

# The Islamic Republic Under Pressure

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Reza Pahlavi, eldest son of the last Shah of Iran and main opponent of the Islamic Republic, interviewed by Michel Taubmann, journalist. Former head of European TV channel, ARTE's Paris office and former editor-in-chief of the magazine *Le Meilleur des Mondes*. Michel Taubmann is editor at *Éditions de l'Archipel* and a political columnist at I24News. His published works include: *La Bombe et le Coran. Une biographie du Président Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*, Editions du Moment, 2008; *L'histoire secrète de la révolution Iranienne* (in collaboration with Ramin Parham), Denoël, 2009; *Iran: l'heure du choix* (book of interviews with Reza Pahlavi), Denoël, 2009.



**Michel Taubmann** – Last April, you made a historic visit to Israel. Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Herzog welcomed you. The Islamic Republic has long contested Israel's right to exist. Your trip marked the first time since 1979 that an Iranian dignitary had visited. What were the objectives of your visit? What do you expect the next steps to be?

**Reza Pahlavi** – My compatriots and I have long expressed our sympathy to Israelis and Jews around the world. Conversely, the Islamic Republic has placed anti-Semitism at the heart of its ideology, even to the point of questioning the veracity of the Holocaust. This trip had to be made. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution underway in Iran, and the outpouring of support from Israel and the world's Jewish communities, have made the circumstances even more favorable. Israel is a democracy and the Iranian people are also fighting to establish a democracy. Therefore, the region's democrats need to talk to and support each other. My wife and I traveled there together and were touched by

the warm welcome we received. We were involved in the Yom Hashoah remembrance ceremonies and were able to visit the Wailing Wall. I remind you that, according to the Bible, this is the wall of the Second Temple that was rebuilt after Cyrus the Great, founder of Persia, who liberated the Jews held captive in Babylon. According to the Book of Ezra, Cyrus declared that he had received a mission from God to help the Jews rebuild their temple by providing them with everything they needed. Later, King Khashayar – known as Xerxes by the Greeks and Ahasuerus by the Romans – married Esther, a Jewish woman, making her Queen of Persia, and followed her advice to prevent his vizier Aman from exterminating the Jews. This series of events is the origin of the holiday of Purim, still celebrated by the Jews with great joy. Since then, the bodies of Esther and Mordecai were buried in Hamedan, Iran. This historic event imposes obvious responsibilities: to encourage dialogue and work towards peaceful coexistence.

It was this message of finding an alternative to war that I brought with me on my trip to meet with Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu. ***The world is not condemned to choose between the Iranian bomb and the bombing of Iran. Instead, there is the path of the people, the only path capable of changing things and enabling a significant de-escalation.*** I have to say that the Prime Minister and his wife Sara welcomed us warmly and gave us their undivided attention. The same goes for President Isaac Herzog, with whom I was able to renew this message of peace. Following the Abraham Accords (1), many Iranians and Israelis began to dream of the Cyrus Accords. I hope and pray that this trip has laid the first stone.

**M. T.** – Was this your first visit to Israel? Did it open your eyes to new things that you did not previously know about the country? What was the most poignant moment of your visit?

**R. P.** – The most poignant moment, and at the same time the most trying, was the visit to Yad Vashem. No sane person can deny that the Holocaust took place, and words fail me when trying to describe what I felt during the visit. Georges Kiejman, a well-known French lawyer who recently passed away, spoke of, "the most unimaginable disaster in human thought." There's something terrifying and inconceivable about the fact that hatred led men to

use bureaucratic methods to organize the extermination of an entire people. These events gave rise to the notion of crimes against humanity and the idea that we are all joined together by our humanity. Therefore, it is our duty to teach the younger generations that we must continuously combat hatred, without exception.

**M. T.** – What were the reverberations of this visit inside Iran?

**R. P.** – Thousands of people from around the globe have told me that this trip sends a powerful message to the regime. It is a reminder that Iranians will always strive to build bridges with other peoples, despite the Islamic Republic's efforts to create conflict.

**M. T.** – Before this trip to Israel, you were invited to the Munich International Security Conference. You are undoubtedly the best-known opponent of Iran's Islamic regime. Not only abroad, but according to a poll published by the highly-respected Gamaan Institute, you are also the most popular domestically: 33% of those questioned would like to see you play a role in any democratic transition. Are you the leader of the democratic opposition? How do you see your role?

**R. P.** – My role has always been clear and I will continue to play it: ***I act to unite the Iranian people around democratic and secular values.*** I endeavor to use my prominence and my personal history to amplify their voice, encouraging all democratic forces to come together. I will continue to do as much as I can until the day Iran is free and Iranians have voted for a democratic constitution via referendum. That day, my mission will be accomplished.

**M. T.** – Israel is the only country in the world whose right to exist is denied by another country, namely the Islamic Republic, through constant inflammatory rhetoric. Israelis of all persuasions are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Several intervention scenarios are on the table. How would you react in the event of an Israeli military operation?

**R. P.** – ***I unequivocally condemn any scenario involving war. War is not the solution.*** It will only add misery to existing misery. I am staunchly opposed to war, first and foremost, as a matter of principle. For me, Iran's territorial integrity

and sovereignty are intangible, non-negotiable. This is in contrast to the attitude of the Islamic regime, which trades the territorial waters of the Caspian Sea to Russia and signs unequal treaties with China. I am so viscerally attached to the integrity of our borders that in 1980, ***at the age of 19, I sent a telegram to Khomeini's general staff to volunteer my service as a trained fighter pilot. I was eager to defend Iran against Saddam Hussein's aggression but my telegram was left unanswered.***

On the other hand, I have my doubts about the effectiveness and success of a military operation. Many nuclear facilities are deep underground and therefore safe from attack. ***Additionally, such an operation would not prevent the regime from continuing to provoke instability, by providing arms and money to terrorist groups.*** The Israelis themselves are preparing for a possible war on five fronts: Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Revolutionary Guards' Al-Quds force in Syria, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza and a Palestinian uprising in the West Bank, and even riots by the Arab population within Israel itself. The prospect of war must be set against that of regime change in Iran. We must bet on the Iranian people and trust them. ***The Iranians are our best army, a peaceful army, against the power of the ayatollahs!*** There are many cracks in this regime today. The "reformers" (2) are openly challenging the system. The conventional army does not take part in the repression. Qom's clergy is divided: many clerics are worried that the mosques will be deserted by a population that now equates Islam with the Islamic Republic, and therefore with oppression. ***And even the regime's praetorian guard, the Revolutionary Guards Corps, is beginning to reveal its divisions. I'm in constant contact with political, religious and military leaders. Since the uprising began last September, more and more of them have contacted me or my staff.***

But worse than being ineffective, military intervention would have a disastrous effect on the democratic movement in general: ***the regime would seize the opportunity to increase repression and silence all who might rebel.***

**M. T.** – The First French Empire didn't survive Napoleon's defeat in Russia, the Third Reich was swept away by its military debacle, not to mention the overthrow of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian monarchies at the end of the First World War. If the Islamic Republic were to provoke a war through

its persistent pursuit of nuclear weapons, wouldn't it be signing its own death sentence?

**R. P.** – We can't compare a potential conflict in the 21st century with the wars of previous centuries. The geopolitical landscape is not the same. Regardless, Iran must not be attacked. ***The international community must not give the Islamic regime the opportunity to portray itself as a defender of territorial integrity. I repeat, we must trust the Iranian people. The Iranians are the bravest soldiers against the Islamic Republic. They continue to prove this on a daily basis.***

**M. T.** – You rebuke the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran but what if it were the opposite? If Iran attacked through Hezbollah, which already has 150,000 missiles aimed at Israeli cities, would you support an Israeli response in self-defense?

**R. P.** – Every state has the right to defend itself. But here again, the best way to avoid such a conflict and an escalation in the region is to isolate the Islamic Republic and support the Iranian people. Why go to war when you know there is a peaceful solution? ***My compatriots have already paid a heavy price for many years. They deserve to be trusted. I would add that a change of regime in Iran would put an end to the support of terrorist organizations such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.*** The Israeli Air Force regularly bombs weapon convoys sent by the regime to Hezbollah that transit through Syria. This is how Hezbollah builds up its stockpiles. After the 2006 war against Israel, it was able to rebuild its arsenal thanks to the Islamic Republic. Without the Islamic Republic, there is no Hezbollah; so what do we want? Simply to weaken Hezbollah in anticipation of a new conflict, or to silence it for good?

**M. T.** – Was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal signed in 2015, a positive development? Could it have led to an "opening up" of the country and, ultimately, its liberalization?

**R. P.** – ***The Obama administration made the same gamble as the Clinton administration did when the United States accepted China into the WTO: they thought economic cooperation would ultimately lead to political***



**liberalization. In both cases, the obvious failure of this approach, which is based on the idea that dictators can be tamed, is undeniable.** It is also unfortunate that in 2015 the P5+1 powers (3) agreed to compartmentalize the problems presented by the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the diplomats in charge of the negotiations only dealt with nuclear fuel enrichment. Even Emmanuel Macron, once President of France, has pointed to areas for improvement in the agreement, namely Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional influence.

More importantly, **the Islamic Republic does not act as a guarantor of the national interests of Iran and Iranians. The regime is corrupt and expansionist, favoring apparatchiks and friends of the state.** When the JCPOA was signed, the Islamic Republic benefited from almost a hundred billion dollars in economic windfall... without the Iranian people seeing their living conditions improve. On the contrary, this money has been used to finance the security apparatus and foreign operations in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere.

**M. T.** – Did you agree with President Trump's decision to have the US withdraw from JCPOA in 2018?

**R. P.** – Beyond what I've just said, my main position has always been that an agreement is better than no agreement, even if JCPOA seemed unsatisfactory to me. **The American withdrawal, without a proposal for a constructive alternative, represents a failure. It served as a pretext for the Islamic regime to free itself from all commitments and resume its nuclear arms race.**

**M. T.** – Do the Islamic Republic's military commitment to Russia and growing economic ties with China represent safeguards designed to protect the regime and ensure its long-term survival?

**R. P.** – **The Islamic Republic plunges Iran back into the 19th century and the era of "unequal treaties."** Back then, leaders gave in to corruption and dereliction, prioritizing personal gain to the detriment of national interests and the country's modernization. Notably, rulers of that era had handed over the manna (oil) for British companies' exploitation.

***Aligned with Russia, the Islamic regime accepted renegotiating its maritime rights in the Caspian Sea without compensation. They have also chosen to supply drones for the Ukrainian conflict, drones that are used to bomb civilian infrastructure. Thus, the Islamic regime is complicit in war crimes in Europe.***

***The twenty five-year "strategic partnership" with China sells off Iran's resources by granting Beijing discounts on Iran's oil production and contractualizing these discounts for many years to come. And that's not all: the Islamic Republic officially endorses the presence of 5,000 Chinese troops in the Persian Gulf, and in return receives "social control" technologies, including Internet censorship tools.***

**M. T.** – According to a poll carried out inside Iran by the Gamaan Institute, 75% of your compatriots are opposed to a clerical dictatorship. How do you explain the resilience of such an unpopular regime?

**R. P.** – The regime has been in crisis since its foundation. It could not have survived without the war against Iraq. It favored war and hundreds of thousands of deaths over peace and prosperity. It also hasn't shied away from bloody repression, global terrorism and the execution of political opponents abroad. The same regime has destabilized Lebanon, committed mass murders in Syria, and undermined Iraq's sovereignty. ***There are even investigations showing that the regime plays an active role in international drug trafficking!*** Despite this, the West keeps throwing them lifelines by proposing dialogue, but what can we expect from a regime with such a track record? In reality, we should note that the regime's resilience has indeed been weakened because it is only supported by a tiny minority of extremists in Iran.

***The international community, and Europe in particular, has a decisive role to play. First and foremost, they need to place the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps on the European list of terrorist organizations in order to help cut off funding to a well-known violent, mafia-like organization.***

Incidentally, only the organization's senior officers benefit from its financial resources. The ordinary soldier, on the other hand, lives modestly, sometimes forced to take a second job. His loyalties are based on the status he is accorded



and the salary he is paid. In any case, I think a general strike is necessary: it will hit the regime even harder.

**M. T.** – A general strike to bring down the regime? In the near future?

**R. P.** – A general strike would accelerate the fall of the regime. This is certain. But going on strike in a country with an already moribund economy is difficult for workers. Skipping work means giving up a very modest salary. That's why I'd like to see the regime's frozen assets confiscated and redirected to an international fund to support the strikers. An Iranian strike could be financed purely with funds of Iranian origin; funds that, therefore, belong to our people. Not a penny would be asked of any foreign state or foreign private interest.

**M. T.** – In 2009, the "Green Movement" led people to believe that "the hour of choice" had arrived in Iran. Fourteen years later, despite a succession of revolts (2017, 2019, 2022), the regime is still in place. What has changed in fourteen years that gives you hope that the Islamic Republic is coming to an end?

**R. P.** – In 2009, when the "reformist" Moussavi won the most votes in the presidential election, the regime enthroned the ultra-conservative Ahmadinejad, who finished third. Iranians were shocked by the realization that the Islamic Republic did not play by its own rules. For a long time, they had been led to believe that the Constitution held the key to change, and that elections were the only way to achieve it. The message was that it was a matter of individuals or political parties – "reformist" or "conservative" – when, in reality, the Islamic constitutional framework and institutional system were flawed from the outset. Dissent came primarily from urban areas.

Conversely, the revolts of 2017 and 2019 were socially motivated. The regime's indifference to the relentless rise in the cost of living led to riots in the poorest sectors of the Iranian population. This, in turn, caused the regime to lose its social base. In reality, the years of Rohani's supposedly "moderate" presidency between 2013 and 2021 only strengthened the regime to the detriment of national interests. I want to underscore that the Iranians have not benefited from the economic fallout of the Vienna nuclear deal. The tens of billions of dollars released when the sanctions were lifted were immediately reinvested in

the war in Syria and in other external operations of aggression, rather than in the Iranian economy.

Since September 2022, Iranian society has been rising up. The regime has succeeded in rallying all sectors of the population against it: women, legally considered as inferior; ethnic minorities, scorned for their idiosyncrasies; bona fide reformers, who no longer believe in reform; the middle class, impoverished by annual inflation of over 70%; young people, unable to find work. The list could go on. There are suspicions of corruption at every level of the state, environmental damage, and not to mention Covid, which, due to disastrous management, cost hundreds of thousands of lives (though this toll has been carefully concealed by official statistics). Iranians are increasingly aware that the only viable solution is to eradicate the root of the evil, namely the Islamic Republic, and establish a democratic, secular regime in its place.

**M. T.** – What sets the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement apart from previous revolts?

**R. P.** – *The "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution is the culmination of a long political and societal process. The other revolts were the precursor for this one. It was only in 2019, with the uprising against mounting energy prices, that the protests became widespread. 2019 was a pivotal movement because thereafter, Iranians no longer mobilize according to their social or professional affiliation. They now stipulate that all of their demands be met, even those that do not directly concern them. The mobilization of men in support of women's rights is a perfect example of this.* And this attitude applies to all the ills from which the country suffers. Even the vain efforts to save Pirouz (4), one of Iran's last cheetahs, have become a national cause!

But let's look for a moment at the sociology of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. It began in Kurdistan, in the town of Saqqez where Mahsa Jina Amini (5) lived. At her funeral, the women removed their headscarves, encouraged by the men to do so. The men recognized that their own freedom is dependent on that of their wives and daughters. Very quickly, this movement spread throughout Iran as a message of solidarity. We saw young people, sometimes barely teenagers, protesting in their schools, 12 year-old girls

chanting "Bassidji, go away!" to a militiaman who had come to praise the Islamic Republic.

It's no coincidence that this revolt has taken on revolutionary proportions so quickly. The Islamic Republic has alienated the entire population, and so Iranian youth – the country's future – knows it has an enemy to whom every opportunity for change has already been given. This movement represents the synthesis of all the values of the Iranian people, which previous movements had failed to embody.

**M. T.** – Faced with the perils that threaten it domestically and abroad, isn't there a risk that the Islamic Republic will go even further in its oppression of the Iranian people? Will it prioritize survival regardless of the human cost and bloodshed, like the Syrian regime?

**R. P.** – Bashar al-Assad is a tyrant, but he is not alone in committing atrocities against the Syrian people. ***The Syrian tragedy is largely due to the intervention of the Islamic Republic. Since 2011, it has provided strategic and logistical support to Damascus.*** Experts estimate that this support amounts to between \$5 and \$15 billion a year in direct and indirect aid (arms, munitions, foodstuffs, hydrocarbons, etc.). Imagine what this represents for an economy one-tenth the size of France. Tens of thousands of soldiers from the Revolutionary Guards Expeditionary Force, Hezbollah and Afghan Shiite militias are still active in Syria. Further proof of Teheran's involvement: Between twelve and fifteen Iranian generals have died on Syrian territory. ***The Islamic Republic has been martyring the Iranian people since 1979 and has exported this fatal know-how wherever it could in the Middle East.*** Opponents are raped in prisons, women are beaten to death, schoolgirls are gassed. Martyrdom is currently underway.

**M. T.** – You've reflected on the revolutions of the 20th century. Broadly speaking, there are two models. On the one hand, there is the Bolshevik model which was inspired by the French Revolution and taken up by Khomeini in Iran. It ultimately leads to terror. On the other hand, there is the Mandela or Gorbachev model, which leads to regime change through negotiation and without the massive persecution of supporters of the deposed regime. We know that you are closer

to Mandela than to Lenin. But will the Islamic regime, with its cruelty and intransigence, leave you the choice of non-violence?

**R. P. – *Democracy and freedom cannot be built on violence.*** It creates no foundation for civil peace. Gandhi and Mandela wanted their people to find the path to peace. Lenin and Khomeini didn't, and it could even be said that their savage ideologies were opposed to peace in their respective societies. Since the advent of the Islamic Republic, violence has been omnipresent in Iranian society. Not only in the persecution of its people, but also in its rhetoric. In what democratic country do leaders call for another country to be wiped off the map – in this case, Israel? And to what end? ***Peace is both a language designed to unite as many people as possible, and a method that focuses on promoting democratic and secular ideas.*** If today's Iranians are taking risks, notably by demonstrating unmasked, it's because they've decided to unite and show solidarity until victory is achieved. In light of this, there is nothing the regime can do. Arrests, torture and executions have not stifled the movement. It has taken other forms, it has adapted, and the regime continues to incur its wrath every day. Until now, the regime has endeavored to turn Iranians against each other. Those days are over. Khamenei and those close to him fear that their own ranks are cracking. This is why one hundred senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers were dismissed...

**M. T. –** What are the concrete steps needed to transition from an Islamist dictatorship to a parliamentary, secular democracy?

**R. P. – *First and foremost, the security forces must disobey the regime and force its dignitaries into exile or else face arrest. All democratic and secular political forces would then have to agree to form a unified national government that would include all components of Iranian society.*** This government will then have three essential missions:

Firstly, it will need to organize an election for a Constituent Assembly that is responsible for presenting a draft Constitution that is in line with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this respect, one idea is particularly close to my heart: Our history shows us how the absence of a supreme court can lead the country towards authoritarianism. With such a body, the 1953 crisis

between my father the Shah and his prime minister Dr. Mossadegh could have been avoided. France has three supreme jurisdictions: the "Cour de Cassation," the "Conseil d'Etat" and the "Conseil Constitutionnel." Procedures are in place to enable citizens to appeal to these courts when a court decision seems contrary to the law, or when the law does not conform with the Constitution. The Americans have grouped these roles and entrusted them to the Supreme Court. By strengthening law enforcement, we will reinforce democracy. No government would be able to enact laws that conflict with the separation of powers, the control of government action and citizens' rights. This is fundamental to the democratization of our country.

Next, the unified national government would need to take emergency measures to restore stability within the country. These measures include : equal rights for all citizens, inflation reduction, anti-corruption efforts, the reintegration of the security forces into a regular state apparatus, the rehabilitation of all political prisoners, an unambiguous ban on all acts of torture, and the suspension of all death sentences pending the outright abolition of capital punishment.

Finally, this transitional government would have to work to rebuild trust with the international community. This implies suspension of the military nuclear program and a strict return to the Treaty of Non-Proliferation, as has been done by all other responsible actors in the international community.

By following this process, I believe that Iran could have a Constitution guaranteeing a secular democracy in less than two years. But we need to go further. Democracy is not limited to elections and the exercise of power by the majority. The opposition must have rights, it must be able to propose legislation, have equal speaking time in the media and be able to request the investigative commissions in the event of government dysfunction. It must also be able to submit draft legislation to a Supreme Court, which would be responsible for verifying conformity with the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**M. T.** - In Eastern Europe, the democratic transition often involved setting up interim governments composed of Communists who had long served the

regime but had since reformed. Should, and can, Iran use this type of government as a stepping stone?

**R. P.** – Democracy requires the participation of all actors who believe in it. ***Many Iranians joined the reform movement with the good-faith belief that it offered an opportunity to liberalize the regime. My message to them has always been the same: We share more values than you do with the regime's apparatchiks. So, let's work together!*** Many of my colleagues lived in Iran until very recently, and some are closely connected with the reformists, so I know that this message has been heard. Therefore, it is perfectly normal for reformists who have chosen to distance themselves from the regime to participate in a unified national government. Personally, I hope they will.

**M. T.** – Are there any forces within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the army that are ready to commit to a transition process?

**R. P.** – Many members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are aware that the regime is trapping them in a vicious cycle.

***Their illusions were shattered when they realized that the regime was using them and was not going to fulfill its promises of peace and prosperity. Families of former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who were wounded in the war against Iraq, or who had lost a father or son, were abandoned and shown no gratitude from the regime. They were left behind. Justice must be done for them too.***

**M. T.** – One of the main problems in Iran is corruption. How can it be combatted?

**R. P.** – ***Corruption is endemic in the Islamic Republic. It is imperative that we combat this plague*** because it is damaging our society and impoverishing our population.

**In France, the National Assembly's Finance Committee is chaired by a member of the opposition. I think this is an appropriate measure; it helps to prevent corruption and promote transparency in the management of public funds. Moreover, France has the *Cour des Comptes*, Germany the *Federal Audit Office* and the United States the *Government Accountability Office*. In**



**Iran, we'll need to use the same model to ensure transparency in the use of public funds. This way, citizens will know what their money is being used for. This is fundamental because *Iran's natural resources, such as oil and gas, are a matter of national sovereignty.* They should be the property of the entire nation, not the printing press of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. *The Central Bank of Iran must be independent, so that it can't be held hostage by frivolous economic policies that generate inflation and clientelism.* Monetary policy directly impacts the level of confidence in an economy in order to encourage investment.** Ensuring stability means ensuring prosperity and purchasing power. It also means a government must exercise caution in its economic policies.

Finally, we need to overhaul our judiciary system to ensure its independence, and pass laws that will provide a framework for the actions of every player in the political, economic and social spheres.

By establishing transparent rules at each level of economic power, we can curb corruption and ensure Iran is aligned with the international standards set by the Financial Action Task Force (6).

**M. T.** – Should the State play a major role in the economy? Should it own the oil reserves?

**R. P.** – ***The state has a crucial role to play to maintain the rule of law and the specificities of its role will be defined by the Constitution. The democratically elected government, accountable to its electorate, will put forth its economic policy.*** Nevertheless, as I said a moment ago, I cannot emphasize enough that Iran's oil, gas, forests and all other natural resources must serve the nation. Energy rents can take many forms. I'm looking at different models, from Norges Bank (7) to the sovereign wealth funds of the Persian Gulf (8). In the case of Iran, I believe that the rent should allow for the sovereign reconstruction of the country. In particular, this means investments in infrastructure and support for national industry so that it can be integrated into the global economy.

**M. T.** – Is it realistic to think that Russia and China would let Iran leave their sphere of influence?

**R. P. – *Iran must no longer be subservient to foreign powers, just as it must no longer interfere in the domestic affairs of other sovereign nations.***

Undoubtedly, Russia and China are major world powers. My wish is to maintain balanced relations based on mutual respect for each other's sovereignty. There is no reason for a democratic Iran to cut itself off from China, the biggest consumer of natural resources. Nor should it avoid coordinating oil production with Russia, as Saudi Arabia already does occasionally.

**M. T. –** Do the current ties between Iran, Russia and China force you to consider a form of neutrality, halfway between the West and the Asian powers?

**R. P. – *Iran must adopt a foreign policy that serves its own interests.*** My country's geographical position, paired with its assets, means that it is destined to play an important role in the global economy. We have always traded with both the East and the West. Diplomatically, Iran must become a stabilizing power, not a factor of instability in the region.

We have been held hostage too often in the game of great power posturing to consider anything other than "mindful neutrality." By this I mean that Iranians are proud of their identity and find any form of subservience unbearable. The new Iran will respect international law, while expecting its neighbors to respect its sovereignty.

**M. T. –** What role will the current repressive forces – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Bassidjis – play in a democratic transition? What role will the army play?

**R. P. – *The role of the army is to protect a country's borders, and that of the police is to maintain public order and personal safety. The Islamic regime has turned these forces into tools of its ideology.*** The Basij monitor the compliance with Sharia law in Iranian society, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps intervene in conflicts abroad to export Islamist ideology.

***Non-violent resistance and civil disobedience are the best ways to win over the security forces.*** These forces are part of the people and, therefore, part of the interim solution. These peaceful methods will make it clear that neither the army nor the police are the enemy. It is the regime that made them into the

enemy of the people. This is the best way to integrate them into the State for the greater good.

We won't be able to try every single civil servant in the armed forces, nor would it make sense to do so. Senior commanders and their subordinates should not be treated in the same way. The former have the freedom to decide, while the latter are obliged to execute. Following the model of the Nuremberg trials, the top brass, who bear the greatest responsibility for the regime's crimes, should be put on trial.

As far as rank-and-file police officers are concerned, the transition must involve them in a process of national reconciliation. Similar to what was done in South Africa, a "Truth and Reconciliation" commission should be established to encourage national dialogue. Victims have a right to know the truth about what they or their loved ones have suffered. Civil servants will be more forthcoming with their testimony if they can be assured that they won't be convicted.

**M. T.** – In economic terms, how can we move from a mafia economy – based on religious principles and run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – to a market economy? Can you cite a few concrete measures?

**R. P.** – There's no need to reinvent the wheel! Recent history provides us with several examples, each more or less successful. In the case of Russia, on the one hand, the failure of privatization, but, on the other hand, the successful integration of former Soviet satellite economies into Europe. Even if Iran is not eligible for European structural funds, my country has substantial oil reserves, a skilled and well-trained intelligentsia, and a diaspora well-versed in management in a market economy context. The government in place will be responsible for implementing policies that transform the economy. However, I am certain of two things. Firstly, transformation will not be possible unless there is a culture of transparency and a total rejection of corruption. Secondly, the Iranian people reject the possibility of a command economy, as illustrated by the singer Shervine Hajipour in his song Baraye (9), which has become the anthem of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

**M. T.** – How do Islam and other religions fit into a democratic Iran?

**R. P.** – Shiite Islam is obviously the majority religion, but ***all religions must have their place in Iran***. Everyone must have the freedom to practice any religion of their choosing, or no religion at all, without being troubled. Religions hold an important place because they respond to the need for faith and transcendence, but they are not designed to govern. ***A secular regime will ensure the separation of religion and state, while guaranteeing everyone the right to believe or not to believe***. In this sense, the secularization of politics will protect religion, in particular Islam, whose numbers have declined sharply since the Islamic Revolution (10).

**M. T.** – Would you agree with the creation of an independent Kurdish state that groups together the Kurds scattered between Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran?

**R. P.** – Kurdish Iranians are part of Iranian history. Queen Mandana, the mother of Cyrus the Great, was a Mede – that is to say a Kurd! Time and time again in history, the Kurds have shown their attachment to the national unity of Iran. They are part of the country and fully Iranian. On the contrary, the Islamic regime has marginalized them by attacking their culture and age-old traditions. It has attacked all minorities, dismissing their cultural differences, even though Iranian identity has been multi-ethnic and multicultural since the Achaemenids! Independence is not the solution. If Iran truly adopts and applies a constitution that bestows freedom, democracy and equality for all citizens, then no minority will be persecuted. All groups will be respected and free to preserve their culture. Persian will be our common language, but other regional languages will be able to be spoken and taught. Isn't that what we call freedom?

**M. T.** – In your father's days, Iran was considered the United States' main ally (along with Israel and Saudi Arabia) in the Middle East. The world has changed a lot since then. Will the new Iran be able to adopt the Western democratic model without becoming a Western vassal?

**R. P.** – ***Choosing a democratic model also means prioritizing sovereignty and long-term prosperity. I don't know of any system that better protects the interests of a state and the welfare of its citizens in the long run.***

Besides, what would be the point of my country becoming a vassal state? Benefit from a security shield? I don't think so: the Americans seem determined to focus on the Pacific. Business opportunities? Once Iran opens up politically and economically, it will unleash an extraordinary emerging market that is currently untapped. The Iranian economy, thanks to our natural resources and human capital, will attract foreign investors. The global economy will emerge stronger.

**M. T.** – In response to the Islamic threat from Iran, Israel and several Arab countries signed The Abraham Accords. Do you think these accords will survive the disappearance of this threat?

**R. P.** – ***The Abraham Accords are more than just an alliance against the Islamic Republic.*** Cultural and economic exchanges are now fluid between the Arab signatory countries and Israel. There are significant investment streams and technology transfers, particularly between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. Synagogues are now being built in Arab countries! I see this as progress in terms of tolerance and geopolitical stability.

**M. T.** – Would a democratic Iran ask to join the Abraham Accords? What kind of economic and cultural partnerships could then be developed?

**R. P.** – We can, indeed, imagine "Cyrus agreements," as I said at the beginning of our interview. Israel is a Middle Eastern country with a proven track record in many fields, especially science. New technologies are an important part of the Israeli economy, and Iran could collaborate on a number of projects. Another topic of common interest is the fight against water scarcity. Iran has much to learn from the Israelis, who have made considerable progress in this area.

As for culture, Iranian artists abroad and Israeli artists are already working together. I'd be happy to see these projects produced in Iran.

***Iran's vocation is not to be an inward-looking state but, on the contrary, to become an economic and cultural engine for the region and the world.*** Our economic partnership opportunities are not limited to Israel and the Arab monarchies. The republics of the Caucasus, for example, have deep historical ties with my country.

**M. T.** – Would you favor the emergence of a Middle Eastern alliance that brings together Israel, Iran and the Arab countries, similar to the European Union?

**R. P.** – There's no doubt that peace can only return if countries rally around major projects. The European Union began with a common energy policy, a common market, a customs union and a common agricultural policy. North America also has a free-trade agreement linking Canada, the United States and Mexico. Such a project is feasible in the Middle East. It is even desirable, as it will keep the region free of conflict and help people to better know each other. It would also lead to political liberalization and greater stability.

***We need to build a new regional security architecture.*** Here again, history offers us interesting models of peaceful coexistence between countries with different political systems. For example, I am thinking of the Helsinki Accords and the “decatalogue” enshrining “good neighbor” relations.

**M. T.** – How do you feel about the strategic shift made by the Arab states that chose to normalize relations with Israel, without first demanding a solution to the Palestinian question?

**R. P.** – ***The Islamic Republic is no stranger to the failure to resolve the Palestinian question. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah are primarily funded by Teheran. I remind you of the slogan used by my compatriots during the demonstrations of recent years: “Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I give my life for Iran.”***

**M. T.** – Despite President Clinton's best efforts, the United States has failed in its role as mediator between the Israelis and Palestinians. Would the heirs of Cyrus the Great be better placed to bring the protagonists of this conflict to the table?

**R. P.** – ***Iran is a crossroads of civilizations, with a history spanning several millennia. It has crossed swords with all the great civilizations:*** Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Arabs and Mongols. Along with the Arabs, the Iranians welcomed Islam. This religion became a civilization through contact with the Persian Empire, adopting its craftsmen, architects, scholars, physicians and poets.



Iranian culture has always been steeped in Islam, and even today it holds an important place in the Muslim world. Nonetheless, Iranians also share an ancient history with the Jewish people. Unlike the Islamic Republic, which has done everything in its power to prevent peace, a free Iran could bring Israelis and Palestinians together around a constructive project for a “win-win” outcome.

**M. T.** – What are you going to do about the Islamic Republic's allies and their overly-armed groups who, among other targets, are fighting Israel? What will you do with Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad?

**R. P.** – Iran's funding of these organizations will cease immediately and unconditionally. A free Iran will not be a sponsor of terrorism, and this spending, which is contrary to its national interests, along with all other forms of current support, will be stopped immediately.

**M. T.** – Have you ever thought of giving up politics?

**R. P.** – Never! I could have refused to involve myself in politics and decided that the 1979 Revolution prevented me from playing any role. But, this was never an option for me. The Iranians may have turned their backs on my family in 1979, but that doesn't mean we've turned our backs on them. It's my duty to always stand by them. I know they never wanted the horrors that Khomeini inflicted on them. My fondest memories are in Iran, and I am first and foremost an Iranian citizen. I'm part of the Iranian people and we are equals. ***I want to live freely in my country alongside my compatriots, with my culture and traditions. My only ambition is to contribute to my country's transition to democracy. I will always be a defender of fundamental liberties in Iran.*** That outcome alone would make me content!

*(1) The Abraham Accords are peace treaties signed by Israel with the United Arab Emirates in August 2020 and then with Bahrain in September. They were followed by normalization agreements with Morocco and Sudan in October and December 2020.*

*(2) Political movement proposing economic openness and a slight liberalization of Iran, but without calling into question the doctrine of Velayat-*

*e Faqhi, which confers full power to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and serves as the foundation of this theocratic regime.*

*(3) The five permanent members of the Security Council - United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom and France - plus Germany.*

*(4) Asian cheetah whose illness and death aroused the emotions of the Iranian public between May 2022 and February 2023.*

*(5) The 22-year-old woman who died as a result of being beaten during her arrest by Tehran's morality police. Her murder marked the beginning of the uprising observed in Iran since September 2022.*

*(6) The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the global watchdog on money laundering and terrorist financing. In February 2023, the FATF placed three countries on its blacklist: North Korea, Burma and Iran.*

*(7) The Norwegian Central Bank, which also manages its sovereign wealth fund.*

*(8) For example, Mubadala and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority in the United Arab Emirates, and the Public Investment Fund in Saudi Arabia.*

*(9) This song is an indictment of all the ills of modern Iranian society, including the "command economy."*

*(10) The Gamaan Institute's March 2022 report reveals that nearly 70% of the Iranian population rejects a political system based on Sharia law.*