McFaul: You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring you in depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus straight to you.

I'm your host, Michael McFaul, the director of the Freeman Spogli Institute.

And today we're welcoming back Dr. Abbas Milani to world class. Dr. Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, a visiting professor in the Department of Political Science, and co-director of the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution with me.

Abbas is also my close, personal friend — I want you all to know — and it is always, always a pleasure to have him on World Class.

There is so much going on in the Middle East, Abbas, so much going on in Iran. We don't have time to talk about at all, but I do want to talk about some of it.

Let's just start at 30,000 feet: if you can tell our listeners . . . there was this incredible, tragic terrorist attack in Israel on October 7, as I'm sure all of our listeners know. There then was Israel's reaction to that, which continues to this day in Gaza with a lot of human suffering happening there. And intermittently there have been worries, most certainly in the press, that this conflict — so far, mostly in Gaza — could spread, and that Iranian proxies in the region might be trying very deliberately to pull the United States into some kind of conflict with Iran.

Tell us how you see that story, starting with October 7 to this day, and at the end of it, give us your assessment: is Iran in a stronger position today, or weaker position today than they were, say, on October 6?

Milani: First of all, it is, as always, a pleasure to be with you, sir. And I want to offer my personal condolences for the death of Navalny. I know how much that meant to you and for anyone fighting for democracy in a despotic society.
I’m going to begin from what I think is the easiest part of your question: is the Iranian regime stronger today than it was before October 7? I absolutely believe it is weakened. It is weaker domestically, and it is weaker regionally for reasons that we can discuss.

Iran just had an election which is a historic defeat for it. And Iran’s proxies in the region are all virtually trying to get out of the possibility of a confrontation with either Israel or the United States. And Iran is doing its best to stay clear of any confrontation.

Initially, when Hamas terrorists crossed the wall and went in and killed 1,400 innocent Israelis, Iran was boastful. And Iran kept saying, “Mr. Khamenei has predicted this. This is the beginning of the end of Israel, blah, blah, blah.”

But as the tide turned, the Iranian regime basically tried to stay out of it. They said this is not our war; we support it, but the Palestinians have to fight the war.

**McFaul:** So they really distanced themselves, then? They steered clear?

**Milani:** Very much. In the early phase, Khamenei within three or four days when the atrocities that Hamas had initially committed, became known they said, “No, this was not our war. We’ve never engaged in this war. The Palestinians have to do their own fighting.”

Then the Israeli attack took place, and as the Israeli attack has lingered, the Iranian regime has tried to use this more for its propaganda purposes. They realize that the world opinion has changed; the world opinions, increasingly — and I think rightfully — are critical of the continuation of these attacks on civilians.

**McFaul:** Right.

**Milani:** The Iranian regimes is trying to use that to its benefit, but I don't think it's working. The economy is hurting. I think since we last talked, everyone's currency has lost another 15% of its value.

**McFaul:** Wow.

**Milani:** And the election is as clear an indication as I've ever seen that the great majority of the people of Iran don’t want this regime. They might not be clear on how they want to get rid of it and who they want to bring in. But clearly, as one very valiant prisoner inside prison in Iran said just yesterday, this a historic defeat for the regime and a historic defeat for Mr. Khamenei himself.

**McFaul:** Well, let's go into some details about that election. It was on March 1, I believe, right? For parliamentary elections, the Majles? Tell us the details about what happened and what it shows about the strength of the regime.
Milani: There were two elections. One was for parliament, for Majles, and the other one for the Assembly of Experts, it is called. There are 86 men — always men — who will be selecting the next Supreme Leader. That's basically their job.

And unmistakably, Mr. Khamenei directly influenced the results of both elections to get his men and the people who are absolutely dedicated to his way of managing in both places. The clearing processes . . . because every candidate has to be cleared . . . was more draconian than ever before.

McFaul: For both elections, right, Abbas? Just to be clear on that. Both parliamentary and the Council of Experts?

Milani: Both elections, yes. For the Council of Experts, for example, they disqualified Rouhani, the two times president.

McFaul: Wow.

Milani: And one of the confidants of Khamenei . . . because they think he might have some plans for his future . . . so they were trying to clear anyone might have any independent ideas.

And they went out of their way to force, invite, threaten, bribe people to participate in the election. They said, this is God's wish, they said that their imam has said it, they say that Khamenei has said it, that the martyrs all want it . . . they threatened.

But it is, by far, the most small number of people participating. The regime itself claims it is 41%. Many in the opposition think the actual numbers are much, much lower.

McFaul: Interesting. So, the setback was mostly on the turnout, right? Because the candidates were controlled.

Milani: The candidates were absolutely controlled but the turnout wasn't just set back; in some places, the number of blank ballots was maybe the second most number of ballots.

In some places, a comedic candidate was picked by people and they put him in. In one place, someone who is a soccer fan and goes to soccer games with a big horn and is called “The Saudi Horn Blower” . . . he won a large number of votes.

So, people found creative ways to say “no” to the regime.

McFaul: Interesting. And tell us more about how the regime has reacted to those results so far. I know it's early, but . . .
Milani: Well, the regime has reacted the way you’d expect the regime to act. Some in the regime who are more reasonable have said this is a serious sign of defeat. We should get the message of this and we should reform.

Khamenei has come out and said this was a great success. There was a concentrated effort by the Americans, by the Israelis, by the opposition to not have people participate in the elections and people showed up. And I guess any showing up for him is a sign of success.

McFaul: Right. And tell us a little bit more about opposition activity within the country. We were all, you know, the incredible initial wave of protests back in 2022 in response to the killing of Mahsa Amini . . . am I saying the accent right?

Milani: Mahsa Amini, yes absolutely.

McFaul: What has happened to that?

Milani: The movement, as you know, was brutally suppressed. According to regime itself, over 80,000 people were arrested.

McFaul: 80,000?!

Milani: 80,000. Because after a few months, they said Khamenei has pardoned 70,000 of them. That's their own figure.

McFaul: I did not realize it was that big. That's crazy. I did not know that.

Milani: It is crazy. And the number of executions in the last year is all time high. So they've been executing people left and right. They have been threatening women; they've been confiscating cars when people drive around without the mandatory veil.

But there is a continued resistance to it, and public resistance. There are a number of strikes going on in Iran as we speak and civil disobedience whether in the form of not participating in the election, not wearing the hijab, and standing up to the regime in different forms. It continues.

McFaul: Right.

Milani: And some of the people who are in prison continue to issue these remarkably brilliant, defiant letters from the prison. Narges Mohammadi, a Nobel Laureate, who has written several just truly defiant letters asking people not to participate, asking women to break through their resistance. Bahareh Hedayati, this young woman who's a PhD student at Tehran University, brilliant, articulate, basically saying the only way Iran is going to be saved is if we have a change of regime. Someone from within the regime, Tajzadeh, who was a deputy minister in internal
security in charge of the election, just issued a statement yesterday, saying that this is a historic defeat for the regime and for Mr. Khamenei himself.

**McFaul:** Wow. That's interesting. To relate what we started with on foreign policy and these domestic issues. . . . is it still the case, therefore — I'm guessing it is — that “the enemy from the outside” is still very important, then, for the regime in terms of its legitimacy? They blamed the low turnout on the West? Maybe they blamed you, Abbas. Tell us a little bit about how the domestic and the international interact.

**Milani:** Regime basically attacked all the usual suspects, saying that the enemy was actively working, there were 150 satellites, blah, blah, blah. But I think the reason this is no longer effective is because it has been repeated so often.

**McFaul:** Right.

**Milani:** Where [now we’re seeing] large number of people from within the regime who asked people not to participate. Many of the Reformers did not participate. Mr. Khatami, the two-time Reformist president, initially asked people to participate. And he got such a strong reaction from everybody that on the election day, he made it known, clearly and unmistakably, that he didn't vote.

**McFaul:** Wow. That is incredible.

**Milani:** They’re very important . . . I know, because you’re very keen and I’ve talked with you many times about this . . . to see signs of a cracking regime. You clearly see this.

The paper Khamenei himself founded — it's a paper called Jomhouri-e Eslami (جمهوری اسلامی) — he, Rafsanjani, and another cleric founded this paper . . . in the lead editorial yesterday, that paper said this is a major defeat and unless we heed that message, we are going to all lose. In other words, the regime is going to fall.

**McFaul:** Wow. Are there things that you think either the United States should be doing, or the democratic world should be doing in response to this? Or does that just make things worse if they get involved?

**Milani:** No, I think the democratic world can do a great deal. They can show support for the democratic movement of Iran. I know you believe as I do, that the United States cannot change the regime in Iran; is the work of the Iranian people to change the regime.

But the United States can make it very clear that they sat on the side of the people, that they won’t allow the regime to get away with this egregious behavior: its hostage-taking, its executions. And there are all kinds of ways that they can make the playing field more equal.
For example, in terms of satellites and access to satellites, access to VPNs . . . all of these things are ways that the international community, corporations that have engaged in citizen democracy advocacy and citizen diplomacy . . . they can help.

And they haven't been as helpful [in Iran] as they were initially in Ukraine. I know you're now worried, about how some of these companies are even scaling down the level of help to Ukraine. But they never revved it up when it came to Iran.

**McFaul:** And why is that, do you think? They're just worried about . . . to the best of your understanding, why is that the case?

**Milani:** I don't know what the case is. I think one of the things that works in Iran's favor . . . and this is just anecdotally . . . is that there is this perception in some quarters and some of the progressives in this country — some of the feminists in this country fan this flame — that criticizing the Iranian regime, is Islamophobia.

**McFaul:** Right.

**Milani:** Some believe that this is a regime that is standing up to the rights of other people. Every week that the attacks on civilians in Gaza continues, I, at least, hear this more often from people . . . that Iran is standing up for these guys.

**McFaul:** Yes, of course. Me too.

**Milani:** Although Iran isn't really standing up with them. If Iran was standing up with the Palestinians in Gaza, they would have, I think, suggested what the majority of the Palestinians want, which is a two-state solution.

**McFaul:** But they don't, right?

**Milani:** Iran is adamantly, absolutely, unquestionably opposed to it. They want a one-state solution.

**McFaul:** One-state, of course. Interesting. Let's go back to foreign policy for a couple of last questions. First, give us the latest developments with Iran's nuclear program: what's happening there, and what worries you about what's happening right now?

**Milani:** I think if you read what the IEA has been saying on the one hand, and if you read what the Iranian officials have been saying, on the other hand, I would think anyone has to be not paying attention if they've not concluded that Iran is clearly, unmistakably, threatening to go nuclear with weapons.

Ali-Akbar Salehi, the guy who ran the program and was supposedly the “Reformist” head of the Iranian nuclear energy said just a month ago, “Every piece for a bomb, we already have. And we
know how to make it. It's only this political decision." In other words, we are beyond the threshold. We are at a turn-of-the-screw capability.

A few months ago, another Minister of Intelligence said, “Some people say Khamenei has issued a fatwa against the bomb.” Well, if you know anything about Islam, you know that you can issue another fatwa just as quickly.

**McFaul:** Right. And change it, right?

**Milani:** Absolutely! Absolutely. When there were fatwas against showers, against girls’ schools, against Pepsi Cola, against television, against radios, against caviar . . . all of those change, right?

**McFaul:** Right.

**Milani:** Another Iranian, literally in the Parliament, said, “Who says we should never have a bomb?. We should openly say that if you push us, we will have the bomb.”

And to me, as the isolation of the regime increases, as their weakness increases, I think they might be more tempted to take that last step.

As far as I understand it, the only major obstacle to it right now is China. And to a lesser extent Russia, because I don't think either of those countries want — for different reasons — to see Iran get a nuclear weapon.

**McFaul:** Right. Interesting. Is there more that the United States should be doing to stop it, or has the train left the station?

**Milani:** I think the train has essentially left the station. I think this regime has put all of these pieces in place. I don't think there are too many things that they need to know. They need to understand . . . and I think China can make them understand that. I don't think Russia is very willing to make that message to them.

Because I think China and Russia have made a strategic decision, Mike. I think China has made a strategic decision that its long-term ally in the Middle East is not going to be Iran; it's going to be Saudi Arabia.

**McFaul:** Right!

**Milani:** And the Arab Emirates, and Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain. They have bet on the other side of the Persian Gulf.

**McFaul:** Right. That’s very striking, isn’t it, what’s going on there.
Milani: And I think it's a strategic change that China has made, a strategic decision they've made. And that has made the Iranian regime, I think, even more desperate. Russia can give them arms. Russia can work with them in espionage. Russia can help them in threatening dissidents. But Russia can't have the kind of economic muscle that the regime needs . . .

McFaul: Right

Milani: . . . if it's going to get out of this pipeline.

McFaul: Well, it is striking that in the war in Ukraine, of course, Iran is probably Russia's most important ally, right? So, it's not just Russia giving Iran things; you've seen the table turns here and it's very striking to me. Do you see that developing deeper? Will they sustain that support?

Milani: I think that Russian forces, intelligence, and military is deeply into this region. I think they have infiltrated this regime. The idea that they would influence American politics and leave Iran alone . . . Iran has been its neighbor, the one that Russia has literally tried to take over, has taken parts of Iran already over the last 100 years . . .

McFaul: Right.

Milani: To say that the Russia is not now actively trying to infiltrate and consolidate this all to me, is folly.

McFaul: Right.

Milani: Russia, I think, will continue. Whether it's a sustainable thing, [I don't know], because the people of Iran, I think, profoundly despise Russia for all of its egregious behavior in the past.

McFaul: Right. So, tragically, the regimes are in alliances and societies are not. I think the Russian “small-d” democrats and Iranian “small-d” democrats have a lot in common.

And it just strikes me that if those regimes are allied and working together, maybe the democratic world should be a little more united and supportive of “small-d” democrats in Iran and throughout the autocratic world.

Milani: Absolutely. I mean, there are people who are doing what Navalny was doing in Russia on a much smaller scale, and in a much more timid way, exposing the corruption of this regime and these sites within Iran. These defiant people who keep going to prison but don't stop exposing the deep corruption of the leaders of the Iranian regime and their multi-multibillion dollar heist of property.

McFaul: There's a lot of parallels there. I've had to say — tragically, since Alexei Navalny was murdered — that I don't know when, but in the long run it's clear to me that his ideas are better than Putin's ideas. And it seems to me that the ideas of the people you're describing in
Iran are much better than the ideas of the theocrats. And we just have to keep helping them, you know, however long it takes. But I still believe that better ideas in the long run always win out.

Milani: I agree.

McFaul: Well, that's a good place to end, Abbas. Thanks again for joining us. You're one of our most popular people on World Class, just so you know, so we're glad to have you back!

Milani: Thank you. It's a pleasure, Mike.

McFaul: You've been listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. If you like what you're hearing, please leave us a review and be sure to subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts to stay up to date on what's happening in the world, and why.