

Cut Through, March 6, 2026: **An Iranian perspective on the US-Israel attack**

All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey's spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews, and today I'm joined by Crikey contributor, Hesam Razavi. Hesam's family fled Iran when he was seven years old, and he's now a doctor and writer based in Perth, who wrote a piece for Crikey this week about the US attacks on Iran, which garnered a huge and, to be frank, quite a polarized response. Hesam, welcome to Cut Through. Thanks for coming on the podcast today.

Hessom Razavi (00:26)

Thank you, Crystal, and thanks for your interest in what's happening in our hour.

Crystal Andrews (00:29)

Now, I'm sure for everybody listening and watching the news context for today's conversation probably needs a little introduction, but I will do a bit of scene setting anyway. On February the 28th, the US and Israel launched an unprovoked missile strike on Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several other high ranking officials of the Islamic Republic. In retaliation, Iran fired missiles on several countries with US military bases, including Israel, Jordan, Kuwait.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE and at the time of recording has closed the Strait of Hormuz an important oil shipping pathway through which about 20 % of the world's crude oil supply passes. The US and Israel claim the reason for the attack was to bring about regime change in Iran but now even you know almost a week later the rationale coming out of the White House keeps changing and we expect it probably will continue to change. That's a

very brief snapshot of the geopolitics of the situation, but the human element is just devastating. There really is no other word for it. At the time of recording, best reports have just under 800 people killed in Iran, including more than 100 children killed in an Israeli strike on a primary school. 40 people have been killed by an Israeli strike in Lebanon, and there have been deaths recorded in every country targeted by Iranian missiles. And all of this is coming off the back of huge revolutionary protests by the people of Iran.

has seen the regime massacre up to 40,000 Iranian citizens as well as committing brutal violence against them to suppress the dissent. And Hessom it's this human element that I want to talk about with you today. Maybe we can start with that initial reaction to this news, you know, from yourself and friends, colleagues and family from Iran when this broke. What were people, you know, feeling and thinking ~ and talking about?

once we learned the news of what had happened.

Hessom Razavi (02:23)

Yeah, thanks, Crystal. So I got a text message on Saturday telling me that war had started. And then I attend I happened to be attending a large gathering of Iranians that afternoon. Nothing to do with the war, but it was a group of several dozen, maybe 100 Iranians. And I think you could say it was a mixed reaction. I think people were really activated, you could say ~ frightened, distressed.

disbelief. You know, it's a mix of emotions. We're a people who have been living under a repressive regime for almost half a century, who has had no serious challenge or threat. They've been very good at being repressive. Finally, there's an attack. So in one sense, there was also a sense of relief and a glimmer of hope that maybe just maybe this could lead to the potential for a more free Iran. And, you know,

All of these feelings are happening at the same time. I think you'd find many Iranians would say it's been an overwhelming time for many of us.

Crystal Andrews (03:27)

How quickly did the information sort of spread? Was it quite instant? As soon as the news was out, everybody was exchanging messages and checking in with each other and talking about this?

Hessom Razavi (03:36)

Yeah, yeah, I mean I'm-

Yeah, yeah, that's right. So I, I got a text message, we drove to this gathering. And the gathering, as I say, wasn't for this purpose. But you can guess what everyone at the gathering was talking about. And everyone was aware. Everyone's glued to their phones on and off. Some people were glued to their phones during the whole gathering. So it's like wildfire. Like wildfire. Yeah.

Crystal Andrews (04:05)

And as you mentioned, you know, this has been 47 years of people living under a brutal violent regime. And there are a lot really of misgivings about the US's stated intentions on this. The piece that you wrote for Crikey this week, you know, you were clear that you have your own misgivings about the US's

conduct and their reasons for, you know, for launching this attack. But even if we just park that for a moment, the fact remains that that the people of Iran have been living in in awful conditions. What should listeners know about what that experience has has been like and what the sort of day to day life is for people ~ in Iran under the regime?

Hessom Razavi (04:48)

It's hard to, it's hard. We could spend the whole podcast talking about that. Crystal, it's really hard to sum it up. Someone asked me that today. And I think the simplest way I can put it, simplest analogy I can draw is that many Australians are quite aware of ISIS and the horror that

ISIS represented as it was expanding its territorial size and its influence. Everyone remembers the picture of decapitated people during that time. Living under the Iranian regime.

Crystal Andrews (04:51)

Yeah.

Hessom Razavi (05:17)

you could think of as living under a state that is governed by an ISIS type force. know, ISIS isn't a country with a government. It's not I'm not saying it's the same thing. We have government with the territory, but they are radical Shia extremists. ISIS are radical Sunni extremists, and they exercise extreme repression. So by all objective measures,

They're among the most repressive governments in the world. Iran has the highest rate of executions per capita in the world. They're number one. ~ They have among the highest uses of torture. The UN and Amnesty International have designated Iran as a systematic user of torture against its whole population. And all you need to look at is what happened last month in January.

When you had civilians marching on the streets, the estimates are between hundreds of thousands and millions of people got up and walked on the streets. And whilst the conservative estimates of deaths are in the thousands, most ~ independent authorities are putting them in the tens of thousands. And that includes children. So we're talking about perhaps seven to eight hundred people that have died in Iran so far after the US bombings. Just two months ago.

the Iranian government itself, you know, if that 30,000 figure is correct, was killing people at a rate of one person per second for the duration of that assault. There is actually no comparable data set to that. I've looked for this for that rate of killing in modern history outside of ~ some Nazi death squads in World War II, where I believe it was Ukrainian Jews that were massacred in one instance.

It's you can't overstate the brutality and the depravity of this regime. And that's just the human rights element. And you can talk about the economic element, many other aspects of this totalitarian dictatorship. I mean, I could go on forever. What it leaves you with as Iranian citizen, whether you're in Iran or in the diaspora, is a constant state of fear, uncertainty and a feeling of suffocation.

It's a constant feeling of suffocation that the people in Iran experience. They've got a boot on their neck constantly and a gun pointed at their heads. So you're left in an extremely desperate, hopeless and helpless state because the people can't fight back. You can't fight back politically because you get imprisoned and executed. You certainly can't fight back with arms because no one has arms. The government has all the arms.

So you know the people are trapped and cornered.

Crystal Andrews (08:13)

The, the, the extent of just how far reaching and wide ranging that is as well, I don't think can be understated. mean, we talk about deaths and a lot of, you know, news reports that people will, will read will focus on death numbers. And certainly that's something that is very impactful and can be is a piece that you wrote for Crikey at the beginning of the month about some information that you'd received from.

doctors who were who are still in Iran about the protests and ~ stories of doctors being jailed for treating protesters who had been injured which to me really just you know drove home the point of it's not even ~ you know it's not even the vocalization or the participation in something like a protest and vocalizing that dissent but it's anyone who is considered to maybe

Hessom Razavi (08:46)

Yo.

Crystal Andrews (08:59)

be linked or helping or, you know, to do anything to advance the course of the people that is being targeted in a whole range of ways.

Hessom Razavi (09:07)

Look, if people didn't know this already and look, I've got to say, I don't think you can't expect the average Australian to have a reason to know Iran's modern history. Certainly many of them obviously will. Many will have Iranian friends. But for those that haven't been aware, I suppose, for the last 47 years, last month should really illustrate to you that there's no limit to what the Iranian regime is prepared to do. They've shown us that there's no if you can kill, you know, the stories of

kids and even toddlers who were standing at apartment windows watching the protests on the street, who were shot by snipers, who were shot by rooftop snipers. You know, I've got family members in the diaspora who have PTSD when they walk around tall buildings, they can't help but look up at the top of the buildings, they can't help but look for snipers. You know, when a government authorizes the killing of anyone, no matter what age, who's simply even observing the protest.

I mean, it's just a litany of crimes that knows no end.

Crystal Andrews (10:12)

That brings us, I suppose, to this argument around regime change. part of the response from some crikey readers and some sections of the public in general has certainly been that, you know, the US can't be trusted and Western intervention has a track record of categorically failing.

~ at this, well, failing in terms of regime change for the interests of the people, I'm sure some would say succeeding in other aims that maybe go along with that. ~ What is your

understanding of the sentiment ~ of Iranians around all of that and around the arguments of what change would like to be seen, who is involved in it? I know that's quite a complex question.

Hessom Razavi (10:55)

That's the right question. It's hard to, I mean, as I try and say in the article, the data on what Iranians ~ want is limited. And the fact that it's limited is a reflection of repression. So that's the first point. We can't speak for the whole population because we're not allowed to.

Obviously, the regime doesn't want that.

because if they did, it would be in plain sight. Everybody would know the vast majority of Iranians don't want this regime. The poll data that exists, which is in the order of hundreds of thousands of Iranians going back more than five years, so it's not insignificant, shows that at least 70 to 80 % of Iranians oppose the regime and want regime change. And the percentage of loyalists is about 10 % of people. And most analysts working in the Middle East, Middle Eastern experts, you could say,

roughly more or less agree on that on that figure. Imagine in Australia if 80 % of people didn't want the Australian Labour Party to be in government, they'd be gone tomorrow. They'd be gone yesterday. Right. So the vast majority of Iranians want a secular, a secular democracy. And it's not clear whether what form that will could take, whether it would be a constitutional monarchy or a federal republic.

But I can absolutely verify that in the entirety of my lived experience, almost every single Iranian gathering you go to, there'll be some discussion about when is this damn regime going to be changed, going to change or going to be changed. And no one has any faith that that change will come internally. And many of us have reached the conclusion, unfortunately, years ago, that the only way

that a totalitarian dictatorship, which acts as a mafia state, which acts as an ISIS state, the only way it can be deposed is using the same means and the same language that they use, which is threats, force and violence. I wish it wasn't that way. But, you know, Obama and his administration were way out of their depth with these guys. Negotiating with an ISIS-like state, a mafia-like state,

And the analogy, the metaphor I use in the article is cancer. Negotiating with a malignant cancer is ludicrous. I wish you could. But experience has shown us that all it does is legitimize their power, legitimize their place as a credible international government, and entrench their sustainability, their ability to keep going.

So, you know, and yeah, talk to it, you know, this is why it's important to listen to the voices of our audience, is the point I'm trying to make in the article.

Crystal Andrews (13:44)

the main sort of theme or one of the key themes of that article was that, you know, some observers in the media, the immediate response and the reaction was to call for de-escalation and that military aggression is never the answer and the rules-based order needs to be respected, things like that, which I'm sure people, you know, understand and can appreciate. ~ And the point being that that overlooks the situation that the people currently find themselves.

Hessom Razavi (14:01)
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Crystal Andrews (14:12)
solves in. how does it feel to be watching that argument, you know, kind of be put forward, be taken up by a lot of people? How does that feel as someone who's, as you've just said, you know what, you wish it wasn't that way, but you know what it would take.

Hessom Razavi (14:27)
Okay.

Yeah.

Look, I can understand it and I don't disagree with the need for a rules based order for a UN Security Council resolution to approve this sort of intervention, which is what happened with the first Gulf War, by the way, you know, the first Gulf War, George Bush, senior, that was a coalition of 35 countries led by the US with UN approval to intervene.

And obviously there'll be critics of that war, it lasted six weeks and it pushed back Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. So it achieved its objectives. ~ We don't have that in the world. We haven't had it for Iran. There's an absence. That UN led rules based order is failing. It's a bit like saying ~ there's a house on our street where we know extreme domestic violence is being perpetrated by the dad.

~ The official police are completely incapable of doing anything about it. We happen to have a couple of crazy vigilantes in our neighborhood who are prepared to go in and take that guy out. What would you like us to do for the women and children in that household? So to hear people sort of, you know, very coolly and comfortably say, well, you know, the family should just sort it out amongst themselves or

you know, other family members in the area should get together and form an army and go in there. We don't have that choice. We don't have that luxury and we don't have that privilege. So I'm pleading, I am begging for people's understanding that there is no time for those sorts of considerations right now. Absolutely, that's how the world should work. Absolutely, that's how we wish the world already worked. If it did, we wouldn't be in this predicament. And

You know, after the Second World War, there was a there was a shift in how the rules based order works. And maybe this is one of the events that leads to a subsequent shift. ~ You know,

the former secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan, when he finished his term was, as he was finishing, famously said that his two most bitter regrets was that the UN didn't intervene in Rwanda and that the UN didn't intervene.

in the massacre of Bosnian Muslims. One resulted in a genocide, one resulted in a massacre. There is a place for intervention. And if the official forces aren't doing it, and if the Iranians have just had tens of thousands of people slaughtered, I'm asking what alternatives are there. And I haven't heard a persuasive argument, to be honest with you. And I've heard many. I haven't heard a single one that directly addresses that question.

and provides a persuasive answer. But I'm open to it. I'm open to it.

Crystal Andrews (17:33)

Hmm.

What do you say to critics who, I'm sure, I'm certain we'll get the comments on this episode and on this video, ~ people who say that, that this argument is US propaganda and that, ~ you know, that, that, that, that's the argument. mean, what would you say to those critics? I've seen that. I should say I've seen that a lot.

Hessom Razavi (17:58)

Yeah,

Crystal Andrews (17:58)

in the past week. And it

does seem to be directed, I think mostly at, ~ you know, at the Iranian diaspora, to be honest, ~ more so than, you know, other commentators

Hessom Razavi (18:11)

I mean, what do I say? You just saw me laugh. I again, I can understand it. I can. What I'd say to those people is please come to my house. I will host you. I will cook you dinner and I'll see you down and tell you my family story. Who had to flee Iran in the 1980s because after the Islamic Revolution, every male member of our family was imprisoned. No one escaped imprisonment. ~ Many were tortured. Some were executed.

One was beaten to death. Okay. And this is in a family where one person was a political activist. One person was actually a member of an opposition political party, which is a bit like saying, I'm a member of the coalition, the liberal national coalition. ~ what a crime. Let's, let's wipe out the whole family. My grandfather was imprisoned in his 60s or 70s at the time and lashed, right, even

given lashings. This is a completely innocent old man. I really well respect and love member of the community. No one escaped the sort of repercussions of that ripple effect, the mental ill

health that has occurred in our community. The number of people who have been unable to work for the rest of their lives, the number of children who have lost their fathers and developed drug dependencies and again, an inability to work or have a normal life.

It's such a malignant, malignant effect. If you would like to think that I am somehow sponsored by people like me, I somehow sponsored by America or sponsored by Israel, just actually read that article and tell me where in that article do you not hear my complete distrust of the American administration and my complete distrust.

and utter grief at what has happened in Israel and Gaza. Where do you not hear that? And why is it not possible to hold those feelings and to hold those opinions and also be holding on to the smallest shred of hope that maybe, just maybe this crazy military action could have one of its effects, of which there'll be many.

And many will be atrocious, as I say in the article. I'm not a proponent of war. If you think that, you haven't read it. You know, what I really think is happening, Crystal, is that people are clouded by their anger towards America and Israel, which I completely understand. I understand that. But just for a moment, can you stop and just look at the Iranian people? You know, I was talking to some colleagues yesterday and I said, I mentioned what had happened last month.

and 30,000 people were killed. And I've seen this so many times and the response is yes, but yes, but quick yes. And then they move on to all their various concerns and actually pull them back. And I said, guys, what do you think of 30,000 deaths? Just let's just talk about that. What do you think of that? Just focus. And honestly, I mean, I'm not a psychiatrist, Crystal, but I think it's too difficult for a lot of.

And I can understand that because I have to switch off from the news sometimes. You know, I just think it's too difficult for people to be able to comprehend the horror, the absolute horror of that and the fact that there is no solution. If there was, give it to me, please give it to Iranians. No one's managed it in half a century. But if you've got the answer, please come and join us. Stand with us, help us. You know, we're asking for understanding. We're asking for help.

We are not warmongers. We don't want to invite a regional war. We wish.

We wish we weren't in this situation.

We wish with all our hearts that we didn't find ourselves in this situation. But we're at the bottom of the well. know, Iranians have been at the bottom of the well for a long time. Young people have no hope. They know, they go out on the streets knowing they could be killed. Fully knowing that, there's video testimonies of young people saying, I'm going out and if I don't come back, please tell so and so what happened. And then those kids were shot. They were shot to death.

Crystal Andrews (22:23)

Okay, take your time.

Hessom Razavi (22:53)

What choice do we have? That's the question that I'm asking. And please just understand, have some empathy, listen to us and include us in the discussion. That's all I'm asking for. Include this voice in the discussion. I listened to an ABC report on Iran yesterday, really typical. They start with Trump and they move to a couple of other things. And the last thing they say, it's difficult to get news out of Iran. Yeah, I know it's difficult to get news out of Iran because of repression, but you can get it if you go looking for it. Talk to the diaspora. They're all in touch with their families. Where they're able to

And there's independent Iranian news sources that will give you information. That should be, you know, that needs to be in the mix. It's strange if it isn't.

Crystal Andrews (23:31)

Hmm. If I can, you know, if I can venture at least how it, how it seems to me watching very much, you know, as an outsider, that there seems to be a ~ glimmer of hope for the Iranian diaspora, no matter how dim and no matter how small right now that is being mistaken, I think by a lot of people for naivety. ~ But there is just this

You know, it seems to be that there is a feeling that this is an opening and that if it all goes wrong, it was all wrong beforehand anyway. So that, I mean, I don't know if that lands for you, but certainly as an outsider, it's what it seems to me.

Hessom Razavi (24:13)

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That's good way to put it. People are saying we've got the gun to our neck, we've got the gun to our children's necks, we're prepared to take any risk. And people have given up their lives. These aren't just words. When things are that dire, people are prepared to almost accept anything. And of course, we completely understand it could go horribly wrong. Do you know a very realistic scenario?

is that they take out the Islamic leadership as they have been doing. But the IRGC, List of Terrorist Organisation, the main security force of the government, you know, they're about 200,000 of them. And there's another 400,000 besieged paramilitia. And then there's the police armed forces and then there's the army. So yes, some of these people are already reported to have defected senior members, but they've got really deep roots in society.

They own all the lucrative and important industries. And a very realistic scenario is you take out the religious leadership and let's say you install a new leader or you don't. But the IRGC holds everyone to ransom, a bit like Myanmar, where Aung San Suu Kyi became the nominal leader and very quickly the military junta took control of her and she became a puppet for them.

Crystal Andrews (25:32)

Mm.

Hessom Razavi (25:34)

There's a half a dozen scenarios like that that have been described by political scientists, and it's just so risky. It's so incredibly risky and dangerous. And that should illustrate to people the sort of insufferable pressure that the Iranian people are under. And that's the if there's one message people take away from that, that's what I'd like them to take away.

Crystal Andrews (25:59)

Thank you so much, Hessam. Yes, if I can urge everybody who's listening to or watching this to read your piece, I'll make sure it's linked in the episode description. Just a desperate situation. Crikey's going to stay on this, but Hessam, thank you so much for your time today.

Hessom Razavi (26:13)

Thank you, Crystal, I really appreciate your time.