Tanya Domi: Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the Arts, Social Sciences and Sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing New Yorkers and the world.

U.S. Iranian relations are arguably at their lowest point since perhaps the 1979 Iranian revolution following President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the multilaterally negotiated Iran nuclear deal in 2017. Just this past week, the New York Times reported that John Bolton, the National Security Advisor, had directed the Pentagon last year to prepare military options to strike Iran.

To explore this relationship in more depth with the historical context, joining us today is Distinguished Professor Ervand Abrahamian of Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he taught Iranian and Middle Eastern history and politics. He is author of seven books and numerous essays and articles. His most noteworthy book is The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and The Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations, published by The New Press in 2013.

Welcome to the podcast Professor Abrahamian.

Prof Ervand A: Thank you, Tanya for having me.

Tanya Domi: You are well known and highly regarded for your book The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and The Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations. Given your knowledge of this really tortured history since the US orchestrated the coup taking out the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, this past week, the New York Times reported that John Bolton, the National Security Advisor ordered the Pentagon last year to prepare military options to strike Iran. It seems that the administration’s alarmed by its weakening position in the Middle East and these plans would somehow reassert US primacy. What are your thoughts on these developments?

Prof Ervand A: Actually, Bolton’s threat fits into the narrative that exists in Iran that the US is basically out to get Iran and this is a continuation of the plans they had going back to ’53, that it’s basically an example of US aggression. Old terminology would be of course imperialism. We don’t use that terminology anymore, but the notion still is the United States is a very aggressive power, expansionist power, and any country that crosses it has to be crushed. Iraq had to be crushed, Libya had to be crushed, Assad of Syria they tried to crush, and now it's Iran’s turn to crush because it has crossed the United States.

Tanya Domi: Bolton is known for calling for regime change in Iran going all the way back to his tenure when he was the US ambassador to the UN under the George W Bush administration. Not only that, but last year President Trump removed the US signature on the multilaterally negotiated Iran nuclear agreement that was
achieved in 2015. This multilateral agreement included the UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany, most of the major powers in the world today, to ensure that Iran’s nuclear program would be developed for exclusively peaceful reasons and basis. This was a significant step forward for Iran in its relations with most of the major powers in the world.

Now, in retrospect, given that Trump has withdrawn the US agreement, does this ultimately undermine the agreement for its fatal demise? How do you see the relations between Iran and most of these major powers since the United States pulled out?

Prof Ervand A: Well, it’s often forgotten how important actually Obama’s agreement was with Iran. Very few people expected he would be able to get such an agreement. For years it was always said the Iran nuclear program has an existential threat to the neighbor, especially to Israel, that Iran was about to get a nuclear bomb, once it got it it would use it, and something had to be done. In fact, what Obama did do was get a very good agreement through international pressure. It wasn’t just American pressure. International pressure through the UN to get Iran to commit itself that it would not actually go to the stage of developing a bomb. It put very stringent restrictions on enrichment, the amount of centrifuges that could be run, constant monitoring by the UN. It was in fact a perfect agreement, something no one really before expected would be achieved.

Then it was denounced-

Tanya Domi: They had a joint comprehensive plan of action. It’s very detailed about the surveillance and the inspections, and very vigorous actually.

Prof Ervand A: And also in fact a lot of loopholes were closed. For instance, if any one party to the agreement felt that Iran was cheating, it could bring evidence to the committee and there would be extra surveillance, inspection, and so on. So far in fact, no one has brought any signs of cheating. This was also done in such a way that in fact it gave Iran what it wanted in terms of self-respect, to have a scientific program that would be very limited. The main complaint against it which was often used was that while it had limitations, that after 10, 20 years that then Iran would be free to actually develop a bomb, and this was absurd. The agreement didn’t have that end of term restrictions. After termination of the agreement in fact, Iran would still be restricted by the nonnuclear agreement they had signed previously. It wasn’t giving an open carte blanche to Iran to develop a bomb after a certain amount of time, but this was how the opposition was presented, that basically Obama was giving Iran permission to develop a bomb after a certain period of time, which was completely a falsification of the agreement.

Tanya Domi: Republican talking point.
Prof Ervand A: Yes. The Europeans in fact went into it with the expectation that if Iran agreed to this, United States would agree to it since it was a US agreement. Now that US has pulled out, the Europeans were rightfully or actually very upset about this. They're basically left in a predicament "What to do?" They would like the agreement to continue, but part of the agreement was in fact the ending of sanctions on Iran, and Europeans would like to basically ignore sanctions and trade with Iran, but then they are faced with the problem of basically US acting as a bully, saying that if you trade with Iran then you can't trade with US.

Tanya Domi: Right. They've reimposed the sanctions.

Prof Ervand A: Yes.

Tanya Domi: Trump reimposed the sanctions. A lot of people don't understand that, so you're absolutely right. Now it puts the Europeans in a box, right?

Prof Ervand A: Yeah. But the sanctions before were UN sanctions. Now they're not [UN-US 00:09:18] sanctions. They're [inaudible 00:09:20] actual US sanctions, which then threaten the Europeans and actually Russia and China, every other country actually [inaudible 00:09:29]. They are basically [inaudible 00:09:31] the problem how to be able to still trade with Iran but not to come under the penalty of US, not to be penalized by US.

Now, if they completely buckle under US and say, "Well, we don't want to antagonize US. We don't want to jeopardize our trade with US, so we want trade with Iran," that then causes actually a warning sign because then Iran has no reason to remain under the sanctions. They could then withdraw from the sanctions and say, "Well, we'll continue enrichment, speed up our enrichment. There's no reason for us to abide by the agreement. US has already left the agreement. There is no agreement so we don't want to be restricted."

Tanya Domi: To adhere to it.

Prof Ervand A: So the Europeans of course are worried about that because then that will escalate the crisis, and obviously down the road there would be a military confrontation between US and Iran, because once Iran withdraws from the agreement and starts fully enrichment, then the nightmare, the existential threat becomes real again. Sooner or later then, Iran can get the nuclear bomb.

Tanya Domi: I'm just gonna make a note here. Not only are a lot of people worried about NATO with the resignation of Mattis, of Secretary of Defense, but he also was strongly opposed to a strike on Iran, and that is part of the reporting by the New York Times in this report on Bolton asking for military options so that the Pentagon was unalterably opposed to any kind of strike, and that in fact if a strike took place from Iraq, Iraq could ask the United States to leave. Who do you think is the big winner out of this in geopolitics? What's your opinion on that?
Prof Ervand A: I think in geopolitical sense, the real winners are actually Russia and China, because they're seen as basically protectors or would-be protectors. Iran of course has historical suspicions of Russia especially. China's never really been involved in [inaudible 00:12:17]. But Russia's always been seen, especially from the Czarist period, as an expansionist power into the Middle East. But now-

Tanya Domi: And now they're back. Russia's definitely-

Prof Ervand A: But they're seen as actually a potential protector against an aggressor, the United States.

Tanya Domi: They hegemonic bully. Interesting. I think that one of the consequences, very interesting, of the sanctions regime by the United States has been now this really interesting situation where the United States [inaudible 00:12:57] to carry out an extradition treaty that we have an agreement with Canada and to arrest the Deputy Chair of a major Chinese telecommunications company, the Deputy Chair and the Chief Financial Officer was in Vancouver. She was in fact arrested and detained and now China has charged a Canadian in China who was visiting of drug trafficking and has sentenced him to death. This is one of the ramifications.

This is also causing trouble, the Iranian sanctions. The allegations against this telecommunications company is that in violation they did business with Iran and violated the sanction regime by the United States. Now the Canadians have people that are in jail. Some person has been sentenced to death. China and United States, the relationship is really in tatters, and Russia's ascendent. This has all happened since Mr Trump has entered the White House and removed his signature from the Iran agreement.

Prof Ervand A: In previous administrations, the US had basically acted with unilateral strong action, but there was some finesse about it. They would try to at least consult allies and try to take into account allies' point of view. With the Trump administration the notion is "We'll do it and other people can go to hell with it."

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and the others can clean it up after we break all the dishes. Given everything that we've discussed, how do you characterize the state of US-Iranian relations right now?

Prof Ervand A: Sorry. The state of ...

Tanya Domi: The state of US-Iranian relations in this moment, and how would you compare it historically?

Prof Ervand A: It's return basically to immediately after the US invasion of Iraq, because at that time remember the neo-cons were saying, "Well, Iraq has been solved. The real men now want to go to Tehran." There was even talk at that time of basically destroying the Islamic Republic after the downfall of Saddam Hussein. The neo-
cons then actually [inaudible 00:15:47] suffered the whole defeat of Iraq, so the whole things was put on a back burner.

Bolton is really back with that same program. There's no doubt in my mind that for Bolton the real intention is not to get a new agreement with Iran. The policy is basically regime change, and their expectation is that stiff sanctions will create such economic disruption in Iran that the regime will collapse.

Now, I don't think that will happen because the regime is actually secure enough to survive sanctions. There'll be enough leakage in the sanctions for it to survive. Then someone like Bolton will be faced with the question, "The policy has failed. The regime hasn't collapsed," so they will up it because he's I think so determined, fixated about Iran that he will then try to-

Tanya Domi: Escalate.

Prof Ervand A: Instigate some sort of military action. I think there isn't enough restraints now at the administration to be able to prevent that. People like Mattis, who had more of a common sense about the situation, have been sidelined, and you're really getting people like Bolton coming into high positions very much like return of the neo-cons. There's very little there to actually prevent them escalating the crisis. So far the Iranians haven't fallen for the bait. As long as Zarif, the Foreign Minister, is running foreign policy he is savvy enough to know that it's not that worthwhile to get into a military confrontation.

Tanya Domi: I might add that one party that's really silent in this moment, and I think it bodes pointing out, is Bibi Netanyahu and Israel. [inaudible 00:18:02] like zero, silent on these issues. What do you think about those dynamics? I think Netanyahu probably liked the idea of Trump being President. I'm not sure he likes it now. What are your thoughts?

Prof Ervand A: Well, I think his silence is 'cause he doesn't have to say anything at the moment because his policy is being [inaudible 00:18:25] implemented, and as long as things are heated up and there's tension with Iran, that fits into his policy. In a situation like that, he knows that he can also trigger off some sort of military confrontation. He's been constantly bombing Iranian militia in Syria, I think hoping that the Iranians would retaliate and then you would get a

Tanya Domi: A basis.

Prof Ervand A: Military escalation there. Again, the Iranians have been very cool about it. They've even ignored actually military strikes.

Tanya Domi: That's interesting. I think for a lot of people unless they are a historian like yourself or really interested in the Middle East, they may or may not know that this Bolton phenomenon in 2019 is really a repeat of history. We can go back to 1953. You've written about this in a seminal text, and you write about the roots
of the US-Iranian relations really start at that point. Interesting point I want to make on this too 'cause I did my own research. Harry Truman didn't buy doing an attack on Iran and he said, "No. I won't do it," but Dwight Eisenhower ordered this coup. Take us back to that moment, the US taking out Mosaddegh and installing the Shah. This is something that as we talked before we started the program today I witnessed that revolution in 1979, and most of the grievances around that revolution went back to 1953.

Prof Ervand A: Actually there's a lot of misconceptions about the coup. You actually expressed that this conception, the notion that somehow the Truman administration, the Democrats, were willing to coexist with Mosaddegh, and it was Eisenhower that ordered the coup. Technically, you're right, but what this ignores is that the Truman administration had been actually for a long time trying to undermine Mosaddegh and get rid of him through the political process. This gets to the core "What was their objection to Mosaddegh?"

The conventional wisdom is this was the Cold War, and Mosaddegh was a danger because his regime was unstable and the Communists would take over and therefore was seen in the context of communist threat, danger. This has become the basic conventional view of the coup. Even when Obama and Albright actually sort of apologized for the coup, they said, "Well, you have to understand at the time it was the Cold War so it was ..."

Tanya Domi: A different period.

Prof Ervand A: It was sort of explained or apologized in the context of the Cold War. I think that is mostly BS-

Tanya Domi: You're callin' it out.

Prof Ervand A: Because if you look at the documents that have come out, the CIA knew in August of '53, in fact there's a CIA report two days before the scheduled coup saying there was no communist danger in Iran. The regime was quite stable. It could continue for the foreseeable future. The idea that Iran was on the verge of a Communist takeover was a complete ... Basically fake news, to use modern terms. It was done to justify the coup, and the Dulles brothers ... The British say, "Well, we came to the Americas. We fooled them. We said there is a Communist threat and then the Americans basically went along with the coup." This is again a convenient story, because it puts the onus on the British, but it also implies that people like the Dulles brothers were naïve simpletons who fell for that sort of BS.

Tanya Domi: Which is not true I take it. Not at all.

Prof Ervand A: The Dulles brothers were many things but they're not simpletons!

Tanya Domi: Dulles founded the CIA for goodness sakes. Fair enough.
Prof Ervand A: And incidentally, the Alan Dulles was running the CIA in Iran under the Truman administration. He didn't come in just with the Eisenhower. There's a continuation here from the Truman to ... The question becomes "What was their objection to Mosaddegh?" It wasn't the Communist threat. The real objection was that nationalization of oil in 1951 was seen as a major international threat to the whole world, 'cause the idea was-

Tanya Domi: Oil politics.

Prof Ervand A: If Iran succeeds in nationalizing, lo and behold, Venezuela, Indonesia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia,

Tanya Domi: And so on.

Prof Ervand A: Every country will nationalize. This did happen of course in the '70s, but in 1951 this was seen as the end of the world as we knew it, end of civilization. The American oil companies were right on the doorstep of the State Department when Iran nationalized, saying, "You can't permit this happening." Standard Oil said it would be better if Iran became Communist than if it succeeded in nationalizing its oil.

Economic fear was the real issue about Mosaddegh. The Democrats were just as fearful of oil nationalism-

Tanya Domi: Of that situation as well.

Prof Ervand A: As the Republicans.

Tanya Domi: Fair enough, and point well made, but let's go forward to '79. A lot of the baby boomers were in school. We were all in university when that happened. Some people were shocked, 444 days hostage captivity by the Iranian guards of US diplomats and some service members. The Marines that were in the Embassy. This launched Ted Koppel on ABC Nightline Day 1, Day 5, Day 20. It went on and on for 444 days. Jimmy Carter tried to rescue the hostages in the disaster in the desert. There was like three helicopters that went down. He called off the operation and Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980. How do you see that now when you look at what's ... The juxtaposition of '79, Bolton now calling for options to strike Iran again. Seems like nobody's learning from history.

Prof Ervand A: I think from the Iranian point of view there's a direct link between '53 and '79. For most Americans there's almost three decades between, so historically what's the connection? For Iranians '53 is like a guillotine. It comes out and it stops history, and history doesn't start [inaudible 00:26:43] until '79 when basically the Shah is removed. The reason for this goes to the question of nationalism. The oil issue on the Mosaddegh wasn't just a question of dollars and cents or of getting more money out of oil. It was a question of national sovereignty, national independence. Iran historically had never been a full
colony of the British. It was a semi-colony, because it was seen as the main resource. The main industry of Iran oil was under a British company. From this, the Iranians viewed that Britain really controlled Iran, that the politicians, the Shah, were all puppets of the British,

Tanya Domi: The British Empire.

Prof Ervand A: Because after all, Britain controlled the main industry. For Iranian nationalists, Mosaddegh's movement of nationalization of the oil industry was like a declaration of independence from a colonial power. At that time, you had India, Pakistan, Kenya, almost every country becoming independent. Iran wanted independence by nationalizing its oil, and it was seen as that actually both in Iran and in the Third World in 1951, 53 that this was Iran's way of getting full independence. When the Shah was returned, Mosaddegh was overthrown. This was seen as undermining Iranian independence, making Iran again a colony, this time not a colony of Britain but a colony of Britain and United States. Because the Shah was seen as a puppet of United States, the oil industry was returned back to the private companies, not just to Britain but [American 00:28:45], Britain, Shell, and so on. The coup was seen as an undoing of what Mosaddegh had succeeded, national independence. Iran was now seen again as subject to the West, so the revolution that came in '78 '79 was seen as a continuation of the aspiration to get independence.

Tanya Domi: National aspirations. Yes.

Prof Ervand A: The irony here was of course Mosaddegh was actually very secular, pro-Western, very much of a liberal, a constitutionalist. The people who now took on the mantle of Iranian nationalism were very much of the religious stripe,

Tanya Domi: Shi-ite [crosstalk 00:29:37]-

Prof Ervand A: And very anti-Western, and no concept of liberal democracy there by the time you come to [inaudible 00:29:44] '79. The national movement continues but comes in a very different shape by [crosstalk 00:29:53]-

Tanya Domi: And form.

Prof Ervand A: Yes.

Tanya Domi: Well, I would say that we have to stay tuned to see what the next events are gonna be with this administration. Mr Bolton is well known for his anti-Iran position. I want to thank you for coming in today. This has been a fascinating conversation.

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Ervand Abrahamian.
The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fischman. I’m Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.