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The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran Is Working

Guests:

For the Motion: Victor Davis Hanson, H. R. McMaster

Against the Motion: Martha Crenshaw, Abbas Milani

Moderator: John Donovan

AUDIENCE RESULTS

Before the debate:**41% FOR****38% AGAINST****21% UNDECIDED****After the debate:****45% FOR****48% AGAINST****7% UNDECIDED**

Start Time: (00:00:00)

00:00:06

John Donovan:

For 40 years plus a couple, the U.S. has been in a hostile relationship in the republic of Iran. A sometimes-hot war kind of conflict. And for all of that time, it's clear what the U.S. wants Iran not to be, not to be a state with nukes, not to be a nation that is destabilizing the Middle East, not to be a government that is exporting Islamic extremism. And to that end, the Obama administration tried a little bit of a carrot approach, the idea was give the Iranians something that would induce them to slow down their nuclear program, say, lifting some of the sanctions and perhaps from that, a more moderate Iran would emerge. The Trump administration threw that out and when in with much more stick.

They tore up the nuclear deal, they slammed on more sanctions, they sent missiles to kill an Iranian general. And with that result so far? Well, we think that question, we have the makings of a debate. So, let's have it.

00:01:02

Yes or no to this statement, "The maximum pressure campaign against Iran is working." I'm John Donovan. And I stand between two teams of two, experts in this topic who have collectively spent decades thinking about this issue. They will be arguing for and against this resolution.

Our debate will go in three rounds and then our audience here at the David and John Traitel Building at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University will vote to choose the winner. And if all goes well, as always, civil discourse will also win.

Our resolution is this, "The maximum pressure campaign against Iran is working." Let's meet the debaters arguing for the resolution. Please, ladies and gentlemen, welcome Victor Davis Hanson.

[applause]

You can stay seated for this. Victor, I just want to briefly tell everybody who you are. You're a military historian. You're a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Your most recent book is, "The Case for Trump." Victor, welcome to Intelligence Squared. It's great to have you here.

[applause]

00:02:01

And let's meet your partner, ladies and gentlemen, H.R. McMaster.

[applause]

H.R., you're also a senior fellow here at Hoover. You served as a commissioner officer in the Army for 34 years, retiring as a lieutenant general. Everyone here thanks you for your service. Most recently, you were the national security advisor in the Trump administration. Again, thank you for being here tonight. H.R. McMaster.

[applause]

H.R. McMaster:
Thanks, John.

John Donovan:

So, that's the team arguing for the resolution. And we have two debaters arguing against. First, please welcome Martha Crenshaw.

[applause]

Hi, Martha. You are one of the nation's top experts, top experts in the study of terrorism. Your books include "Explaining Terrorism" and "Counting Terrorism." Welcome to Intelligence Squared. It's great to have you.

Martha Crenshaw:
Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:
And finally, your teammate, ladies and gentlemen, welcome Abbas Milani.

[applause]

Abbas Milani:
Thank you.

John Donovan:
Abbas, great to have you as well. You were one of the founding directors of the Iran Democracy Project here at Hoover. You are the director of the Iranian Studies program at Stanford. It is great to have you here. Thanks so much.

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Abbas Milani:
Thank you,

John Donovan:
And the team arguing against the resolution, "The maximum pressure campaign against Iran is working." All right. So, on to the debate. We go in three rounds. Round one, opening statements by each debater in turn. Those statements will be six minutes each. Here to speak first in favor of the resolution, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working," please welcome former national security advisor, H.R. McMaster. Ladies and gentlemen, H.R. McMaster.

[applause]

H.R. McMaster:
Well, good evening, everybody. It's a real pleasure to be here with my colleagues here at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, a pleasure to be with you. Dr. Hanson and I ask that you vote for the resolution that maximum pressure against the Iranian regime is working. We ask you that consider three facts, three facts that should lead all of us, might I suggest even our esteemed opponents, to conclude that combined diplomatic, economic, financial, and military pressure is necessary to force the Iranian regime to choose, to choose either to cease its hostility and destructive proxy wars or face continued diplomatic and economic isolation until it ends its hostility to us.

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So fact one, the Iranian's theocratic dictatorship is driven by the ideology of the revolution and is permanently hostile to the great Satan, the United States, the little Satan, Israel, and lots of others, including Arab monarchies and the West generally.

Consider a short highlight reel from Iran's four-decade-long proxy war against the United States. Tehran, 1979, revolutionaries stormed the U.S. embassy and hold 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. Lebanon, October 1983, Iranian trained terrorists kill 241 servicemen in a Marine barracks and 58 French paratroopers in their headquarters.

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Six months earlier, a truck bombing of the U.S. embassy killed 63 people, including 17 Americans. And across the 1980s and early 1990s, they kidnapped 100 foreigners and tortured to death in captivity a CIA station chief and a Marine colonel.

Saudi Arabia, 1996, a Hezbollah truck bomb outside Khobar Towers kills 19 American airmen. Iraq, 2004 to 2011, Iranian-backed militias kill over 600 American servicemen and women with bombs manufactured in Iran. In the past few months, the past few months alone, Iranian forces and proxies blew up oil tankers, fired missiles into neighboring countries, attacked oil facilities, shot down a U.S. drone, attacked a U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and rocketed U.S. bases in Iraq.

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There is much more, but time is limited.

Fact two, conciliatory approaches have consistently failed to end the regime's hostility. Again, just highlights.

President Carter sends National Security Advisor Brzezinski to Algiers to meet Iranian leaders, express respect, and give assurances that the United States would not try to reverse the revolution. The response, storming the U.S. embassy and hostage taking.

President Reagan does not retaliate after the 1983 mass murders, and instead offers arm sales to gain the release of U.S. hostages. The response? Another embassy bombing in 1984 that killed 23 and a Navy CB [spelled phonetically] murdered and his body dumped on the tarmac during a hijacking.

00:07:00

Oh, some hostages were released, but then the Iranians then immediately took more hostages. George W. Bush strikes a -- George H.W. Bush strikes a conciliatory tone with the phrase, "Goodwill begets goodwill." The response, terrorist attacks from Europe to Latin America.

President Clinton does not retaliate for the Khobar Towers murder and expresses his desire for conciliation in the hope that a new reform-oriented Iranian president will gain influence. The

response, tighter restrictions on speech and political participation in Iran and brutal repression of student protests.

Even George W. Bush, who wasn't really easy on Iran, seeks cooperation, cooperation on the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after 9/11. The response, Iran supports the Taliban, gives safe haven to al-Qaeda leaders, and builds militias that kill U.S. servicemen and women, not only in Afghanistan but also in Iraq.

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Then President Obama doubles down, doubles down on conciliation with a flawed approach to block Iran's path to a nuclear weapon in the hope that the deal's huge financial payoff will convince Iranian leaders to moderate their behavior. The response, Iran uses payoff -- that payoff to intensify its destructive activities.

In short, fact two confirms fact one. Goodwill will Iran does not beget goodwill. Fact three, when Iran has moderated its behavior, it was in response to intense political, economic, and military pressure. Just two highlights. Late 1980s, in shambles from the Iran-Iraq war, Iran releases all U.S. hostages. In 2013, under pressure of sanctions, cyber-attacks, covert action, and the prospect of a military strike, the regime agrees to nuclear talks.

00:09:06

Please consider these three facts when it is time to vote. I ask also that you consider what pressure on Iran is accomplishing. Again, three things. First, containing the regime's ability to finance its proxy armies and international terrorist network.

Second, restoring deterrents such that the Iranian regime can no longer escalate its proxy war on its own turfs and kill American citizens with impunity. And third, supporting the Iranian people's desire for change in the nature of the corrupt mafia-like dictatorship that steals and squanders their nation's wealth while denying them fundamental rights. So Victor and I ask you to do your part to isolate the regime and support the Iranian people by voting for the resolution. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:
Thank you, H.R. McMaster.

00:09:59

Our next debater will be arguing against the resolution, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." Please welcome to the stage in the speaking position, Martha Crenshaw. Ladies and gentlemen, Martha Crenshaw.

[applause]

Martha Crenshaw:

Thank you. Thank you. Well, with all due respect to my esteemed colleagues, Professor Milani, my debate partner, and I want to ask you to vote against the resolution.

We have a combined approach to this so I'm going to give you a hint of the game plan that we are going to follow tonight. The first thing we want to do -- and both of us want to do this -- is question what it means to say that the maximum pressure campaign is working. We want to question the premise of the question behind this. Next, we want to come to the issue of what exactly has this accomplished. And we want to really try to drill down on that.

I'm going to talk briefly about Iran's behavior, and Professor Milani is going to talk at more length about precisely the effect of our maximum pressure campaign and our attempts to punish Iraq on the Iranian people themselves.

00:11:15

If this is one of the main purposes of the current U.S. maximum pressure campaign, then this could be one of the most important aspects. And nobody is better qualified to talk about this man Professor Milani himself who is the only one among us to have personally experienced the regime of the ayatollahs.

Now, in terms of the premise behind the question, what does it mean to say that maximum pressure is actually working? Working to do what? My colleague, H.R. McMaster has mentioned three things, containment, deterrents, and protecting the Iranian people. And we want to argue that we don't think that it's accomplishing any of those goals.

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I also want to suggest and to make the point that maximum pressure should be in the service of a larger policy toward the greater Middle East, a larger sort of grand strategy to create some sort of stable region in the Middle East and to pursue and protect American interests in the Middle East so that we don't have a return to the 1980s precisely.

And we really request whether or not this policy will do that because we don't see that it has a thought-out strategy behind it at all. Now, we're aware that when the policy was first announced by the Trump administration, that Secretary of State Pompeo listed about 12 conditions that Iran had to meet before the U.S. would lift the sanctions. And those 12 conditions are actually rather a long list and rather onerous. And many experts on Iran don't think that any regime in Iran could meet all of those conditions and still stay in power in Iran, and that one of the most important things for any regime, the current regime or any regime that might replace it, will be to stay in power, will be survival of the regime.

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But let us go back, in effect, to what my opponent, General McMaster said that we're trying to get Iran one, to cut back on their nuclear program, to not become a nuclear power; second, to curb its behavior in the region, aggression, provocation, support for proxies who attack American interests.

Let us accept that as important. These are certainly very important goals and I don't think anybody disagrees with it. As you all know, the 2015 deal was directed at the first of these things. It was the nuclear issue and not so much Iran's behavior in the region.

So has maximum pressure done better? Well look at the some of the recent events -- just what, yesterday, the IAEA announced that Iran is exceeding the supply of uranium enrichment. So they've gone back to enriching uranium and they're building more centrifuges.

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So that part, that doesn't really look very promising in terms of working -- what every working means. Then if we look at Iran's behavior in the region, which indeed, in the past year or so has been extremely provocative. There's no doubt about that. More provocative than it was before 2018. So, in fact, before the U.S. abandoned the agreement, Iran was abiding by the nuclear agreement and they were more restrained in the region. So it really seems to us that maximum pressure, in many ways, is counterproductive, That it is not producing the kind of changing in Iranian behavior that we really would like to see.

As far as the issue of deterrents, I think that this is an issue that really is worth some thought and some discussion. What does it mean to deter Iran? Is it possible to deter Iran?

00:15:00

And let us also say that in the pursuit of deterrents or containment or halting progress toward nuclear weaponry or curbing Iran's provocative and violent behavior in the region, if we're talking about what's effective and what works, we also have to look at what some of my students would call "negative externalities."

What are the other consequences beyond the effect on Iran of maximum pressure? It's alienated our allies on whom we depended to force sanctions.

Diplomacy -- well, I agree that diplomatic efforts to contain or deter Iran to prevent Iranian bad behavior would be a good idea, but we simply don't see the diplomacy part of maximum pressure. We don't see the political part. What we see is an increasing reliance on the use and the threat of force to try to deal with Iran.

Now, we think that one of the reasons that we were able to reach an agreement in 2015 limited albeit it was, was precisely that we had our allies with us.

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We had an unusually powerful coalition coordinated through the U.N. Security Council. It doesn't look as though the Trump administration is going to be able to reach that kind of unity at all. So, we're going to ask you in the end when you come to cast your vote, to vote against this motion. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Martha Crenshaw. And a reminder of what's going on. We're halfway through the opening round of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate.

I'm John Donovan. We have four debaters, two teams of two arguing out over this resolution, "The Is Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran Working." You've heard the first two opening statements and now on to the third, please welcome military historian and author Victor Davis Hanson. Ladies and gentlemen, Victor Davis Hanson.

[applause]

Victor Davis Hanson:

I want to thank our host, Intelligence Squared, Stanford University, Hoover, and all of you for having us here. Everybody in the audience, I think, and our colleagues on the stage agree on two things, that this theocratic revolutionary government should not have nuclear weapons.

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It would disrupt the Middle East in particular, in general the world at large. And second, that we do not want the Iranian people to be denied popular will. We want the majority of opinion to be codified in a constitutional government. What we disagree is how to achieve those noble aims that we all agree on.

As I listened to the litany that H.R. McMaster went through of the aggressions, I can't think of how you could be any less provocative, the idea that they're even more provocative than that is frightening. What they all had in common though, if you think about it, this regime as a propensity to target the vulnerable and those who are considered in the world in general and society as sacrosanct.

By that, I meant this revolutionary government was born in attacking an embassy and diplomatic personnel. And then it trumped that in 1983 by attacking another in our embassy and killed Americans.

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And then it trumped that again and attacked the annex, not satisfied with that, it went into Argentina and killed Jews at the Israeli embassy. It attacked the British embassy in Tehran. It attacked the American embassy in Baghdad most recently. It's a -- there's a theme there and the reaction to it. What was the reaction?

It's tragic comedy among American presidents. Remember when Ramsey Clark went over and he was going to conduct a war crimes trial of former attorney general?

We had Robert McFarlane with the Bible and the cake during the Reagan administration. I don't need to touch on the comedy and the buffoonery of arms for hostages in Iran Contra. George H.W. Bush said goodwill earns goodwill" as he addressed that to Iran. During the Clinton administration, Madeline Albright and Bill Clinton effusively apologized for the Mosaddegh incident of 1953.

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George W. Bush did not want to directly tie sheik charges that killed 600 Americans in Iraq with the Iranian government through their hostage appendages, Hezbollah. And when they took our -- a boat and humiliated our sailors, remember Barack Obama suggested that it could have been worse if it had not been for the Iran deal. So, there's a pattern here.

Now, what's difference about the maximum pressure? Why should we expect any different results? Well, it's not 1979. It's not 1980. It's not 1983. It's not 1986. It's not 2011. It's not even 2015. It's 2020 and the world has changed. The United States is the largest producer of gas and oil in the world and next year we'll be the largest exporter.

Whether we like it or not, the Middle East is not so strategically necessary for our survival. Which means Iran does not have the levers of influence and power over us that it did. If it shuts the Straights of Hormuz down, it would be terrible for the world economy, but that's a blow to the largest importer of Middle East oil for the European Union, or the largest exporter of merchandise into the region, China.

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So, we have an independence and autonomy from the region that we've never enjoyed before. There's always been a split in the Muslim Middle East between Shia and Persia, Persians and Arabs, and Sunnis. But nobody in their right mind, as late as 2010 or 2012 would think in popular polls of the Arab world, that most of the Arabs believe the vast majority would see the Iranian government as the existential enemy and not Israel.

Translated strategically, that means when we engage on maximum pressure, most of the people, most of the Muslims that is of the Middle East, are siding with us. That's absolutely unthinkable 10 years ago. And third, Donald Trump is many things. People hate him. They tolerate him. They like him.

But he is one thing, he's unpredictable. Now, that's bad that he doesn't consult the council on foreign relation, the government department at Harvard, the Brookings Institute, maybe even the Hoover Institution.

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But he makes it -- he is unpredictable and that's of some advantage in strategic diplomatic poker. He can say anything, do anything, on any given day to anyone. And that creates a sense of fear in a government that has all too rarely feared us.

And finally, maximum pressure is not a pro-active strategy. It's not 12 years of no-fly zones over Iraq. It's not nation building. It's not preemptive invasion of Iraq. It's a passive, "don't tread on me." What we're essentially saying is, "We're disengaging from you. We've had enough. You do your best and we'll do our best. If you want to be free of the satanic west, the big Satan, go ahead and do it.

We just don't want to trade with you anymore. We don't want to have any financial dealings with you, and we don't want our allies to, either." And that leaves the decision on what to react, what to say, entirely in Iran's hand. They have three choices, don't they?

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They can say, "The deal was flawed from its essence. It should have been comprehensive as a title suggested. We want to go back and address including terrorism. We want to include the idea of guided missiles that have nuclear warheads, and we don't want to just have 15-year suspension. We want to outlaw these forever." They could do that.

Or secondly, they could say, "You know what? You're right. Mao's China in the Cold War had a completely autonomous economy. We don't want to have anything to do with the West and go ahead and have all this maximum pressure and these are western rubrics, inflation, unemployment. Doesn't bother us a bit.

We'll just divorce from you and the world at large." Or they can continue where they are and they can use terrorist surrogates and have denial of culpability as they have for 40 years and they will always time that attack during an election because they want to always hope that the next administration will be somewhat less severe than the prior one.

And finally, very quickly, we're not at war with the Iranian people.

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We didn't kill 1,500 Iranians in the streets. We didn't lie about the coronavirus and help it spread. We didn't shoot down an airliner and lie to our own people. Iran has an illustrious history; it goes back 2,500 years to pickup Herodias [spelled phonetically] Thucydides classical authors. There's nothing but respect and appreciation of our hallowed culture. It was this government who said that history started in the eighth century and they disallowed or they erased 1,000 years of illustrious history. And want to bring that back and have Iran come back into the family of nations. Thank you very much.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Victor Davis Hanson. Our resolution again, “The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran Is Working.” And here to make his opening statement against the resolution, Abbas Milani, Iranian studies program director at Stanford University. Ladies and gentlemen, Abbas Milani.

Abbas Milani:

Thank you.

[applause]

Abbas Milani:

When they asked me to do this program, I was initially reluctant and honored.

00:24:05

I was honored because of what this program is. I was reluctant for two reasons. I didn't want to be on the other side of McMaster.

[laughter]

I knew what he does to the other side.

[laughter]

I've read the New Yorker article.

[laughter]

But I also thought that the question -- the way the question is posed does not allow us to actually scrutinize the policy. And the best example of why that reality has materialized is the two presentations about the defense of this policy. These are not defense of this policy. These are indictments of the regime. I share, fully, those indictments, and I think they're inadequate.

The regime is more mendacious than they pointed. The biggest crime this regime has committed is against the Iranian people. For 40 years, it's not just the last year. For 40 years, this regime has lied to its people.

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It has bankrupted the country. It is incompetent, it is corrupt, and it is wreaking havoc in the region. That's not what we're discussing. A vote for one side or the other is not a vote for this regime. This regime deserves to be condemned. But this policy deserves to be rejected because it is unclear on its purpose. It is random in its -- the way it is used, and it is damaging to the Iranian people who are the only people who can change this regime.

We cannot have peace in the Middle East without a more democratic Iran. A more democratic Iran can be created and will be created by the Iranian people. We cannot create Iranian history --

[applause]

We don't need -- we don't really -- Iran have preserved our culture of history, our cultural heritage for 2,500 years.

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We will continue to do it. We don't need Greek philosophers to teach us. We have our own philosophy.

[applause]

What we do need -- what we do need is a wise U.S. policy. I am for maximum pressure. But maximum pressure on the regime, not maximum pressure on the Iranian people. I am for maximum pressure, but one that is used with a surgeon's scalpel, not a bludgeon.

I am for maximum pressure that bans every member of the Iranian regime that has ever killed anybody from traveling abroad. I am for maximum pressure on confiscating every dollar that this regime has stolen and has brought outside.

Use the clause that you use to confiscate mafia money in Russia because this regime is as much as the mafia as any mafia has ever been. But this policy, it's unclear on what its purpose is. The reason they don't talk about this is because the administration doesn't know.

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Sometimes they tell us it is regime change. Sometimes they tell us it is simply the change in the behavior of this regime. If the regime is as mendacious as these two gentlemen have articulated -- and they have clearly articulated right -- how can you expect that regime to change its behavior? This regime in its core is a liar. This regime has lied to its people. It is going to lie to everybody else.

The way to move forward is help the Iranian people get rid of this regime. The way you do that is help them, not interfere in politics. You help them by not trying to decide who the next regime in Iran will be, but you help them equal the playing field.

Maximum pressure has worked in one sense. It has weakened this regime. There is no doubt in my mind that this regime today is weaker than it has ever been. It isn't because of maximum pressure. The regime is weak economically because it is corrupt, it is incompetent, it is rapacious.

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Maximum pressure has exacerbated an already damaged economy, an already plundered economy, an already bankrupt economy. The Iranian people are the victims of this regime. They should not be held hostage. You cannot deny medicine to the Iranian people. You cannot deny food to the Iranian people. There can be a process, transparent, international, open to -- into view, open to scrutiny by everyone, where Iran should be allowed to medicine, where Iran should be allowed to buy food.

This kind of a policy, this kind of policy with a bludgeon is only serving the worst elements of the Iranian regime. We have now reached the moment, I truly believe, partly because of maximum pressure, mostly because of the incompetence of the regime, mostly because of the lies they have done, and also because people have risen up against this regime.

00:29:07

They rose in November; they rose a year before. The regime killed over 1,500 people. 7,000 people are now in prison in Iran on charges of that. The world is silence about these. You want to bring maximum pressure, bring maximum pressure for the freedom of these people. You want to bring maximum pressure; they have ceremony of prominent women of the world yesterday in the State Department.

There are 20 women mentioned. Not a single Iranian woman is mentioned. Iranian women have been at the forefront of the struggle for democracy. Nasrin Sotoudeh is in prison. There are so many other Iranian women. They should have been the top of that State Department list. That's the kind of a maximum pressure you can help bring and with it, help Iran achieve its goal.

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Voting against the maximum pressure is not voting for Iran; it is voting for Iraq maximum pressure that will bring democracy to Iran. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Abbas Milani. And that concludes round one of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate, where our resolution is "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." Now we move on to round two. And in round two, the debaters stay seated, and they have conversations with each other. They also take questions from me and from you, members of our live audience.

Just to recap what we've heard and where we're going, we've heard one team arguing for the resolution, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." H.R. McMaster and Victor David -- Davis Hanson. Actually, even before I say that, I want to point out -- I want to point out that what we see on this stage is, there are no apologists for the Iranian regime here. It's clear that the end goal that all four debaters want is strikingly similar.

00:31:01

None of them is a fan of the persistence of the Iranian regime. All of them are yearning for and looking forward to the day when the Iranian people can determine their own fate and have freedom. They all agree on that. Where they disagree, the team arguing for the resolution, H.R. McMaster and Victor Davis Hanson, are saying that a maximum pressure campaign alone is the way to force Iran to change.

They cite a litany of 40 years of venality, outright evil, violence by the Iranian regime. They do not think that that's going to change. They say that attempts to do so through conciliation, through the principle that goodwill begets goodwill has failed again and again and again. They point out that the only times during those 40 years that the Iranians have actually been willing to change their behavior or show themselves willing to behavior [sic] is when they have been under intense pressure. Intense pressure they say is what would -- restores deterrents and actually supports the Iranian people.

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So they also say that in 2020, the U.S. is in a better position than it has ever been to exert this sort of pressure because Iran lacks leverage in a way that it hasn't over the last 40 years until this moment that we're in now. The team arguing against the resolution, Martha Crenshaw and Abbas Milani, they -- they're saying, first of all, they are not at all any way making a defense of the policy but -- of -- sorry, the defense of the Iranian regime.

But they're saying that they feel that the Trump administration's current maximum pressure policy is unclear. It is random. It is hurting the Iranian people. Its purposes are unclear, that it is not -- it is not materially changing the kinds of -- it's not materially leading to the kinds of results that it is supposedly aiming for, such as containment and deterrence and protecting the Iranian people.

And they cite a litany of incidents and events from just the past two to three years in which they say Iran is acting more provocatively, especially since the Iran deal was torn up. For example, they are enriching uranium already.

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And while conceding that the maximum campaign -- pressure campaign has weakened the Iranian regime, they say that it was weakened already and that the Iranian people are the victims. So there's a lot to go into there. But first, Abbas, I want to go to something that you said in your opening remarks which makes me wonder just how much you agree with a lot of what the other side is saying, because you cited forms of maximum pressure that you say you're okay with, that's from a list that's in some ways overlapping with what your opponent said; you know, maximum pressure on diplomatic, for example and other forms.

So, what I want to understand is what is the maximum pressure campaign that you're saying is random and is ineffective so that I know for sure where it is that this team disagrees with your opponents?

Abbas Milani:

For example, there is a ban on travel of Iranians. This is before this crisis that has now necessitated banning travel from Iran because Iran, because of the incompetence of this regime, has been the second exporter or the third exporter of the virus.

00:34:05

But before this, Iranians were banned from traveling into the United States. That's counterproductive. The Iranian people should be allowed to come in. Regime elements should be banned from this -- from coming into the United States. Food was -- should never have been banned. Medicine should never have been banned. Today, the United States should announce that we are allowed an internationally supervised institution to bring as much as -- mass, gel, medicine for this -- but that is both good will to the Iranian people and long-term policy prudence.

Because if you are doing maximum pressure, if you are bringing the Iranian regime to its current state of desperation, what is the next step? The fact that this regime has allowed this virus to continue is a metaphor for everything else this regime is.

00:35:04

John Donovan:

Okay. Let me take that to your opponent, Victor Davis Hanson, where you are actually arguing, Victor, for a kind of disengagement, the mother of all disengagements from Iran. That, you know, just cut ties, cut business. We don't want your sales. We don't want to have anything to do with you. Does -- did you hear from your opponent?

Victor Davis Hanson:

Yeah, I did.

John Donovan:

Yeah.

Victor Davis Hanson:

We have put it, again, on the context, why are we here tonight? It's because Iran was on its way to get a nuclear weapon and that 40 years of deterrents had failed because it wasn't as effective enough to stop them. So, we all empathize with the short-term pain and suffering of the Iranian people that may occur from maximum pressure, but that is miniscule in comparison if they develop a nuclear arsenal.

Because it's going to trigger a nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East. The Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, maybe even Jordan will feel they have no alternative to deter this government other than become nuclear itself. And the potential human toll will make what's happening now look like nothing.

00:36:02

And then the second thing, these arguments have a long history. And we all understand that clamping down on authoritarian and dangerous regime causes short-term suffering. It's exactly the same argument we heard in the '80s and '90s when we shouldn't have sanctions against the South African regime. We were trying to stop them from becoming nuclear, if you remember. And we put up with it for 40 years and their lies, and their disingenuousness and people said, "But the Black majority are suffering." And they were suffering. And we said, "Whatever suffering they are doing now will be worth it to get rid of this horrendous regime." And so, I think it's the same situation throughout history.

Short-term suffering is justified as bad as that sounds, if you have a long-term solution.

John Donovan:

So, Martha, at this point, we're talking about the instrument of sanctions. And there are other instruments we can talk about such as military action, et cetera. But what's your response to Victor's take that short term justifies the long-term because the idea of being that this would ultimately lead to some sort of freedom for the Iranian people?

00:37:01

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, I don't think that the comparison or analogy with South Africa is entirely apt here. It seems to me that one of the major differences was something that I pointed to, which was there was an international regime opposed largely to apartheid in South Africa.

And the international community of nations came together to try to push South Africa. I'm not sure whether the level of sanctions is what it is now against Iran.

For example, the travel ban that Abbas has referred to -- and also, I think we all agree that we do not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. But it looks to me like the 2015 agreement, at least, put some limit on their pursuit of this end. And now, they have abandoned not the complete agreement, but a number of the really critical provisions of it. And we're moving backwards rather than forward. So, we're inflicting pain, but there isn't any gain on anybody's part.

00:38:05

John Donovan:

H.R., what about that? So, you heard from Martha's opening statement, she talked about -- basically, she made the case that the Iranians are acting more provocatively --

H.R. McMaster:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

-- since the -- especially since the Iran deal was torn up. And that, therefore, that's a challenge to your point that being tougher with them will get them to change their behavior.

H.R. McMaster:

Well, with all due respect to my friend, Martha, that's just not true. Just consider the litany that Iran threw, but then add to that half of the Syrian population dead, wounded, or displaced in large measure based on the Syrian support for Assad's murderer's campaign.

The idea that Iran is more aggressive is just demonstrably not true. Actually, what happened is the relief that they got under sanctions relief, sanctions relief, let's think about what that does, right? We're talking about how tough sanctions make it on the Iranian people. Actually, the sanctions are helpful to the Iranian people because they don't legitimize the government like the way sanctions relief in the Iran deal did.

00:39:06

Actually, the influence of the reform movement within Iran was diminished by the Iran nuclear deal. What Iran did with that money is they gave Hezbollah \$700 million a year. They gave Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas each \$100 million a year plus they raised a proxy army of 40,000 and committed them into combat against, really, the Syrian people, which essentially serialized you know, mass murder events everywhere.

John Donovan:

So, H.R., I mean --

H.R. McMaster:

So --

John Donovan:

Given that dollars are basically fundable --

H.R. McMaster:

[affirmative]

John Donovan:

-- what's your case that that money --

H.R. McMaster:

Okay

John Donovan:

-- absolutely allowed for that?

H.R. McMaster:

Since the redistribution of sanctions in 2018, the effect has been on the economy. It's been significant. In 2017, thanks to sanctions relief, the Iranian economy, which is by the way

captured by the corrupt order that's in charge in the country, it's the Bonyads and it's the Islamic Revolutionary Guard's Corps who are the beneficial owners of these companies.

00:40:08

So, what sanctions relief did is it strengthened their criminalized patronage networks with the influx of cash. The economy was growing in 2017 by about 3.7 percent. By 2018, the economy was contracting by 4.8 percent. Last year, it contracted by 9.5 percent. What was the impact? A 28 percent reduction in Iran's defense budget. So, that is part of what is a logical, comprehensive strategy aimed at isolating the Iranian regime financially and drying up the funding to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard's Corps and Iran's proxy armies in the region. The - and to get to Abbas's point on targeted sanctions, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on individuals and entities of over 1,000 of them, 1,000 individuals and entities.

00:41:03

So, these have not just been, you know, blanket sanctions. There are have been a whole range of targeted sanctions associated with the campaign of maximum pressure.

John Donovan:
Abbas?

Abbas Milani:
Several points about what you said. First of all, on the defense budget, I think you know better than I do that what defense numbers appear on the budget, official budget --

H.R. McMaster:
[affirmative]

Abbas Milani:
Is a small part of the monies they have.

H.R. McMaster:
Yeah, right.

Abbas Milani:
Much of the military budget of the Iranian is under the table. So, the fact that they show the 27 percent decrease in no way shows that they have decreased their actual budget. And the budget that they have used to suppress the people of Iran hasn't decreased. They have used the IRGC much more to suppress the people of Iran. We need to get them off the Iranian scene. The reform failure, the failure of the reform movement began. It wasn't because of the nuclear deal.

00:42:01

You're absolutely right, the regime got the money and much of it they spent on nefarious activities. But the reform movement failed because Khomeini clamped down on it. Khomeini

did not allow the nuclear deal to work. Khomeini said, “No deal with the United States. Everybody else can come in except the United States.”

John Donovan:

I want to jump in with one of the core principles that your opponents are arguing. In making the case for maximum pressure, they are positing that at one pole and at the other end the approach that they refer to is goodwill begetting goodwill. They say the record shows goodwill does not beget goodwill with Iran. Can you take on that point? Martha?

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, I'm glad you raised that question because I thought about that the minute I heard that goodwill conciliation. I'm not sure the kind of pressure that led to the 2015 agreement could be described as conciliatory or goodwill.

John Donovan:

Let me just stop you for one second. Just for definitional purposes, not to get you saying a lot, would you say that that agreement does demonstrate your principal, that it was conciliatory, the Iran deal?

H.R. McMaster:

Absolutely.

John Donovan:

Okay. I want to take it back just so we know where you opponent stands.

00:43:07

Martha Crenshaw:

Okay.

John Donovan:

Okay, go.

Martha Crenshaw:

We disagree [laughs].

John Donovan:

Okay.

Martha Crenshaw:

-- on that point.

John Donovan:

But it would be interesting to hear why.

Martha Crenshaw:

Yes. And Well, I think that there were a lot of extremely painful aspects to the sanctions that led up. In fact, we could --

H.R. McMaster:

I would agree with that, Martha. I'm sorry --

Martha Crenshaw:

Yeah.

H.R. McMaster:

-- I would agree that what led up to the deal --

Martha Crenshaw:

Okay.

H.R. McMaster:

-- was effective pressure. That's one of the points. That's why maximum pressure worked then, it works now.

Martha Crenshaw:

Ah.

H.R. McMaster:

But the way that the deal was constructed and the artificial separation of narrow parts of the nuclear program from Iran's nefarious activity. Actually, it didn't just -- that wasn't benign. What that did is the relaxation of sanctions allowed them to ramp up that nefarious activity dramatically.

John Donovan:

Okay. Martha, take that.

Martha Crenshaw:

But surely, a coordinated international diplomatic action combined with sanctions and pressure could accomplish a lot more than sanctions and the threat and use of military force, because, remember, if Iran is actually being set back in terms of its nefarious activities in the region, why did we take the very risky step of killing Soleimani, which, effect, really consolidated the power of the regime in Iran more than it undermined it.

00:44:25

So that -- you know, that is a big question in my mind.

John Donovan:

Victor, I want to take that question to you, but I want to put it inside of this framework. Your opponents argued in their opening statements that the maximum pressure policy isn't really a policy. It's the absence of a policy, that -- I think in the sense that in the past, U.S. action in the

region has involved a sort of grand scheme, working with allies, having clear targets, knowing where they want to go, at least where they want to go, and that there's really no great big strategy here other than you're advocating disengagement as a strategy.

00:45:05

I think they're saying that's sort of not a strategy in the sense that we understand it.

Victor Davis Hanson:

Thank God there's not because this -- we had a grand strategy on the joint comprehensive plan of action. I don't think any serious observer thought that in 15 years, Iran was going to say, "You know what? I decided that I'm never going to have nuclear weapons." They were going to aggregate money and keep up with nuclear expertise and research and then after the end of 15 years, they were going to spring a bomb. I think most people understood that. But I want to get back to an earlier point. I wish human nature was predictable and followed my colleagues' predictions.

But unfortunately, it doesn't. When we got into an analogous situation with China, patent infringement, trademark, cheating, dumping, currency manipulation, everybody said, "You cannot confront China. You'll hurt the Chinese people, or they're becoming Westernized. One day they'll be like Carmel if we just allow a little bit more latitude."

00:46:01

What happened is, when we confronted China, what did we learn? That this was a corrupt, unstable government. In just the year and a half we've learned they have a million people in reeducation camps. Nobody was even talking about that before, at least outside of a few people. And then we've learned that they have an Orwellian surveillance campaign of their own people. Now we've learned they'd lie about the Coronavirus.

The same thing happened with the Soviet Union. People said, if Reagan confronts them and he gets rid of detente -- we had a strategic operational principle that was comprehensive. He comes in like a bull in a China shop and says, no, he's going to -- and the Russian people are [unintelligible] what happened? Soviet Union imploded.

And that's the way the world works, unfortunately, is that human nature being what it is and the authoritarian mind does not understand outreach. They interpret magnanimity -- outreach as magnanimity to be exploited and not reciprocated. They see it as weakness to be exploited, not to be reciprocated.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Abbas -- Abbas and Martha, you cited the missile attack that killed General Soleimani. Do you think that -- that seems to be very much in the vein of maximum pressure.

00:47:10

What is your concern about that?

Abbas Milani:

Well, she was talking about it. My concern about it is, first of all, it was against international law. It brought the international system of targeting the commander, the second person in line of an authority. I know Qasem. I don't like Qasem Soleimani. Qasem Soleimani has thousands of lives on his hands, hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, U.S. soldiers, Iranians.

His forces were responsible for the suppression of Iran. But he was the second in command of an Iran -- in Iran. He was the second most powerful. If you go after and hit him the way you hit him, you open the world to a new set of improbable things. But I want to say one point about the nuclear deal.

00:48:06

John Donovan:

Before you do --

Abbas Milani:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

-- I just want to stay on this point for a moment. I want to take it to H.R., the killing of General Soleimani.

H.R. McMaster:

Well, I think it was the righteous use of violence. And it was -- it was --

[applause]

It was righteous because of everything you mentioned, Abbas. And, you know, I don't think -- you know, I don't really care what international law said. I think article 2 of the Constitution gave the president the authority to do what -- to make the decision he made. What you have to consider, though --

John Donovan:

Do you really not --

H.R. McMaster:

What?

John Donovan:

Do you really not care what international --

H.R. McMaster:

Well, no, about this case, about --

John Donovan:

No, no, I mean -- I'm not trying to be cute. I mean in this situation, yeah.

H.R. McMaster:

No, I mean, this is a man who was traveling the region at that moment for the specific purpose of planning mass murder attacks against Americans in a region, right?

Male Speaker:

But that was his job.

H.R. McMaster:

So it would have been negligent -- it would have been negligent not to kill him. And in fact, what you have to consider -- what you have to consider, Abbas, you talk about how this could be escalatory.

00:49:06

Actually, not attacking the RGC directly, right, pretending like we don't know what the return address is for all -- for all these deaths of Americans in the region for decades actually allowed the Iranian regime to escalate really on its own, right, unfettered by any kind of fear of reprisal.

And so I think that this was a move to restore deterrence. And, by the way, everybody's replaceable. We know that, right? But killing one leader doesn't make a difference. But Qasem Soleimani is probably about as close to irreplaceable as possible, having personally built these murderous networks in a region for two decades.

So it was very significant in connection with arresting, the large-scale sectarian civil war that is causing this -- and perpetuating the humanitarian catastrophe in the region. This is where the people behind it.

00:50:03

John Donovan:

H.R., let me -- let me break in. I want to let you to respond, if you would like to, to what your opponents were saying. And you had wanted to mention something on the nuclear deal.

Abbas Milani:

Well, I do care about international law, and I'm sure General McMasters does too.

[applause]

John Donovan:

I know he does.

Abbas Milani:

But let me add another point to what General McMaster said. I think hitting Soleimani had one very important positive impact. It scared the bejesus out of the Iranian regime.

John Donovan:

Isn't that their point, though?

Abbas Milani:

No. That's part of their point. There is a gain to be made by scaring the regime, but there is a cost to be paid by breaching international law. The United States cannot be seen as the country that can take the law into its own hand and at any moment, not a terrorist -- mere terrorist. The United States might have called him a terrorist, but he was an official member of that regime.

H.R. McMaster:

What I like to say is he was a designated -- there was a designated terrorist organization by that time.

00:51:01

And the definition of terrorism is the use of violence against innocents for political purposes. That's the definition of what his job was. And so he was a terrorist. He was a designated U.S. terrorist. He was plotting against the United States. And the president has the responsibility and the authority under article 2 of the Constitution to protect the American people. So you could say that [unintelligible] --

[applause]

-- I think he made the right decision.

John Donovan:

All right, I'd like to go to audience questions, if -- are there questions? Yeah, right here.

Female Speaker:

There is -- you mentioned that -- for gentleman for the motion.

John Donovan:

Okay.

Female Speaker:

You said that Trump doesn't have a strategy and doesn't have -- and is unpredictable. Don't you think -- I raised in Iran, and I know that the government of Iran is the same. Don't you think that two are [unintelligible] people put the people and two nation in the situation that is unpredictable and is hard to reverse.

00:52:00

John Donovan:

Could you -- so, as I understand the question, you're saying if -- isn't it going to be terrible to have two parties in the region who are both unpredictable? That's not a -- that can only lead to disaster, not to a strategy that works.

Victor Davis Hanson:

And that was in reference to the United States?

John Donovan:

The United States, Donald Trump being unpredictable, as you cited as a good thing and --

Victor Davis Hanson:

Yeah, I kind of resent the question because you're equating a theocratic, authoritarian government that just murdered 1,500 of its own people with a constitutional republic where the chief executive is subject to audit, where the Congress, the Supreme Court, they're not morally synonymous at all.

And to suggest otherwise is really unfair and it's a misrepresentation of the environment and the landscape of the Middle East. If you were to go and survey governments in the Middle East and ask them, "Do you feel more convinced that Iran will not have a nuclear bomb under the present policy or will you more satisfied with the --"

John Donovan:

Victor, I just --

Victor Davis Hanson:

-- action." I think they -- and I'm including the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, and even Turkey, they have turned on Iran.

00:53:06

And one of the reasons they've turned is because we're not doing no fly zones. We're not doing preemptive invasions. We're not trying to overthrow the government actively. It's a new strategy. We're saying this is the way it is. We're disconnecting. A better term than maximum [inaudible] --

John Donovan:

Victor, Victor, Victor, Victor, I'm only breaking in to say you don't have to do this.

Victor Davis Hanson:

[laughs] Yep.

John Donovan:

I'm doing it so I can see the folks. But I just wanted to let you know -- no, but you don't need to see them.

Victor Davis Hanson:
Yep.

John Donovan:
I know what you see is a wall of darkness.

Victor Davis Hanson:
Yep.

John Donovan:
So, you're all sitting in the light. Enjoy. You wanted to jump in on that?

H.R. McMaster:
I just wanted to say quickly there really is a strategy, okay?

Martha Crenshaw:
[laughs]

H.R. McMaster:
And really, I think what we're talking about, what we can agree on, right, so what we would like to do, recognizing that the Iranian people are those who will choose how long this regime survives, right?

Not us, but what we can do is we can put a policy in place that influences that outcome in the hopes of affecting a change in the nature of the regime such that it ceases its permanent hostility to the United States, Israel, the Arab states, the West, the world, right?

00:54:11

And so, I happen to believe that maximum's pressure's the only way to do that. It's just failed [phonetic] --

John Donovan:
Does that represent U.S. leadership in the regime?

H.R. McMaster:
Yes, it does.

John Donovan:
Is there U.S. leadership in the regime?

H.R. McMaster:
Yes -- yes, I would point to the president's speech in September, maybe, of 2017 that really laid out the strategy. But everybody got so focused, right, just on the decision around the Iran nuclear deal that that strategy was obscured, okay? And really, he was quite explicit in there

about drying up resources to the RGC, isolating the regime diplomatically as well as economically. And of course, your point is well taken. Hey, it's not our sanctions that's destroying the economy. It's the corrupt nature of the regime [inaudible] --

John Donovan:

Does it represent -- does it represent leadership and the way that we understand it?

H.R. McMaster:

Absolutely. I think what we had been -- if there was a success to the previous Iran policy, it was empowering Iran across the region in a way that was a fundamental disaster for --

John Donovan:

Okay.

00:55:08

H.R. McMaster:

-- the Arab states and for Israel. So, it was a reversal of that and a resumption of leadership in the region.

John Donovan:

Okay. I've let your side go on for quite a few minutes. So, I'm going to let you guys do the same.

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, thank you, but I want to return to the question and the questioner and unpredictability. And is unpredictability on both sides not a bad thing? And let me interpret this as the fact that we're in an extremely tense situation now in the Middle East and U.S. relations with Iran. The real risk of war went up with the death of Soleimani. Iranian provocations could constitute the kind of crisis that could bring about escalation. There could be an accident.

And very true, if you have leaders on both sides, whether democratic or authoritarian, in charge of a large country, in charge of military forces, and they are behaving in a way that is irrational, whether it is calculated or not, then the danger of escalation and really tipping into war.

00:56:10

And I don't think, no matter how hawkish one might feel that we want to go to war with Iran at all, I don't think that would be very good for the Iranian people. I don't think it would be good for the United States. And so, that's the way I would interpret the question. Yes, it's a very bad thing to have two irrational, unpredictable leaders on each side when the risk of escalation is truly devastating.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Abbas?

Abbas Milani:

I want to make two brief points. One, the fact that Soleimani was planning killing of Americans and attacking, to me, is nothing new. That was his portfolio. That was his job. That is the definition of what he did [phonetic]. Other administrations had -- you know better than anybody else -- had him on their sight.

00:57:00

They could have taken him out. They didn't because they thought the cost was much more than the benefit. There is two elephants we haven't yet touched in this room. It's called Russia and China.

Martha Crenshaw:

[affirmative]

[applause]

Abbas Milani:

You pressure this regime. It has no other choice. It will go to Russia. It will go to China. Russia now has more of a foothold in Iran than ever before over the last 200 years. You know, you studied geo-strategy. Iran, Russia, and China together had, for the first time ever, joined naval operations in the Persian Gulf. Not in the gulf, in the Persian Gulf. And that is a very geo-strategic change for China and for Russia and for Iran that is trying to stay behind them and say, "We are not as alone as you think."

John Donovan:

Victor, we're actually live-streaming this debate right now on YouTube and we have a question from somebody who's watching on YouTube about Soleimani's death asking whether it was meaningful to Iranian politics?

00:58:05

Victor Davis Hanson:

Well, I think there's an official explanation among Iranian circles that it was provocative, that it was destabilizing. But if there are these much-referenced moderates privately they must have been delighted. Because he was the most extreme and dangerous man and the greatest opponent of democracy and freedom in Iran. And so, actually, his loss of face and literally, his loss of life, would have empowered the moderates in a way that we can't really articulate publicly. But privately, people also, I think, would agree about that. And, you know, there is a little bit of strategic clarity now and we, as a democracy, felt that 19 years on -- was unsustainable in Afghanistan. We decided the Iraq War was too costly. There was the Libyan misadventure. And the rule of the modern Middle East is any foreign country that goes in there wishes they hadn't. Russia has 1/20th the size of our economy. They're broke and they're in a huge mess

right now in Iran, with Syria and Turkey, the Kurds, us, and I don't think they've developed any influence on anybody there.

00:59:11

And China, right now, is in a dear [spelled phonetically], their economy's in crisis. Their Silk Road project throughout the Mediterranean and Africa is not going to pay off benefits. And the idea that they're going to come in and find huge dividends to the geo-strategic way, it's not -- it's not logical.

John Donovan:

Martha, do you want to respond to that -- if you'd like to take a response, and I'd like to go to another audience question.

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, I guess I agree with my colleague with Abbas that if there's no other game in town, I'm not sure I agree entirely that Russia and China are, in effect, paper tigers. I think China suffered some setbacks. So, I'm not sure Russia wasn't a big winner in Syria. And the fact that we said we were going to withdraw our forces from Syria, which we had to move to Saudi Arabia to protect Saudi Arabia against Iran, quite recently, why did we have to do that if maximum sanctions are working?

01:00:06

John Donovan:

Okay. I'd like to go to audience question. And I also wanted to comment on our question. I know you wanted to ask two. You picked one, and it really opened up a good direction in this conversation. So, thank you very much for choosing -- betting the better one. So, thank you for that. All right, then down here. And if you could stand up. Thanks.

Male Speaker:

Sure. It seems like everyone agrees that the 2015 agreement wasn't effective at stopping nefarious activities. I haven't heard a clear agreement of whether the maximum pressure will stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and lead us to a situation similar to what we have with North Korea.

John Donovan:

Thank you. Thank you. H.R. McMaster?

H.R. McMaster:

Well, I would just say that I don't think the 2015 agreement did that either. The 2015 agreement had a sunset clause and it was going to expire. The 2015 agreement didn't have adequate inspections and monitoring. If you recall, the same agreement --

John Donovan:

Wait, your question was not about --

H.R. McMaster:
No, he --

John Donovan:
-- 2015, was it? Wasn't it will maximum pressure -- will maximum pressure stop Iran?

Male Speaker:
Yeah.

John Donovan:
Right. Not did the 2015, but will maximum pressure?

Male Speaker:
We know that there --

John Donovan:
No, we understand. Yeah.

H.R. McMaster:
Okay. It --

John Donovan:
I just felt he wasn't taking it, so.

Victor Davis Hanson:
It might or it might not, right?

01:01:17

So I think that's important is that the regime be forced to make a choice, right? So, the problem is previous approaches have allowed them to have it both ways. And we really didn't have confidence anyway that it was going to prevent a nuclear weapon and the range of capabilities that are related to a nuclear weapon like the missile capabilities, for example. So, it was like the worst of both worlds for us because the regime got the big payoff and we didn't really have the --

John Donovan:
But --

H.R. McMaster:
-- assurances --

John Donovan:
But his --

H.R. McMaster:

-- that it had -- that agreement did not block their path to weapons.

John Donovan:

But his question, "will maximum pressure stop Iran from --" You don't --

H.R. McMaster:

We don't know. [unintelligible] answer is you don't know.

H.R. McMaster:

I would say -- I would say there's -- you know, of the alternatives, you know, we -- not everything is in our control, right?

01:02:02

But maximum pressure is the best way to both restrict the regime's nefarious activity, destructive activity in the region and at least limit the resources they have available to apply, for example, to a nuclear program.

John Donovan:

Martha.

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, I'll just let H.R. speak for himself. We don't know.

[laughter]

So there we are.

[applause]

H.R. McMaster:

But we do know --

Abbas Milani:

No, actually -- actually, we do know.

John Donovan:

I actually like the intellectual honesty. I want to give you points for that.

Abbas Milani:

They actually do know.

Victor Davis Hanson:

Can I make a point? We do know that Iran feels that the present situation is unsustainable. And they -- and they know that because all the classical barometers of unemployment, GDP, and inflation, and financial fluidity, they're in crisis. And a crisis they've never been before. And

unlike North Korea, they don't have a Chinese patron on the board that's willing to subsidize them as a useful asset.

Martha Crenshaw:
Yes.

Victor Davis Hanson:
In fact, it's the most alienated country in the world right now. You don't see a patron coming forward and saying, "They're right about this, morally, spiritually, politically, economically, and we're going to champion them," not turkey, not the Middle East.

01:03:06

Russia and China to the degree they're interested, it's only to aggravate things. But they're not going to get out in front and say, we're going to protect Iran to the bitter end in the way China said that about North Korea.

Abbas Milani:
The question, again, was very specific. The answers from the other side were rather large. I'll give you a very specific answer. Yes, we do know. There is more likelihood that this regime will go after a nuclear deal. They have opened a nuclear bomb. They have talked about it. And the way they have talked about it is by pointing to the inconsistencies of the Trump administration. They say, "Look at North Korea. North Korea is experimenting, North Korea has bombed. It gets love letters from the President of the United States. We haven't been able to even open our enrichment." They say the difference is they had the bomb. I am talking literally about the discourse. I'm not talking about guesses.

01:04:04

I'm not trying to read third hand. The regime will, if it is forced, try to develop it. They don't have the capacity right now. And we don't know how close they are because they have, in the past, cheated. But again, I'd hate to disagree with General McMaster. The deal was --

John Donvan:
That's what you're here to do. It's okay.

Abbas Milani:
No, because I have so much respect for him and, you know, in Persia, we do tariff [spelled phonetically] a lot.

[laughter]

The deal absolutely had flaws, you're right. But it was the most substantial rollback of --

John Donvan:
I think we should stay on this for one more response from your side.

H.R. McMaster:

I would just say, how do we know that the deal just didn't give them cover to develop a weapon anyway? I mean, in the beginning --

[applause]

-- as soon as the deal was announced, the Iranian regime announced all the places we couldn't go for inspections. And so it gave us a good feeling, but I think it was dangerous.

01:05:03

It was dangerous because it led to complacency in connection with the nuclear program and then gave them all the cash they needed not only to intensify their proxy wars but to tighten their grip on power through their patronage networks, through the Bonyas [spelled phonetically], through the RGC-owned businesses.

John Donovan:

Okay. I want to stop -- I want to stop so we can get on to another question. But thank you so much for that question, really, again, took us in a great direction. I saw a hand going up on the aisle here.

Female Speaker:

A question for the gentleman on the left hand side.

John Donovan:

That's the team arguing for the resolution.

Female Speaker:

For the resolution. It's about humanitarian impact on Iranian people. I heard General McMaster mentioned about Syria and the role that Iran has and the fact it is causing humanitarian issues. But then I hear Mr. Hanson talks about the humanitarian impact on Iranian people as a temporary issue. How is it that the impact on my people, not having food, not having medicine, is just dismissed as temporary issue?

01:06:08

[applause]

Victor Davis Hanson:

It has. And we have great empathy for the Iranian people. We have great empathy for the North Korea people. But we don't live in a perfect --

Male Speaker:

[unintelligible]

Victor Davis Hanson:

Excuse me. We don't live in a perfect world, and we've had 40 --

John Donovan:

Wait, wait. Wait. I'm sorry. Can we please hear what Mr. Hanson's going to have to say?

Thank you.

Victor Davis Hanson:

We've lived with a revolutionary government for 40 years. And the logical end of all of their aggression is a nuclear weapon. And unlike most countries, they've talked, at least informally, as reported in the West, about they would use various anecdotal information. They'd use it against Israel. They use it against other countries. They've even threatened us with it. And so at this point in this long relationship, if that's the proper term, we don't have a lot of options. And we would like the Iranian people to rise up and throw -- overthrow this government.

01:07:02

We would like to [unintelligible]. We're desperate to find a solution because we're not going to sit here and allow that country to get a nuclear weapon, because we feel that, unlike democracies, like France or Britain or us or India, they will use it, and they will use it preemptively, that regime will.

And if we're not certain of that, we -- in nuclear strategy, there's no second chance. The fact that they are -- they have a history of aggression against Western interests and the United States in particular, and you have a force multiplier factor of a nuclear weapon, that puts everybody in the sphere of the United States in danger. And every government has a responsibility to their own people first. And the responsibility of this government is to protect it from a nuclear weapon from Iran or its interests. We --

John Donovan:

Let me -- let me -- H.R., you wanted to jump in?

H.R. McMaster:

Yeah, I think there's -- we have to get some facts on the table. Medicine is not prohibited under the sanctions. Food is not restricted. In the last week, the Trump administration made clear again, hey, we don't -- do not want to stop medicine going in to -- especially in connection with the coronavirus and the treatment and so forth.

01:08:08

So, you know, of course, sanctions hurt the people. They hurt the people. I'm not debating that at all. But I just want to make clear that medicine is not --

John Donovan:

Okay.

H.R. McMaster:

-- prohibited.

John Donovan:

I just want to let the other side respond before we can go to one more question, possibly.

Martha Crenshaw:

Well, I think that sort of saying, well, near-term suffering is fine because it will lead to long-term benefit to everybody, and then saying we're not sure, though, about these long-term benefits, so short-term suffering might just be long-term suffering, and that's the policy. I just don't think that's very successful or effective.

[applause]

John Donovan:

So the -- so I think the -- I think the questioner was asking a moral question, and you are saying, in addition to what the moral issues are, that practically speaking, it also doesn't --

Martha Crenshaw:

Both together.

John Donovan:

Both together. Abbas, one more thought on that?

Abbas Milani:

General McMaster is right. Medicine was technically excluded. But practically, it was included. No bank would allow a deal.

01:09:07

I can speak with specific detail. Last week, through Switzerland, they have now opened a path. They should open it much more extensively. Medicine should not be banned, period.

H.R. McMaster:

Yeah, I think we absolutely all agree on that. I would just say -- can I make one last point on this question?

John Donovan:

Sure.

H.R. McMaster:

I agree with Abbas that those who are responsible for the destitution of the Iranian people are the regime. I agree with him on that. And I think that this is a bit of a red herring around, you know, these sanctions. And I think what we ought to do is we should never take credit, right, for wrecking Iran's economy. I mean, the Iranian leaders are doing that on their own already.

John Donovan:

I want to take one more question. I -- somebody over -- this gentleman over here, if you could stand up, and please make it a great question so that I can take it.

Male Speaker:

Pressure's on.

John Donovan:

No pressure, yeah.

Male Speaker:

My name is Maxwell. I wonder if those speaking for the motion could address the limits of unilateralism to provide maximum pressure, and those against the motion to address the limits of multilateralism in providing insufficient pressure.

01:10:11

John Donovan:

Okay. Can you do this in 45 seconds, like really collect your thoughts? Same over here. Who would like to take it?

H.R. McMaster:

So I would just say, it's not unilateral, right? So everybody wants to talk about, hey, our strategy of maximum pressure, our allies don't support it. Well, which allies are you talking about? Are you talking about Saudi Arabia, United Emirates, the Israelis? They -- the Turks now --

Male Speaker:

Turks.

H.R. McMaster:

They all support it. Those who have suffered the most from the Iranian regime's hostile behavior love the idea of maximum pressure and are extremely supportive of it. And I think the Iranians are going to -- I mean the Europeans are going to come around to it because the Iranian regime won't be able to help itself. It's just going to continue its hostility as you saw yesterday. It will continue to --

Victor Davis Hanson:

I would just add very quickly is that the missing tessera in this mosaic is the EU. And why isn't the EU more muscular?

01:11:01

Because the EU is the largest purchaser of Middle East oil in the world. For all the talk of solar and green power, they need Middle East oil more than any other country. And why is China interested? Because that's the greatest exporter of consumer goods of the Middle East.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let me take. I'm going to call an audible and you do not have to talk about the limits of multilateralism. I would like you to respond to what they said, especially they challenging your argument -- they making the case that there are allies out there who love the maximum pressure campaign.

Martha Crenshaw:

Ah.

John Donovan:

And that that's working for them.

Martha Crenshaw:

Some allies do who are a natural enemies of Iran in the region and rivals for power. However, the E.U., I'm very glad that Dr. Hanson brought up the issue of the E.U. and the weaknesses of multilateralism. A lot of time, a lot of effort to get an international coalition together. The original coalition, the P5 plus one plus E.U., it was remarkable to get them all to agree on this. And it was a rare thing. We may never see those circumstances come together again.

01:12:03

But we did and now we have completely abandoned that. And no, we're never going to be able to reach that again. It is very difficult to do. And it was an achievement to do so.

John Donovan:

And that concludes round two of this intelligence Squared U.S. Debate where our resolution is, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." Thanks everybody for your question. I want to move on now to round three. Round three will be closing statements by each debater in turn.

Speaking first in our closing round with closing statements to argue in support of the resolution, one last time, please welcome H.R. McMaster, former national security advisor.

[applause]

H.R. McMaster:

Thank you. Well, I just want to begin by thanking my colleagues for a lively debate. But it doesn't -- I think the course of debate didn't change the three facts. The three facts that if you accept these facts, you don't have an alternative to maximum pressure. Fact one, the dictatorship is driven by an ideology that makes them permanently hostile to the United States and others, right? A lot of others.

01:13:02

Second, conciliatory approaches don't work. So, if you don't like maximum pressure, what do you like? It sounds like they like the conciliatory approach, which we know demonstrably has

failed, right? What's the definition of insanity attributed to Einstein sometimes? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result?

And then the third, when Iran has moderated behavior, it's when there has been pressure. And I think what you're seeing is a regime moderate its behavior now in connection with how aggressive it can be in the regime and certainly the amount of resources that it has available. So, if the alternative is conciliation, I would say that our opponents are advocating for the continued failed pattern of the past.

I would like to also say that the effects of maximum pressure are demonstrable, constraining the resources available to the regime, a lot of their budgeting is as Abbas has pointed out, is opaque, but they have less money to do -- and therefore can do less damage overall in the region.

01:14:02

In terms of deterrents, I think now Iran realizes we know the return address for their murderous attacks and the strike on Soleimani has, in large measure, I think, restored a degree of deterrence. Not that they're going to stop their proxy wars. I mean, it's like the Geico commercial. It's what they do. I mean, they can't help themselves. All right? But I think they're going to think twice because we are now, I think, willing to impose costs on the Iranians beyond those that they factor in at the beginning of their decision-making. But the reason point that I would like to hit home is that this is the best course for the Iranian people.

The conciliatory approach, the resources it made available to the regime, those were put to the regime's uses to strengthen their grip on power and stifle the people's desire for say in how their governed. Thank you. Please vote for the affirmative team. Appreciate it.

John Donovan:

Thank you, H.R. McMaster.

[applause]

The resolution again, "The maximum pressure campaign against Iran is working. Here to make her closing statement against the resolution, the author of explaining Terrorism, Martha Crenshaw.

01:15:06

Martha Crenshaw:

Thank you. Well, of course, we're going to ask you to vote on our side against the resolution. We think that maximum sanctions is punishing. It does inflict pain on Iran and on the Iranian people. But beyond that, has it produced any results? Remember, it is also accompanied by an American policy that threatens the use of force and does use force even if the risk of escalation is very high.

We've also heard from our opponents in this debate that we don't know where it's going. There's a hope that it will produce some sort of compliance on Iran's part. There is no evidence so far up to now that it has produced any compliance whatsoever. So, we are asked to support, in effect, what is a leap into the unknown. We -- I think we can perceive and understand the cost of maximum pressure much more clearly than we understand what the benefits are.

01:16:04

We have not seen them. We are just imagining. Now, in terms of does this deter Iran to inflict pain, to use force, to threaten force. Well, most theorists of deterrence will tell you that if you have to use force against your adversary, deterrence has failed. Your threats didn't work. You had to carry something out. If deterrence is successful, they don't threaten. Well, we cannot say that if this is a policy of deterrence, and I'm not convinced of that at all because it's still not clear to me, at least, what the general nature of inflicting pain is.

You can inflict pain for the sake of pain, but then you've got to show results. And as John was saying, combine the moral aspect of this with the pragmatic of this. We know the reality of the suffering of Iranian people. We do not really see that it's separating punishment is separating them from the regime.

01:17:02

Do we have any clue of what kind of regime what might replace the current clerical regime should there be regime replacement? Especially regime replacement under maximum pressure as opposed to replacement by the Iranian people themselves. I think that it is a very risky strategy and I urge you to vote no.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Martha Crenshaw. The resolution, again, "The Maximum Campaign Against Iran is Working." And here to make his closing statement in support of the resolution, military historian and author Victor Davis Hanson.

Victor Davis Hanson:

Thank you very much for coming out tonight. The maximum pressure campaign was not our first choice. It was our last choice. It didn't come in year one of the Iranian revolution. It came in year 40. It wasn't to start a war. It's to prevent a war. It wasn't to hurt the Iranian people; it was to help them. This is a reaction to what we call the Iran deal, which was formally entitled, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." What a cruel joke that was, the name.

01:18:02

It wasn't at all a joint plan of action because no sooner was the deal signed, it was bypassed by the U.S. Senate, by the way, which would never have given two-thirds of approval, and it is a treaty. But members of the supreme leader's clique were already saying they wouldn't follow

elements. There was no joint effort to make this deal work. Second, it was not comprehensive. There were not missiles involved. There was not any sanctions about any mention of terrorism. There was no idea that there would be spot instantaneous inspections. It wasn't a plan of action at all.

It was a 15-year plan of inaction, at which time it expired and they were free to do what they wanted. What we're seeing here is an age-old debate, it really is. This is what Demonsites [spelled phonetically] was being attacked for when he said, "You have to stand up for Philip." This is what Churchill was attacked in the 1930s when he tried to warn people that the logical trajectory of Hitler was something that ended up at Auschwitz. This was what Reagan was attacked when he said, "You cannot deal with the Soviet Union."

01:19:04

This was what, as I mentioned earlier, that the apartheid government. When you say that you're for deterrence and you want to finally -- you had enough and you're exasperated and you want to get tough and deter an enemy, obviously, that's a long-term goal in the short-term, it requires misery. It requires discomfort. It requires tragedy. But it's not just being conciliatory. It can also be appeasement, that the more you deal with it, the more you have a frameworks, and the more you have an Iran deal, the more emboldened, as I said earlier, the more your opponent and Iran is the opponent of the civilized world, not the people, but the government, they always will interpret that outreach, not as magnanimity it'd be reciprocated, but weakness to be always exploited. And that's a tragedy of the human condition. But it's no more true than it is now in antiquity. Thank you very much.

[applause]

John Donovan:
Thank you, Victor Davis Hanson.

01:20:01

The resolution one more time, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." Here to make his closing against the resolution, Iranian Studies program director at Stanford, Abbas Milani.

[applause]

Abbas Milani:
Well, thank you. Thank you all for coming and thank you for a very interesting discussion. I'm not suggesting conciliatory approaches to Iran. General McMaster, you know me better than that. Part of the problem with this debate in Washington is that it has been polarized. Those who are in favor of this proposition see everyone who has the slightest criticisms of it as an appeaser, as someone who wants to compromise with the regime.

There are people in Washington who are critical of this policy who are appeasers. There are people in Washington who criticize this policy because they essentially work on behalf of the Iranian regime.

01:21:01

I don't work on the behalf of the Iranian regime. The Iranian regime actually thinks I'm a CIA agent that -- literally, that work with Mike McFall [spelled phonetically] and Larry Diamond in what they call the Hoover Institution to work under Mike. They have been saying this for 15 years. The only part of it that they're wrong is that we don't work for the CIA and we don't work for the Hoover Institution. We work for Stanford and Hoover. This is not a trial on Barack Obama. This is not a trial of Bush.

This is also not a trial of Donald Trump. I don't know whether you like Donald Trump or you don't like him. Voting on this should depend on whether you think this policy will work. And this policy will work whether in our version, which I think is the only way maximum, smart pressure on the regime will help the Iranian people get rid of a regime that has been a cancer on Iranian society, on the region, and the world.

01:22:07

The only way we can get rid of this regime is with the help of the Iranian people. The U.S. has a role to play. And if they play it wisely, they can help in this process. So, vote for our resolution. Hopefully, we will win. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Abbas Milani. And that concludes closing statements and round three. And now it's time to learn which side you feel has been most persuasive. We're going to ask you again to go to your phones and vote as you did at the beginning of the evening, before the arguments began.

While we're doing that, I just wanted to say a couple of things. Our purpose in doing these debates is to show that it's possible to test ideas in a competitive fashion and for all sides to do so in a way that is civil and respectful. And I listened to the manner in which all four of you argued tonight, and you so lived up to our goals for us that I just want to thank you so much for the way that you -- that you did this.

01:23:03

[applause]

So the competition part of the evening is over. And what we sometimes like to do at the end of the debate, while we're waiting for the results, is to just toss out a question that's a little bit in the news that relates to the topic that we have. And so the -- you know, I hope you don't want to pass on this, but maybe. You might want to. But, you know, the Democratic primaries appear to

be coming down to a likely choice between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden. Which of those two would you say you would rather -- in terms of the things we were talking about tonight, that goal that you all share, of an Iran where the people are free to make their own decisions in life and to be treated humanely and civilly and be part of a civil society, Biden or Bernie?

Victor Davis Hanson:
Would I prefer Biden or Bernie?

John Donovan:
Yeah.

[laughter]

Victor Davis Hanson:
In the spirit of bipartisanship, I won't comment other than to say that I would -- if it's between those two, I would prefer Biden.

01:24:09

John Donovan:
For the purposes of the Iran policy.

Victor Davis Hanson:
Yes.

John Donovan:
Okay.

Victor Davis Hanson:
I don't -- yeah. Well, for any purposes. How's that?

John Donovan:
Okay.

[laughter & applause]

John Donovan:
Let me take it to Martha.

Martha Crenshaw:
Oh, I don't like to be in this position. I will say that I will vote for either one. I always vote Democratic. [laughs] Admitting -- don't tell anybody. Don't tell my students.

John Donovan:
Okay. But that really doesn't answer the question at all, does it?

Martha Crenshaw:

Oh, I know. I really -- I don't know. I truly don't know. But I guess I do feel that someone who would try to think of a more nuanced policy and gaining more international support and restoring American credibility in the region would be a good thing.

[applause]

John Donovan:

And that would be -- okay. H.R., how about you?

H.R. McMaster:

I want to pass.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

I knew that was coming. Abbas.

01:25:05

Abbas Milani:

Instead of picking one, my hope is that both of them develop a policy that is clear, unambiguous and does not give the regime the hope that if they wait out another year of Donald Trump they will survive. I think they have to -- the new policy of the Democrats, whether it's Bernie or Biden, has to be the regime needs to understand the game is up. You need to change, and you're not going to get a respite. You're not going to go back to the beginning if there is a change in administration. Neither one of them has yet produced that policy.

John Donovan:

Okay.

H.R. McMaster:

And, John, I'll just comment on that, too. Thank -- thank you, Abbas. I think that in foreign policy, we ought to have discussion that's reverse kind of the polarization in citizenry, right? Because who's for attorney continue what they're doing?

01:26:01

I mean, so I think it's possible to use some of the most crucial challenges to foreign policy as a way to bring Americans back together, to have the kind of discussions like we had on this stage, right? And, really, I think if we got -- well, I know -- we agree on more of this problem set than we disagree. And I think that's true of all Americans across the political spectrum. On any issue, there's probably more we agree on than we disagree on, but we focus on the elements of disagreement at the exclusion oftentimes of what we do agree on. And if we talk more about that, that can be a basis for real action. And to get to Abbas' point, we need a foreign policy that's sustainable and consistent over time, right? The swings in our foreign policy is what

diminishes our influence, especially in the Middle East, where I think a lot of countries are hedging. That's why Russia is posing as both the arsonist and the fireman in the region and can get away with it.

John Donovan:

Well, I think your -- I think your point -- and -- yeah, I don't mean to make this a commercial for what we do, but that was a great commercial for what we do.

01:27:05

[laughter]

No, you're exactly right. What happened on this stage tonight is the thing that we're talking about. Even though, interestingly enough, it was designed to focus on the disagreement, it was -- because it can be conducted civilly, the common ground really emerged.

So, I have the final results now, and I want to share those. I want to say this, though, about the vote that we do. It puts -- it puts a nice button and a ribbon on the end of the evening. But the reality is that the point of these debates is that both sides get heard by everybody in the room all the way to the end. And this audience might swing one way or the other. A very different audience in front of the same debaters might swing another way or other. The people who are going to listen to this debate on the podcast for the next four years, they're not going to know till the end of the debate how you all voted. So I want to put in context that we've already achieved what we want to achieve. And one side's going to nominally win --

H.R. McMaster:

Everybody gets a trophy, pretty much?

John Donovan:

No.

[laughter]

No. Only one side's going to get the trophy.

01:28:08

[laughter]

Only one side's going to get the trophy. But I want to make the point that there's no great dishonor in having come up here and not won, because you showed courage, you showed guts, you showed intelligence, and you persuaded people no matter what. Both sides -- our data always show both sides always persuade people from the other side. So you are heard.

Let's go to the final results. Before the -- before the debate, we had you vote. We had you vote again after the debate. We give victory to the team whose numbers move up between the first

and the second vote on the resolution, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working." Here is how the first vote went.

On the first vote, 41 percent agreed with the resolution, 38 percent disagreed with it, 21 percent were undecided. On the second vote, again, "The Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran is Working," the first vote was 41 percent, the second vote was 45 percent. They picked up 4 percentage points. That is the number to beat now.

01:29:02

On the "against" side, the first vote was 38 percent. Their second vote was 48 percent. They pulled up 10 percentage points. That's enough for the team arguing against the resolution to be our winners. Congratulations to them. Thank you from me, John Donovan and Intelligence Squared U.S. We'll see you next time. H.R., you did not get the trophy.

[applause]

[end of transcript]

This is a rough transcript. Please excuse any errors.