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Middle East conflict

Iran's cultural heritage sites are being damaged by American and Israeli strikes

UPDATED MARCH 21, 2026 · 10:21 AM ET

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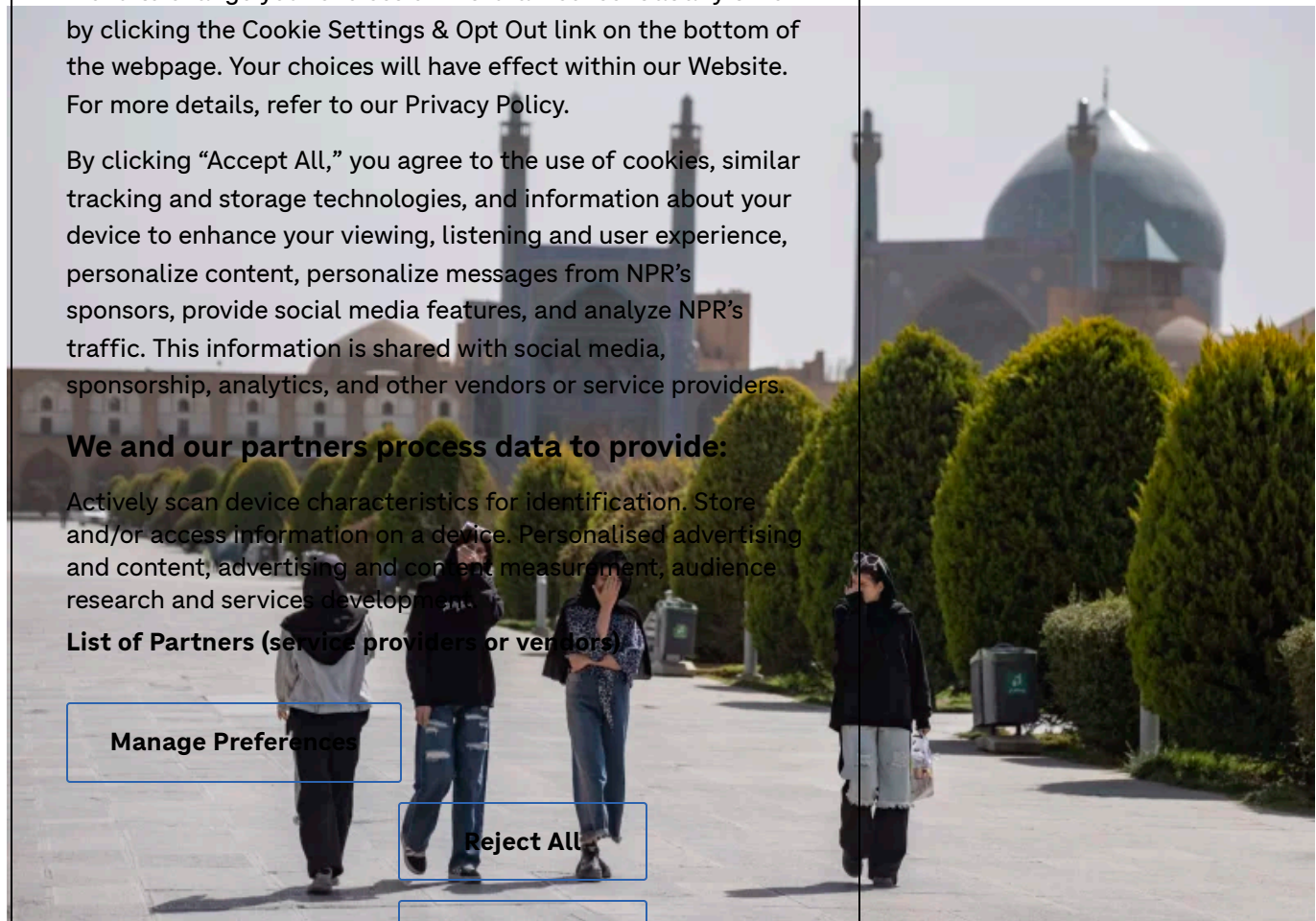
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PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



Young women walk through historic Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, Iran, on March 11.

Morteza Nikoubazi/Getty Images

ISTANBUL — There's an old Persian phrase about a particular place in the city of Isfahan — the famed Naqsh-e Jahan Square.

"The sort of nickname for it is *nesf-e-jahān*, which means 'half the world.' So what they meant by that, that if you saw Naqsh-e Jahan, you had seen half the world already," explains Katayoun Shahandeh, a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. "That was how fabulous Naqsh-e Jahan was supposed to be."

Shahandeh, who is Iranian, has studied Isfahan's treasures for years: its stunning blue and turquoise tiling and arched Islamic architecture, much of it crafted by Persian and Armenian artists in the 16th and 17th centuries, during the height of the Safavid dynasty, a golden age for art during the Persian empire.

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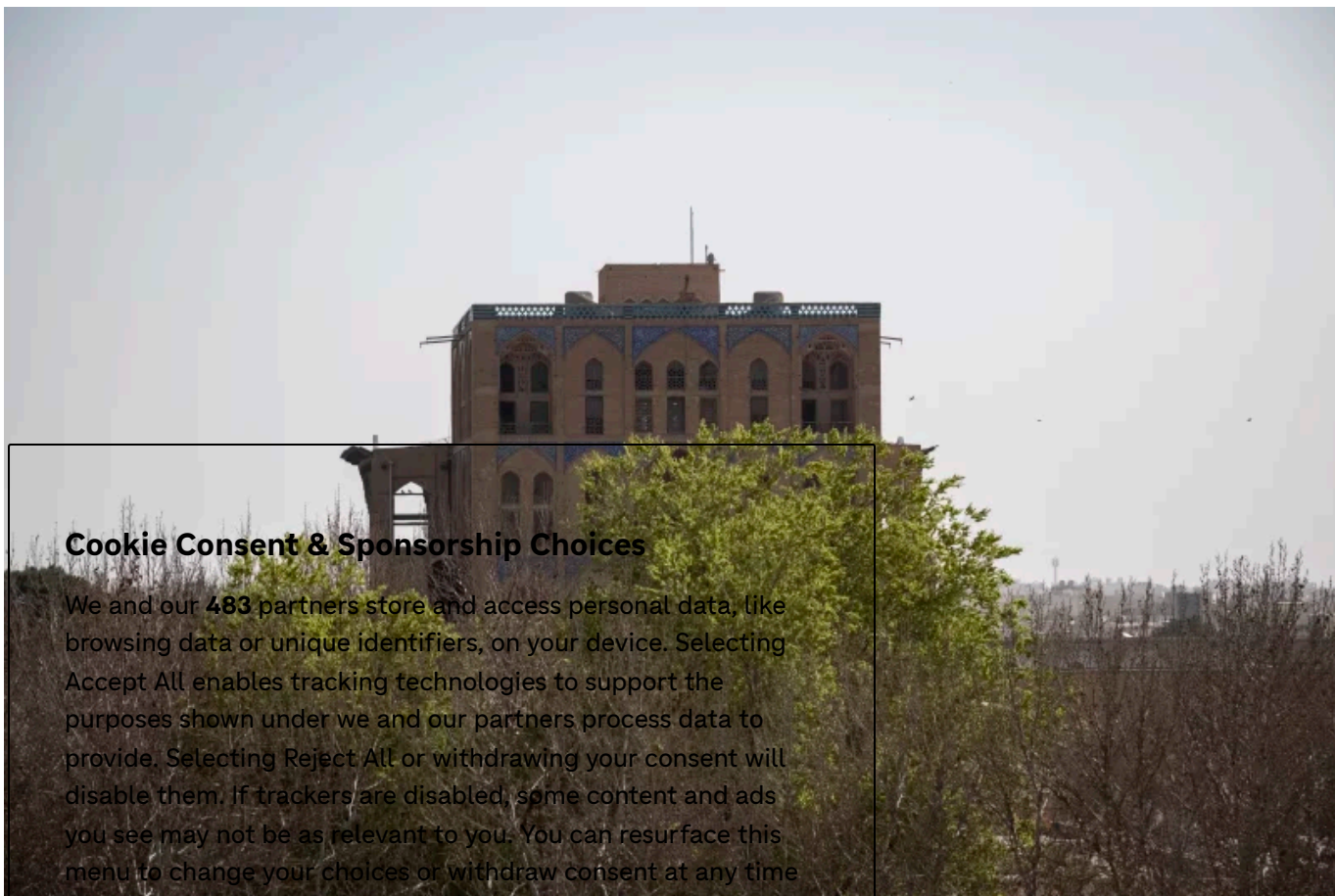
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"Iran and the Persian Empire and the Ottomans were the two [powers] in the region who were sort of vying with each other. In terms of architecture, [Naqsh-e Jahan] is probably one of the most important sites in the Islamic era," says Shahandeh.

This and other Iranian sites which Shahandeh has studied have been damaged since the U.S. and Israel began jointly striking Iran last month.

UNESCO, the United Nations body that protects scientific and cultural sites, says it has documented at least four historic sites damaged by shockwaves from a March 10 strike.



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A view of the Ali Qapu Imperial Palace in Isfahan, south of Tehran, on March 11. Morteza Nikoubazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images

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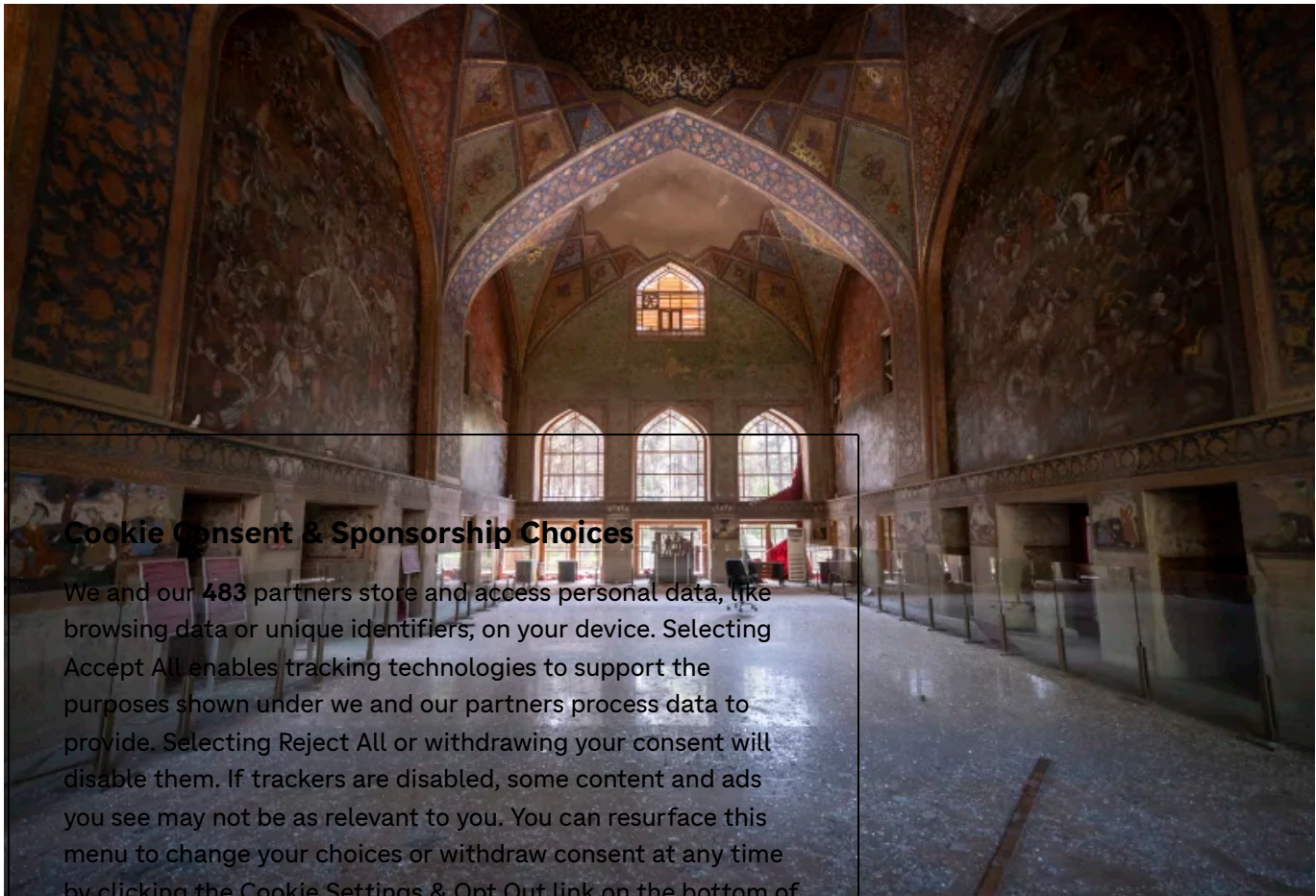
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Three are in Isfahan, and two of those are in the Naqsh-e Jahan Square: the Safavid-era Abbasi Jame mosque and Ali Qapu Palace. Also damaged is the Chehel Sotoun pavilion, a colonnaded building and gardens featuring intricate frescoes and mosaics. All three are UNESCO-designated cultural sites.

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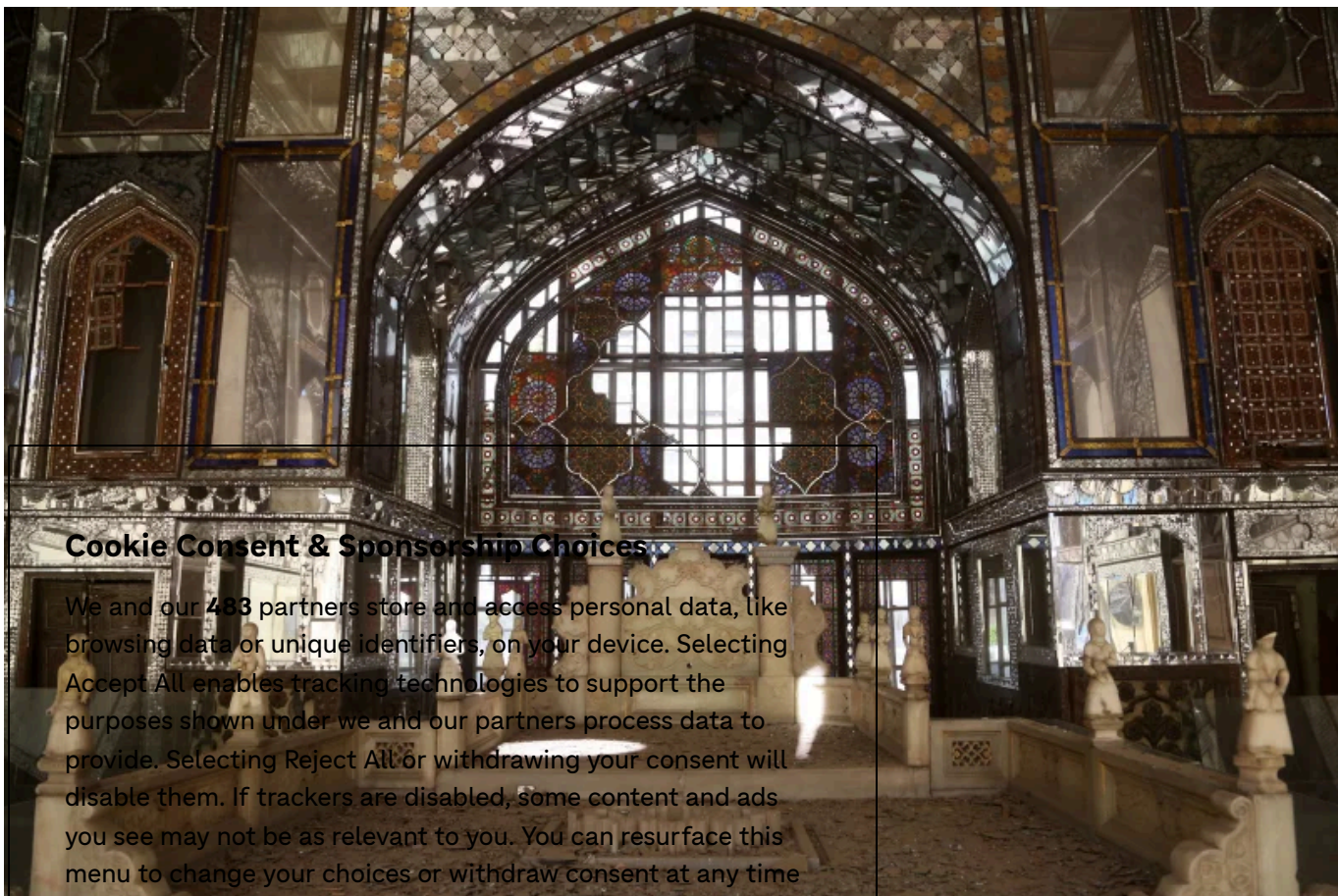
An interior view of Isfahan's Chehel Sotoun Palace on March 11. The palace was damaged in an explosion wave during the strike. For more details, refer to our Privacy Policy.

Morteza Nikqubazl//NurPhoto via Getty Images

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This photo taken on March 3 shows a view of the damaged Golestan Palace in Tehran. The palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was partially damaged in air raids during U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran. For more details, refer to our Privacy Policy.

Xinhua News Agency/Getty Images

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A March 2 strike also damaged Tehran's Golestan Palace, an opulent former royal Qajar dynasty complex, largely built and renovated in the 18th century.

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"You know, we sometimes even compare it with the Versailles Palace in France," the director of UNESCO's world heritage center, Lazare Eloundou Assomo, said this month.

UNESCO says it has also "communicated to all parties concerned the geographical coordinates of sites on the World Heritage List as well as those of national significance, to avoid any potential damage."

Under international law, all countries must distinguish between military and civilian sites and minimize damage to cultural sites during military conflicts.

But **Cookie Consent & Sponsorship Choices** minimize civilian damage are Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's remarks earlier this month, when he said the U.S. would employ "no stupid rules of engagement" in its conflict with Iran.

In the past, rules of engagement have been key in helping military forces in conflict zones like Iraq and Afghanistan distinguish cultural sites from military ones.

Any absence of rules of engagement in this conflict with Iran could put cultural and civilian infrastructure at greater risk of U.S. and Israeli bombardment, warns Patty Gerstenblith, an emerita professor of law at Chicago's DePaul University who serves as president of the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield International, which works to protect cultural heritage during times of war.

Rules of engagement are established practice, she says. "This is what you can or cannot do, all of which is already incorporated into law in the United States," she explains. "So the rules of engagement are not law per se, but they're based on things like the Uniform Code of Military Justice, other aspects of the War Crimes Act of 1996, which incorporates several aspects of international law ... which the United States has ratified and is therefore automatically incorporated into U.S. domestic law."

A weeks-long internet and telecommunications blackout imposed by Iran's government is also complicating efforts to document and verify damage to the country's most cherished cultural sites.

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In previous conflicts, such as the civil war in Syria and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Gerstenblith says preservation groups like hers were able to monitor damage and looting to archaeological sites through satellite imagery. But now, companies including Planet Labs and Vantor are blocking or embargoing satellite imagery of the Middle East for days or weeks before public release. Gerstenblith says this makes it nearly impossible to monitor Iranian sites in real time.

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How to make sense of the damage to Iran's cultural legacy is dividing Iranians.

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"There is this, you know, at the same time, this anger and rage that why should buildings matter more to the world than the lives of all these children, all these people?" says SOAS Shalender, referring to the thousands of Iranian demonstrators human rights organizations say were killed by Iranian security forces during anti-government protests earlier this year, and more recently, the civilians killed in joint U.S. and Israeli strikes.

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But in reality, she says, the tragedy is twofold. The Iranian people and our heritage and our culture - everything is caught in this crossfire."

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iran cultural heritage



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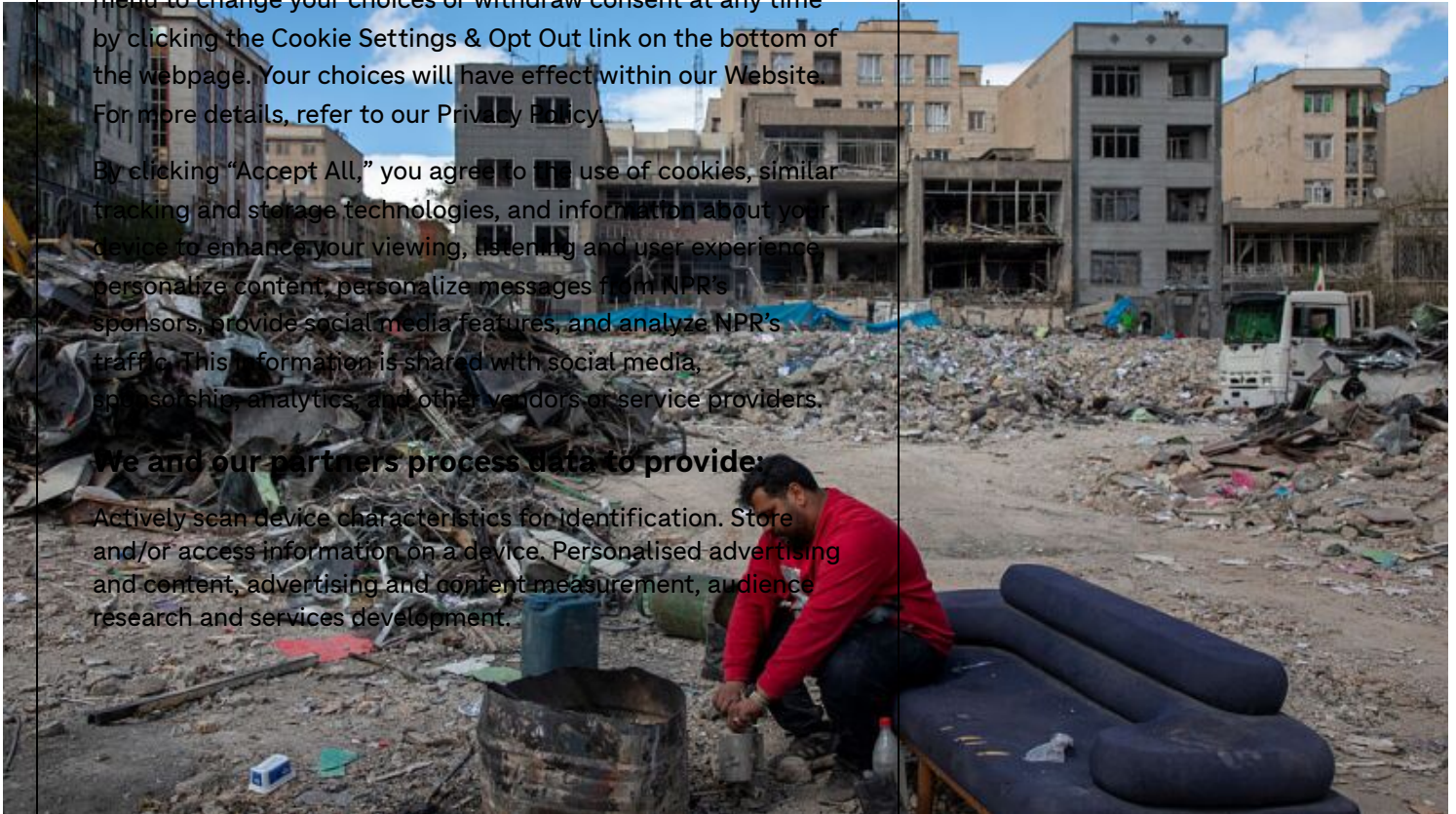
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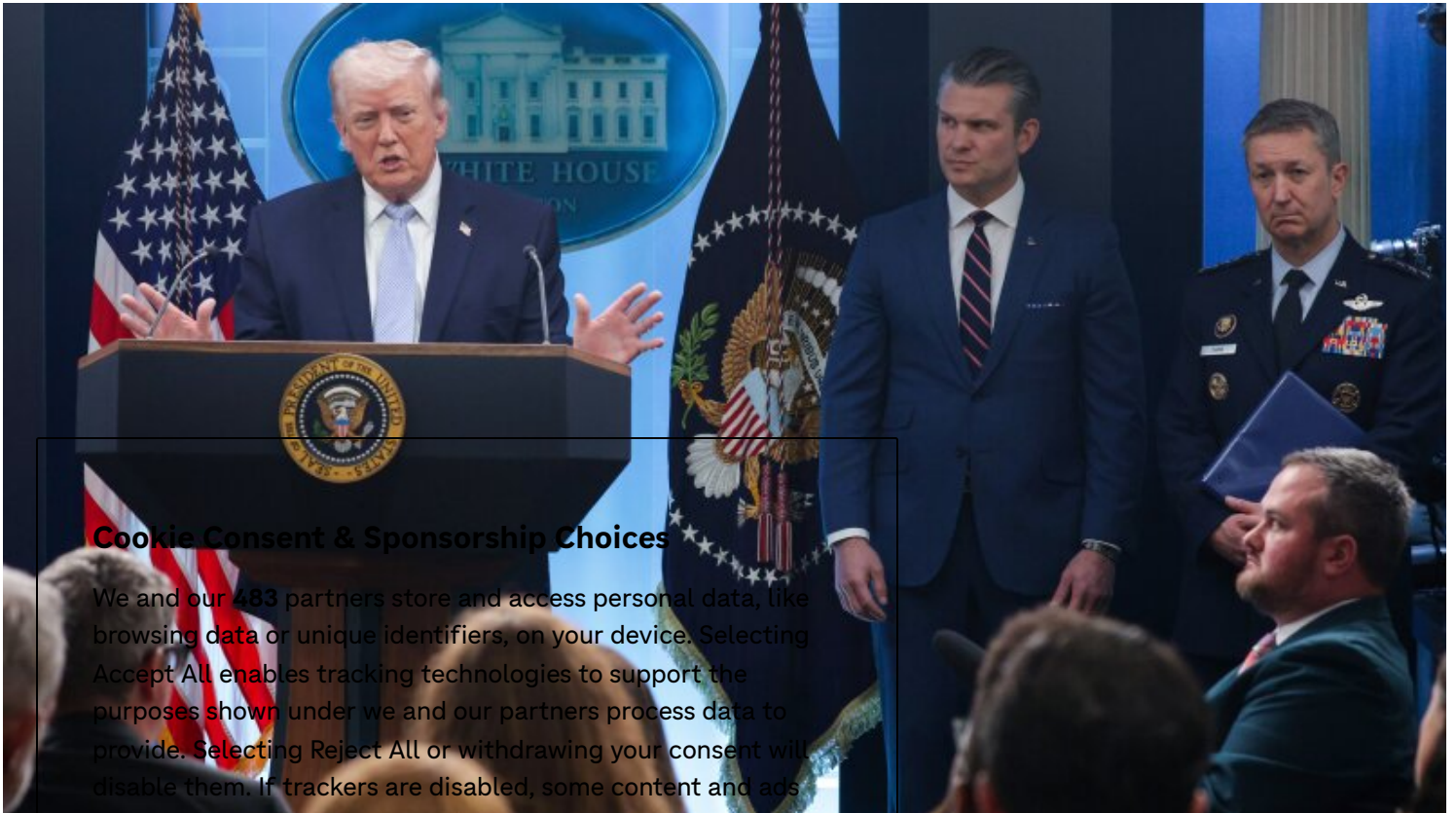
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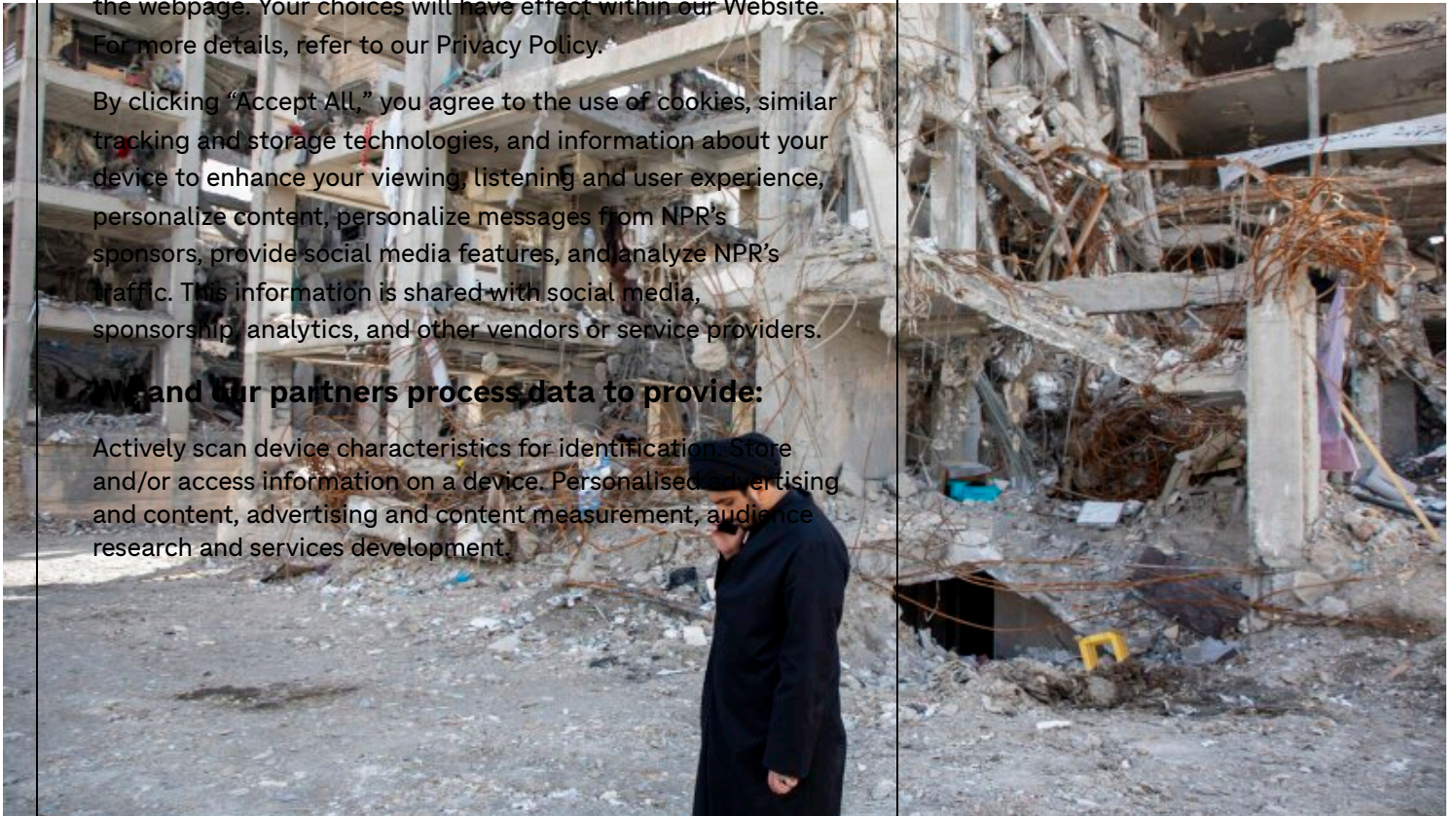
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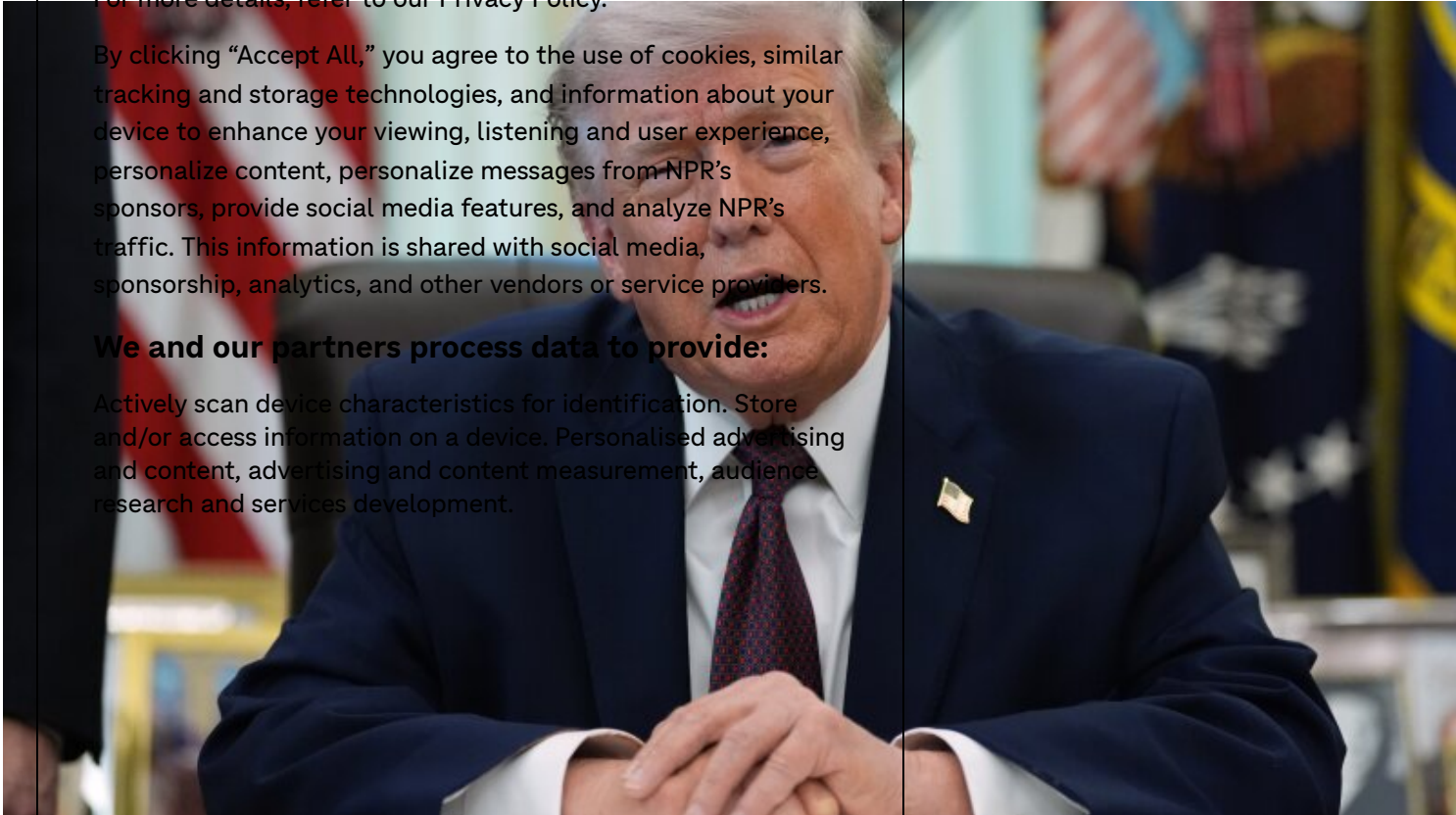
By Israel. Some say they're targeted

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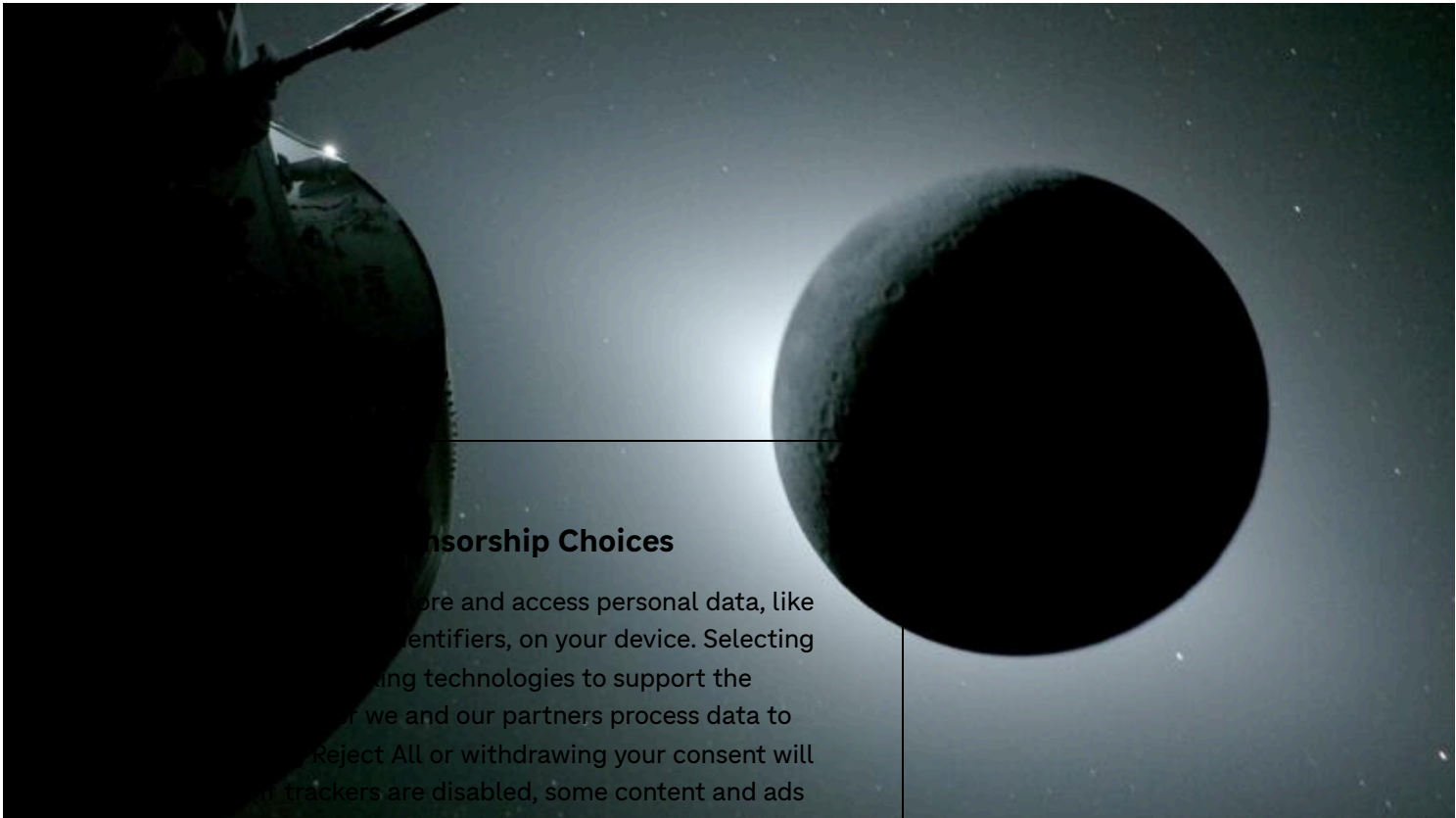
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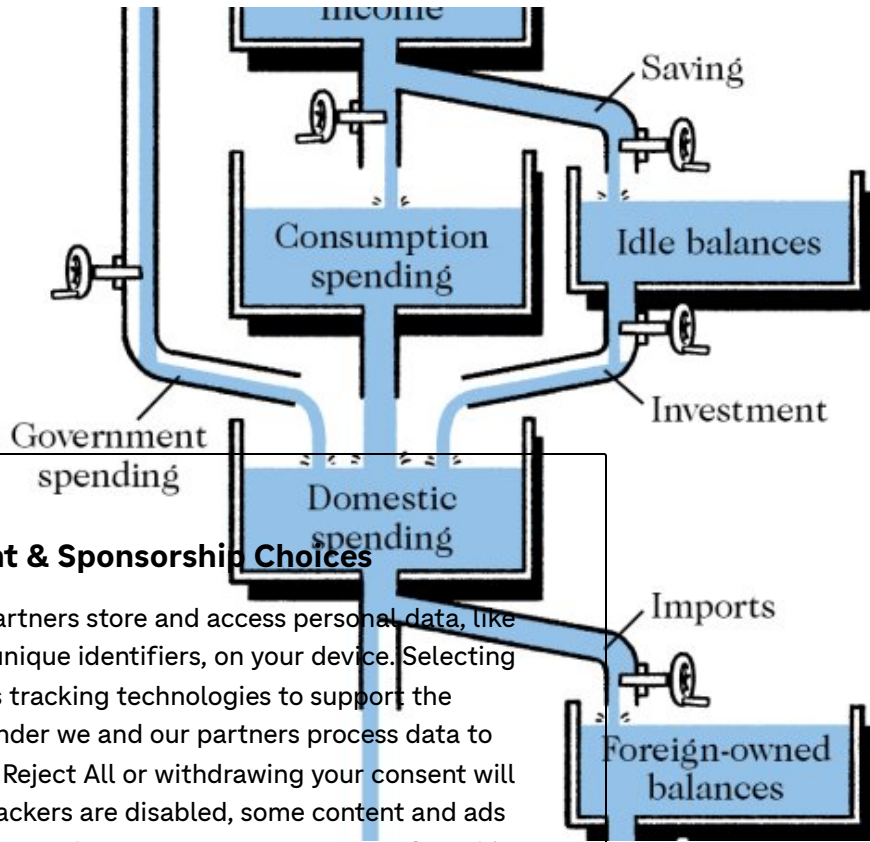
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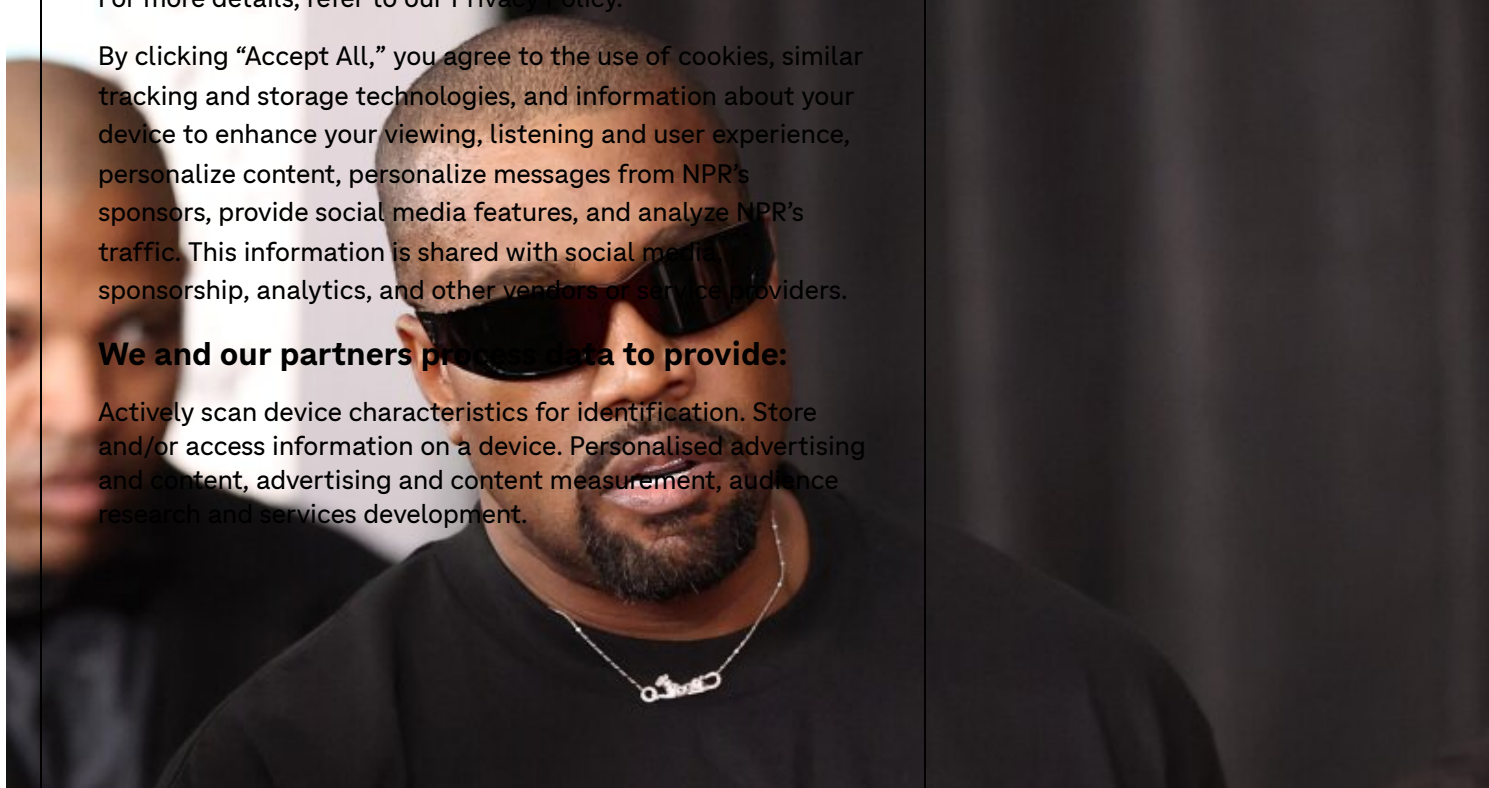
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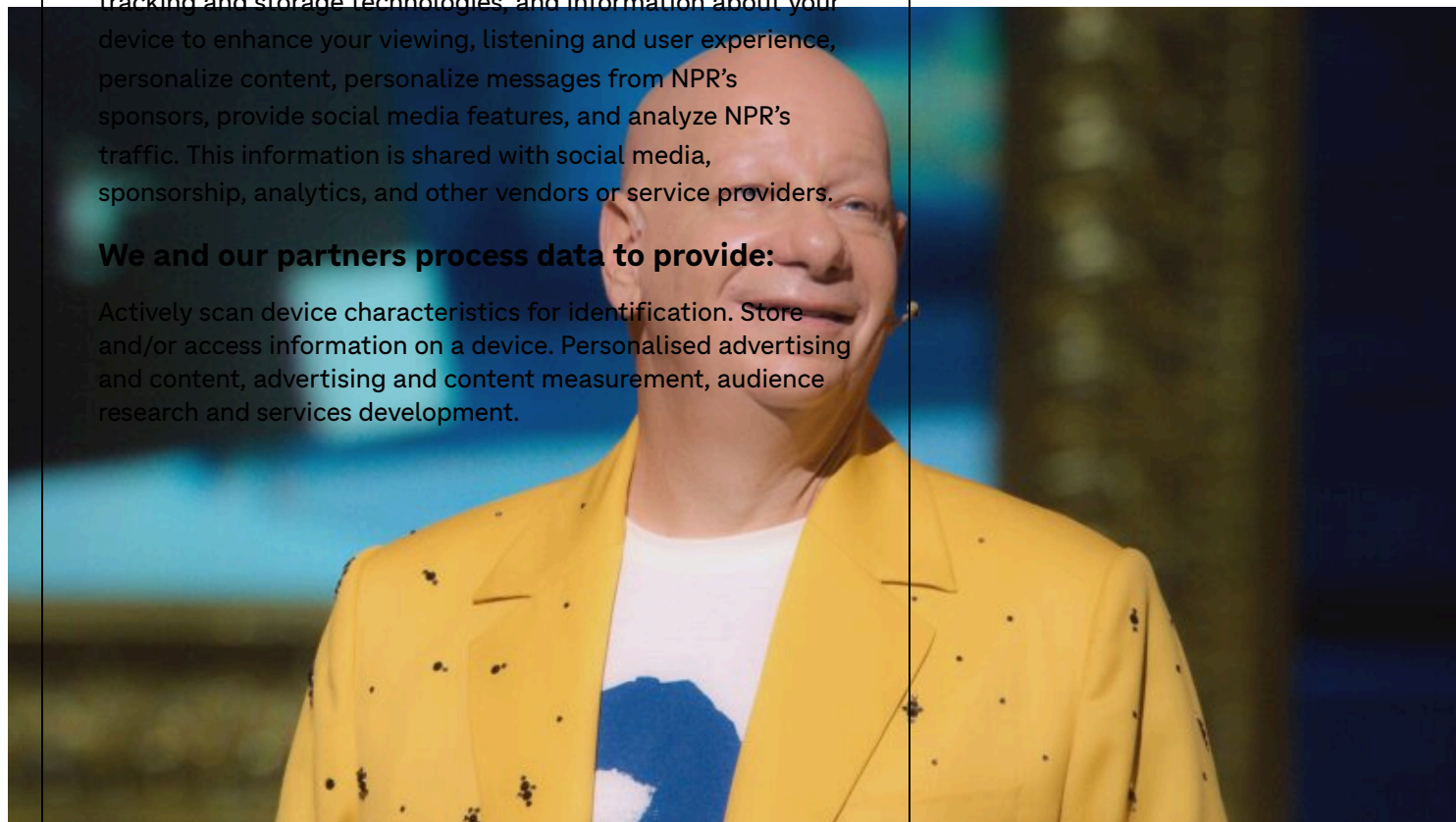
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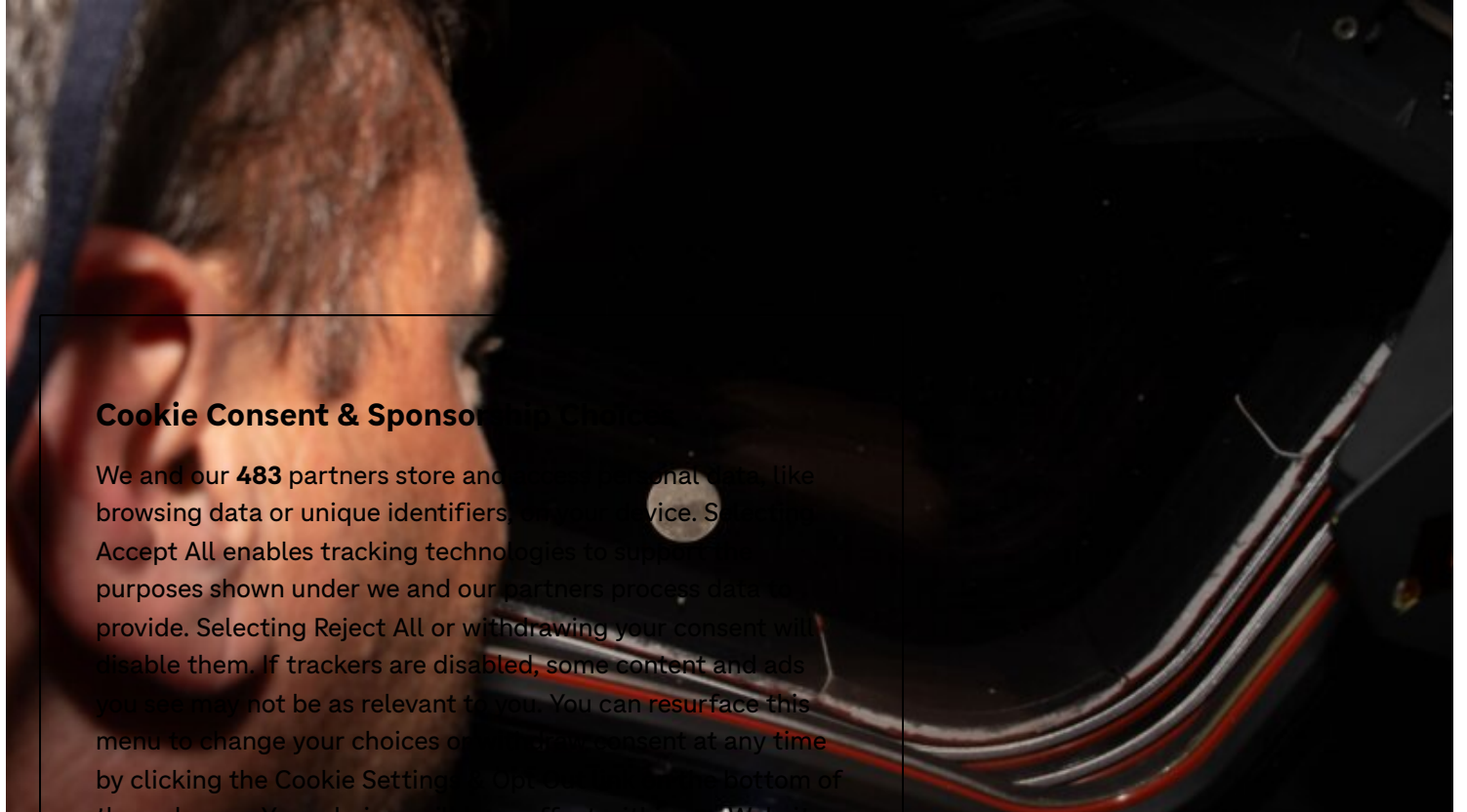
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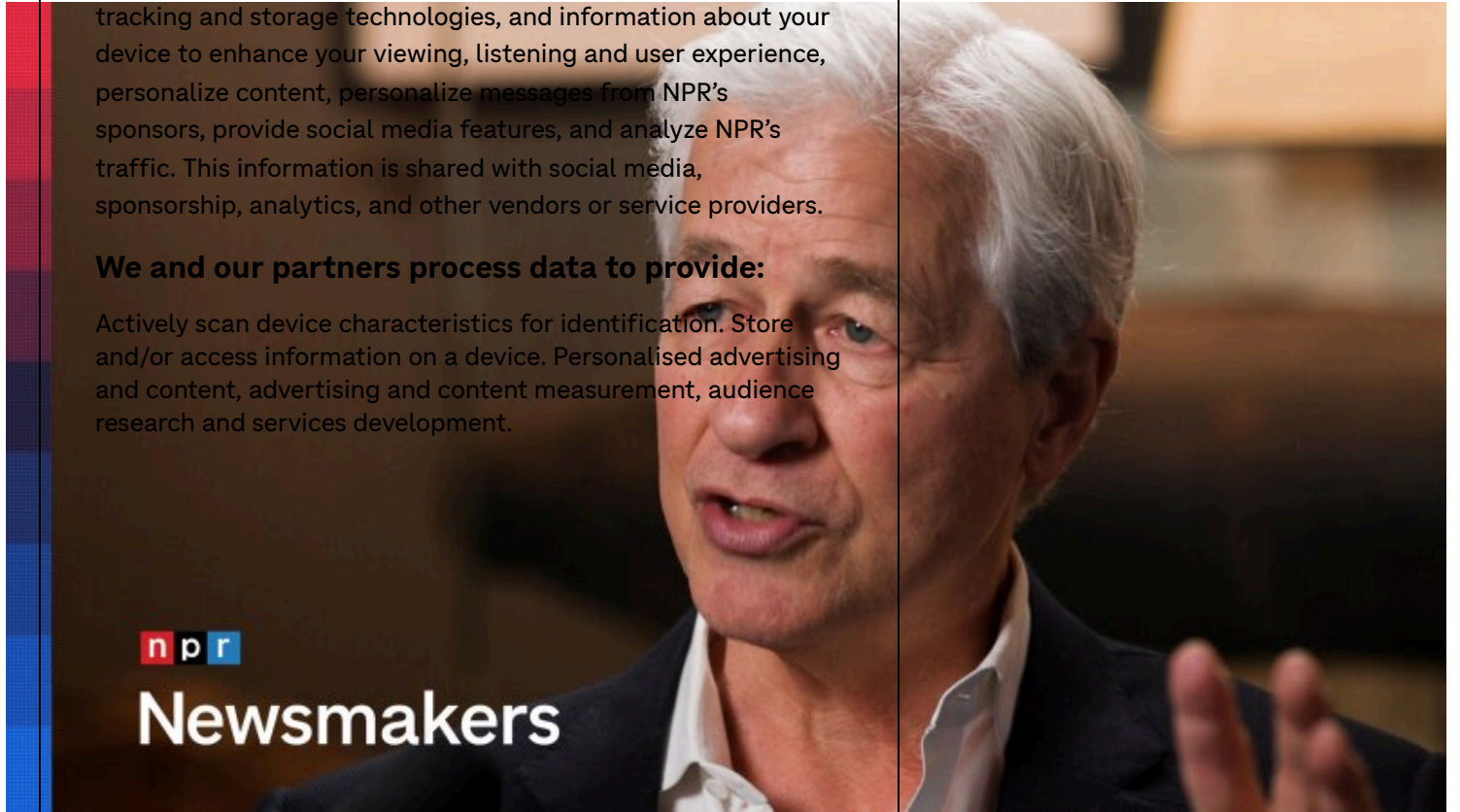
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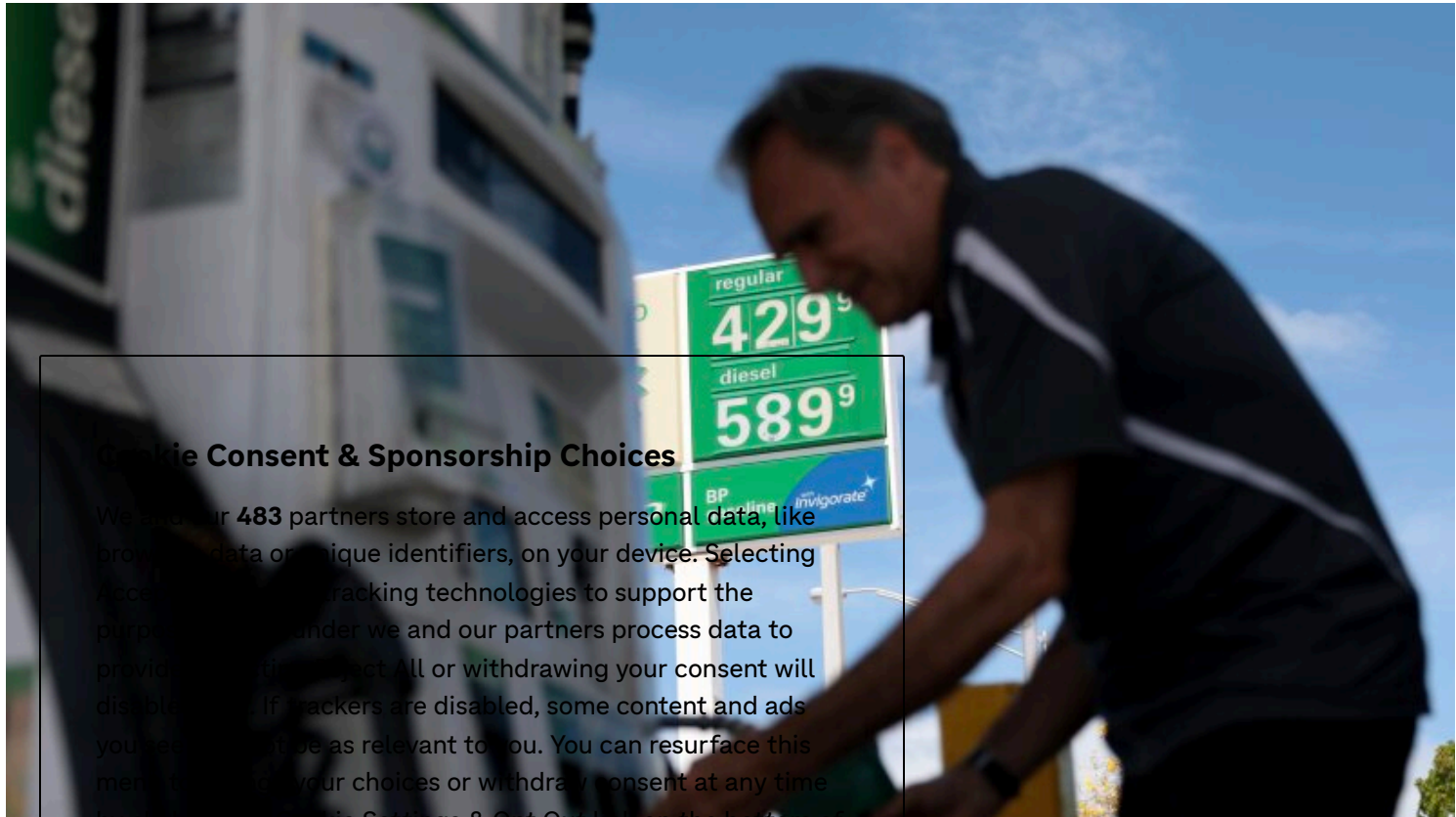
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