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# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security



# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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## Persistent Utopia and Insurgent Democracy: Political Futures After Iran's 2022 to 2026 Uprisings

Maryam Anahita Yousefi\*

York University

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### ABSTRACT

Challenging the common framing of Iran's 2022–2026 uprisings as a failed revolution, this commentary argues that the *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* movement constitutes a completed political sequence, one that ran its course within existing conditions while generating political thought that persists beyond the sequence's closure. Sylvain Lazarus's account of how ordinary people produce thought at a critical distance from the State, and Miguel Abensour's paired concepts of insurgent democracy and persistent utopia, together illuminate how the movement forged solidarity around gender, democracy, and social justice demands, before being foreclosed by a double capture: domestic delegitimization by the Islamic Republic and external appropriation by monarchist restoration discourse. The article then maps three futures from most immediate to most transformative: dispersed everyday resistance, theorized through Asef Bayat's social nonmovements; renewed collectivization; and insurgent democratic rupture, arguing that the political thought of 2022–2026 has become an instance of persistent utopia: an enduring resource for future political sequences.

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**Keywords:** *persistent utopia, insurgent democracy, Iran uprisings, Women Life Freedom, social nonmovements, emancipatory politics, authoritarianism, political sequences*

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**Biographical Note:** *Maryam Anahita Yousefi is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics at York University. Her research focuses on the Politics and Aesthetics of Utopia, Emancipatory Politics, and Iranian Cultural Products. Her dissertation on Gholam-Hosseini Sa'edi integrates utopian theory (Bloch, Abensour), politics of aesthetics, Black and abolitionist aesthetics, and Iranian and Afro-Iranian studies to examine how cultural production functions under authoritarian control. Her work contributes to debates on authoritarianism, censorship, democracy, and resistance through aesthetics and culture.*

## **Introduction: When Catastrophe Calls Forth Utopia**

On January 8 and 9, 2026, Iranian security forces massacred protesters across the country in what Amnesty International described as "mass unlawful killings committed on an unprecedented scale." This followed over three years of sustained uprising beginning with Mahsa (Jina) Amini's death in police custody on September 16, 2022. The scale exceeded all prior postrevolutionary repression.

The French political philosopher Miguel Abensour argues that "instead of catastrophe forever nullifying the idea of utopia, its persistence paradoxically gave it new life." Yet the utopia Abensour theorizes is not the blueprint of an ideal society, nor abstract wishful thinking detached from material conditions. Rather, he identifies what he calls "persistent utopia": a stubborn impulse toward freedom and justice that survives defeats, learns from failures, and re-emerges in new historical forms despite systematic efforts to extinguish it. This persistence manifests through what Abensour calls the "new utopian spirit," characterized by critical self-reflection, the abandonment of reconciliation fantasies, and vigilance against utopia's own tendency to invert into domination. The Iranian uprising poses Abensour's framework with lethal urgency: How does this impulse persist under conditions engineered to destroy not just organized resistance but political imagination itself?

This essay draws on three theoretical frameworks to analyze the 2022 to 2026 uprisings and illuminate potential political futures. From the Iranian-American sociologist Asef Bayat, I employ the concept of "social nonmovements" to understand dispersed resistance under authoritarianism. From the French philosopher Sylvain Lazarus, I utilize the theory of political sequences and "subjective singularities" to grasp how ordinary people produce political thought adequate to their conditions. From Abensour, I engage the concepts of insurgent democracy, the dialectic of emancipation, and persistent utopia to theorize democratic practice under repression. Together, these frameworks help explain how ordinary Iranians have sustained political imagination despite systematic violence.

## **Nonmovements, Political Sequences, and the Persistence of Thought**

Understanding post-2026 futures require grasping how political possibility was sustained after 1979. Following the Islamic Republic's

consolidation through mass executions of leftists and ethnic minority activists, collective political action became extremely costly. In such conditions, Bayat argues, resistance assumes a distinctive form: "social nonmovements," defined as "collective actions of noncollective actors...representing the shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change." Women's four-decade hijab resistance exemplifies this pattern. Bayat documents that "those women began to push back their headscarves, allowing some of their hair to show in public. Over the years, headscarves gradually inched back further and further." During one 2013 crackdown, authorities stopped 3.6 million women and detained 180,000, yet "despite such treatment, women did not relent."

Bayat's sociological concept requires theoretical deepening through Lazarus's philosophical framework, which recognizes politics as emerging through singular, sequential modes rather than continuous revolutionary process. Politics is not destroyed from outside but "completes itself endogenously": it ceases when its internal processes reach exhaustion. Lazarus understands political activity as appearing in "subjective singularities," defined as "modes of thought at work in specific places and times that produce genuine political thought adequate to their practice." The core axiom insists that "people think" (*les gens pensent*), meaning ordinary people produce political thought on their own terms. Each woman pushing back her hijab is not merely resisting but thinking politics: developing analysis of power relations, calculating risks, inventing tactics. This challenges assumptions that politics requires either formal electoral participation or revolutionary consciousness transmitted by vanguard parties.

Reading Bayat through Lazarus reveals that Iranian nonmovements since 1979 represent what Lazarus calls politics maintaining "distance from the State," designating political activity refusing subordination to state logic while remaining below visibility thresholds triggering systematic repression. This accumulated thought constitutes what Lazarus terms "inner experience of politics," subjectivity irreducible to either state discourse or oppositional ideology.

## **The Conjunctural Crisis and the Collectivization of Hope**

September 2022 marked the moment when decades of dispersed political thought erupted into

visible collective action. Recent scholarship demonstrates this through "overdetermination," identifying how multiple structural contradictions converge at specific historical moments to produce revolutionary situations. The uprisings emerged from the convergence of at least four systemic contradictions: the crisis of gendered social control; the crisis of the nation-state as a Persian and Shi'i-centric, centralizing force; the crisis of "religious democracy" and defeat of the Reform movement; and the crisis of authoritarian neoliberalism.

This conjunctural crisis produced what Lazarus would recognize as a new political sequence. In the first three months, two million Iranians staged 1,200 protest actions across 160 cities and towns. The slogan's Kurdish origins (Jin, Jiyan, Azadi), rooted in Kurdish feminist theorizing in Rojava, and its adoption across Persian, Baluch, and Arab communities demonstrated unprecedented cross-ethnic solidarity. Participants reported that "it was incredibly moving to hear demonstrators in Tehran, who are largely from the dominant Persian community, shouting out a slogan that originated in Kurdistan."

The movement's this-worldly character, centering women's rights, bodily autonomy, and "the desire for a 'normal' life," embodied what Abensour identifies as persistent utopia: not a blueprint but an impulse that "despite all its failures, disavows, and defeats, is reborn in history." Crucially, the slogan specified neither institutions nor leadership, maintaining what Abensour calls "absolute distance" (*écart absolu*), the structural space preventing democracy from coinciding with itself or achieving a final form that would end democratic contestation.

### **The Dialectic of Emancipation and Its Iranian Forms**

Yet Abensour's concept of the "dialectic of emancipation" becomes crucial for understanding the uprising's fate. This concept identifies "the paradoxical movement by which modern emancipation is inverted, giving rise to new forms of domination and oppression, to barbarism, in spite of the initial emancipatory intentionality." The 2022 to 2026 period manifested this dialectic through two forms of capture.

First, external appropriation. By January 2026, "regime change" vocabulary had marginalized democratic advocates. While "Woman, Life, Freedom" dominated the 2022 uprising, by January 2026 protesters increasingly chanted "Javid Shah" (Long live the Shah) and "This is the national slogan: Reza Pahlavi." Analysis confirms

that "over the course of the recent protests, there were increasing calls for Pahlavi's return." When Israeli strikes killed hundreds of Iranian civilians in June 2025, exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi maintained that "anything that weakens the regime" would be welcomed inside Iran, positioning protesters as beneficiaries of external military action in remarks that "sparked fierce debate." This shift represents not tactical adaptation but transformation of political horizons: from democratic plurality to monarchist restoration linked to external military intervention.

Second, domestic delegitimization. The regime systematically framed protesters as foreign agents. In June 2023, Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Chief Mohammad Kazemi claimed "secret services of about 20 countries were involved in supporting Iran's popular protests in 2022." During January 2026, the IRGC Intelligence Organization framed the unrest as "a targeted, multi-phase plan...designed under the guidance of foreign intelligence services, with operational leadership by organized terrorist forces." Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei labeled demonstrators "mercenaries for foreigners." The regime specifically framed the 2026 uprising as a Mossad initiative. Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu stated publicly, "we have some of our people there right now," while former CIA Director Mike Pompeo tweeted "Happy New Year to every Iranian in the streets. Also to every Mossad agent walking beside them." This framing extended to individuals: journalist Niloofar Hamedi, who photographed Mahsa Amini's parents at the hospital, faced charges of being a "CIA foreign agent."

This double capture eliminated space for autonomous collective hope. The reformist path had already closed. In May 2021, Iran's Guardian Council disqualified all prominent reformist and pragmatist candidates, leaving only hardliners approved to run, representing the moment when elections "shifted from being 'engineered' to being a mere facade for direct appointment."

Abensour's "new utopian spirit" names the critical vigilance required: "only a thought of utopia that does violence to itself, that includes the critique of utopia, acquires the hardness necessary to destroy the myths that ruin utopia." This demands "demythologization": abandoning narratives promising reconciliation or final harmony and embracing separation (*écart*) as utopia's permanent condition.

### **Three Futures: Dispersed, Collectivized, or Insurgent**

Political futures depend on how accumulated political thought relates to structural pressures emerging from January 2026. The question is not whether new political sequences will emerge, but under what conditions and with what capacities to defend their autonomy.

The most probable near-term trajectory (2026 to 2030s) involves return to dispersed, everyday resistance. Evidence suggests this pattern is underway: women continue removing hijabs despite intensified morality police patrols; workers engage in wildcat strikes without formal unions; youth maintain underground cultural spaces through encrypted networks. One account captures this: "We learned the art of quiet dissent. In private, non-religious families led a double life, defying rules for the most normal activities." In Lazarus's terms, dispersed resistance represents not the absence of politics but politics maintaining structural distance from the State while building subjective capacities for future collectivization.

Yet dispersion carries contradictions. Isolated resistance cannot address the systemic crises that catalyzed the 2022 uprising. These conditions have intensified: Iran's economy hemorrhages under sanctions; inflation reached triple digits in early 2026; water shortages threaten entire provinces. At some threshold, material necessity will force re-collectivization not through ideology but through the impossibility of individual survival strategies. Analysis warns Iran faces "sustained conditions of crisis, while emergent social forces struggle to cohere or build up the necessary social power to realise their revolutionary aspirations."

Here Lazarus's framework illuminates the risks. Lazarus distinguishes between politics maintaining distance from the State and politics becoming "prescriptive," attempting to seize state power and impose predetermined programs. The danger is that re-collectivized movements, facing regime violence and external pressure, will abandon autonomous political thought developed through decades of dispersed resistance in favor of prescriptive models imported from revolutionary tradition or external actors. Lazarus warns that when politics shifts from maintaining distance to prescribing state power, it loses capacity for genuine invention and becomes absorbed into existing state categories. The critical question is whether organizational forms will exist defending against both the dual capture mechanisms destroying the 2022 to 2026 sequence and the prescriptive temptation to seize state power without adequate mechanisms for ongoing democratic contestation.

This brings us to what Abensour's framework clarifies as the most difficult but necessary scenario: insurgent recuperation of democratic capacity under ongoing repression. Abensour's "insurgent democracy" defines democracy not as achieved institutional form but as continuous action against domination, occurring "on the streets, in the squares, and just about anywhere people gather to struggle together against the state." Its distinctive temporality is "the caesura between two state forms," the interval when old rulers decline but new rulers have not consolidated, creating space for democratic practice refusing subordination to either.

What concrete capacities does Abensour's framework suggest this requires? First, temporal autonomy: protected time and space for political invention before state categories colonize meanings. The 2022 uprising achieved this temporarily through "Woman, Life, Freedom," resisting easy translation into either regime discourse or diaspora opposition discourse. But this proved fragile when the regime's internet shutdowns disrupted communication while external appropriation by monarchist discourse gradually displaced indigenous vocabularies. Abensour's concept of demythologization becomes crucial: abandoning narratives promising reconciliation and embracing separation (*écart*) as utopia's permanent condition, transforming utopia from end-state to ongoing practice.

Second, categorical self-defense: protecting indigenous political vocabularies from both external appropriation and domestic delegitimization. When "Woman, Life, Freedom" shifted to "Javid Shah," it transformed the uprising's political horizon from democratic plurality to monarchist restoration. Yet Abensour's persistent utopia concept suggests categorical self-defense cannot mean isolation. His formulation of persistent utopia as "not a closed society, shut in on itself, static" but "open to time, to the event, to the appearance of the new" indicates movements must develop practices maintaining political autonomy while accepting material support.

Third, organizational forms combining resilience against repression with mechanisms preventing ossification or capture. Here Abensour's analysis of the dialectic of emancipation becomes essential: revolutionary success without adequate institutional mechanisms for ongoing democratic contestation produces tyranny, as the 1979 revolution demonstrated. Yet reformism proved equally futile once the regime closed off that space in 2021. Abensour's insurgent democracy offers a

third path: neither revolutionary seizure of state power nor reformist accommodation, but ongoing democratic self-organization maintaining autonomy from state logic while contesting it at every point. This requires what Lazarus calls "sites of the name," concrete spaces where political thought and practice emerge independent of state determination.

Evidence suggests these capacities exist in embryonic form. As one observer notes: "Even though the Burnt Generation grew up traumatized and cautious, they have imparted their hopes for a freer future to a younger generation that is willing to fight against state repression."

This intergenerational transmission ensures the 2022 to 2026 sequence, despite violent suppression, will continue producing effects far beyond its immediate moment.

### Conclusion: The Persistence of Utopia

Abensour's governing principle, "to democratize utopia and to utopianize democracy," provides the essay's compass. Democratizing utopia means making political imagination genuinely plural. Utopianizing democracy means orienting democratic practice toward radical transformation. Lazarus's complementary insight prevents both despair and false continuity: the 2022 to 2026 uprising was not "failed revolution" but a completed political sequence whose thought reached limits within existing conditions. New sequences will emerge when accumulated thought makes them possible.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement demonstrated that a "chain of equivalence" linking gender equality, democratic self-government, ethno-national autonomy, and social justice could be forged across Iran's immense diversity. That this chain was broken through massacre and categorical capture does not erase the political thought it produced. Abensour's concept of "the resistance of the human" takes refuge in persistent utopia, "not a closed society, shut in on itself, static" but "open to time, to the event, to the appearance of the new, in a word, to adventure."

William Morris's formulation, which Abensour cites as capturing persistent utopia's essence, deserves final attention: "men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name." Iranian resistance after the 2026 massacre demonstrates precisely this: not heroism but persistence, not martyrdom but the

stubborn refusal to let political imagination be extinguished, not revolution but politics, the irreducible human capacity to think and act collectively despite everything designed to prevent it.

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