



Journal of  
**Conflict**  
**Transformation**  
and  
**Security**

Vol. 11 | No. 1 | 2026

# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security



# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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## Arrested Development in Iran: The 12 Day Israel-U.S.-Iran War in Historical Perspective

Nader Hashemi\*  
Georgetown University

### ABSTRACT

*Abstract The 2026 US-Israeli attack on Iran which produced a global crisis surrounding the Strait of Hormuz was preceded by a twelve-day war in June 2025. The key actors and arguments used to justify both wars were the same. In 2025, much of the Western debate focused on questions related to nuclear weapons, Iranian missiles and concerns about American involvement another Middle East quagmire. This article shifts the focus to questions of Iran's political development trajectory related to themes of democracy and authoritarianism. It is argued that this war fits a historic pattern where Western military intervention in Iran has inadvertently strengthened the forces of authoritarianism and weakened the prospects for democracy and democratization.*

**Keywords:** Iran, Israel, colonialism, United States, Democracy, Development, Authoritarianism

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The twelve-day war between Israel and United States versus Iran was a landmark event in both Middle East and world politics. 1,190 Iranians were killed and 4,400 were injured. On the Israeli side, twenty-eight people were killed and more than 3,000 injured.<sup>1</sup> This conflict threatened to plunge the Middle East into a regional war with major destabilizing consequences for Islam-West relations, the global economy and international order more broadly.

Much of the debate leading up to this war and in its aftermath related to nuclear weapons, regional security, American involvement in another Middle East quagmire and the prospects for U.S.-Iran diplomacy. Largely ignored, however, was any consideration of the internal effects of this war on Iran's political development, specifically related to the themes of authoritarianism and democratization.

It is my contention that the U.S.-Israel bombing of Iran has inadvertently strengthened authoritarianism in Iran and weakened domestic opposition forces. The net winner from this war, viewed from the perspective of democratization, is the Islamic Republic and its ruling elite, specifically, the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other repressive institutions of the Iranian state. This is not the first-time that an external intervention has bolstered political authoritarianism in Iran. In fact, the June 2025 bombing of Iran fits a historical and recurring pattern dating back more than 120 years where Iran's internal development trajectory has been deeply skewed and negatively affected as a direct result of foreign intervention.

This is the argument I would like to advance here. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that prior to the U.S.-Israel-Iran war, the Islamic Republic was not about to be toppled. The

regime, however, was on shaky political ground. It was facing an expanding crisis of political legitimacy, and its base of internal support had shrunk to historic lows. Discontent was widespread and growing. Eventually, a day of reckoning would arrive as these mounting, political, economic, social and environmental problems increased. This day has now been pushed back, giving the Islamic Republic a new lease on life. The U.S. and Israel, backed by most Western liberal democracies who supported the attack on Iran, have contributed to this outcome.<sup>2</sup>

### Legitimation Crisis

Forty-six years after the Iranian Revolution, there is widespread societal discontent and a deep desire for political change. One measure of this are the Iranian election results. While elections have never been fully free and fair, when reformist candidates are allowed to participate, campaigning on a platform of citizenship rights and engagement with the West, and against the official policies of the Islamic Republic, they often win. Iranian conservatives have publicly acknowledged a crisis of legitimacy. On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, 300 conservative figures penned an open letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader "about existing concerns regarding the state of the Islamic Republic and the need for fundamental reforms." They wrote that "day by day the government is resembling a lifeless body and breaking from within... and...the country needs structural and fundamental reforms."<sup>3</sup>

Ali Khamenei has received this message and admitted there is a problem. "The people's trust [in the Islamic Republic]," he noted in a rare moment on candor, "has unfortunately been slightly damaged."<sup>4</sup> This confirms an observation from a former Iranian Deputy

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Activist News Agency, "Twelve Days Under Fire: A Comprehensive Report on the Iran-Israel War," June 28, 2025, <https://www.en-hrana.org/twelve-days-under-fire-a-comprehensive-report-on-the-iran-israel-war/>; Emanuel Fabian, "The Iran-Israel War by the numbers, after twelve days of fighting," *Times of Israel*, June 24, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> See the G7 statement that explicitly backed the Israeli bombing of Iran. "G7 Leaders' Statement on Recent Developments Between Israel and Iran," June

16, 2025, <https://g7.canada.ca/en/news-and-media/news/g7-leaders-statement-on-recent-developments-between-israel-and-iran/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Iranian Conservatives Ask Supreme Leader for Reforms," *Al Monitor*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/04/iran-khamenei-open-letter-conservatives-structural-reform.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Khamenei: The Trust of the People is a Little Damaged," *Radio Farda*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khamenei-admits-people-no-trust-biden-us/31432577.html>.

Minister of Interior that “the desire for structural change in the country is increasing.”<sup>5</sup> Statements of this nature by senior regime officials are not uncommon in Iran. It is a reflection of the deep and widespread societal desire for political change. Another measure of discontent is street protests. Major demonstrations have rocked the Islamic Republic in 1999, 2003, 2009, 2017, 2019 and most recently in 2022. In February 2022, according to a leaked document from the IRGC, “society is in a state of explosion.”<sup>6</sup> This prediction came true a few months later. The spark that produced the eruption was the arrest of Mahsa Amini.

In September 2022, 22-year-old Amini was arrested by state security forces for improper hejab at a Tehran subway station. Her beating and subsequent death produced the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement. It shook the Islamic Republic to its core and generated global headlines for several months. Iranians both within the country and outside, came together in an unprecedented show of unity, unseen since the 1979 Revolution, demanding a new political order. More than 500 people were killed by security forces. Some of the most intense protests and clashes took place in minority Kurdish and Baluch regions of Iran where discrimination and economic conditions are more severe.<sup>7</sup> In response to these protests, Iranian hardliners tried to reassert control by passing a new hejab and chastity law. It got stalled, however, in the Supreme National Security Council. A core problem for the regime in passing this law was the defiance of Iranian women. In many cities, they were challenging the regime by walking in the streets without a hejab, daring the security forces to arrest them. The Islamic Republic backed down. It lacked both the will and manpower to stop this nonviolent form of protest in fear of social

backlash. Similarly, a new bill that sought to criminalize anti-regime content on social media was withdrawn. It too produced a societal reaction where citizens expressed anger over further restrictions on their personal freedoms.<sup>8</sup> In short, prior to the Israeli/American bombing, state-society relations in Iran were deeply fraught. The embers of discontent were burning ready to ignite.

Everything changed, however, on June 13, 2025, when Israel, backed by the United States, attacked Iran. A potent, longstanding theme of modern Iranian identity was unleashed – the power of secular nationalism brought on by external aggression. Like other countries in the Global South, nationalism and the desire for dignity and independence from Western subjugation and humiliation remains a powerful mobilizing theme in Iran. It played a critical role in all the key transformative events of Iran’s modern history, and once again, it was a force to reckon with.

As result of the twelve-day war, a new form of nationalism is discernible in Iran. It is organic in nature, politically secular, independent of state control and it seems to have broad societal appeal. Nematollah Fazeli, a cultural anthropologist, calls it an “everyday nationalism” that is “reflected in a return to epic poetry, popular podcasts about Iranian history and thousands of ordinary conversations across the country about Iranian identity.”<sup>9</sup>

Leaders of the Islamic Republic have sought to exploit this development to shore up their legitimation crisis. Building on this trend the Iranian regime is now promoting a new form of nationalism that mixes Iran’s pre-Islamic secular identity (which was previously disparaged by Iran’s clerical leaders) with a

<sup>5</sup> BBC Persian, “Iran’s Deputy Interior Minister Says ‘Desire for Fundamental Change’ is ‘Increasing’ in Iran,” January 16, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, “‘State of Explosion’: Leaked IRGC Document Warns of Rising Discontent in Iran,” *Radio Free Europe*, February 2, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-irgc-leaked-document-discontent/31683642.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Nader Hashemi, “Women, Life, Freedom: A Human Rights Report on the Islamic Republic of Iran,” May 18<sup>th</sup> Foundation (Seoul: South Korea, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Mazhari, “After the War Iranians Demand a New Social Contract,” July 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/08/31/trump-gaza-plan-riviera-relocation/>.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Wintour, “‘The people stood up’: how war turned Iran towards ‘everyday nationalism,’” September 7, 2025.

light coating of political Islam.<sup>10</sup> Preliminary evidence suggests that this tactic is working.

An interesting fact about Iran, that separates it from the rest of the Middle East, is that core sections of its population are secular and pro-American (but necessarily pro-US foreign policy). They strongly support engagement with the Western world after decades of political isolation and estrangement. This applies mostly to young people, who form the bulk of Iran's population and who came of age after the revolution. The political experience of these young people has been shaped by living under a religious authoritarian regime for which anti-Americanism is a core tenet. As discontent grew in Iran, so did popular rejection of the official narrative of the regime in both domestic and foreign policy.

Iranian anthropologist, Narges Bajoghli, observes that after the bombs started falling in June, she noticed "a profound shift among my contacts across Iranian society." People were now repeating the official slogans of the regime related to the evil machinations of foreign powers, the need to invest in Iran's national security and the dangers of diplomacy. "Even among some of the most vocal critics of the regime, the anger turned not inward but outward."<sup>11</sup>

The Israeli bombing of Iran began amid U.S.-Iran diplomatics talks. Five rounds of negotiations had already taken place, the sixth was supposed to begin two days after the first Israeli strike. Israel, with US approval, also targeted Iran's lead negotiator, Ali Shamskhani, who survived a direct attack on his home. This aspect of the war shocked Iranians across the political spectrum. Many believe the Trump Administration deliberately deceived Iran by going through the motions of diplomacy while secretly planning for war. In this context, a resistance narrative, long advocated by Iranian hardliners, enjoys more popular support than before.

"We need something that makes them [US/Israel] think twice," one journalist in Iran observed, "otherwise, they will be able to target

us every few years." Another member of Iranian civil society who considered herself part of the opposition to the regime noted: "I use to be one of those who would chant during protests to not send Iranian money to Lebanon or Palestine. But now I understand that the bombs that we all face are one and if we don't have strong defenses across the region, the war comes to us."<sup>12</sup>

The logical consequence of this war is that Iran will likely seek to obtain a nuclear weapon. Critically, it will now do so with much greater internal support than before. Basic questions of national security and the threats from the West now dominate public thinking, including among the internal opposition to the Islamic Republic. Questions related to accountable government, the rule of law, and human rights and democracy no longer galvanize Iranians as they did before. What matters today for many Iranians is dismantling the Mossad spy network, upgrading Iranian air defenses and expanding ballistic missile technology. How long this sentiment will last is unknown but external intervention and aggression from abroad typically affect internal politics in this manner. Conservatives are emboldened; liberals are weakened. All of this is music to the ears of Iran's clerical leaders.

This is not the first time in Iranian history that we have seen this result. The recent Israel-U.S. attack on Iran echoes two previous critical moments when external intervention from the West bolstered the foundation of authoritarianism in Iran and closed the door on democratization.

### Two Moments of Democracy

Between 1906-1911, Iran experienced a Constitutional Revolution, its first moment of democracy. By regional standards, this revolution was a significant leap forward in terms of advancing political development, promoting modernization and transforming Iranian society. The primary causes of the revolution were economic stagnation, foreign subjugation (mostly British and Russian), and in

<sup>10</sup> Yeganeh Torbati, "Iran's leaders reach back to pre-Islamic time to stoke nationalism," *Washington Post*, July 27, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Narges Bajoghli, "The Generation Iranian Hardliners Have Been Waiting For," *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

particular, political corruption of the Qajar dynasty.

The solution to the crisis of authoritarianism in Iran called for a limiting of royal absolutism by transforming Iran into a constitutional monarchy, establishing a parliament with popular representation, and institutionalizing the rule of law. The driving forces behind this democratization process were a diverse coalition of social democratic activists, liberal constitutionalists, women, intellectuals, artisans, merchants, religious dissidents, and ethnic and tribal groups.

Morgan Shuster was an observer and participant in this revolution. An American lawyer and civil servant, Shuster was appointed by Iran's new parliament as treasurer-general to modernize Iran's finances that were in a state of disrepair because of the monarchy's corrupt spending. Eager to retain influence, Russian and Britain protested Shuster's appointment and demanded his expulsion. These powers eventually got their way. After returning to the United States, Shuster wrote *The Strangling of Persia*. This major work is a first-hand account of a weak developing nation falling prey to the machinations of the Great Powers who rejected an independent and democratic Iran.

Despite its early successes, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution was gradually defeated. A critical factor that produced this result was direct British and Russian intervention in support of the Iranian monarchy. This was explicitly revealed by an event that occurred in the middle of the revolution in June 1908. Under the leadership of General Vladimir Liakhov, Russian troops invaded Iran. They advanced to the capital city, Tehran, where they laid siege to and bombed the Iranian parliament, while it was in session. In the end, the forces of Iranian constitutional democracy could not compete with Russian firepower, coupled with British intrigue. They eventually were defeated. The monarchy was back in full control after 1911, with critical support from Western powers.

Iran's second democratic moment was also snuffed out because of Western intervention. In 1953, a CIA coup (backed by the UK) altered Iran's political trajectory. Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected prime minister, was toppled and Mohammad Reza

(the monarch who had fled the country) was re-installed in power. Iran's post-World War II brief experiment with democracy came to an end. In Washington D.C., the official justification for the coup was the Cold War and the fear of a communist takeover. While this story is now more widely known in the West, the events that precipitated it are not.

The early 1950s coincided with the struggle for de-colonization and independence across the Third World. The central theme of Iranian politics revolved around who should control Iran's vast oil reserves. Iranian nationalists were in conflict with British Petroleum. This company-controlled Iran's oil industry, reaping most of the profits in an arrangement that humiliated the people of Iran, and effectively amounted to thievery.

The United Nations and the International Court of Justice were key battlegrounds in this dispute. When negotiations between Britain and Iran broke down, Britain responded by imposing sanctions, blocking Iranian access to foreign currency accounts, while the Royal Navy imposed an economic blockade. Just as it is now, the Iran crisis of the early 1950s was at the top of the global agenda.

After the 1953 coup, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was in firm control with backing from the West. The Shah's repression of all secular opposition groups had profoundly negative effects on Iran's political culture. With secular alternatives crushed, opposition to the regime and the struggle against dictatorship gradually shifted to the realm of religion, specifically to the mosque and the bazaar. Political Islam in Iran originated in this context, buttressed by a new politicized interpretation of Islam led by Ayatullah Khomeini and the writings of the charismatic intellectual Ali Shariati. These religious forces played a critical role in the toppling of the US-backed monarchy. The 1979 Iranian Revolution must be understood against this backdrop. It's worth pondering today, given Western hysteria about the Islamic Republic, where Iran would be if the CIA has not staged a coup and Mohammad Mossadegh was allowed to consolidate democracy? How different might the Middle East be today? How different might the broader Islamic world be if there was an authentic

democracy in a Muslim-majority society, that could lead by example?

### Conclusion

The 12 Day Israel-U.S.-Iran war has had profound negative consequences for Iran. Not only has it killed more than one thousand people and weakened Iran's already fragile economy, still reeling from American sanctions, Iran's political development trajectory has also been negatively affected again. The forces of authoritarianism have been strengthened, and reformist and democratic voices have been weakened.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, within the span of a week, the Center for Human Rights in Iran reported that more than 700 people were arrested, and detainees were "fast-tracked trials in kangaroo courts without lawyers or due process."<sup>13</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Office, 110 people were executed in Iran during the month of July alone, bringing the total number of executions in Iran to 841 this year, as of August 28, 2025.<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International just reported that from the start of the war on June 13 until September 3 "Iranian authorities have arrest over 20,000 people, including dissidents, human rights defenders, journalists, social media users, families of victims unlawfully killed in nationwide protests and foreign nationals."<sup>15</sup>

The Iranian regime is also pushing vague new criminal laws that could punish civic activity or social media content with the death penalty. The official justification for these policies is a new national security crisis awash with foreign spies and foreign intrigue. In this context, the UN has reported that more than half a million Afghans refugees were expelled from Iran in the sixteen days since the war ended.<sup>16</sup>

In considering the modern history of Iran, foreign intervention has never benefited the

forces of democracy and human rights. The biggest beneficiary of external intervention has consistently been the forces of authoritarianism. This applies both to interventions before the 1979 Iranian Revolution and afterward. The June 2025 war fits this historic pattern. It serves as a reminder that the social conditions needed to advance democracy in the Middle East are not just dependent on ripe internal conditions and the balance of political forces. A suitable regional and international context is also a critical variable that affects the prospects for democracy and the resiliency of authoritarianism. Iran's modern experience with the West is a perfect illustration of this thesis.

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