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INDEXING & ABSTRACTING

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The Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) provides a platform to analyse conflict transformation and security as processes for managing change in non-violent ways to produce equitable outcomes for all parties that are sustainable. A wide range of human security concerns can be tackled by both hard and soft measures, therefore the Journal's scope not only covers such security sector reform issues as restructuring security apparatus, reintegration of ex-combatants, clearance of explosive remnants of war and cross-border management, but also the protection of human rights, justice, rule of law and governance. JCTS explores the view that by addressing conflict transformation and security holistically it is possible to achieve a high level of stability and human security, requiring interventions at both policy and practitioner level. These would include conflict management, negotiated peace agreements, peacekeeping, physical reconstruction, economic recovery, psycho-social support, rebuilding of primary services such as education and health, and enabling social cohesion. Other macro-level governance issues from constitution writing to state accountability and human resource management also need to be considered as part of this process of change.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume11, Number 1, 2026*

Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue on Iran

Co-editors Alp Ozerdem and Nergis Canefe

Biographical Note: Dr. Özerdem *specializes in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. With over 20 years of field research experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Indonesia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and Turkey, Dr. Özerdem has undertaken numerous research projects that were funded by the UK's Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) (faith-based conflict prevention); British Academy (youth and peacebuilding); US Institute of Peace (reintegration of ex-combatants); and various European Union funding schemes (conflict transformation and leadership).*

Nergis Canefe *a scholar trained in the fields of Political Philosophy, Forced Migration Studies and International Public Law with special focus on Critical Human Rights and state-society relations. She has over twenty years of experience in carrying out in-depth qualitative research with displaced communities and teaching human rights and public law globally. Her research experience includes working with the Muslim and Jewish Diasporas in Europe and North America, refugees and displaced peoples in Turkey, Cyprus, India, Uganda, South Africa, Bosnia and Colombia. She worked as the Associate Director of Center for Refugee Studies, York University between 2008-2013. She is an executive committee member of the IASFM (international Association for the Study of Forced Migration) since 2016 and the Vice-President of IASFM since 2018.*

Why Conversations?

As of May 2026, our journal embarks upon a journey of publishing an annual issue of Conversations on a topic that marks the year's events in a global sense concerning our focus and mandate. The inaugural issue is thus on Iran for the year 2026.

Using conversation as a narrative form—also referred to as dialogic storytelling—shifts the burden of the plot from the "all-seeing" and "all-knowing' narrator to the immediate, and subjective perspectives of the readers. In a dialogue-driven academic narrative, the reader isn't being told a story; they are "overhearing" one and at the same time invited to join in. This creates a unique kind of intimacy that standard academic prose lacks.

Despite the democratic significance of citizen talk about politics, academia has not considered how conversation is an essential part of our political and civic culture. The format of a conversation calls into question the presumed inability of talk to bridge political and social differences in periods of polarization and fragmentation, with direct implications for radical democratic resilience. Our emphasis of the literature on political conversation as a form of deliberation is based on the consideration of limitations of academic research. We strongly believe that peace and transitional justice scholarship would immensely benefit from taking into consideration what we know as individuals and our lives as active agents and communicators.

Indeed, there is a strong ethical dimension to conversation. This is an important issue for the future of engaged scholarship, where the quality of politics depends heavily on the quality of public discourse. Recently, university education has been criticized for fostering moral relativism. We believe that the experience of critical inquiry conducted through conversational dialogue can cultivate precisely those ethical characteristics required of participants in the public life of a deliberative democracy. We therefore invite political conversations in common academic spaces, correlated significantly with political participation, indicating that such conversations are a vital component of actual democratic practice and formal deliberation.

A final word on Aristotelian phrónêsis and its relevance for engaged academic research. Aristotle's concept understood in the wider context of his thinking on intellectual and ethical virtues, is not primarily concerned with learning, inquiry, and research but with application, performance, or enactment. Phrónêsis' praxis-orientation invites dialogue and dialectics into scholarship, whose tasks have traditionally been fundamentally associated with learning, inquiry, and research. It is in this spirit that we invite 'conversationalists' to publish on our pages concerning issues of immediate importance and with critical impact on our lives at a global scale.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume11, Number 1, 2026*

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

Maryam Anahita Yousefi*

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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.

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

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-Hossein 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, disavowals, 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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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume11, Number 1, 2026*

Federalism and Iran: Reimagining Dignity and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This article examines the enduring tension between centralization and pluralism within Iran's political geography, arguing that the modern state has historically pursued unity at the expense of dignity and inclusion. It conceptualizes this condition as a form of "internal statelessness," wherein ethno-national communities remain formally incorporated yet substantively marginalized. In response, the article advances federalism not merely as an institutional arrangement, but as a normative and political framework grounded in ethical decentralization. Drawing on political theory and historical analysis, it reinterprets federalism as a mechanism for reconstituting belonging through autonomy, recognition, and shared governance. Rather than threatening territorial integrity, territorial federalism is positioned as a viable pathway toward sustainable peace, democratic legitimacy, and plural coexistence in Iran, while offering broader implications for rethinking sovereignty and diversity in the Middle East.

Keywords: *Federalism, Iran, Dignity, Pluralis, Internal statelessness*

Biographical Note: *Mstafai Hetteh is a Course Director at York University and a postdoctoral researcher in Politics and Law. His work spans political theory, international relations, and comparative politics, with a focus on state power, sovereignty, federalism, and the politics of identity in multiethnic societies. He specializes in state formation, liberty, immigration, state borders, ethnicity, nationalism, and legal pluralism, examining how authority is constructed, contested, and reorganized across institutional and territorial contexts. His research engages issues of colonial governance, securitization, and sub-national struggles over recognition and autonomy. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches, he combines theoretical analysis with applied experience in journalism and policy, offering insight into contemporary geopolitical dynamics and the lived realities of political conflict.*

Iran today stands at a crossroads between the persistence of centralization and the promise of pluralism. The country's long-standing tensions between the state and its diverse national communities reveal an unfinished political project—one that has privileged unity over justice and uniformity over dignity. This opinion piece unfolds in three steps: it begins by tracing the unfinished promise of the Iranian state, shaped by centralization and exclusion; it then turns to federalism as ethical decentralization, proposing autonomy as a moral and political remedy; and finally, it explores the path from statelessness to shared belonging, envisioning federalism as a foundation for dignity, coexistence, and sustainable peace in Iran and beyond.

The modern Iranian state was built upon the rhetoric of unity, yet its consolidation relied heavily on military intervention and colonial domination of non-Persian regions between 1921 and 1925—a unity that has too often come at the cost of diversity.[1] Since the early twentieth century, Iran's statecraft has relied on centralization—political, linguistic, and cultural—as a means to consolidate authority and preserve territorial integrity.[2] Yet this model has simultaneously marginalized many of the ethno-national communities: Ahwazi-Arabs territory, Turks, Kurds, Baluch, Turkmen, and others.[3] Their languages, histories, and collective memories have been subordinated to a singular national imaginary that equates "Iranian" with a narrowly defined Persian-Shi'a identity.

This tension between centralization and diversity is not simply a constitutional issue—it is a moral and existential one. It has produced what might be called internal statelessness: communities that belong to the state yet are systematically excluded from its moral and political promises.[4] The challenge of governance in Iran, then, is not only about distributing resources or political power but about reconstituting the very meaning of belonging. Federalism—long dismissed as a foreign or divisive idea—offers a framework for rethinking this belonging in ethical, not just administrative, terms.[5]

The Iranian political tradition, deeply shaped by fears of disintegration, has often treated pluralism as a threat. But history shows that the suppression of difference has only deepened the fractures it sought to avoid. From the uprisings in the peripheries to the ongoing discontent among marginalized peoples, the message is clear: peace cannot be achieved through homogenization. It must be built through recognition, participation, and shared dignity.

Federalism, in the Iranian context, is often misunderstood as secession in disguise. Yet at its core, federalism is not about division but about ethical decentralization—the acknowledgment that equality requires autonomy.[6] It rests on the principle that unity can be sustained not through coercion but through cooperation among distinct political communities.

From a political-theoretical perspective, this approach resonates with contemporary debates on self-determination and dignity. Thinkers from Hannah Arendt to Iris Marion Young have argued that political belonging must be grounded in the capacity to act and speak as equals within the public sphere.[7] When this capacity is denied, individuals and groups are rendered invisible; they become what Arendt called "stateless" even within their own country.

Federalism thus becomes a way to reimagine citizenship as a shared yet plural experience. It proposes that diverse peoples—Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Baluch, Persians—can coexist within one political framework without erasing

[1] Hetteh, A. Political History of Ahwaz: Iranian Occupation, Colonialism and Ahwazi People's Territorial Claims. *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, *7*(2), 291-322.Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45–50.

[2] Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 45–50.

[3] See: Saleh, A. (2013). *Ethnic identity and the state in Iran*. Springer.

[4] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 267–270.

[5] Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 88–95.

[6] Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42–45.

[7] Arendt, Hannah. *The origins of totalitarianism*. Vol. 244. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973.

their specificities.[8] Such an arrangement would allow local governance structures to reflect the social, linguistic, and economic realities of their communities, while still maintaining the coherence of a national system.

Critically, this vision challenges the moral hierarchy embedded in the Iranian state: that some lives and identities are more central to the nation than others. To move toward peace, the state must dismantle this hierarchy and recognize that dignity cannot be distributed selectively.[9] Dignity, in the political sense, is indivisible—it cannot coexist with the systematic silencing of difference.

In practical terms, a federal framework could mean constitutionally guaranteed regional parliaments, linguistic and cultural rights, and mechanisms for resource-sharing that respect local autonomy. These structures do not fragment the state; they deepen its legitimacy by ensuring that all citizens experience governance as representation, not domination.

The heart of the Iranian question today lies in the politics of recognition. For decades, the denial of cultural and political rights has produced a sense of alienation among sub-national communities—a feeling of belonging nowhere fully. Many Ahwazi Arabs, for example, describe themselves as "citizens without citizenship": tied to the Iranian state through coercive structures but excluded from its national narrative. The same can be said for the Kurds, Turks, and Baluch, whose demands for local governance and linguistic freedom are often conflated with separatism.

To respond to these experiences, federalism must be understood not merely as a system of governance but as a moral response to statelessness. It reclaims the notion of the political home—a space where communities can see themselves reflected in the laws, symbols, and priorities of the state. In doing so, it transforms the state from an apparatus of control into a shared framework of belonging.

This transformation is not only crucial for Iran but also for regional stability. The Middle East has long been haunted by unresolved national questions, border conflicts, and the legacy of colonial cartographies[10]. A federal and inclusive Iran could become a model for reimagining sovereignty beyond domination—a shift from managing difference to nurturing coexistence.

Thus, by anchoring political structures in the language of dignity, Iran could also begin to rebuild its fractured social trust. Dignity, unlike mere tolerance, implies mutual recognition; it requires seeing the other not as a threat but as a co-creator of the collective future. Federalism, understood this way, becomes a practice of peacebuilding: a framework that recognizes the right to difference as the foundation of unity.

Yet this transformation demands courage—from both the state and its citizens. It requires the political imagination to move beyond inherited fears of disintegration and to see plurality as strength. It also requires the humility to acknowledge the suffering that centralization has caused, and the resolve to build new institutions rooted in justice and equality.

If Iran is to move toward a future of peace, it must move beyond the binary of domination or disintegration. Federalism offers a third path: one grounded in shared dignity, mutual recognition, and the restoration of belonging. It is not an imported solution but a necessary evolution of Iran's own political and moral landscape.

Ultimately, the debate on federalism in Iran is a debate about what it means to be human in a plural society. It asks whether belonging can exist without erasure and whether unity can be built on justice rather than fear. Federalism, reimagined through the ethics of dignity, offers not a blueprint for division but a vision for peace—a peace that begins with recognizing every community as a rightful participant in shaping the nation's destiny.

Reimagining Iran through federalism is therefore not about redrawing borders but about redrawing relationships—between the center and the margins, between the state and its citizens, and between memory and hope. In doing so, it gestures toward a region where

[8] Asgharzadeh, Ailreza. *Iran and the challenge of diversity: Islamic fundamentalism, Aryanist racism, and democratic struggles*. Springer, 2007.

[9] Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 75–80.

[10] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 101–105.

dignity replaces domination and where belonging becomes the foundation of peace.

Otherwise, the reality is clear: the majority of non-Persian political parties and movements have already turned toward demands for self-determination and independence, driven by decades of exclusion and broken promises. Federalism thus stands as Iran's final opportunity to transform confrontation into coexistence. It is now the choice of the Iranian state—to embrace a dignified, pluralistic future through federalism, or to face the far worse consequences that come from ignoring the call for justice and equality.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume11, Number 1, 2026*

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

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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.[1] This conflict threated 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 backed, 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.[2]

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 polices of the Islamic Republic, they often win. Iranian conservatives have publicly acknowledged a crisis of legitimacy. On the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, 300 conservative figures penned an open letter to Ayatullah 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."[3]

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."[4] This confirms an observation from a former Iranian Deputy

[1] 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.

[2] 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/.

[3] "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.

[4] "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."[5] 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."[6] 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 unprecedent 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.[7] 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.[8] 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."[9]

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

[5] BBC Persian, "Iran's Deputy Interior Minister Says 'Desire for Fundamental Change' is 'Increasing' in Iran," January 16, 2022.

[6] 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.

[7] Nader Hashemi, "Women, Life, Freedom: A Human Rights Report on the Islamic Republic of Iran," May 18th Foundation (Seoul: South Korea, 2023).

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[9] Patrick Wintour, "'The people stood up': how war turned Iran towards 'everyday nationalism'," September 7, 2025.

light coating of political Islam.[10] 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."[11]

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."[12]

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

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

[11] Narges Bajoghli, "The Generation Iranian Hardliners Have Been Waiting For," *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2025.

[12] 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."[13] 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.[14] 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."[15]

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.[16]

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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RESEARCH ARTICLE **JCTS** *Volume11, Number 1, 2026*

How Theoretical Kleptocracy of Iran Threatens Global Security and What the West Must Do

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This paper argues that Iran's post-1979 regime has evolved into a theocratic kleptocracy that poses a systemic threat to global security. Originally misjudged by the West as a potential stabilizing force, the regime has instead aligned with anti-Western powers while exporting terrorism and regional instability through proxy networks. Its governance structure centralizes power under the supreme leader and sustains itself through entrenched corruption and using brute forces against Iranians. Beyond the Middle East, Iran's nuclear and missile programs and deepening ties with Russia, China, and Taliban elevate the threat to a global scale. The paper contends that containment has failed and calls for a strategic shift toward supporting Iran's internal democratic opposition. Backing a potential "second real revolution," it argues, represents the most viable path to long-term regional stability and global security.

Keywords: *Theocratic Kleptocracy, Iran Regime, Global Security, Proxy Warfare, Democratic Opposition*

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In 1979, the West made a profound strategic miscalculation, hoping Iran's new Islamic regime would serve as a bulwark against communism. Forty-five years later, the lessons are clear: the regime quickly sided with communism, and ever since has allied with all of the anti-Western powers, as it has evolved into a violent, absolutist religious dictatorship that has also become a leading state sponsor of terrorism and a primary source of global instability.

Today, Iran's regime is not merely a regional threat; it is a global threat, actively destabilizing the Middle East, challenging U.S. and European interests, and forging a dangerous alliance with Russia, China and Taliban terrorists. To counter this, a strategic shift is required. The key question for policymakers is no longer how to contain the regime, but why a new, decisive strategy in support of a second Iranian revolution is a vital national security policy.

A Kleptocratic Dictatorship Masked as a Republic

The Iranian regime brands itself an "Islamic Republic," but in reality, it is a theocratic kleptocracy. The principle of Velayat-e Faqih, or the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, enshrined in the constitution, concentrates all power in the hands of one person: the supreme leader. The president, parliament, and judiciary are all subordinate to this single figure.

This authoritarian control is fueled by a system of structural corruption. Iran's vast natural resources and national revenues are not used for public good but are instead controlled and misused by regime officials and their cronies. While the majority of Iranians grapple with poverty and inflation, the families of the ruling elite live lavishly inside and abroad on stolen national wealth. This deep-seated corruption is not just an internal issue; it is a direct driver of the popular uprisings that have shaken the regime from within, while it funds its destructive activities abroad.

The Export of Instability and Terror

I The regime's foreign policy is built on the systematic export of violence and instability. While the regime claims to be a protector of Islamic values, it actively supports extremist groups to sow division and enmity among Muslims. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite Quds Force operate as the regime's primary instrument for this campaign, using proxies to wage wars and advance Regime's interests.

This strategy of regional interference is evident in key hotspots:

- **Lebanon:** All-out support for Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organization.
- **Yemen:** Equipping and funding the Houthi militia, enabling attacks on international shipping lanes.
- **Iraq:** Supporting Shia paramilitary groups to weaken the national government and maintain a client state.
- **Afghanistan:** Providing direct intelligence and strategic support to the Taliban terrorists.

The Escalating Global Threat

The regime's ambitions are not limited to the region. Its nuclear and ballistic missile programs remain a significant global security threat. The diplomatic negotiations have so far failed to permanently curb these ambitions, and the regime continues to enrich uranium while advancing its missile technology. In the recent 12-day war, regime's nuclear and military capabilities were significantly damaged, but its ability to pose a global threat remains. A nuclear-armed regime would fundamentally undermine global security.

Even more concerning is regime's expanding strategic alignment with Russia, China and Taliban terrorists. The regime is now a key partner for Moscow, providing military support in the war in Ukraine and cooperating on global anti-Western initiatives. At the same time, regime is rapidly deepening its economic and security ties with Beijing. Together with Russians, they are working with Kandahar on managing terror networks and improving accessibility and deployment of Taliban's suicide brigades. This emerging alliance is not merely a partnership of convenience; it is the formation of a cohesive anti-Western axis that aims to challenge the U.S. and its allies on a global scale.

The Window of Opportunity: A Second Revolution

Despite the regime's strength, a powerful and growing domestic resistance offers a unique opportunity. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement has demonstrated that the Iranian people, particularly its youth and women, are determined to overthrow this regime. These protests are not just expressions of discontent; they are the early stages of a second revolution. The Iranian people are no longer willing to live under this oppressive and corrupt system. Their struggle is not merely a domestic issue; it is the most critical and effective means to neutralize the regime's threat.

Policy Recommendations: A Path Forward

The West must shift its strategy from reactive containment to proactive support for this democratic movement. The time for half-measures has passed.

- **Acknowledge and Empower the Opposition*:*** Western leaders must recognize and actively engage with the democratic opposition in exile. Unity among opposition figures, such as Prince Reza Pahlavi, Maryam Rajavi, and Victoria Azad, must be encouraged and supported to build a strong, credible alternative to the current regime.
- **Sever Diplomatic Ties:** Following Australia's lead few days ago, all Western nations should expel Iranian ambassadors and diplomats. This would not only send a clear signal but also prevent the regime from using its diplomatic presence to suppress dissent and fund terrorism. In consultation with the democratic opposition leaders in exile, the Iranian Embassies and consulates should be handed over to the representatives of the Iranian people in exile to amplify their voices.
- **Pressure and Sanction*:*** The IRGC must be fully designated as a foreign terrorist organization by all Western nations. Comprehensive sanctions should be imposed on all entities and individuals linked to the regime's corruption and its funding of foreign proxies.

The fall of the current Iranian regime would be a transformative event, not only for Iran but also for Afghanistan, the Middle East, and for the entire world. A democratic Iran would recognize Israel, align with the West, and help stabilize the region by ending proxy wars. They will also stop forced deportation of Afghan refugees, and instead will provide them with the necessary protections, and facilities that they need to free Afghanistan from the Taliban terrorists. For the first time in over four decades, it would be an ally in the fight against terrorism rather than its primary sponsor.

The choice is clear. The West must end their failed policy of containment that allows a dangerous axis to form, and instead speak with one voice in support of the "second revolution" of the Iranian people, and stand with them to seize this historic opportunity, and secure its long-term strategic interests.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

by Behnaz Fatemi

My practice emerges from lived conditions of constraint and migration, where belonging is never settled, and both self and place remain fluid, continually redefined through encounter. I am drawn to gestures that are slow, attentive, and insistently ordinary—walking, touching, listening—as ways of orienting myself within spaces shaped by surveillance, loss, and partial visibility. These gestures are not symbolic; they are methods of survival and relation. Across performance, drawing, installation, sound, and video, I approach the body as both site and witness, a place where history is carried, negotiated, and quietly reworked through material encounter.

Born and raised in Iran, I grew up within a system that disciplined the body through regulation of movement, appearance, and expression. Everyday actions—how to dress, how to speak, how to occupy public space—were subject to constant scrutiny. Existing under these conditions demanded ongoing negotiation, a form of political labor embedded in daily life rather than declared through overt opposition. Over time, this produced an acute awareness of how power operates through space and routine, shaping not only behavior but also emotion, self-perception, and the capacity to belong. While deeply restrictive, this environment also cultivated strategies of endurance: attentiveness to subtle shifts, care for what must remain fragile, and modes of refusal that operate both quietly and confrontationally. These experiences continue to ground my practice, where the body functions as an archive of constraint while insisting on alternative ways of being present.

Relocating to Canada did not resolve these tensions but reconfigured them. Living in diaspora introduced a different form of displacement; one marked by partial belonging, accented presence, and continual translation. No longer fully situated within either Iran or Canada, I inhabit an in-between condition where identity unfolds through negotiation rather than resolution. Language, gesture, and social codes continually signal proximity and distance, situating the body as both familiar and out of place. Within this uncertainty, new orientations emerge. Ways of sensing, listening, and moving develop not from national belonging but from diasporic awareness. Identity, in this context, remains unresolved, shaped by memory, repetition, and the ongoing labor of adjustment.

Memory within my practice is not treated as a stable narrative but as a material and ethical process. I approach remembering as labor; an accumulation of gestures shaped by duration, care, and the limits of repair. This approach is central to *Traces and Erasures*, a two-part performance-based drawing on large paper. In the first performance, I covered the entire surface with graphite, saturating the paper through repetitive mark-making. In the second, I attempted to erase those marks, working toward an impossible return to the paper's original state. Created in response to the emotional weight of witnessing ongoing violence in Iran while living in diaspora, the work registers tension, anxiety, and grief through the body's repetitive effort. The accumulation of traces registers the residue of lived and mediated trauma, while erasing is akin to a body's scars and its efforts to heal. This action reflects the complex relationship between remembering and forgetting, and the necessity of both in cultural progression.

While *Traces and Erasures* engages memory through subtraction, *Stitching Segmented Memories* turns toward the politics of care. In this live, durational performance, I embroider names directly onto a handmade, layered dress as I wear it. The names include loved ones and individuals whose lives were cut short by political violence. As the performance unfolds, the garment becomes an embodied archive, accumulating acts of remembrance through sustained, attentive labor. Stitching functions as a mode of holding—binding lives, losses, and affiliations into a form that remains vulnerable, incomplete, and in process. The body supports this archive, carrying its weight while remaining exposed to fatigue and time.

Rubbing and Remembering extends these concerns into a collective and sculptural register. Created from found objects, the works emerged from prolonged engagement with mourning as an ongoing condition rather than an event with resolution. The act of rubbing—repetitive, tactile, and durational—produces surfaces marked by friction and wear, registering contact without offering closure. These works reflect my experience of living under authoritarian conditions that go beyond borders and the dislocation of immigration, where grief does not conclude but circulates, folding outward into the world. Mourning is not an endpoint but a passage—a moment of suspension that opens spaces for contemplation and reinterpretation, suggesting that within mourning there lies potential for transformation and renewal, even in the deepest moments of despair.

My practice operates as an embodied and material form of engagement that remains attentive to what persists —what cannot be erased, repaired, or fully articulated. Through gestures of repetition, care, and durational labor, I work with memory not to stabilize it, but to keep it active, exposed, and accountable. The spaces I create do not offer closure; instead, they hold loss and endurance together, allowing meaning to emerge through sustained encounter rather than explanation. Within conditions shaped by displacement, surveillance, and constraint, these works insist on the body's capacity to bear, to remember, and to remain. Presence, in this context, is neither declarative nor triumphant. It unfolds quietly through contact, friction, and care, as a way of staying with what has been carried forward.

Image List

1. Behnaz Fatemi, Mourning Silences. Installation of the dress worn in the live performance, Art Windsor-Essex. Handmade cotton dress, graphite, jewelry, custom metal dress hanger, 2023. Photo: Justin Elliot (2025).

2. Behnaz Fatemi, Traces and Erasures. Performance drawings. Video performance of mark-making drawing. Hung mark-making drawing. Drawing — graphite on paper. Duration: 60 minutes. 2024. Photo: Scott Lee (2024).

3. Behnaz Fatemi, Traces and Erasures. Still image taken during performance drawing. Drawing — graphite on paper. Duration: 60 minutes. 2024. Photo: Amir Sadeghi (2024).

4. Behnaz Fatemi, Rhythm of Remembering. Found objects, graphite. 2024–2025. Photo: Justin Elliot (2025).

5. Behnaz Fatemi, Rhythm of Remembering (detail of the installation). Found objects, graphite, and herbs. 2024–2025. Photo: Justin Elliot (2025).

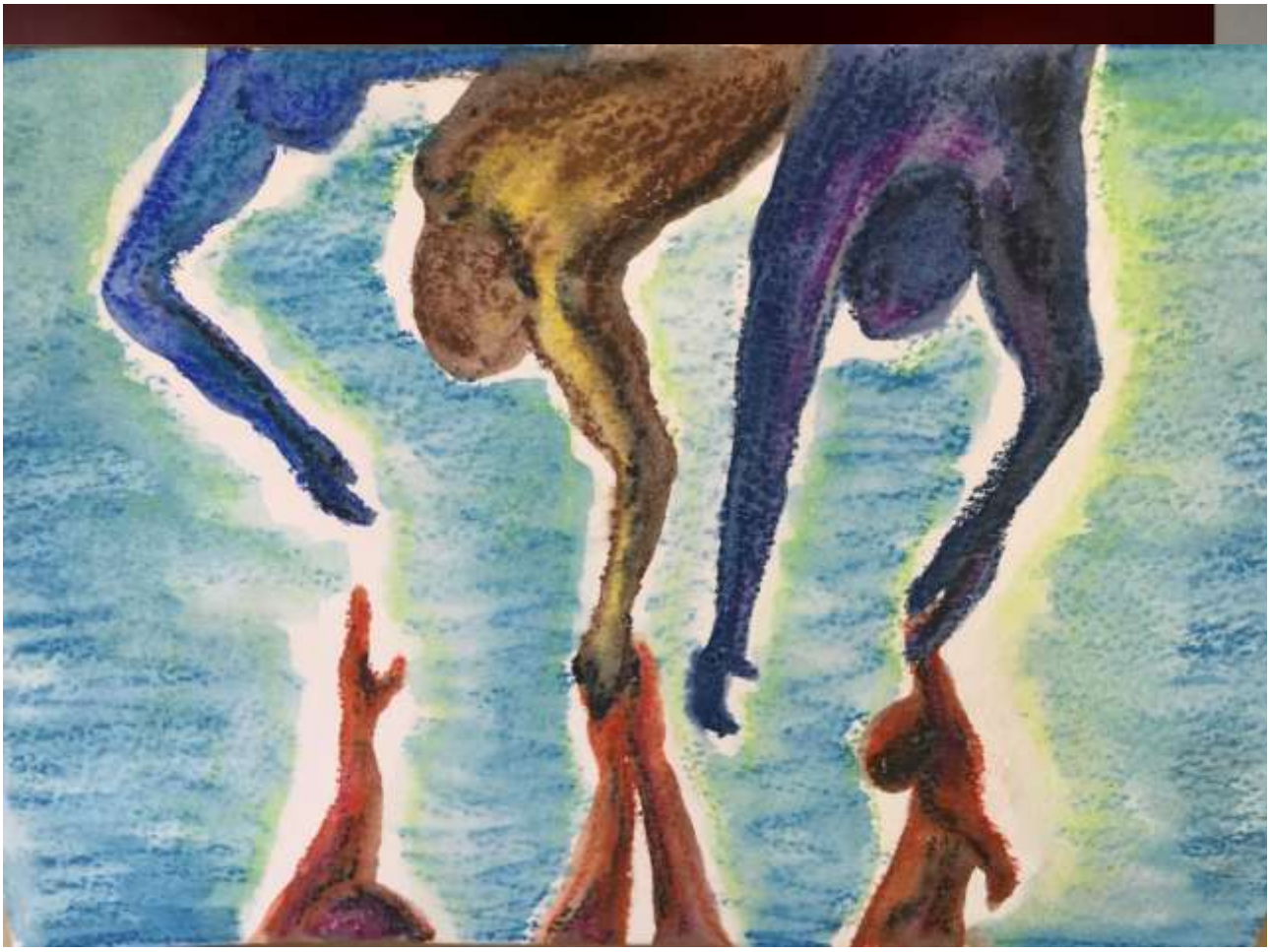
6. Behnaz Fatemi, Rubbing and Remembering (detail of the installation). Found objects, graphite. 2024. Photo: Scott Lee (2024).

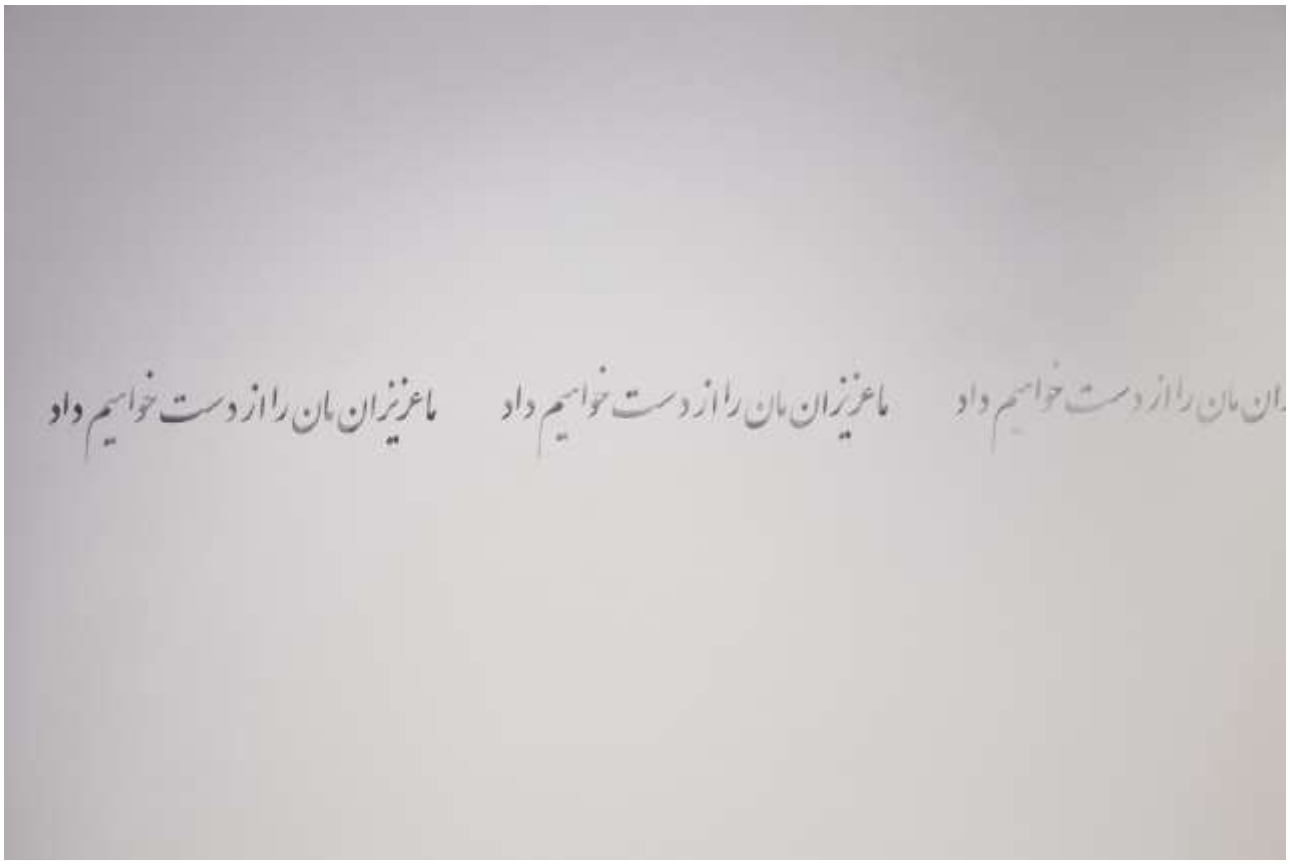
7. Behnaz Fatemi, We will lose our beloveds — ما عزیزامان را از دست دادیم. Stenciled graphite on gallery wall. English text (left) and Persian text (right). 2024. Photo: Scott Lee (2024).

8. Behnaz Fatemi, We will lose our beloveds — ما عزیزامان را از دست دادیم (detail of the installation). Stenciled graphite on gallery wall. English text (left) and Persian text (right). 2024. Photo: Scott Lee (2024).

9. Behnaz Fatemi, Stitching Segmented Memories. Lifetime performance. Images from the live performance at Art Windsor-Essex, engaging the community. Embroidery thread and needle, handmade cotton dress, custom metal dress hanger. 2025. Photo: Justin Elliot (2025).

10. Behnaz Fatemi, Stitching Segmented Memories (detail of the performance). Lifetime performance. Images from the live performance at Art Windsor-Essex, engaging the community. Embroidery thread and needle, handmade cotton dress, custom metal dress hanger. 2025. Photo: Justin Elliot (2025).

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