Iran and America: 47 Years of Conflict, and the Hope for a New Middle East

Alex Agahi | Temecula Valley Republican Women | October 20, 2026

Good morning, everyone!

First, I want to thank Brandy and the Temecula Valley Republican Women for inviting me. It's truly a pleasure to finally be here.

Now, I owe you an apology. I was supposed to be here back in May, but unfortunately, I had a little disagreement with my family.

You see, I had some heart-related medical tests coming up. Personally, I didn't think it was such a big deal. After all, I've already had five bypasses. I figured, what else could they possibly find?

But my wife and children had a completely different opinion!

Apparently, in my family, when it comes to my heart, I'm the only one who doesn't get a vote!

So, as you can see, I lost that election.

And after spending years involved in Republican politics, I should have known better than to challenge an election where my wife controls all the votes!

Thankfully, everything turned out beautifully, and I'm doing very well. Thank you for inviting me back.

Today we're going to talk about Iran, America, and a conflict that many people believe started recently. But I want to take you back 47 years.

Because for me, this story didn't begin with a headline, a missile, or a president. It began when I was a fifteen-year-old boy living in Iran, watching a revolution unfold without realizing how completely it would change my life.

I was born in a very different Iran from the one you see on television today.

Iran was a country with thousands of years of civilization, enormous natural resources, a rich culture, and a vision for becoming one of the world's great modern nations.

Under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran was building highways, universities, hospitals, factories, and modern infrastructure. Women gained the right to vote in 1963.

Education expanded, and Iran became an important regional power.

Iran maintained close relations with the United States and quiet working relations with Israel. Its government pursued secular modernization, although religion remained an important part of society.

Now, history also records censorship, political repression, and restrictions on dissent under the Shah. I don't deny that. But I want to explain how I experienced the revolution.

At fourteen or fifteen, I heard people constantly talking about oppression, injustice, and the lack of freedom. Marxists, Islamists, and other revolutionary groups circulated those messages everywhere.

Looking back, I believe much of what influenced us was propaganda. Many of us followed the crowd almost like a herd, swept up in the excitement of a movement. There was even something cult-like about the unquestioning faith we placed in its promises.

We did not carefully examine who was leading us or what would replace the monarchy. We were young, and change sounded wonderful.

Some people wanted democracy. Others wanted socialism. Others wanted religious government. They agreed that the Shah had to go, but not on what came next.

Ayatollah Khomeini promised justice, freedom, and a better life. Once the monarchy fell in February 1979, the new religious leadership consolidated power.

Some of the people who had helped bring about the revolution were imprisoned, tortured, or executed. Others fled.

And by the time many of us realized what had happened, it was too late.

I learned something I have never forgotten: Be careful when people promise you paradise. Ask who will be in charge once they get there.

Now, this is where Iran's story connects directly to the United States.

Before the revolution, Iran was an American strategic partner. Soon afterward, the new government turned against Israel and increasingly against America.

In February 1979, the former Israeli diplomatic premises in Tehran were handed to the Palestine Liberation Organization. Yasser Arafat visited Iran.

Then, on November 4, 1979, militants seized the American Embassy in Tehran. Fifty-two Americans were held hostage for 444 days.

President Jimmy Carter struggled to resolve the crisis. Ronald Reagan challenged Carter's foreign policy during the 1980 campaign. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the day Reagan took office.

But that did not end the hostility. It became embedded in the Islamic Republic's politics and foreign policy.

That is why I say today's confrontation did not begin overnight. Its roots go back nearly half a century.

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran. The war lasted eight years. I lived through five or six of those years, and I lost people I knew.

When you experience war, it isn't an abstract military strategy. It is a mother losing a son. It is a family losing its home. It is a young person's future disappearing.

That is why I despise war.

During those years, Iran's government tightened its control at home. In the summer of 1988, thousands of political prisoners were executed after secret proceedings. Families were left without answers.

Eventually I had to leave Iran. I spent about a year in Turkey, uncertain of my future and trying to find a way forward.

Finally, in 1986, I arrived in the United States.

Forty years ago.

Like many immigrants, I struggled with a new language, culture, and responsibilities. But I fell in love with America because I believed I had the freedom to build a future.

I built my career. I married my wife, Rosa. We raised three children. We made our home in Irvine.

Iran is where I was born, but America is where I built my life. I consider myself American before anything else.

And I want this nation to remain a place of freedom and opportunity for my children and future generations.

Even after coming to America, I never forgot Iran.

I served on the national board of the Iranian American Republican Council and headed its Orange County chapter several times. I participated in the campaigns of George W. Bush,

John McCain, and Mitt Romney.

I worked with congressional offices, including those of Dana Rohrabacher, Ed Royce, and Christopher Cox. I made trips to Washington, D.C. We communicated with members of Congress, senators, and Vice President Dick Cheney's office about political change in Iran.

When President Bush described Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an axis of evil in 2002, I hoped American policy might bring meaningful change.

But I gradually became disillusioned. Speeches and action were not always the same.

I came to distinguish between politicians and activists. I was an activist, committed to a cause. Politicians had elections, alliances, and compromises.

Eventually I stepped away from political activism. And something unexpected happened: I found spirituality. Or perhaps spirituality found me.

I began looking differently at life, people, and purpose. But I never stopped caring about Iran.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic expanded its influence across the region.

Iran helped build Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s. In October 1983, the bombing of the American Marine barracks in Beirut killed 241 American service members; a separate bombing killed 58 French military personnel.

Over the decades, Iran supported armed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories, and backed the Assad government during Syria's civil war.

Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, became central to Iran's regional strategy.

After the United States removed Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran gained new opportunities for influence in Iraq. Iranian-backed militias attacked Americans and contributed to violence within Iraq.

I sometimes picture this regional network as an octopus, with influence reaching far beyond Tehran.

These groups have different histories and degrees of independence. But Iranian financing, training, weapons, and political support have been significant.

And all the while, ordinary Iranians continued struggling with economic hardship and repression. That contrast has troubled me for decades.

Let me explain how I personally see the American response.

President Bush spoke forcefully about Iran, yet removing Saddam Hussein also opened the door to greater Iranian influence in Iraq.

President Obama negotiated the 2015 nuclear agreement. Supporters believed it could restrict Iran's nuclear program and reduce the risk of war. I worried that sanctions relief would increase Tehran's resources without changing its regional priorities.

That relief largely restored access to Iran's own assets and trade; it was not simply a gift of American taxpayer money. But I questioned whether it would change the government's behavior.

Then Donald Trump entered office. This next part is my personal political opinion.

I had become concerned about larger government, dependency, and the future of America's middle class. I associated that direction with what some call the New World Order.

Trump's America First message gave me hope for a different approach. His administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018, imposed maximum-pressure sanctions, and ordered the January 2020 strike that killed Soleimani.

Later came the Abraham Accords, opening diplomatic relationships between Israel and several Arab countries.

I wondered what might have happened if Trump had won a second consecutive term in 2020. No one can know, but I believed the region might have taken a different course.

During the Biden years I became more disengaged from politics, although I remained concerned about Iran's nuclear program, missile capabilities, and regional activity.

Then the Iranian people drew my attention back.

In September 2022, Mahsa Jina Amini died after being detained by Iran's morality police. Her death sparked nationwide protests. Women, students, and young people demanded change.

Three words echoed around the world: Woman. Life. Freedom.

In January 2026, Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah, called for nationwide demonstrations. Crowds in Iran were heard chanting his name.

In my personal opinion, Reza Pahlavi is the one opposition leader with the recognition and potential to guide a transitional government toward a free Iran. That is my belief, and I know Iranians hold different views about their political future.

The January crackdown was horrific. Thousands were killed, according to human-rights reporting; higher estimates, including claims of tens of thousands, remain disputed and should not be presented as confirmed totals.

What matters to me is that the Iranian people must have the right to choose their government, freely and without fear.

And now we come to the conflict in today's headlines.

The confrontation among Iran, Israel, and America is the culmination of decades of hostility, nuclear disputes, sanctions, armed groups, and military escalation.

In February 2026, American and Israeli strikes marked a dramatic escalation. Ali Khamenei was killed, and Mojtaba Khamenei subsequently became Iran's leader.

The conflict has affected regional security, civilian lives, energy markets, and shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Ceasefire efforts have not produced a durable political settlement.

But changing one leader does not automatically change an entire political system.

So the question is not only how the fighting stops. It is how the people of Iran can secure a peaceful, accountable government and how the region can avoid another cycle of violence.

I want to be clear about something: the Iranian people and the rulers of Iran are not the same.

Many of us regard the Islamic Republic's ruling establishment as occupiers of the homeland we love. That is how deeply alienated we feel from the system.

I want you to imagine the whole world as one human body.

In my imagination, America is the brain - a center of leadership, innovation, and possibility. And Iran, the country of my birth, is the heart - an ancient civilization full of culture, poetry, and remarkable people.

But what happens when a disease attacks one part of the body and begins to spread?

In my personal view, the authoritarian governing system that took power in Iran is like a cancer within the institutions of the country. Its coercive networks have contributed to suffering beyond Iran's borders.

I use that metaphor for a governing system and its repressive institutions - never for Iranian people, Muslims, or any other religious or political community.

When I see some alliances among ideological movements today, including elements of the political left and political Islamism, I remember the unlikely coalition I witnessed in 1979. I do not claim they are the same, but the memory reminds me to ask what every movement would do with power.

The Iranian people are not the disease. They are among its victims.

I don't want to destroy the body. I want the body to survive and heal.

I lived through war. I lost people I knew. I do not celebrate innocent suffering.

And I believe any political transition must be followed by rebuilding courts, protecting freedoms, restoring public trust, and making government accountable to its citizens.

After all this talk of war and conflict, I want to finish with hope.

I believe the Middle East could experience a renaissance.

Think about Europe. After centuries of devastating wars, many European nations built institutions and relationships that made cooperation possible among former enemies.

Why should the Middle East not aspire to something similar?

Imagine Iran living peacefully with its neighbors. Imagine Israel and Arab countries expanding cooperation. Imagine young people competing to build companies, universities, hospitals, and new technologies rather than fighting wars.

Imagine the talents of Iranians, Israelis, Arabs, Turks, and others contributing to shared prosperity.

This is my hope, not a guarantee. But I believe the people of the region deserve the chance.

When I look back, I think about the fifteen-year-old boy I once was in Iran. He had no idea he would experience war, leave his homeland, and one day stand before a wonderful group of Americans in Temecula telling his story.

I lost the Iran of my childhood. But I gained America.

I gained the opportunity to build a life, marry the woman I love, raise three children, and become part of this extraordinary country.

I love Iran because it is where my story began. I love America because it is where my future became possible.

My greatest hope is that one day the people of Iran will enjoy the freedoms my family has enjoyed here, that the Middle East will find a path toward peace, and that America will remain a nation of liberty and opportunity for generations to come.

Thank you for listening.

God bless the people of Iran.

And God bless the United States of America.

I would be delighted to take your questions.