

Imperial and Anti-Imperial Responses to the 12-Day Israel-Iran War

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Abstract

Many self-identified Iranian leftists, who positioned themselves as dissidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) during the 12-Day Israel-Iran War, openly or tacitly aligned with the Iranian regime and emerged as guardians of the state's "territorial integrity." This paper investigates the complexities of this alignment, asking how one can justify siding with an oppressor when that oppressor is under attack. To address this paradox, the paper analyses the imperial and anti-imperial dynamics shaping responses to the 2025 Israel-Iran War, focusing on how segments of the Iranian left, once opposed to the IRI, came to support a state that has long oppressed them. It argues that this contradiction stems primarily, though not exclusively, from the

methodological dualism identified by Sara Kermanian within postcolonial studies—specifically, the tension between imperialism and anti-imperialism, juxtaposed with nationalism. The regime has exploited this paradox, resulting in a shift from emphasizing Ummah (the transnational Muslim community) to a form of pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism. By providing a brief critical historical analysis of Israeli and Iranian nation-state building, the paper contends that neither state is immune from charges of imperialism. Furthermore, it examines the anti-imperial rhetoric of the IRI to illustrate how this rhetoric serves as a crucial instrument for obscuring its imperial Islamism. In doing so, this article contributes to contemporary Iranian politics and aims

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to offer an awakening critique to foster transnational solidarity among and between the peoples.

Keywords: *Iran; Israel, war, nationalism, imperialism, postcolonialism.*

Introduction

On June 13, 2025, Israel launched an airstrike campaign against Iran aimed at preventing its nuclearization, following the conclusion of a two-month ultimatum for nuclear negotiations issued by President Donald Trump of the United States.² The airstrikes specifically targeted high-ranking officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including its commander-in-chief, Hossein Salami, as well as prominent Iranian nuclear scientists.³ However, civilians were not spared. Over the course of 12 days, these attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 individuals, including approximately 700 civilians, according to Iranian state reports. Beyond the immediate destruction, the conflict exposed a deeper, paradoxical struggle within Iran. The Iranian regime, which has a long history of systematic crackdowns on dissenting voices, has remained “intact as the people have rallied around the flag,” as Vali Nasr has recently put it.⁴ Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is grappling with intertwined crises across all areas of governance, including political, economic, and societal issues.

The 2022 *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* (‘Women, Life, Freedom’, JJA) revolutionary movement, triggered by the death of young Kurdish woman Jina (Mahsa) Amini while in custody for allegedly violating the compulsory dress code of the IRI, laid bare, once again, the regime’s insurmountable loss of legitimacy among a significant portion of the population, most of whom were seeking the

² Ravid, B. (2025) “Scoop: Trump’s Letter to Iran Included 2-Month Deadline for New Nuclear Deal.” *Axios*, March 19. <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/19/trump-letter-iran-nuclear-deal>.

³ Farhat, Beatrice, and Adam Lucente. (2025) “Over 200 Israeli Strikes in Iran Kill 10 IRGC Commanders and Scientists.” *Al-Monitor*, June 13. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/over-200-israeli-strikes-iran-kill-10-irgc-commanders-and-scientists>.

⁴ On the Middle East with Amberin Zaman (2025) “Iran was battered by Israel and US, but its regime is intact as Iranians rally around flag”, *Al-Monitor*, 25 June. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/podcasts/iran-was-battered-israel-and-us-its-regime-intact-iranians-rally-around-flag-says-vali>



overthrow of the regime. However, many individuals, particularly those identifying as ‘Iranian leftists,’ who positioned themselves as dissidents of the IRI during the 12-Day Israel-Iraq War, openly or tacitly aligned themselves with the Iranian regime and emerged as guardians of the “territorial integrity” of Iran.⁵ The term “Iranian leftist” does not signify a singular or unified identity; rather, it encompasses a range of diverse and plural positions. In this paper, “Iranian leftists” refers specifically to those who self-identify as defenders of socialist and leftist values and who initiated the “No to War” campaign, condemning the conflict by solely criticizing Israel while—knowingly or unknowingly—overlooking the Iranian regime’s history of colonial domination over non-Persian nations and women. My focus on this group arises from the potential they hold to foster transnational solidarity in the struggle against colonial domination, particularly in the context of war. The aim of this critique is to provoke awakening rather than to assign blame.

This paper endeavours to answer the following questions: how can one justify siding with one’s own oppressor when that oppressor is under attack? Should, and how does, one identify oneself with an oppressor identifying with you? How can this paradox be explained? I shall argue that this paradox primarily, though not exclusively, originates from the combination of methodological dualism developed by Sara Kermanian, which underpins postcolonial studies, particularly the tension between imperialism and anti-imperialism, juxtaposed with nationalism.⁶ This paradox has been co-opted and exploited by the regime, resulting in a transition from emphasizing

⁵ Daftari, A. (2025) “How Israel’s attacks are uniting Iranians”, *NewsWeek*, 20 June. Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-solidarity-community-israel-attacks-trump-2088345>; Tababar, M.A. (2025) “The Islamic Republic’s new lease on life: How the U.S.-Israeli strikes empowered the Iranian regime”, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 July. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israelic-republics-new-lease-life?utm_medium=social; and

Eslami, M. and al-Marashi, I. (2025) “Why Israel’s attacks are backfiring as Iranians rally around the flag”, *Middle East Eye*, 18 June. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-attacks-are-backfiring-iranians-rally-around-flag-why>

⁶ Kermanian, S. (2024). “Geopolitics of Inter-subaltern Colonialism and Gender: Challenging Methodological Dualism through the “Woman, Life, Freedom” Journey from Kurdistan to Iran.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 14. 779-802.

Ummah (the transnational Muslim community) to a form of pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism.

This piece aims to elucidate this paradox. First, it provides a brief critical historical analysis of Israeli and Iranian nation-state building, arguing that neither Israel nor Iran is immune from the charges of imperialism. Second, it examines the anti-imperial rhetoric of the IRI to illustrate how the IRI's anti-imperialism and construction of *umma* are contingent upon its absolute enmity towards Israel, and that this form of anti-imperialism serves as a vital instrument for the regime to cover its imperial Islamism. And finally, it delves into the discussion surrounding war and nationalism to explore the intertwined and complex relationship between the two, highlighting how this relationship has been appropriated by the Iranian state to enforce the prevailing political and cultural structure.

Imperial Legacies: A Critical Historical Analysis of Nation-State Building in Israel and Iran

State-building is not a clean and peaceful process. Warfare has been pivotal in the formation of many nation-states throughout history. Prior to the twentieth century, most nation-states emerged through wars, with their boundaries often defined by the resolutions of wars. The contemporary nation-state system itself is a direct consequence of the total wars of the twentieth century, during which the consolidation of power and global expansion of nation-states were largely facilitated through military engagements. As Charles Tilly notes in *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, 'war made states and states made war.'⁷ Tilly formulates a theory of state formation based on continuously varying combinations of concentrated capital, concentrated coercion, preparation for war, and position within the international system.⁸ This suggests that the state is a by-product of the ruler's efforts to monopolize the concentrated accumulation of means of war (coercion). War is an organizational phenomenon from

⁷ Tilly, C. (1990) *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 14.

⁸ Ibid.



which the state derives its administrative machinery.⁹ Here, the state is understood in Weberian terms, referring to a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a delineated territory and over a specific population. War is thus a major factor, though not the only factor, in state formation. Strictly speaking, the major progressive resolutions of modernity emerged in the context of war, as exemplified by the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions.

The state's successful claim to a monopoly over legitimate violence is consolidated within the nation-state through a process of internal pacification¹⁰ that utilizes nationalism as a modern secular religion.¹¹ This model of sovereignty was fundamentally shaped by the resolution of a major conflict: the sovereignty of each state within its territory was fixed and legitimized by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the 'Thirty Years' War in Europe. However, this early model of state sovereignty was often thought to be legitimized through the divinity of the monarch. Influenced by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution (1789-1799)—a radical and rapid upheaval—shattered this transcendent sovereignty of the *Ancien Régime*. It gave rise to a grounded form of sovereignty, one that receives its legitimacy from the popular will, a notion known as popular sovereignty. To form such a grounded sovereignty, however, the state needed a new tool to legitimize its control over the populace. The legitimacy grounded in the notion of popular sovereignty rested on the idea of 'the people,' who needed to be united and bound together. Such boundness is not provided through the universalist values of liberal freedom and equality alone, but rather through the particularity of nationality.

Constructing the modern nation-state thus presupposed the nationalization of the state, which in turn required the construction of the 'nation.' This process often involved politicizing one ethnic

⁹ Hutchinson, J. (2017) *Nationalism and War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Giddens A (1985) *The nation-state and violence. Volume two of a contemporary critique of historical materialism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹¹ Öcalan A. (2017) *Democratic Nation*. Cologne: International Initiative.

group while depoliticizing and excluding others. The nation-state functions as a “bordered power-container,”¹² in which political authority is concentrated in those who identify with the state-bearing nation.¹³ The nation-state is, therefore, an ethnic political order predicated on a monolithic identity, denoting a centralized political organization constructed around a singular ethnocultural existence. The nation-state constitutes a dominant political paradigm that operates through the systematic depoliticization of pluralistic political communities and their subsequent reconstitution into a homogenized territorial polity. This process typically involves the state-led imposition of a unitary national identity upon historically distinct political communities¹⁴ through mechanisms of what Gellner termed “high culture” assimilation.¹⁵ As Michael Mann argues, the establishment of national homogeneity routinely necessitated what he terms “the dark side of democracy,”¹⁶ including state-sanctioned forced assimilation programs (e.g., linguistic standardization), territorial displacement,¹⁷ and, in extreme cases, ethnic cleansing.¹⁸ The homogenization, standardization, and nationalization of language, economy, lifestyle, thought, knowledge, and being emerge as vital instruments of state control, shaping the very essence of existence and consciousness.¹⁹ The process of nationalization often privileged one ethnocultural group as the state-bearing nation, transforming particularistic ethnic claims into universal national narratives. This structural privileging reflects what Anthony W. Marx identifies as the fundamental paradox of nationalist politics: “The

¹² Giddens A (1985) *The nation-state and violence. Volume two of a contemporary critique of historical materialism*, p.13; and Giddens A. (1989) *The Nation-State and Violence; V. II of A Contemporary critique of Historical Materialism*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, p.120.

¹³ Mamdani M. (2020) *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p.329.

¹⁴ Brubaker R. (1996) *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press; and Wimmer A. (2013) *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation, and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Gellner E. (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

¹⁶ Mann M. (2005) *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Sassen S. (2014) *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. USA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁸ Naimark N.M. (2002) *Fires of hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. USA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹ Beck U. (2000). *What is globalization?* New York, NY: Polity Press, p.51-52.



nation is that group viewed as the legitimate owner of the state.”²⁰ What we can learn from the historical development of the nation-state is that war has thus shaped the historical trajectory of nation-state building and continues to manifest through open-ended conflicts among and within nation-states.

The Second World War and the Holocaust accelerated and shaped the conditions for Israeli state formation. As Ilan Pappé notes, the process of Israeli state-making began much earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of Zionism.²¹ This early movement laid the ideological and organizational foundations for a future state, which gained new momentum and international legitimacy in the aftermath of the war. The formation of the Israeli state, nevertheless, was accompanied by an ongoing process of forced exodus and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.²² Consequently, many leftists around the world view Israel as an unjustified occupier state representing imperialism in the Middle East, a perspective predominantly echoed by Iranian leftists. Born out of the Holocaust, the Israeli state suffers from permanent ontological insecurity,²³ which has led to ongoing anxiety, intensified militarization, and indiscriminate warfare against any potential threats to its existence. Israel’s ontological insecurity is presently intertwined with the political insecurity of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, particularly following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel. This event unleashed an unprecedented response against Hamas, Palestinians, and the “Axis of Resistance,” which, at the time of writing, has resulted in the deaths of more than 58,000 Palestinian civilians, the majority of whom are women and children.²⁴

The Iranian nation-state, on the other hand, was also largely formed as a result of inter-imperial wars and conflicts in the 19th century. In

²⁰ Marx A. W. (2002) “The Nation-State and Its Exclusions”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 117(1), p.104.

²¹ Pappé, I. (2008). *Zionism as colonialism*. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 107(4), 611–633.

²² Quigley, J. (1998) “Displaced Palestinians and a Right of Return”, *Journal Name*, 39(1):171-229.

²³ Ejodus, F. (2018) “Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21: 883–908

²⁴ The Guardian (2025) “Death toll from Israeli attacks on Gaza surpasses 58,000, says health ministry – as it happened”, *The Guardian*, 13 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2025/jul/13/iran-nuclear-talks-us-israel-further-attacks-middle-east-crisis-live>

an effort to avoid official annexation by the Russian and British empires, which unofficially colonized the north and south of Iran respectively, the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925)—the ruling dynasty of Persia (the name of Iran until 1935)—initiated a defensive modernization campaign.²⁵ This campaign was grounded in the concentration and centralization of coercive forces and power. The process of defensive modernization gained momentum following the First World War and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which expanded the nation-state structure to the Middle East. While the Treaty did not alter the borders of Persia, it resulted in the replacement of the Qajar dynasty by the Pahlavi monarchy and the incorporation of Persia into the nation-state system. Authoritarian, patriarchal nation-state building continued the modernization process of Persia with increased speed and brutality. The Persian language, culture, history, myths and identity become the monolithic identity of the novel state of Iran while non-Persian peoples were deprived of their cultural and political existence. This process entailed forced assimilation, proletarianization, settlement of nomadic people, coercive displacement, and political deprivation.

The Iranian peoples united to dismantle Pahlavi absolutism in 1979; however, the forces of colonization, domination, and exploitation were reconfigured in more brutal forms with the establishment of the IRI. The IRI consolidated its power by waging a campaign of terror in Rojhelat, resulting in the deaths of almost 45,000 Kurds in the first half of the 1980s, following the 1979 *fatwa* (Islamic decree) of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder and first leader of the IRI.²⁶ This period also saw the mass execution of leftists following the 1988 Iraq-Iran war and the constitutionalization of a gender-apartheid regime.²⁷ The IRI has cloaked its true nature behind a façade of hollow anti-imperialism. While espousing an external anti-imperialist

²⁵ Matin, K. (2013) *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change*. New York: Routledge.

²⁶ Cabi, Marouf. 2023. "The armed struggle of the 1980s in Iranian Kurdistan: a space for survival." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 5: 1091-1111.

²⁷ Kermanian, Sara. 2024. "Geopolitics of Inter-subaltern Colonialism and Gender: Challenging Methodological Dualism through the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Journey from Kurdistan to Iran." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 14: 779-802.



rhetoric, this stance concealed an internal imperialism directed towards non-Persian nations and women. In other words, the colonial imperialism of the IRI is disguised as anti-imperialism, a point I will elaborate on in the subsequent section. The dissonance between its proclaimed anti-imperialism and the systematic repression within its borders is reinforced by the monopolization and deployment of coercive forces, both domestically and internationally, thereby securing the regime's existence.

A brief examination of the historical trajectories of nation-state building in Israel and Iran reveals that both are products of imperial genesis, albeit manifested in distinct forms. However, it is important to recognize that each also followed its own internal logic, shaped by local, social, political, and cultural dynamics. Consequently, for advocates of anti-imperialism, it becomes logically imperative to confront both states simultaneously. However, theoretical missteps, particularly the methodological dualism within postcolonial studies that frames the binary notion of the West versus the rest, have led to the geopolitical othering of the 'rest.' Methodological dualism often neglects the complex, uneven, and non-linear power relations, instead offering a binary and linear understanding based on the dualities of East/West, colonized/colonizer, and imperialism/anti-imperialism. This perspective renders non-Western entities as passive victims, incapable of reproducing the very forces of colonial imperialism. From this perspective, the Iranian regime cannot be characterized as a state with imperial tendencies, nor as one capable of extending internal imperial colonialism towards nations whose identities do not align with the state's. The following section further elucidates this point by demonstrating how the IRI's anti-imperialism and its construction of an *Ummah* are fundamentally contingent upon its absolutist enmity towards Israel. Moreover, this absolute enmity towards Israel serves to reinforce the IRI's colonial imperialist tendencies at home.

Colonial Imperialism Disguised as Anti-Imperialism

Since its foundation in 1979, the IRI grounded its legitimacy and existence in the rhetoric of ‘anti-imperialism.’ The regime’s ‘anti-imperialism’ is coupled with its absolute enmity toward Israel, viewed as a representative of imperial power in the Muslim-majority Middle East. ‘Death to Israel’ thus became a central pillar of both the IRI’s ideology and foreign policy, aimed at constructing an ‘imagined community’ of Muslims opposed to Israel, or *ummah*. *Ummah* refers to a transnational collective community of Muslims subjected to the divine rule of salvation. The reconstruction of the *ummah*, propelled by the Islamic revolution, necessitates an unwavering stance of purported anti-imperialism, which in turn demands absolute enmity toward Israel as an imperialist force in the Middle East. This ostensibly hollow anti-imperialist rhetoric has afforded the Iranian regime a means of survival in at least two significant ways. First, by cultivating an external adversary and fostering a perpetual sense of existential threat to national security, the IRI has utilized this condition to label any internal dissent, particularly from non-Persian communities, as a Western conspiracy against its anti-imperialist agenda. This framing has rendered such dissenters legitimate targets for suppression. Second, grappling with a crisis of internal legitimacy, the IRI has, under the guise of anti-imperialism, established a buffer zone around its borders. This has been accomplished through the continuous expansion of its influence in the region, achieved by financing and forming the so-called ‘Axis of Resistance.’ Monopolising the Palestinian cause and their struggle for freedom, the ‘Axis of Resistance’ functions as an instrument of Islamist imperialism, operating under the pretext of anti-imperialism against the imperial state of Israel.

The regime’s anti-imperialist posture has, nonetheless, proven vacuous in the eyes of the majority of the Iranian populace. Confronted by a confluence of crises—including governance, legitimacy, economic instability, environmental, and societal challenges—the voices of dissent within Iran are increasingly resonant. Resistance manifests in various forms, particularly among



women and non-Persian communities. Through their everyday practices, these groups actively repudiate the regime's legitimacy and reclaim their autonomy and freedom. A salient example of this growing discontent is the 2022 '*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*' ('Women, Life, Freedom') movement. However, as noted by Hossein Dabbagh and Patrick Hassan, the 12-day Israel-Iran war reinforced an oppressive regime that was ostensibly meant to be undermined.²⁸ This conflict provided the regime with a significant opportunity to revitalize its credibility while amplifying its anti-imperialist propaganda, effectively framing its self-perception as a plausible and compelling narrative that addresses Iran's geopolitical position. That is to say that the rhetoric of anti-imperialism of the regime in response to Israel's bombardment gained ground as it materialised and actualised the regime's transcendent self-perception in the eyes of ordinary citizen as the threat of so-called Israeli imperialism became seemingly real. Dabbagh and Hassan labels this the logic of "imperial self-fulfilling prophecy."²⁹ This opportunity primarily arose from the paradox engendered by the war between Israel and Iran, placing the regime's dissenters in a profound dilemma: what course of action should one take? Which side should one support: Israel or Iran? The causal factors underlying this paradox are multifaceted; however, my focus will be on how the regime's anti-imperialism, as previously discussed, intertwines with nationalism. This interplay creates a strategic opportunity for the regime to appropriate not only this dynamic, but also the grassroots solidarity that emerges among the populace as they endured the consequences of war. The following section examines this issue by exploring the intricate relationship between war and nationalism.

²⁸ Dabbagh, H. and Hassan, P. (2025) "When liberation becomes subjugation: the moral paradox of regime change in Iran". *THE PHILOSOPHER*. Available at: <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/when-liberation-becomes-subjugation-the-moral-paradox-of-regime-change-in-iran-by-hossein-dabbagh>

²⁹ Ibid.

Warfare and National Identity: The Iranian State's Manipulation of Nationalism for Political Control

The relationship between war and nationalism is characterized by a dynamic interplay. As John Hutchinson argues, warfare serves as a constitutive force in shaping national sentiments and nationalism by sacralising the nation.³⁰ It contributes to the formation of national identity by constructing a myth around the war experience. In this sense, warfare influences the perceptions of fundamental values within a population and their place in the broader context of space and time. During times of crisis, such as wars, there is often a renewed focus on national traditions and identities. Individuals may turn to historical narratives, cultural practices, or symbols that resonate with their national identity as a means to seek solutions or renewal within the political landscape. Through the production of 'them and us' stereotypes, which result in collective differentiation, the state also constructs myths and memories of war as part of a political project, thereby reproducing what Hutchinson terms "everyday nationalism."³¹ Nationalism in turn acts as both a legitimizing and mobilizing force in the face of war, creating meanings for death and destruction through the sacralizing of the nation. The sacralization of the nation, in conjunction with the territorial sovereignty of the state, culminates in the sacralization of the 'territorial integrity' of the nation-state, framed within the context of 'national security.'

The interplay of methodological dualism inherent in postcolonial studies, especially the tension between imperialism and anti-imperialism, coupled with the symbiotic relationship between war and nationalism, led many 'Iranian leftists' to align themselves with the Iranian regime and rally around the national flag. Many perceived the Israel-Iran conflict as a struggle between imperialist and anti-

³⁰ Hutchinson, J. (2017) *Nationalism and War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Hutchinson, J. (2018) 'Bringing the study of warfare into theories of nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24(1), pp. 6–21.

³¹ Hutchinson, J. (2018) 'Bringing the study of warfare into theories of nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24(1), pp. 6–21.



imperialist forces, a notion heightened by nationalist fervour during the war. This indicates that the theoretical malaise of the 'Iranian left' is intricately intertwined with an ontological insecurity that revolves around the concept of Iran's 'territorial integrity.' Consequently, they interpreted the Israeli attack as an affront to Iran's national sovereignty and 'territorial integrity.'³² Faced with a critical choice, these leftists felt they had to decide between supporting a 'homogeneous Iranian nation' under the centralized rule of the IRI or risking the potential of a 'heterogeneous Iranian nation' governed by decentralized authority. They chose the former, inadvertently enabling the regime to exploit the situation and co-opt the grassroots solidarity that had organically developed among the populace in response to the war's challenges.

In the face of war, many individuals began to forge grassroots solidarity, sharing resources such as food, providing rides, offering shelter, and caring for the injured. As Asef Bayat recounts, in a bakery, when supplies were limited, the customers prioritized communal support over individual needs, demonstrating profound solidarity. At a bakery, Bayat writes,

10 customers stood in line. The first asked for 15 pieces, the second for 10, the third for 5. But the baker announced he had only 25. 'I don't want any — give them to others,' said the first. 'Me neither, give mine away,' said the second. 'I'll just take one,' said the third. Eventually, everyone walked away with a few pieces. The baker cried and hugged them all.³³

However, this burgeoning grassroots solidarity was manipulated by the IRI, which framed the war as an existential national threat. The regime appropriated the unity among the people to further its agenda, intensifying sentiments among dissenting voices who

³² Tabaar, M.A. (2025) "The Islamic Republic's new lease on life: How the U.S.-Israeli strikes empowered the Iranian regime", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 July. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/islamic-republics-new-lease-life?utm_medium=social

³³ Bayat, A. (2025) "The spirit of Tehran: While Israel's bombings have shaken the Iranian capital and killed hundreds of civilians, its people have displayed care, resilience and quiet determination to carry on", *New Lines Magazine*. Available at: <https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/the-spirit-of-tehran/>

perceived the conflict as a direct challenge to Iran's 'territorial integrity' and 'national security.'

The IRI's so-called anti-imperialism is deeply rooted in its Islamic imperialism, manifested through the concept of *ummah*. This term denotes a collective identity based on Islamic beliefs that transcends state borders. Under IRI rule, the 'Iranian nation' is defined through an Islamic identity, a notion consistently emphasized by Khamenei. In a speech to his followers in September 2024, he stated, "For years, I have deliberately emphasized the term 'Islamic *Ummah*' to remind us that we are one *Ummah*. Yes, some of us are Iranian, some are Iraqi, some are Syrian, and so on. However, these borders do not alter the fundamental truth of the Islamic *Ummah*."³⁴ Before the 12-Day Israel-Iran War, Khamenei dismissed any ethno-national identity outside the Islamic framework as artificial and unreal. In a 2018 address to university students, he asserted, "National dignity means a sense of national pride grounded in reality, stemming from actual conditions within society rather than relying on illusions and misconceptions. While there may have been a sense of pride in the Kian and Achaemenid dynasties, these are mere illusions; they do not inspire true pride. National dignity must be rooted in reality."³⁵ Thus, for the IRI, the 'Iranian nation' becomes synonymous with an Islamic, post-Safavid identity. Nevertheless, this identity is not entirely devoid of ethno-nationalistic elements, as Persian is upheld as the sole official language of the state.

During the 12-Day War, the IRI skillfully manipulated grassroots solidarity among the peoples and the responses of 'Iranian leftists,' who aligned with the regime against both imperialism and perceived threats to Iran's 'territorial integrity.' This manipulation resulted in a notable shift from the Islamic concept of *ummah* to a more pre-Islamic notion of the 'Iranian nation' among IRI officials, including its supreme leader. In his third video message during the conflict,

³⁴ Khamenei, I. (@Khamenei_fa) (2024) "Man salhāst bar ruye vāzhe-ye "ommat-e eslami"", X, 16 September. Available at: https://x.com/Khamenei_fa/status/1835657960946651533

³⁵ Khamenei, I. (2018) "Ezāt-e melli", *Khamenei.ir*. Farsi. Available at: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=1349>



Khamenei used the word ‘Iran’ 23 times, while referring to the term ‘Islamic Republic’ only 7 times, clearly signalling this shift.³⁶ Following the ceasefire between Israel and Iran, Khamenei emphasized this nationalist sentiment in a post on his X account, stating, “The Iranian nation is a great nation; Iran is a strong and vast country with an ancient civilization. Our cultural and civilizational wealth is hundreds of times greater than that of America and similar countries. The expectation that Iran would surrender to another country is one of those absurd statements that will undoubtedly provoke the ridicule of wise individuals.”³⁷

Two weeks after the ceasefire, Khamenei appeared at the annual mourning ceremony of Muharram on the eve of Ashura, requesting the eulogist to sing “Ey Iran,” a patriotic anthem imbued with nationalist sentiment. This juxtaposition of Shia mourning rituals and nationalist imagery represents a deliberate attempt to instrumentalize the emerging unified identity in the face of existential threats. By resorting to the myth of the Iranian nation and its symbols, the IRI sought to unify the nation with the state, reviving ethno-nationalism through pre-Islamic myths and imagery. Mohammad Ghalibaf, the conservative spokesperson of Parliament, claimed, “Today, in the face of this aggression, and in the pursuit of the collapse, division, and overthrow of Iran, it should be known that the hard core of this regime consists of 90 million people. We are all united. This is the most important achievement that exists.” He further asserted that “Nation and Islam are aligned with each other.”³⁸ This sentiment was echoed by the more moderate diplomat, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the former foreign minister of the IRI (2013-2021), who stated in an interview that what saved the regime was the “unity among the people,” an achievement that needs protection. For Zarif, the essence of peoplehood lies in their identity, which constitutes the

³⁶ Khamenei, I. (2025) “Somin payam-e televisioni khatâb be melat-e Iran dar piye tahajom-e rezim-e sionisti”, *Khamenei.ir*, Farsi. 26 June. Available at: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/audio-content?id=60504>

³⁷ Khamenei, I. (2025) “Melat-e Iran melat-e bozorgi ast, #Iran keshvar-e ghavi va panhâvari ast”, X, Farsi. 30 June. Available at: https://x.com/Khamenei_fa/status/1939720628971426018

³⁸ Tamashachi (2025) “Mosahebe Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf: Nagofteh-haye jang ba Israel”, *YouTube*, Farsi. 12 July. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHvp4SnTz5g>

“Iranian nation” and encompasses both pre-Islamic and Islamic dimensions.³⁹ While it is difficult to predict whether this shift will lead to any concrete reforms, it is evident that it will achieve nothing for already marginalized groups, including the Kurds, Baluchs, Arabs, and other non-Persian nations, as well as women.

Conclusion

War of aggression is fundamentally and morally reprehensible, and there is no justification for the belief that it can in and of itself facilitate the establishment of democracy and freedom. The brutality of war of aggression renders civilians, particularly women and children, its primary victims, a reality starkly illustrated by the casualty figures in the Israel-Gaza conflict. This essay does not, in any way, advocate war of aggression; rather, it unequivocally condemns it. Nor does it argue for externally driven regime change, as such interventions often reactivate an epistemic template that casts Western powers as “civilized liberators” bestowing progress, while depicting non-Western “others” as “backward recipients” in need of uplift. This narrative deprives people of their subjectivity and political agency, reducing them to mere victims in need of liberation. However, the moral repudiation of war of aggression should not lead to political alignment with the domestic oppressor, as many Iranian leftists has tended to do. Instead, this critique advocates for actively realizing potential forces through the formation of concrete transnational solidarity, rather than passively responding to a war appropriated by the regime. During the conflict, internally ‘othered’ nations, non-Persian groups, were again portrayed as existential threats to Iran’s ‘national security’ and ‘territorial integrity,’ necessitating the unity of Persians as the indispensable guardians of the ‘Iranian nation.’ The left has thus had a tendency to fall into the arms of those who dominate it and seek its destruction. Real anti-imperialism is not seduced by the ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric of actual

³⁹ IRNA (2025) “Goftogu ba Mohammad Javad Zarif dar avvalin barnameh “Be Vaqt-e Iran”; Zarif: Mardom ra forsath bebinid”, *YouTube*. Farsi. 15 July. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d8DnGqLa90>



imperialists who dominate marginalized groups like ethnic minorities and women.

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