

The Iran Crisis #17: Prof. Richard Falk on his Meeting with Khomeini, International Law & More

Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Prof. Richard Falk on 4/29/2026. The video is [here](#). The audio is on [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#).

[Helena Cobban]

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational.

And this is number 17, as it happens in our ongoing series of recorded conversations with really fascinating and dynamic and well informed people in our Iran crisis project. Today, we're recording this on April 29. I'm in Washington, DC.

And I am really delighted that my guest today is our wonderful board member, Professor Richard Falk. Richard, thank you so much for giving time to do this.

[Richard Falk]

Well, it's lovely to be with you, even though the subject isn't quite so lovely.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, that's true. I try to get grains of hope where I can. But we were talking a little early about our grandchildren, and you have one great grandchild. So we do need to have, you know, the future that we're all trying to build for those coming generations well in mind.

And today, Richard and I are going to be talking about some really fascinating things. The first will be the time he met Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris the day before he flew back to Tehran.

The second will be the status of international law in which of course, as all of you watching this know, Richard is an amazing leader. And then we will talk about nuclear non proliferation. Given that this week, and for the next couple of weeks, the nations of the world that are members of the nuclear non proliferation treaty, which by the way, does not include Israel, but does include Iran, are discussing what needs to happen with the treaty in a five yearly review conference.

So lots to talk about, Richard, let's dive right in with you and the Ayatollah, what led you there? And what were your hopes at that time?

[Richard Falk]

Well, I had been an opponent of the Shah's government on the basic premise that it was violating fundamental human rights, and that it was a government imposed on Iran by a CIA supported coup in 1953 against a democratically elected leader who pursued an agenda of economic nationalism. And that's often missing in the discussion, that historical background,

which was very much on the mind of Ayatollah Khomeini, when we had the opportunity to meet him in Paris after having spent two weeks in Iran meeting a variety of persons involved in one way or another in the movement against the Shah. And we had the opportunity to meet several of the most prominent religious leaders in Iran, as well as the US ambassador, William Sullivan, who I had testified against his confirmation months earlier.

And he greeted us with, greeted me particularly with the words, 'I know Professor Falk thinks I'm a war criminal.'

[Helena Cobban]

So you were with a delegation of Americans or an international delegation or what?

[Richard Falk]

Two other people, the former US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, and a young younger religious leader, Philip Luce. The invitation had come to me because from the acting interim president of Iran.

[Helena Cobban]

Was that Ali Shariati?

[Richard Falk]

No, no, it was-- But anyway, we can figure that out. And he was an interesting person.

I had been persuaded to be active about Iran by a group of Iranian students. The Shah had sent students abroad to take advantage of American higher education. But these students often had been either tortured or their family parents had been tortured.

And rather than being emissaries of goodwill for the Shah, they turned out to be centers of early opposition. And I was sort of mobilized in support of them. And that's why the invitation originally came to me and I persuaded Ramsey Clark, who had been involved in the Harrisburg kidnapping trial of Kissinger that was brought against some Catholic activists, Berrigan brothers, and I guess that they were the main defendants along with Elizabeth McAllister, I think, a nun at the time.

But anyway, we were a harmonious threesome in our visits to Iran during the time of which the Shah abdicated. People couldn't believe it at first. They thought it was a trick to make those in opposition show their true colors.

[Helena Cobban]

Oh, how fascinating. So you were there when he abdicated. Were there massive protests in the street demonstrations?

I mean, I remember, I was in Beirut in those days. It seems that there was like every 40 days, there would be a massive great demonstration.

[Richard Falk]

And there was violence on the part of the Shah's security people. And many, many protesters were killed. And there was a chant from the movement people as these 40 day demonstrations became more and more widely supported, which ran as follows: 'Leaders, leaders, give us guns!'

And it's notable that Khomeini's leadership first expressed itself by saying, we will do better if we do not resort to guns. And he denied those requests. And in the face of fairly serious violence, we were there also in visiting some doctors in a nearby city that had treated the victims of police violence at the most recent of these demonstrations.

And they said that there was a repeated and sustained recourse to violence. The most spectacular instance is when police closed off a square in Tehran and machine gunned the protesters, which led to this Brzezinski Carter, congratulatory phone call to the Shah of being tough on the protests. And that was part of what alienated this movement from the United States at an early stage.

[Helena Cobban]

And if I could just leap in there, I mean, my recollection from when I was in Beirut was those very long months after the American hostages were taken. I know I'm leaping forward a little bit here. But the representatives of, by then it was the Islamic Republic of Iran throughout 1979 and 1980, they were determined that they would not give the hostages back to Jimmy Carter while he was president.

They would wait until his successor was inaugurated. So maybe that is linked to that phone call that you're talking about, the Carter-Brzezinski phone call congratulating the Shah on his repression.

[Richard Falk]

That was certainly a factor. Another factor was that the Republicans sent delegations to Tehran, in which they promised to, I think, unfreeze assets, Iranian...

[Helena Cobban]

Well, that's right. That was the Iran-Contra whole thing, and Bill Casey doing that. And of course, in 1980, it was Carter and Brzezinski who gave the backing to Saddam Hussein to launch his terrible invasion of Iran.

So there was a lot of history there between Jimmy Carter and the Islamic Republic. But I want to go back to you and your delegation. You'd had these interesting experiences in Tehran in late 1978, early 1979.

And then you went to visit with Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris. I'd love to hear any, like, impressions you have how it was to meet him. You know, I'm assuming he didn't speak in English and you...

Did he speak French? Anyway, you needed translation and how he talked to you. I'd love to hear everything.

[Richard Falk]

Well, it was quite long. This meeting with Khomeini was not something that was in our agenda as we went. But they seemed impressed by our willingness to try to understand the revolution that was unfolding.

And they actually told us as a kind of culmination of the visit, if we can arrange to stop in Paris, we will have the opportunity to meet with him. And we met with him for a long time, two, three hours. And we broke up the meeting because we had to catch a plane back to the US.

[Helena Cobban]

So tell me a little bit about the *mise en scène*. I mean, you know, he was in a suburb of Paris. He had a big compound, he was being protected by the French or threatened by the French?

What was his situation there?

[Richard Falk]

Well, I think he was being given a kind of asylum by the French. And he was, I believe, in the home of his, of a relative or it was a was a normal kind of comfortable house. And I think Neauphle-le-Château was the suburb, and he dealt with media or visitors like ourselves, by meeting in a tent that was set up on the lawn, this large tent, and we sat on the floor.

[Helena Cobban]

This was January, it must have been cold.

[Richard Falk]

Yeah, I guess it was. I don't have any recollection of the weather, because it was such a kind of dramatic occasion. He, and his translator had been my friend back here, who became their first ambassador, Mansour Farhang, who recently has, as an aside, he's recently published an interesting book written in collaboration with the lead surviving hostage in the American embassy.

And he was an early-- He had been a professor in, I think, Sacramento, California system. And he was an early convert to the revolution, even though he was not particularly Islamic. And we, the meeting with Khomeini started with his asking us questions.

And obviously, on his mind, was the earlier American experience in 1953. And whether we could give any assurances that that kind of intervention would not be repeated in some form. And there was a plausible basis for concern.

The US government had sent the NATO leading general to Tehran to see whether they could mobilize the armed forces to either stage a counter coup, or to create enough support for an alternative to the Islamic Republic. And, of course, we couldn't give any real assurance, except that we would try to convey the impression that if the United States respected the outcome of this national movement, which seemed overwhelmingly supported by the population at that time, including its secular elements. We marched in some couple of the demonstrations that were held in celebration of the Shah's abdication, and they were very impressive, moving, completely nonviolent, no police presence.

And it was one of the first things that Khomeini said after that was that he only had entered political life because, as he put it, there was a river of blood between the state and the people. And that when he went back to Iran, his intention and hope was to resume a religious life. And, in fact, he did go back to Qom, the holy city there, which we also had visited during our time in Iran.

And only in the aftermath of the hostage crisis, I believe, or shortly before it, he was persuaded that the sort of technocratic and liberal leadership was not capable of sustaining the revolutionary momentum that he was induced to depart from that religious intention. And it may be that he underestimated his appeal to the Iranian public, because he'd been in exile for a long time, ever since the coup in 53. So he was quite out of touch in one way with the happenings in Iran.

But he definitely gave the impression that his hope for Iran was that if it was accepted by the West, and particularly by the US, normalization was a prime objective, and a kind of win-win situation for both the West and Iran.

He also seemed, at that time, to take an interesting attitude toward the minorities, which, particularly the Baha'is and Jewish minority, both of which the Shah had used because he didn't trust the mainstream population of Iran. And he said an interesting, I had actually posed the question to him of what could these minorities expect?

[Helena Cobban]

Religious minorities? Did he ask about national minorities, or this was only religious minorities?

[Richard Falk]

My question was only religious. And as I recall it, he didn't say anything about the [national] minorities, but he was very non-sectarian in his approach to political governance. He didn't want to distinguish between Sunni and Shia, which later became such a important way that the US intervened in Iraq in 2003, where they tried to displace the Sunnis with the Shiites, much to, as it turned out to be a very dysfunctional adjustment that...

[Helena Cobban]

Well, that's been a longtime tactic of imperialists and colonialists, divide and rule, and in particular, spreading this idea that, you know, there's this age-old enmity between, you

know, Shiites and Sunnis, or between, you know, various groups as a way of pitting them against each other. And, you know, obviously, it did have a really terrible effect in Iraq, especially with the rise of ISIS, and now in Syria, you know, since the rise of the Sunni extremists there.

But it's interesting that you say that Ayatollah Khomeini was at pains not to be part of that sectarianism, was trying to tamp it down and build bridges or stress the unity of Shias and Sunnis, which is a continuing issue today.

[Richard Falk]

Yes, yes, it's a continuing issue, and probably was viewed differently as the conflict with Israel and the West unfolded. But what he said with respect to the Jews and Baha'is was interesting in terms of later development. He said the Jewish religion is a genuine religion, and it would be a tragedy if they left Iran, so long as they didn't involve themselves with Israeli politics.

The Baha'is, in contrast, [he said] are not a genuine religion, and they have no place in the Islamic Republic. You know, because of their worship of a prophet after Muhammad. And that aspect of what he said, I think, was moderated to some extent, because some young mullahs took this attitude to stage what could have been a genocidal elimination.

There were a lot of, as many as 300,000 Baha'is at that time in Iran. And Khomeini apparently intervened to prevent that in the early stages of his governance in Iran.

[Helena Cobban]

Fascinating. So what kind of picture did he hold up for the future of relationship between the Islamic Republic and the United States? I mean, it was not yet the Islamic Republic, but it would become the Islamic Republic.

But you know, what was his view of building bridges with the United States? Do you think that's something that could have been much less confrontational than what happened?

[Richard Falk]

Yes, but it would have required a degree of reassurance from Washington. In other words, the historical background made it somewhat-- I mean, I suspect that Khomeini would have been accused of being very naive if that reassurance hadn't been forthcoming, because people in a wide range of those we spoke to shared the anxiety about some repetition of the 1953 intervention. And it's quite extraordinary how that concern has sort of disappeared from the discourse, even by those who oppose the Iran war.

They haven't really suggested that. One other thing I think...

[Helena Cobban]

Hang on. So when you say it's disappeared from the discourse, you're talking about here in the United States that people have forgotten that history, or you're talking about the discourse there in Iran?

[Richard Falk]

No, in the US. No, it's well remembered in Iran, I think. But even among Iran experts, with various points of view toward what's happening currently, they tend to be ahistorical in their approach to the attacks by Israel and the US. But I want to mention one other comparison, because it contrasts with Khomeini's uncertainty about how to address the future relationship with the US.

And that was his relation, his attitude toward Saudi Arabia, which at that time was not sectarianly expressed, but it was more, I think, derivative from the experience in Iran with dynastic rule. And his opinion at that point was that Saudi Arabia had the same deficiencies of governance toward its own people that the Shah of Iran had, that they were, in other words, birds of a feather, in a sense. And his wider remarks about an Islamic community of states were completely free of sectarian commentary.

And he was very intelligent. I suppressed the question of what he did for pleasure and joy in life. But, you know, he had a sternness, and these very riveting black eyes that could be viewed as somewhat menacing.

[Helena Cobban]

And then the day after your meeting, he flew back to Tehran and entered the stage of history in a new way.

[Richard Falk]

Yes. And as I say, I think he was surprised by the scale of the welcome and his sort of charismatic relationship to the revolutionary movement. And a unifying, a unifying figure.

I had thought, previous to that, that he was sort of the icon of the revolution, not so much a political influence or a typical political leader. But I, this proved to be wrong. As the revolution radicalized in response to various perceptions that it was still under threat.

And Israel in particular, attempted destabilizing moves from the very beginning. And there was no prospect of a reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the kind of fierce Zionism that dominated Israeli political outlook.

[Helena Cobban]

So that has been a much more constant thread in the history of the Islamic Republic than its relationship with the United States, where, you know, time after time, there have been attempts to find a way to work together.

[Richard Falk]

But I don't think very deep or serious attempts. I think the reformists, you know, in in the course of the Islamic Revolution, so called reformists, Khatami was perhaps best known of them. And I've been in touch with the former Foreign Minister Zarif, who's in Iran and has been trying to find a peace plan that can work.

[Helena Cobban]

And he was he was the main negotiator for the JCPOA in 2015. So, you know, that was a very serious attempt to significantly de-escalate the tensions and explore the possibility of coexistence, I think. But of course, then Trump came out of, took the United States unilaterally out of the JCPOA in 2018.

[Richard Falk]

Some people are now speculating that he'll be lucky if he gets away from the Iran, what shall I say, forever war, potentially forever war, with a agreement that looks as good for the for the non-proliferating West as that 2015 agreement was.

[Helena Cobban]

I mean, before this latest war, I was writing in a couple of places that, you know, maybe he should just rebrand it, the TCPOA, the Trump Coordinated Plan of Action, and claim victory and avoid, you know, all the horrors of this war.

Which I have to say, the horrors of the war have not yet actually manifested themselves or bitten very hard at all here in the United States, where there has been, you know, obviously some inflation, people notice it, the gas pump, and in other commodities, but but compared with, you know, the the gross disruption that countries in the Global South and in East Asia have been facing from the ongoing blockade, you know, we are very lucky here. We're not yet feeling it, in a sense, but it...

[Richard Falk]

Say we maybe we're unlucky, because if we felt it more, there would be more pressure to find a off-ramp.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, yeah, we definitely need that off-ramp. So, Richard, I want to shift now to the next topic, which is really the status of international law. And I, I know, it's a lot for us to talk about in one conversation, maybe we should divide it up and cut it into three.

But let's go with this for now. Because you and I, and everybody has been sitting for the last 31 months through the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, and you have done amazing work with your People's Tribunal for Gaza. And, you know, we've seen the South African

government, we've seen the International Criminal Court, we've seen, you know, all these efforts to try to say, international law means something.

But in my view, none of them have come to anything. And all those of us who've grown up in the post-1945 world order, you know, suddenly, there seems to be no world order that is based on, you know, the Nuremberg Principles and the Charter of the United Nations. It all seems to have fallen apart.

What do you think?

[Richard Falk]

Well, I would make two points in response. One is that the idea that the Nuremberg Principles were, or the Charter, as generally perceived, was intended to nullify the discretion of the geopolitical actors is a delusion that goes back to 1945. In other words, it was never intended.

And the geopolitical actors of which the chief ones were the US and Soviet Union, didn't have any hesitation about using force in ways that defied the constitutional order that was supposed to be applicable to states. And the Mexican delegate to the UN drafting conference put it best when he said, we've created an organization that regulates the mice, but lets the tigers run free. And that, so in other words, the design of world order, created through the veto, and through the practice of great powers prior to the two world wars, a sense that their strategic interests would not be subject to any external authority.

And we've never gotten away from that idea of geopolitical supremacy, when it comes to war, peace, and global security issues. And the second thing I'd say is, there's a mistake to think that international law hasn't been relevant and potentially important. It really has given a aura of legitimacy to civil society efforts to express solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, including the formation and process of our Gaza tribunal, which rested on the premise of Palestinian, a Palestinian victory in the legitimacy war that is waged for the high moral and legal ground, independently of whether that's enforced or not.

And the Palestinians have won the legitimacy war. And most winners of the legitimacy wars in the anti-colonial context have gone on to control the political outcome, though suffering great devastation and human casualties in the process. Vietnam is one of the principal examples, but it's...

[Helena Cobban]

Algeria, so it's so many others, the Mau Mau in Kenya, yeah.

[Richard Falk]

Where the colonial side always has had a decisive military superiority, including India, for instance, where nonviolence overcame military superiority. And that lesson can't be learned in the West because of what the extension of what Eisenhower warned about in 1961, the military-industrial complex that you have the private sector gaining from the profitability of wars, however they end, and a bureaucratized state that has absorbed a military culture

ever since World War II and during the whole of the Cold War. And democracies, as the founding fathers understood, we could never withstand a peacetime, large military capability.

And therefore, there was great questioning of whether it should even have a standing army at the time in intervals between real conflict.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes, but well, I completely agree with you about the military-industrial complex. And of course, that the longer a war goes on, the more reliable become the flow of revenue and profits for the investors in those military-industrial companies. So, those companies have an interest in waging war, preparing for war and prolonging war.

And what we see now, is the hollowing out of so many basic social needs here in this country, with Trump saying there's no way that he can continue to fund basic things like rural health care or SNAP benefits, food benefits, food stamps for the low-income populations around the country. But he wants 1.5 trillion for the next military budget. And he wants many, many billions to go to Israel, where they have free healthcare, free education, free childcare, and all these things that US citizens can only dream of.

So yes, you're quite right, that this military-industrial complex is a burden on society. But we haven't seen the effects of this war yet here. And so it might go on.

And that is a terrifying prospect, in particular for people in Iran and people in Lebanon and in Palestine.

I want to come to the nuclear file quickly, because some people say it was just a pretext on which the US and Israel have sustained the hostility to Iran for so long. Do you see it as a pretext or a genuine concern that could be met through negotiations?

[Richard Falk]

I think it's predominantly a pretext. And I think it's a way that even Israel, it's especially a pretext for the US, because it's not in no way a security threat to whatever the Iranians might do. It's in no way a security threat to it.

And in Israel, I think it's been exaggerated as a security threat in order to mobilize support for people concerned about proliferation, and to solidify its status as the only nuclear power in the region. As you know, Iran and Saudi Arabia, all the important Arab countries around the early 21st century indicated their support for a nuclear free zone in the whole region. And that's the only solution that makes any kind of sense from a world order perspective that treats states as equal.

And it should be understood that even if you do violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty, for which Iran probably has the best case to make for that, it hasn't made that case, but it could make that case. Even if it does violate it, it has a right of withdrawal from, in the treaty, there's a right of withdrawal from the treaty if security so requires. But also, and more significantly, are two things.

One is that Iran, according to the most reliable intelligence sources, really hasn't sought to have a nuclear capability. It is committed by the repeated declarations of its leaders to regard nuclear weapons as immoral and unacceptable. And now whether that is totally reliable is hard to say.

But in addition to that, the NPT itself has not been implemented as far as the nuclear weapons states are concerned. Article 6 of the NPT pledges good faith negotiations for nuclear disarmament. And what the nuclear powers, particularly the US again, have said, and I've heard it in the private annals of the Council on Foreign Relations, they say this Article 6 was just a, what they call a useful fiction, in order to induce the non-nuclear countries to pledge.

So it's a treaty that's been fundamentally wounded by the behavior of the nuclear weapons states and not carrying out their part of the bargain. And yet, it is taken as a pretext for waging war against countries that are seen as violating it, of which there is no ground in the treaty. Treaty does not support war as an enforcement option for members treaty parties.

So it's a very distorted kind of thing. And the fact that when the World Court made its advisory opinion, reinforcing this Article 6 commitment, the NATO powers, UK, France, and the US issued a statement saying, they don't agree. They think deterrence is more capable of avoiding nuclear war than is disarmament.

And they obviously want to maintain a kind of nuclear hegemony in relation to the non-nuclear world. And so it's a complicated issue.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes, it's complicated at one level and at another, it really is not. I mean, you know, there has been so much, in the US discourse, willful blindness to the reality of Israel's possession of a very capable nuclear arsenal. I mean, I've dealt with this issue in various forums for 40 years here in Washington, DC, where people at respected think tanks or whatever, or in the New York Times, they never come out and say, yes, Israel is a nuclear power. Israel is, you know, in a major way, violating all the norms of international behaviour and Iran and Saudi Arabia and Egypt and all the other states of the region are members in good standing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

I mean, I've dealt with that double standard here in Washington, DC, for so long. I think now it might be changing a little bit in the broader discourse in the country, that it's no longer completely verboten to say that Israel is a nuclear weapons power, and that any serious attempt to build a non-nuclear regime in West Asia, the Middle East, must grapple with that fact, first and foremost.

We have, I guess, right now, every five years, there's the review conference for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the NPT.

As far as you know, what are the main issues there? Because, I guess, Iran's ambassador has been nominated to be a vice president of this conference, which is notable. And of course,

the US representative is horrified that Iran could have any kind of a leadership role in a conference of this kind.

Is this conference going to help us actually grapple with the issue of disparity and double standards in West Asian nuclear proliferation in general?

[Richard Falk]

Well, I think it will expose the double standards to some extent. But I don't think it will have any real clarifying effect on what to expect in relation to the future. I mean, it's, these review conferences have been very unsuccessful in pushing the nuclear weapon states to do, to fulfill their part of the non-proliferation bargain.

Now, maybe one could make an argument that that bargain was ill considered, and you need to have a new treaty that eliminates the obligation to engage in disarmament. But the treaty is based on the premise that it's desirable to get rid of the weaponry, not just to prevent others from acquiring it. And in case of Israel, not only is it, are Western sources sullenly silent about it, they don't, they don't explore except in, I think Seymour Hersh has a book and a couple of other writers have a book, but the West facilitated the acquisition of nuclear, whatever, whatever technology was needed to develop nuclear weapons.

But, and even when the US was opposed during the Kennedy years to facilitating Israeli acquisition-- And one of the conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination is that he didn't cooperate with France and the UK that were, France, particularly, I think, facilitated the acquisition of nuclear, nuclear capabilities by Israel, on condition that they keep silent about it.

[Helena Cobban]

Yes, there's a wonderful book by a French writer called Pierre Péan, called *Les Deux Bombes*. And of course, the chief person in Israel responsible for organizing this was Shimon Perez, who, you know, over the years became lauded and feted, you know, all over the West as a liberal, you know, wonderful face for liberal Zionism. But he was actually the guy that built the nuclear bomb.

[Richard Falk]

Yeah, and he, he didn't deserve that. I had frequent contact with him, including editorial board meetings of *Foreign Policy* magazine, where he came and he was-- he actually wanted a treaty with Saudi Arabia at this time, you know, a long time before the Iranian Revolution occurred.

[Helena Cobban]

Interesting, a sort of precursor of the Abraham Accords, which have brought us so much--

[Richard Falk]

Yes, he was, he definitely was a precursor. I mean, he went beyond the Abraham Accords, and tried to say that this kind of alliance could really provide a stability for the Middle East that would benefit the whole of the West.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, I guess right now, I've been looking at the clock, Richard, and I'm afraid we've talked far too long, but it's been so fascinating. I mean, maybe we should do this more often. We've summed up like so many, like 47 years of your engagement with the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran and covering a little bit some of the more current issues.

I just really want to thank you again. And I want to assure everybody watching this that we're hoping to do something with the records of all these great conversations that we're having in the Iran, in our Iran crisis project. And please do go to our website, www.justworldeducational.org, and learn all about the project. And so big thanks to you, Richard, and talk to you again soon, I hope.

[Richard Falk]

Well, thanks to you, Helena, for challenging me in this way to rethink these events that were occurred long ago, but seem worthy of recollection.

[Helena Cobban]

Absolutely. Thank you and goodbye.

[Richard Falk]

Goodbye, and do well.