooman Majd: Exactly, by allowing people to behave, by allowing [00:36:30] women to wear miniskirts.

Demetri Kofinas: Things that we would consider normal here in other words.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. For rural people, that was ... A good example is I remember years ago in Iran a woman was being interviewed I think by the Financial Times of England. She said, "I owe my university education to the Islamic Revolution." The person said, "What do you mean you owe it to the Islamic Revolution?" She said, "Under the Shah, my father would have never allowed me to go to school, because he wouldn't want me to [00:37:00] share a dorm with boys. I wouldn't be able to be in a dorm with boys. The segregation, the fact that I have to wear a hijab was what convinced my father to let me go to school." Those attitudes also existed.

Demetri Kofinas: That's interesting.

Hooman Majd: Those attitudes also existed.

Demetri Kofinas: Interesting.

Hooman Majd: Those are now slowly kind of going away, because with modernity, and with people having more connection to the outside world, being more sophisticated, they're starting to see things that, well, it's not just the hijab. It's not [00:37:30] segregating the sexes. But at the time of the revolution, there were certainly many Iranians who felt like Islam was being disrespected if-

Demetri Kofinas: Very interesting.

Hooman Majd: Boys and girls could be like having sex for example openly. For many people, that was not acceptable. It was a very conservative country.

Demetri Kofinas: That's very interesting.

Hooman Majd: Not very conservative in Tehran, but outside of Tehran it was a very conservative country, and still is to a large degree quite conservative. People seem to forget that.

Demetri Kofinas: You're painting a picture of a society that [00:38:00] really was broadly religious. It wasn't something that was imposed. It really was something I mean.

Hooman Majd: No, at the time it was. I mean again, I should point out that during the revolution or in the aftermath of the revolution, certainly the educated elite who joined the revolution and thought they were going to have a secular republic believed that they were fooled, because that's not what they were bargaining for. But the country as a whole I think, yes, did kind of feel like this is correct. Also, I mean things were different at the time of the revolution. As I [00:38:30] said, the country outside of Tehran was much more conservative and people would accept the idea of Sharia law for example and stuff like that. Today, that's not the case. I think people have kind of like outgrown it a little bit, and that's one of the frustrations is that the system hasn't moved along as quickly as the population has.

Demetri Kofinas: I've heard you say this before I think, that a fair comparison, correct me if I'm wrong, it would be if in the United States the evangelical [00:39:00] community had elected their president, a president that represented their values, and that the laws were changed. What would be a good way for an American to conceptualize what life would be like under a Christian theocracy-

Hooman Majd: Theocracy.

Demetri Kofinas: That is equivalent?

Hooman Majd: Well, all you have to do is look at people like Roy Moore in Alabama. You have the 12 commandments, and you put that in your courtroom. You follow the 12 commandments. If it's adultery, you go to ... I mean those become laws.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:39:30] You would go to prison, yeah.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, I guess so.

Demetri Kofinas: In Iran, if you commit adultery-

Hooman Majd: Theoretically, but you don't.

Demetri Kofinas: Who is it? There's someone else that I have a quote here. I do this normally. Sanam Naraghi, how do you pronounce her name? Saman Naraghi-Anderlini. Anyways, she's an Iranian. "Iran is a system without a system within which a system operates."

Hooman Majd: Yeah. That's a good quote. That's a good quote, yeah. Theoretically, you're supposed to be lashed for drinking alcohol, but nobody gets lashed for drinking.

Demetri Kofinas: You lash yourself, [00:40:00] didn't you? Okay, so let's talk about that a little bit. What is the sort of the theoretically, and then what is in practice? What are the things that would shock an American about the difference in how the law operates in Iran and the culture, things that would meaningfully surprise someone? Let's say if they didn't have a bias one way of the other and they just went there.

Hooman Majd: What surprises Americans actually is how similar it is to America. That's what surprises people, that there aren't actually that many differences. If you talk to any-

Demetri Kofinas: I would expect that.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. If you talk to any journalist [00:40:30] or you talk to any visitor who's gone, Americans are always like shocked if you read their accounts, whether they're doing a blog or something.

Demetri Kofinas: Americans are always shocked when they go.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, but they're like, "Oh, the people don't hate America. It's easy." I mean yeah, there's some inconveniences, like liquor is banned. Everybody drinks. Not everybody, but a lot of people drink in Iran privately in their homes. If you're a tourist, that's not an option. If you're a tourist and you're going there for two weeks or 10 days to see the sites or see Iran, you're not going to drink for 10 days. [00:41:00] For a lot of people, that's an issue, who want a beer at the end of the day or a glass of wine with their dinner. The fact that women have to be covered.

Demetri Kofinas: Right.

Hooman Majd: Not quite with burkas the way that some people imagine.

Demetri Kofinas: Didn't they rescind something recently?

Hooman Majd: They said they're not going to arrest people anymore for it.

Demetri Kofinas: They're not going to arrest people for it.

Hooman Majd: But the law is still that you have to have your head covered if you're a woman. Now, they don't define what that means, one inch of your hair to be showing, five inches of your hair to be showing. There's no definition of it, but you do have to have a headscarf. You do have to have what they call a hijab.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:41:30] I think in Vermont there's actually a law that says you can't kiss your wife on Tuesdays or something.

Hooman Majd: I wouldn't be surprised.

Demetri Kofinas: There are lots of crazy laws that no one-

Hooman Majd: Yeah. There used to be a law in Virginia. I remember when I went to college in DC in the 70s, I think the law was still on the books that oral sex was illegal. It was illegal, even between consenting ... I mean it's like what does that mean it's illegal? Who's going to ...?

Demetri Kofinas: Well, I mean there were sodomy laws in Texas up until-

Hooman Majd: Sure.

Demetri Kofinas: Maybe there still are actually. There probably still are.

Hooman Majd: I wouldn't be surprised if there still are.

Demetri Kofinas: Not too many years ago, like 10 years ago, they arrested someone for that.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. If you don't like your neighbor and you know [00:42:00] that he's committing sodomy, just call the cops.

Demetri Kofinas: If you're gay in Iran-

Hooman Majd: That's illegal.

Demetri Kofinas: That's illegal.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: What does that mean? Because I remember there was an interview that Ahmadinejad did where he said there were no gay people.

Hooman Majd: There are no gays, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: There are no gays in Iran. How does that work? Let's say you are gay in Iran. How does that work? Do you have to leave the country essentially or you have to-

Hooman Majd: No, you don't. I mean there are plenty of gays in Iran, and they have a gay lifestyle, and there's gay places they gather, and all that, but they're just not very public.

Demetri Kofinas: It's like the US in the 70s, or is it worse than that?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, maybe US in the 50s.

Demetri Kofinas: 50s.

Hooman Majd: Maybe, yeah. [00:42:30] You kept it quiet. You don't tell people at work. You have a group of friends and probably family. You just live your life as a gay person, but not openly. You're in the closet as it were, except within the community where people know who's gay. I mean yeah, for some people it's intolerable to do that, and they leave, and they get political asylum, or they just leave and find another country to live in. For the others who continue to live there, I mean the truth of the matter is that there are humans who are going to be gay always, under [00:43:00] any regime, under any system. Some of them will be forced to be in the closet as they have been over the centuries in the west too. In the east, it's coming around a little bit, but still. I mean Lebanon for example has a little bit more open gay culture, but Saudi Arabia, not there either. You'd be executed there if you were.

Demetri Kofinas: It's also interesting. Yeah, Saudi Arabia's another animal entirely. You know this, but Lebanon used to be a very liberal place.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: There used [00:43:30] to be, I forget to was saying this, that there used to be condoms available for sale anywhere before the invasion by Israel, right?

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: Which brings up Israel actually, which is great, because Israel looks large as a sort of source of ... I don't know how I would describe it. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, obviously something that has been very important for Iran, especially because it is both a nation and a movement, right?

Hooman Majd: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Demetri Kofinas: What has been the impact of the recent recognition of Jerusalem in Iran? Has that played [00:44:00] any role?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, Iran then turned around and recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

Demetri Kofinas: Did they?

Hooman Majd: Yeah, which is, I mean, silly. Either way it's silly. Both of them, I mean it's a big factor in the Middle East. I mean the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a huge factor, and it goes beyond just religion I think. I think it's also the idea of the underdog, David and Goliath, and for the first time the Jews are the Goliath in this case. [00:44:30] There's an antisemitic element of course. There always has been an antisemitic element with anything to do with a Jewish population anywhere in the world. I don't deny that there's an antisemitic element to it, but I think it goes much beyond that in terms of seeing a people who despite certain ... I would say right wing Israelis claim there is no such thing as a Palestinian people. They're just a bunch of Arabs who happen to be here. We were here too, but we go back 2,000 years. They only go back who knows.

Demetri Kofinas: Is that the position of [00:45:00] Netanyahu?

Hooman Majd: No, Netanyahu doesn't say that, but other right wing.

Demetri Kofinas: He's pretty right wing though.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, but other people have said that there's no such thing. Our own ambassador, US ambassador to Israel I think, Trump's ambassador to Israel has said that in the past. There are certainly people who have said that. Some people have said the Palestinians are Jordan. That's what Palestine is. You want to call it Palestine, call it Palestine, but that's the country that they should live in. In fact, Jordanians mostly are, I think something like 40% of Jordanians are actually Palestinian. The fact of the matter [00:45:30] is there is a lot of land in that region that for maybe not millennia but certainly for centuries was owned by native Palestinians.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, that land-

Hooman Majd: Was taken. It was taken.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah, I don't know. I mean most Americans don't know the history. It would be impossible to go through it there. When Israel was created formally in 45, 47. 47, right?

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Or 48? When was it?

Hooman Majd: It was 1948.

Demetri Kofinas: 46?

Hooman Majd: 48, 48.

Demetri Kofinas: It was a British colony. The area was a British colony.

Hooman Majd: Palestine it was called.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah, Palestine, [00:46:00] exactly.

Hooman Majd: The British Mandate of Palestine.

Demetri Kofinas: Right. It's a very complicated story.

Hooman Majd: Now, there were Jews living there well before Israel.

Demetri Kofinas: Sure.

Hooman Majd: Going back centuries.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, it was Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Hooman Majd: Correct.

Demetri Kofinas: It was a very mixed place.

Hooman Majd: Correct, but it was a colony. It was not a country. There was a dream of Zionism, which goes back to the 19th century, but the Zionism of the early days of Israel was not really very much faith based. It was much more European, secular kind of [00:46:30] Judaism rather than the faith based, which has become much more religious in recent years because of the demographics in Israel. The sympathy that the populations have for the Palestinians is only partly religious. It's largely I think to do with sympathy for the underdog. These people, the images that we see in the west, there's more of a sympathy for the Israeli equation, that they're under terrorist attack.

Demetri Kofinas: In America.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: I think in Europe there [00:47:00] is a similar sympathy that you describe in terms of the underdog.

Hooman Majd: Yes, there is in Europe a much more, but in America we see images of terrorists, we see a bus being blown up, Israeli kids being killed, and stuff like that, so that's the image we have.

Demetri Kofinas: Does that upset you, the mental framing?

Hooman Majd: I think anytime anything's not 100% fair upsets me. I think that there should be fairness on both sides. I think if you're completely on the Palestinian side, that's also not fair. I mean Israel has not been the villain that some of the Arab countries make them out to be all the time. They have committed villainous [00:47:30] acts, absolutely, but so have Palestinians. I don't approve of blowing up a bus full of school children in them, so I can't say that I'm with the Palestinian terrorists for example.

Demetri Kofinas: I just mean-

Hooman Majd: Am I with the Palestinian cause for them to have a homeland, for a two state solution? Yeah. Of course, I am. I think many other people in the region would be too, but it would have to be a fair two state solution, not an unfair two state solution. I think what President Trump's doing is saying, "I want to create this [00:48:00] two state solution. I want to give the Palestinians a homeland, but they're not going to have Jerusalem." Well, that doesn't work.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah.

Hooman Majd: You can't give Jerusalem ahead of time to the Israelis, which is probably the single most important issue for Palestinians, at least for East Jerusalem to be there, their capital. To take that away from them just like that in a tweet basically as a foreign policy, it's kind of unfair. Going back to your question, has that resonated in Iran? Of course, it has. It's like [00:48:30] America's taking the side of Goliath again rather than taking the side of David. America always used to be on the side of the underdog.

Demetri Kofinas: Right. Well, until it inherited the-

Hooman Majd: The empire.

Demetri Kofinas: The empire.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: The king is in a castle.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, but it was on the side of the underdog. Yeah. Throughout the Middle East I think, and as you pointed out, I think in Europe there's a sense. I think this is not good for Israel that they are the guilty party in not [00:49:00] coming to a peace agreement.

Demetri Kofinas: Have you seen The Man in the High Castle or read the book?

Hooman Majd: Yes, yes.

Demetri Kofinas: Have you seen the-

Hooman Majd: I read the book.

Demetri Kofinas: You've seen both seasons?

Hooman Majd: I have not seen both seasons. I've seen 1 1/2 seasons.

Demetri Kofinas: How do you like it so far?

Hooman Majd: I like it a lot, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: I loved it. I watched it actually over break. I mentioned it because it was in my mind as well when I was preparing for this conversation. I think it's actually amazing in so many ways. I really think I enjoyed it more than most people, but I think it's also instructive and useful because it helps Americans to [00:49:30] think about what it would be like if they were on the other end.

Hooman Majd: Right.

Demetri Kofinas: Because for those who haven't seen the show, America, it's fictional. It takes place in 1962 in an alternative sort of dimensional world where America lost the war and the Nazis-

Hooman Majd: Lost World War II, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: The Nazis have taken over-

Hooman Majd: Half of the United States.

Demetri Kofinas: More than half, and then a smaller amount of the west coast is the Japanese. There are all these other interesting aspects to it as well. Before we end, I want to ask you a little bit about [00:50:00] what you sort of see going forward for the Middle East, and for Iran, and its role in how it's all going to shape, because there are some really dominant trends, some dominant forces in the Middle East. One of them is oil, and it's a diminishing resource. There is a move by countries, China, United States, how big and influential that move will be I don't know, to move away from oil. Certainly shale has affected. The shale boom in the United States has changed the price dynamic, and that has had a huge impact on Saudi Arabia especially. [00:50:30] It's become more politically fructuous, certainly after the invasion of Iraq. There's ISIS and this terror network. There is Saudi Arabia. There is Iran. There is Syria, which is a huge thing we haven't even discussed here. There is sort of the open wound of Palestine-Israel, which seems like small potatoes now compared to the rest of this stuff.

Hooman Majd: All the other things, yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: This has to be obviously personally resonant with you. How do you see sort of the future for this part of the world, [00:51:00] the next five, 10 years?

Hooman Majd: I'm not very optimistic unfortunately. I don't think things look particularly good. I mean you can start with terror. I think ISIS has been defeated territorially, but hasn't been defeated in terms of their ability to commit terrorist acts or to influence lone wolf attacks. There's always going to be people now. I mean nowadays you don't need a bomb. You just need a truck to commit an act of terror. Terror coming out of this ideology of ISIS, Al Qaeda [00:51:30] ideology that the west is evil and that all our problems are because of the west is I think a big problem. I think it's partly because the states in those countries has failed its population, whether it's Egypt, or Saudi Arabia, or the UAE even. Many of these countries, the people of those countries feel like their states, which is almost all cases with the exception of Iran and a couple of other places, supporting by the United States and by the west [00:52:00] has failed the people, the population. There is this condition that is continuing to exist for terrorists to be recruited and/or just show up on our shores and the west, in particular Europe but also in the United States. That's troubling, and that is partly ... I mean nobody wants to hear this, or very few people want to hear this, but it is partly because of our policies, the US policies.

Demetri Kofinas: Of course, it is, but it's not something that people-

Hooman Majd: People don't want to hear that.

Demetri Kofinas: You can't really say that in the United [00:52:30] States. You certainly couldn't say it after 9-11.

Hooman Majd: After 9-11, you couldn't say it.

Demetri Kofinas: It was impossible.

Hooman Majd: Well, Bill Maher said it or a few other people said it.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, Bill Maher lost his show.

Hooman Majd: Other people said it and they lost their jobs.

Demetri Kofinas: Politically Incorrect.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Sorry to interject here, and I'll let you continue. I remember, and I've tried to find the name of this person, maybe you can help me, in preparing for other shows and trying to put together reels of things. There was this Palestinian. I don't know if he was ... He couldn't have been the foreign minister. He just have been of the PLO or whatever. He must have been some type of foreign representative. Fox News in particular, but also MSNBC, [00:53:00] they paraded him around after 9-11, and he was really inarticulate and the worst spokesman I've ever seen for any people or country. He was basically just brought up and sort of furthered this narrative.

I remember the images. That was also the second intifada or the whatever it was where there were all these Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israel. It was impossible to see anything other than one particular narrative. The idea that we should hold ourselves accountable for the things that we do to project our power explains, [00:53:30] brings it back to my point about The Man in the High Castle. But I interrupted you.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. No, no. When I say I'm not optimistic, I mean we've got that factor. I'm not optimistic that the Trump administration in the next three years will do the right thing necessarily when it comes to the Middle East.

Demetri Kofinas: But would the Clinton administration have done anything else do you think?

Hooman Majd: I'm not sure, no. I don't think they would either. I think I'm not optimistic the US is going to do anything that's going to help the situation.

Demetri Kofinas: Obama did some stuff on the margin. I mean that was-

Hooman Majd: Yes. He made a nuclear deal [00:54:00] for example, which was-

Demetri Kofinas: The nuclear deal.

Hooman Majd: Which was great, and people are now criticizing it. Yeah. I mean that brought down, ratcheted down the tension in the Middle East. The idea that Israel was going to attack Iran or even the US was going to attack Iran, that there would be another war in the Middle East, that was gone once the nuclear deal was agreed to. Yes, Obama did do certain things. Obama wasn't as keen on Saudi Arabia bombing Yemen, but he went along with it.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, the relationship between the Americans and the Saudis soured significantly under Obama.

Hooman Majd: [00:54:30] Yes, but the way that the Trump administration's going about it, I think we're seeing him being very close to Saudi, very close to-

Demetri Kofinas: Israel.

Hooman Majd: The Emirates, those three.

Demetri Kofinas: The Emirates.

Hooman Majd: Those three countries, and that's potentially a problem, and very against Iran. We have this issue of the Iran nuclear deal, which is very open to whether it's going to last, the nuclear deal, because if the US does pull out of it, either by officially pulling out of it or just by [00:55:00] violating the deal to the point where the US is no longer a party to the deal just because they violated it, all of these just create tension. I

think for the next couple of years I'm not particularly optimistic that things are going to be very, very pleasant in the Middle East.

Then this Jerusalem issues, and the Palestinians refusing to now talk, and then Trump threatening to withdraw funding for the Palestinian refugees, which could be a humanitarian disaster for Palestinians. I mean it's just one thing after another.

Demetri Kofinas: [00:55:30] We didn't talk about the nuclear deal really at all. Do you think that ... In my mind, there's a possibility that the deal could survive even if the Americans pull out of it-

Hooman Majd: Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: Because the Europeans, as you mentioned, I mean sanctions ultimately have to do with the enforcement of sanctions.

Hooman Majd: Yes, correct.

Demetri Kofinas: American diplomatic soft power has been waning, has taken a hit particularly under the Trump administration, and I think also aspects of Obama as well, certainly in the way that the administration is blamed for the red line in Syria [00:56:00] and the challenges there.

Hooman Majd: Right.

Demetri Kofinas: Do you look back at the Axis of Evil speech by the Bush administration in 2002, it was a State of the Union I believe it was, and say that that was a missed opportunity, that that was something that distorted the priorities of American foreign policy? Because Iran was put in the same group as Iraq and North Korea.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Now, we see what North Korea has wrought, our relationship there, right? I mean that has become the dominant foreign policy concern. They are an inch away from being able to hit New [00:56:30] York with an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Hooman Majd: Right, sure.

Demetri Kofinas: I don't know how many tests away, but they've surprised us in their development.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: Iraq didn't have a chance really to prove one way or the other. We invaded Iraq, and the result has been ISIS and the instability there. But Iran, I mean if you compare Iran to any of those other countries in that bucket-

Hooman Majd: It made no sense.

Demetri Kofinas: Right.

Hooman Majd: It made no sense. It was almost like it was revenge for the taking of the American hostages in 1979 and also revenge for what [00:57:00] was believed to be Iranian complicity in the bombing of the barracks, marine barracks in Lebanon by Hezbollah in 198-

Demetri Kofinas: 6.

Hooman Majd: Was it 86? Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: I think it was.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, under Ronald Reagan.

Demetri Kofinas: Or 82. I'm sorry, 86, 82.

Hooman Majd: I can't remember.

Demetri Kofinas: Anyway.

Hooman Majd: But anyway, under Ronald Reagan where Reagan actually withdrew our troops from Lebanon.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah, 86 was Iran-Contra. I think 82 was the bombing of the barracks.

Hooman Majd: Anyway, my point is that the neocons who came into office with George Bush Junior, George W, had this hard-on [00:57:30] for Iran. I mean there was a famous quote.

Demetri Kofinas: They had a hard-on for a lot of conflict, for Iraq, for Iran-

Hooman Majd: But Iraq was first, but then-

Demetri Kofinas: For Syria.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, for Syria, but the idea was that Iraq's going to be successful. We're going to turn it into this democratic place. They're going to cheer as our tanks roll through the streets of Baghdad. Kids are going to be throwing roses like World War II going down the Champs-Elysees with the French welcoming our victory. They forget that the French were under occupation. We freed them, but anyway.

Demetri Kofinas: They had to go, and they had a resistance force that we could ally [00:58:00] with.

Hooman Majd: Exactly. Exactly. This was the fantasy, that they would then say, "Okay, we got Iraq now. Now it's Iran's turn, or Syria's turn and then Iran's turn." Pretty much we're going to create this democratic Middle East in our own image, and they're going to be allies of ours, and they're going to do what we want to say. This idea was a fanciful idea to begin with, but clearly, I mean the axis of evil was designed to be the beginning of that, Iraq and Iran. I mean North Korea, I don't know if he ever was going to go after North Korea, but it was certainly not an axis. [00:58:30] North Korea's got practically nothing to do with Iraq or Iran.

I mean was that a big mistake? I think pretty much. I'm not an academic. I'm not a scholar. I don't study things like this. I'm more of an observer, but I think pretty much everybody you talk to who is an analyst or a scholar of the Middle East will say that was a massive mistake.

Demetri Kofinas: I think, again as really an amateur observer of this, not to take away the challenges of trying to engage in rapprochement with Iran, [00:59:00] but given the cohesion of the country relative to these other countries, given its history, it's very sturdy national boundaries and borders, it would seem such a natural ally for the United States in the 21st century in the Middle East given everything that's happening and given the desperate need of America to have allies in that country that can actually ... I mean it was Iran after all that played a significant role in helping to stabilize Iraq, right, against ISIS. Not Iraq, to help to push back ISIS.

Hooman Majd: Sure, ISIS

Demetri Kofinas: They are in that region. They [00:59:30] are committed there. It just seems to me that we're dealing with so many potential powder kegs in the world. It doesn't just seem to me. It's not just to me, everyone. It's pretty obvious. It seems to me that it would behoove us to begin to identify people that we can work with, countries we can work with, politicians we can work with so that we can stop trying to hold this dam together, which every day there seems to be another crack. That's what worries me. It's the complexity in the [01:00:00] system and the criticality of it.

Hooman Majd: Well, I think what you were saying is pretty much what I think Obama had identified, and the reason he pushed so hard, and the reason he wasn't so vocal, as vocal as some people wanted him to be, during the 2009 unrest in Iran and protest in Iran. Because he saw exactly what you see I believe, and other people have seen, and John Kerry subsequently. I think Hillary Clinton to a lesser extent. She seemed more tied to the Arab states.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah, she was more [01:00:30] of a hawk.

Hooman Majd: More to the Arab states, tied more to the Arab states, and flattered by the Arab states, and her husband was flattered by the Arab states by their money into the foundation. I'm not saying that-

Demetri Kofinas: She in the Democratic primaries against Bernie Sanders, she identified Iran as one of the enemies along with the Republicans and the healthcare industry that she's most proud to have.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, yeah. No, she was not a fan of Iran. Bill Clinton did try in fact to have some rapprochement with Iran, and it didn't work. I mean there's always been these missed opportunities. Whether the United States comes forward [01:01:00] or Iran comes forward, there's these missed opportunities.

But I think you're right, Obama recognized that. His idea was, and as he articulated or his team articulated it, that there was no guarantee, but certainly that if you brought Iran in from the cold, if you made this nuclear deal, there would be incentive for Iran. If it was a successful deal and they saw the advantages of working with the west and having foreign investment, having European investment, even American investment, and working with the west that gradually over [01:01:30] time they could deal with other issues where there's conflict. The other issues where there's conflict is Hezbollah, Hamas, basically that, and some instances of what America believes is Iranian interference in American interests in the region, all of which could have been discussed assuming that the nuclear deal was going well and Iran was seeing the benefit of not having an antagonistic relationship with the west, and being under sanctions, and so on and so forth. That was Obama's idea. He never guaranteed [01:02:00] that that was going to be the case, but he said basically in so many words we've got to start somewhere.

Demetri Kofinas: You can't invade Iran. You can't invade Iran. We're better off-

Hooman Majd: Yeah, I don't think so. I don't think we can invade. I mean some people might think we can.

Demetri Kofinas: We're better off invading North Korea.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. It's more urgent. Let's put it that way.

Demetri Kofinas: Well, it's more urgent. There's also a less popular regime. There's less popular support for the country.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. We don't know that.

Demetri Kofinas: I'm not saying we should invade North Korea.

Hooman Majd: No, no. I know.

Demetri Kofinas: I'm just saying the idea that we could invade Iran-

Hooman Majd: Yeah, that would be a huge mistake, worse than invading [01:02:30] Iraq. I think people recognized at least in the Democratic Party and in the Obama administration, I think probably some people in the Republican Party too but not President Trump. What's happened since Obama had that very short period basically from 2016 when the deal was implemented to 2017, I mean he basically had one year to see if the deal could bring about better relations with Iran, and that's not fair. It's not fair [01:03:00] to only give it one year. Then for President Trump to start by saying, "I'm going to tear up this lousy. It's the worst deal ever," and going and rallying, and talking to people like John Bolton who think we should bombing Iran, I think everything's just kind of fallen apart.

Demetri Kofinas: You know, it's hard for me, because I respect anyone who ... Like I respect John McCain for example. I respect his experience. I respect what he's done for the country, his sacrifices, but I can't reconcile that with just anecdotally [01:03:30] when he sang Bomb, Bomb, Bomb Iran in the 2008 campaign.

Hooman Majd: Right. Now to be fair, it was a joke, but yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: It was joke, but it reflected the reality of his own policy.

Hooman Majd: Yes, exactly. Yes.

Demetri Kofinas: He's such a smart guy. He's such a courageous person. Lindsey graham is not an idiot, and both of them are very hawkish on Iran.

Hooman Majd: Well, the thing is you can be hawkish when you're not the president.

Demetri Kofinas: Right. Yeah, well look, I take the effects of Donald Trump's rhetoric seriously. I don't ascribe to it [01:04:00] a level of thought that I would put to someone like a McCain for example. But I think that more generally speaking what you're getting to, I mean Obama began to bring some sort of strategic rethink to American foreign policy. His bet was on Asia, on the future being Asia, and that the Middle East, the greater Middle East was going to be this quagmire that we were going to get sucked into, and that the future wasn't there, and we're going to miss the train, we're going to miss the ball. I do think that more generally, whether you agree with that or not, there is a dramatic need to rethink [01:04:30] foreign policy in general, not just American foreign policy but what is foreign policy in the 21st century given the globalization and the changing technological boundaries and norms in society.

Hooman Majd: Sure, sure.

Demetri Kofinas: But I think America in particular needs a major rethink, and that's sort of why ... I mean the protests. This was a timely conversation to have because of the protests, but I wanted to have you on also because of that fact that I think we need to bring a new level of awareness to the Middle East, [01:05:00] to the greater Middle East obviously to include Iran and other countries, and to rework our mental models of this map of this area of the world and how relate to it, engage with it, and what sort of autonomy we

can expect for it to have on its own, the countries in that area. Because there are going to be powers that are going to rise up, whether it's going to be Iran or someone else, because the United States cannot continue to enforce. This is not 1991 Desert Storm. We're not going to go into these countries and [01:05:30] have that level of power of control.

Hooman Majd: Right, right. No. No, we're not. I mean yes, it would be a good thing if people did reconsider, as I think Obama to a large degree tried to, foreign policy specifically as it relates to the Middle East, because that is a problem spot in the world that directly affects us. It affects us because of our relationship with Israel and also because of terrorism. Those are the reasons, and because of the price of oil too still.

Demetri Kofinas: It's huge.

Hooman Majd: It's still a factor. Yeah. I mean I think it would be good, but I don't [01:06:00] see it happening. I don't want to be that pessimistic, but I think it's easier for politicians to not consider a drastic change in the way that we've operated. It's much easier. I mean Trump is talking about making America great again, in other words going back to the way America was in his mind when he was a kid in the 50s.

Demetri Kofinas: Suez.

Hooman Majd: Yeah. I mean to make America great again, he says he's got a bigger button than-

Demetri Kofinas: That was today. We were both talking about this.

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: He tweeted, and it works.

Hooman Majd: [01:06:30] A bigger nuclear button than Kim Jong-Un has.

Demetri Kofinas: All right, did you ever watch George Carlin?

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: You remember the bigger dick foreign policy?

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: That is like one of the best clips ever, you know?

Hooman Majd: Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: That is the classic bigger dick foreign policy.

Hooman Majd: Yes, that is the classic bigger dick foreign policy. I think based on Trump's sensitivity about the size of his hands and that-

Demetri Kofinas: I'm going to catch some shit for even talking about Trump. Again, to anyone in our audience who are Trump supporters-

Hooman Majd: It's fine. I mean-

Demetri Kofinas: It's fine. I just want to say that, because the reason I don't talk much [01:07:00] about Donald Trump is in general I don't like to talk about individuals, because I think news and information outlets and the media personalize things so much, and that doesn't serve any of us. My issue is not with Donald Trump as an individual. It's with-

Hooman Majd: No. My issue isn't with any-

Demetri Kofinas: Lack of seriousness.

Hooman Majd: My issue certainly isn't with any supporter of Donald Trump. I think anybody who voted for Donald Trump probably had a very good reason.

Demetri Kofinas: I know many people had very good reasons to, absolutely.

Hooman Majd: Yeah, to vote for Donald Trump. I mean if you accept democracy, you've got to accept that you've got to respect people's right to have the opinion [01:07:30] that Donald Trump is great, and that's fine. But they also have to respect the idea that I might criticize certain aspects of Donald Trump's presidency. I might even be willing to criticize and they should accept that I would be willing to criticize some aspects of his personality as well. But that said, I'm not one who, to quote Hillary, I don't believe in a basket of deplorables. Let's put it that way. I think people who voted for Trump voted for a reason, and they'll either be happy with him or unhappy with him. They will make the decision in the next election whether to reelect [01:08:00] him or not, and we'll see.

Demetri Kofinas: I think those people, the people that throw sort of Molotov cocktail expletives in the arena actually do a major disservice, because then people like you and me or whoever want to actually have a serious conversation that talk about the different policies or the individuals leading them or president immediately, and it's understandable, people are listening are oftentimes going to get siloed and are going to ascribe to an opinion, any particular political opinion, all the other things that they've heard.

Hooman Majd: By the way, when we say [01:08:30] big dick foreign policy, some people in America might think that's good. I mean we're sort of jokingly talking about big dick foreign policy.

Demetri Kofinas: There are people that think that's good. Actually, Joe Kernen on CNBC this morning specifically said he really liked it. I thought it was really weird. I'm thinking-

Hooman Majd: But yeah, I can see that some people would like it. By the way, what I'm criticizing here is specifically foreign policy and specifically Middle East foreign policy. I believe that Obama was right on his Middle East policy, largely [01:09:00] right. I'm not going to say 100%. No one's 100% right. I believe the steps that Donald Trump has taken in his presidency have not been right. That's my opinion. I could be wrong. I mean maybe Trump will be right. Maybe he's right to recognize Jerusalem. I don't know. We'll know 20, 30, 50 years from now. We won't know tomorrow if he was right or not.

When Obama said that Saudi Arabia and Iran should learn to share the region, Iran thought, "Yeah, fine. That makes sense. We'll [01:09:30] share the region with Saudi." The Saudis were pissed off, like, "What do you mean share the region? We don't want to share the region with Iran." That was their attitude. They hated Obama for saying that. "We'll have to share it with the Shiites. I'm not going to share it with those guys." But Obama was right. They do need to learn to share the region. When I say share the region, they're both big powers in a place where there's lesser powers like the gulf states, which are smaller countries, and weaker countries such as Iraq, and Syria, and Jordan, places like that. Yes, they have to share [01:10:00] it. They're both going to have influence. You have to accept that they're both going to have influence. The Saudis are going to have influence in Syria with the Sunnis, in Iraq with the Sunnis, and Iran has to accept that. Saudi Arabia has to accept that Iran's going to have influence with the Iraqi Shiites, Kurds, and Syria's going to have influence with the Alawites, and Yemen's going to have influence with the Houthis. It's just natural. It's a natural order.

Demetri Kofinas: Yeah. I also think the election of Donald Trump represents a failure in creative thinking for the American foreign policy establishment. I think [01:10:30] that there's been ... We talked about Israel-Palestine. There are so many open wounds that haven't been resolved. I don't think that we were headed towards a solution before the election of Donald Trump.

Hooman Majd: No, we weren't.

Demetri Kofinas: I don't think we're getting any closer obviously. Hooman, thank you so much for coming on the program.

Hooman Majd: It's my pleasure. My pleasure. It was great.

Demetri Kofinas: It was great having you.

Hooman Majd: It was an absolute pleasure.

Demetri Kofinas: That was my episode with Hooman Majd. I want to thank Hooman for being on my program. Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos [01:11:00] Nicolaou. Sound engineering is Ignacio Lecumberri. For more episodes, you can check out our website at HiddenForces.io. Join the conversation through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at @HiddenForcesPod or send me an email. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.