

The American–Israeli war in the Middle East: toward the collapse of the Iranian regime and the partition of Lebanon?

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The war against Iran, launched on 28 February 2026, is part of the American–Israeli strategy pursued since October 2023 (Gaza–Lebanon–Syria–Iran), aimed at reshaping the Middle East into a “new order”—one that could curb the dynamics associated with the rise of the Global South, the challenge to dollar hegemony, and the normalization of the Middle Eastern bloc within a Eurasian pole of power. While Washington frames its objective as the degradation of Iran’s military (and nuclear) capabilities, a longer-term perspective on U.S. strategy over the past four decades suggests a broader aim: the systemic weakening of Iran and its neutralization within a regional order increasingly detached from U.S. power interests. This is not, therefore, a regime-change war (in fact it tends rather to radicalize the regime), but a preemptive war of destabilization.

For Israel, the aim is likewise to weaken Iran, and the Syria–Lebanon–Palestine nexus, but with a more immediate agenda consisting in occupying part of Lebanon in order ultimately to engineer a “land-for-peace” type exchange, as it did with Egypt regarding the Sinai, and as it hopes to do with the government of Ahmed al-Sharaa concerning the buffer zone around, and in the longer term part of, the Golan. The aim extends beyond the mere neutralization of Hezbollah to encompass the creation of a demilitarized belt surrounding Israel and the expansion of its strategic depth—Gaza–Sinai/West Bank–Jordan / South Lebanon–Golan plus buffer zone.

I- The preemptive and asymmetrical war against Iran

Contrary to common media narratives, asymmetry is not a feature of the weaker party in a conflict; the war spanning Iran, Lebanon, and Gaza clearly demonstrates this. Genocide, war crimes, military offensives launched during ongoing negotiations, and the targeting of civilian populations and political leaders, all function as instruments of asymmetric warfare. Iran has long anticipated this type of U.S. intervention—while a large-scale conventional war involving ground invasion, as in Iraq, was not an option—and has prepared accordingly. It has accumulated both defensive and offensive weapons systems, at home and abroad, while also securing the continuity of the state—notably by designating between three and seven potential successors to key political and military decision-making positions.¹ Tehran’s most consequential asymmetric move in this conflict has been its campaign of retaliatory strikes against both military and civilian targets across the Gulf states, as well as in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Jordan, Syria, and Cyprus. This amounted to a “strategic surprise”² as most observers had anticipated strikes limited to U.S. bases. By regionalizing the conflict in this

¹ Iranian authorities confirm death of Larijani, appoint successors, TASS, 17 March 2026, <https://tass.com/world/2103155>

² A strategic surprise is an unexpected, high-impact event—military and/or geopolitical—that catches a state off guard and forces its leaders to change strategy. It is not necessarily the result of an intelligence failure, but rather of flawed analysis, which may stem from: 1) disbelief and miscalculation (‘they won’t do that,’ ‘it’s not in their interest,’ ‘the reaction of the targeted states would be too costly,’ etc.); 2) cognitive biases (cultural gaps, mirror imaging); and 3) the adversary’s behavior, which has conveyed a consistently misleading message (‘we will not attack,’ ‘we do not want to harm our relations with neighboring states,’ etc.).

way, Iran seeks to pressure Gulf states into urging Washington to bring the war to an end—while simultaneously exposing the limits of American protection—and to exert leverage over European actors by raising the prospect of an energy shock.

The extent of damage to U.S. and Israeli military sites and systems remains unclear, while the combined number of strikes by the United States and Israel against Iran is estimated at nearly 10,000—primarily targeting command-and-control sites, senior commanders, missile deployment and production facilities, nuclear and energy sites, military bases, and naval forces. Civilian casualties in Iran are estimated at over 1,400, with some 3.2 million displaced³. Iranian retaliation has taken the form of a “total deterrence” campaign, escalating in a way that risks drawing in the Houthis in the Red Sea if diplomacy does not prevail, thereby creating a dual blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb. Saudi Arabia is determined to avoid this scenario at all costs (its economy would effectively grind to a halt) and is pressuring Washington to end the conflict—Riyadh can only be highly reluctant in the face of a war that risks hardening the Iranian regime, destabilizing the region, and delaying economic and energy-logistics integration projects. It should be noted that Iran has not closed the Strait of Hormuz by firing on every ship attempting to pass. Instead, it has rendered the strait effectively impassable through a combination of kinetic strikes, naval mines, electronic warfare, and market-disrupting panic effects. Even a targeted armed intervention by Washington and its allies would be insufficient to reverse this situation; only the end of the conflict could restore it.

Iran’s military strategy is primarily based on saturating the adversary’s missile defense systems, notably by deploying a limited number of drones and missiles each day, with the goal of depleting adversary antimissile arsenals and operators while simultaneously exerting pressure on civilian populations and economic actors. Tehran has stated that it is prepared to sustain this war of attrition for months—by mid-March 2026, it had reportedly used only a few hundred missiles and 1,500 drones, despite having a capacity measured in the thousands of missiles and tens of thousands of drones. Its missile and drone stocks, as well as production facilities, are deeply buried in the Zagros Mountains and near the Gulf (the so-called “missile cities”). In short, in this conflict where both sides employ asymmetric tactics, Tehran has so far demonstrated its ability to manage escalation. Moreover, in the post-conflict period, Iran could claim to have genuinely altered the strategic balance in the region: it is difficult to see how the Gulf states which host U.S. bases but were neither adequately protected (lacking equivalents to Israel’s systems, such as *Iron Dome*, *Arrow*, *David’s Sling*) nor sufficiently consulted, will continue to host U.S. forces, thereby remaining targets and, de facto, providing Iran with strategic depth.

American strategic analysts commonly refer to the Gulf’s strategic configuration as “compressed deterrence”: a system in which geography, energy dependence, and asymmetric military doctrines amplify the geopolitical (and financial) costs of any intervention, not to mention the risks of miscalculation. It was therefore largely understood in Washington that any intervention against Iran would lead Tehran to take all possible measures to raise those

³ UNHCR, 12 mars 2026, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-3-2-million-iranians-temporarily-displaced-iran-conflict-intensifies> AP, 21 Mars 2026, <https://apnews.com/live/iran-war-israel-trump-03-21-2026>

costs—which it has done through widespread retaliatory actions against the Gulf states and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. In a sense, the structural instability of the U.S. “defense” system in the region has been exposed, and the post-conflict period is likely to be marked by strategic reorientations, if not realignments. However, this cannot be characterized as a “miscalculation” on Washington’s part, given that its strategic objective remains the techno-military and economic weakening of Iran, as well as the disruption of Eurasian trade routes and alliances. In practice, even if the Beijing–Moscow–Tehran alliances is strengthened as a result, the continuation of severe sanctions against Iran, together with the ensuing economic crisis and social instability, will delay the emergence of a coherent Eurasian axis.

The Iranian Strategic Security System

Weapon Systems

Iranian operational doctrine combines a “mosaic defense” (dispersed across the territory with autonomous commands) and a “forward defense” (deploying the most experienced units at borders, in potential unrest zones, and abroad) through the demonstration of conventional, asymmetric, and hybrid⁴ defense and counterattack capabilities. It is based on: 1) the dual structure of forces: on one hand, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, Pasdarans, approximately 190,000 personnel), which integrates special forces, paramilitary units, and conventional capabilities for operations within the national space, regional projection (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen), and popular territorial defense (through affiliated militias, the Basij, reportedly numbering several millions); on the other hand, the regular army (Artesh, 350,000 personnel); 2) the dispersion of Command and Control (C2) centers, with partial autonomy of C2 in the case of the IRGC ; 3) the streamlining of conventional force structures, with small divisions organized into semi-autonomous brigades. Iran’s asymmetric “anti-access” capabilities primarily include: attack helicopters and fast attack craft, anti-submarine warfare and air defense assets, ballistic missiles (long- and medium-range, including *Shahab-3*, *Qiam*, *Ashura*, *Khorramshahr*, *Kheibar*, and ultimately an ICBM derived from the *Safir*), some equipped with submunitions (complicating interception), cruise missiles, naval mines, hypersonic missiles (*Fatah*, *Emad*, and *Qadr*), and low-cost armed drones, including kamikaze variants (*Shahed*). Iran’s force development policy revolves around the need for force dispersion and a system combining: swarming of agile, flexible, and highly maneuverable systems (fast boats, drones); saturation of enemy defense systems using non-smart conventional weapons and drones; missile barrages; denial operations (air, naval, and undersea); enhancing survivability of the defense system through camouflage, decoys, concealment, mobility, distribution, and redundancy of systems; cyber warfare; and popular revolutionary warfare in the event of an invasion.

Alliances system

Iran’s regional allied actors—the stakeholders of the “**Axis of Islamic Resistance**”—entered the conflict from the outset, insofar as a red line had been crossed, namely the assassination of Ali Khamenei. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has demonstrated a certain capacity to withstand the Israeli offensive, thereby complicating the situation on Israel’s “second front” and its project of establishing a “buffer zone” in

⁴ Asymmetry in strategy refers to the use of capabilities (weapons systems, operational concepts, doctrines) that avoid direct, symmetrical force-on-force confrontation, exploit adversary vulnerabilities while circumventing strengths, and employ all forms of deception, surprise, and destabilization—including actions outside the war sphere, and potentially beyond legal or moral constraints. Hybridity is understood as a combination of conventional and irregular warfare (may include terrorism, insurgency, and weapons of mass destruction), along with cyber operations.

southern Lebanon. In Iraq, pro-Iranian militias—some identifying themselves as part of the “Axis of Islamic Resistance in Iraq” (including Kata’ib Hezbollah, Kata’ib al-Shuhada, Harakat al-Nujaba, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, as well as various sub-groups), along with the Badr Organization—play a role in forward defense. These militias were founded and structured by the Pasdarans after 2003, and, in the case of Badr, as early as 1980—it fought alongside Iran during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Their role in Iran’s counteroffensive strategy is to harass U.S. forces stationed in Iraq, target Iranian Kurdish opposition groups (and deter Iraqi Kurds from supporting them), and increase regional pressure. There exists an organic link between these militia factions and Tehran, sustained both by ideology and religion—namely, the defense of the “doctrine” and the place of Shiism in the region—and by political pragmatism, insofar as their dominance at the helm of the Iraqi state is partly ensured by Tehran’s role in counterbalancing Washington’s influence. In Yemen, the Houthis, who control Sanaa and some Red Sea ports (al-Hodeida, Salif, Ras Issa), are allied with Tehran and could enter the conflict by blocking the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. It should be recalled that ties between the Houthi leadership (Zaydi Shiites heading the insurgent movement Ansar Allah) and Iran date back to the 1990s, when Tehran began developing its regional network of influence through various insurgent movements opposed to Western and Saudi influence. When the Houthis took control of Sanaa in 2014, this relationship deepened, taking on quasi state-to-state forms, with transfers of weapons as well as financial and economic assistance.

Russian and Chinese backing for Iran is motivated by several factors: both states reject the precedent of action outside international law and without prior diplomatic framework (particularly regarding nuclear issues); they view Iran as a pillar of the Global South, integrated into BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; China relies on the region for 50% of its oil imports; disruption of the International North-South Transport Corridor (Russia–India via the Caspian and Iran) and Belt and Road Initiative routes would significantly impede Iranian-Russian-Chinese alternative transport routes in the region. Both states have recently signed strategic partnerships with Tehran for 20 and 25 years respectively—partnerships Iran had long refused, preferring to develop its industrial and defense base independently to create an autonomous ecosystem. Before the outbreak of the conflict, Russia had delivered S-400 air and missile defense systems, combat aircraft equipped with electronic warfare capabilities capable of detecting U.S. F-35s (*Sukhoi-35 Flanker-E*, 48 units delivered in early 2026), *Rezonans-E* radars (capable of detecting stealth aircraft and missiles), and the Tor-M1, a short-range mobile air defense system designed to counter low-altitude aerial threats. China has provided its *BeiDou-3* military navigation service (ensuring communication even if C2 centers are destroyed) and a fleet of satellites granting Iran access to Chinese SIGINT (Signal Intelligence). In the ongoing conflict, Russia and China are reportedly serving as Iran’s “eyes” (as they did during the “12-Day War”), providing space-based surveillance and reconnaissance—including the Russian-made Iranian spy satellite *Khayyam*—and guidance for advanced missiles. The transfer of Chinese supersonic anti-ship missiles *CM-302*, dubbed “carrier killers,” is reportedly underway, while delivery of Chinese stealth-detection radars *YLC-8B* has already occurred. Potential transfers of Chinese short- and medium-range missile batteries *HQ-16* and *HQ-17AE* are also mentioned. Additionally, China and Russia supply all dual-use components necessary for Iranian missile and drone production, including microelectronics, chemical propellant fuels, and composite materials. Finally, while southern maritime access is increasingly constrained—by December 2025, the United States had seized Chinese weapons shipments in the Gulf of Oman—land routes through Pakistan and Turkmenistan remain open (favored by China), as does the Caspian route (preferred by Russia and considered a “blind spot” for the U.S. and Israel).

II – The creation of a “buffer zone” in Lebanon

The current operation in Lebanon, part of the United States’ preemptive strategy in the Greater Levant and Israel’s strategy of control of its periphery, aims to further weaken Hezbollah, create opportunities for other Lebanese political forces to consolidate power, and ultimately establish a demilitarized buffer zone, similar to the Sinai Peninsula (since 1982, Egypt has sovereignty over the Sinai, which remains demilitarized and partly under international supervision). It is uncertain whether this scenario will unfold as smoothly as planned. The assumption that Lebanon’s Christian population⁵ would align behind President Aoun and transform the Lebanese Army into an instrument to control Hezbollah appears doubtful. In reality, the anti-Hezbollah front in Lebanon remains far from cohesive. Hezbollah continues to enjoy support from another major Shiite actor, the Amal Party, while the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), no longer the ally it once was, continues to back Hezbollah when their interests coincide. Sunni factions, divided into multiple currents, do not systematically oppose Shiite groups.

At the beginning of the war, the Lebanese debate focused on criticizing Hezbollah for provoking the Israeli intervention through its rocket attacks on northern Israel. Today, however, Lebanese actors have largely shifted toward condemning Israel’s war itself, which extends far beyond targeting Hezbollah positions. The human toll is severe: over 1,000 deaths, 1.5 million displaced, and, evidently, the Israeli military has undertaken the systematic destruction of southern Lebanon’s infrastructure⁶—residences, bridges, and healthcare facilities—to render the area uninhabitable and, de facto, create a buffer zone. This is not Israel’s first invasion of southern Lebanon, but it occurs at a moment when the Lebanese state is severely weakened following one of its worst financial crises, with an inefficient army and a Hezbollah debilitated by the 2024–2025 conflict—its political and military leadership largely decimated and its arsenal mostly destroyed.

It is important to recall that Hezbollah is not a “militia” directly controlled, funded, and wholly subordinated to Tehran. If that were the case, it would not have achieved such a high degree of influence over the Lebanese state, nor developed legitimacy among broader segments of Lebanese society beyond the Shiite community. While influenced and supported by the Tehran regime, Hezbollah pursued two strategic objectives centered on Lebanon: 1) to take up arms against Israel, which invaded southern Lebanon in 1978, again between 1982 and 2000, and briefly in 2006—it was thereafter named “the Resistance” among Lebanese citizens, not only Shiites; 2) to end and prevent the recurrence of Lebanon’s civil war—it did not participate in

⁵ Shiites constitute approximately 32% of the population, Sunnis 31%, Christians 31%, Druze 4.5%, and Alawites and Ismailis 1.5%. Under a tacit political arrangement, Sunnis are guaranteed the office of Prime Minister, Shiites the presidency of Parliament, and Christians the presidency of the country as well as command of the army.

⁶ Israel Orders Military to Intensify Demolitions in Southern Lebanon, *New York Times*, March 22, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/22/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-fighting-hezbollah.html>

the civil war, so under the 1989 Taif Agreement, it was not disarmed. Over the years, Hezbollah's military branch functioned as a parallel army in Lebanon, while politically it was represented in Parliament and government, and socially it established a comprehensive infrastructure of charitable and financial services to compensate for the country's highly deficient public services.

It should also be noted that Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war was not that of a "proxy" solely defending Tehran's geostrategic interests. Hezbollah, as was done, in a less publicized way, by young Lebanese Christians from the Hermel region, went to fight in Syria to prevent the spillover of jihadist elements into Lebanon—and to protect Lebanese Shiite communities across the border, notably in al-Qusayr. Hezbollah's Lebanon-centered struggle involves defending national territory, safeguarding the Lebanese Shiite community, and protecting Shiism itself. The Jabal Amel region (Shiite areas of Lebanon, from the south to the Bekaa plain) is a historic stronghold of Shiism, with strong connections to the *hawzas* (centers of theological scholarship) in Qom and Najaf, and a center of Shiite thought encompassing various currents. Hezbollah represents the Islamist political trend (without advocating clerical governance in Lebanon), while other currents reject any political instrumentalization of religion (the heirs of Moussa Sadr and Hussein Fadlallah who opposed to the option of government by religious authorities, or *wilayat al-faqih*). Yet all Shiite currents in Lebanon aim to advance the emancipation of their community, notably through the consolidation of its sociopolitical identity and agency, and are united by concern over the potential decline—or even disappearance—of Shiism in Lebanon and the region.

In this context, framing Hezbollah's elimination as a war objective or medium- to long-term geopolitical goal is not credible. In fact, one may doubt that it is the actual aim of the Americans and Israelis. If their geostrategic goal is to create a buffer zone encompassing the entirety of southern Lebanon up to the Litani River, the issue of Shiite resistance—and its alliance with Christians⁷, also largely expelled from southern Lebanon— will remain open, even if Hezbollah's military capabilities are severely weakened. Moreover, occupying southern Lebanon as a bargaining tool to force the country to demilitarize parts of its territory and recognize the state of Israel is a double-edged sword: it not only creates a de facto justification for armed resistance and even continued support for Hezbollah, but also fosters widespread hostility among Lebanese of all communities toward Israel, thereby making recognition even less likely.

There are indications that such a plan exists for Syria, involving the return of recently occupied areas around the Golan—and, in the longer term, potentially parts of the Golan itself, which has been annexed and settled—in exchange for recognition of the State of Israel. Former U.S. Ambassador and Special Representative for Syria (2018–2020), James Jeffrey, stated in a congressional hearing on February 10, 2026, that Washington had been in contact with Ahmed al-Sharaa (leader of the jihadist movement Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, and current President of Syria) since 2016, and had negotiated in 2018 with the Russians to halt the offensive against HTS in Idlib—allowing HTS to consolidate its strength over six years before

⁷ Christians constitute between 10% and 20% of the population in the South Lebanon Governorate and around 10% in the Nabatieh Governorate. Like the Shiites, they are driven by fear of disappearing from the region—submerged within the majority, forced into exile, or threatened with elimination in conflicts.

launching its offensive across Syria. The agreement with al-Sharaa's Syria would involve: limiting militarization near the Israeli border; returning areas seized by Israel after December 2024; establishing "understandings" regarding Israeli military operations against third countries; opening bilateral communication channels (with a view to normalization and eventual mutual recognition); and allowing Israeli support for the Syrian Druze population.⁸

It is clear that the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and their removal from Syria, are reshaping the strategic landscape of the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the end of 2024, there has been a "rush" by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Qatar, European states, and the United States toward Lebanon. However, the balance within Lebanon will also depend on developments within the Iranian regime and the reconfiguration of alliances in the Gulf. There will not be a "regime change" in Iran, like it happened in Iraq in 2003, not only because Iraq experienced a ground invasion and occupation, but also because Saddam Hussein's regime was in terminal decline, whereas Iran's regime has successfully reproduced itself and maintained an economic and technological trajectory despite harsh sanctions—and has been preparing for a potential U.S. military intervention for forty years.

The war itself favors the hardline wing of the regime, embodied by the Pasdarans and their candidate, Mojtaba Khamenei, whom they brought to power despite opposition from certain clerics committed to the principle, established by Khomeini, that dynastic succession is impermissible. Moreover, the elimination of Ali Larijani⁹ in an Israeli strike further diminishes the prospects of a transition toward a more moderate regime capable of engaging in international negotiations. On March 26, he was replaced—by appointment of the Supreme Leader—by Major General Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, a hardliner (member of the "nezam," the core of politico-security power), closely connected to Ali Larijani's brother Sadeq, the President of the Expediency Discernment Council. One can infer that an American-Israeli policy of deliberate deterioration is being executed: supporting the hardline wing of the regime, not with the expectation that this will generate popular revolts and bottom-up regime change (an entirely unrealistic prospect today), but because the authoritarian Shiite theocracy of Iran represents the "best enemy"—one that will not facilitate agreements with regional countries and will therefore hold back the emergence of a normalized regional bloc integrated with China's and Russia's transcontinental Eurasian projects.

The American-Israeli agenda is one thing; the sociopolitical reality of Iran is another. Beyond questions regarding the hardening and durability of the current regime, it is necessary to raise a broader and more fundamental question: that of the revolutionary legacy.

⁸ *Testimony Before The House Foreign Affairs Committee* February 10, 2026 Ambassador James F. Jeffrey.

⁹ Ali Larijani belongs to a so-called "clerico-political" family: his father, Ayatollah Mirza Hossein Amoli, was highly respected in Qom, which enabled Ali Larijani and his five brothers to integrate into the clerical sphere while advancing their political careers. One could say that they represent a clerical extension within Iran's political power structure, even though only one of them, Sadeq Larijani, is a cleric (and is President of the Expediency Discernment Council). As Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani was a moderate conservative with the capacity to manage external reactions, domestic unrest, strategic responses, and the political unity of state institutions. He served as Ali Khamenei's key representative in Moscow and Beijing.

III – Is the Iranian Islamic Revolution “terminated”?

The question of whether the regime will be strengthened or weakened in the post-conflict period may not be the most relevant one to ask. In wartime—and even in the post-conflict context, where the risk of renewed hostilities is likely to become acute—it is highly probable that the regime will harden, becoming more security-oriented and conservative, while Iranian society itself may also be shaped by a more conservative and nationalist current. Yet beyond the fact that a security-driven approach will assert itself with an intensity and immediacy commensurate with the shock produced by the war, a more fundamental question—one that has persistently lingered in the background since 1979—will resurface: what is to become of the revolutionary legacy?

Those who support this war appear to have forgotten that the Iranian Revolution occurred not only as a rejection of the Shah’s brutal dictatorship, but also as a rejection of Western world policies perceived as predatory (particularly concerning hydrocarbons), belligerent (continuous wars in its peripheries), and immoral (the sacrifice of millions of people in the wars they conducted and in the dictatorships they supported). The war in Gaza, as well as the attacks against Lebanon and Iran in 2024–2025, had already contributed to a shift in the discourse of the Iranian opposition to the Islamic Republic, increasingly framed as a call to rely solely on the Iranian people and to unequivocally condemn American-Israeli policy. Two major figures of the Iranian opposition in exile, Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, illustrate this evolution:

“Our military forces are fighting with full faith and courage; the people must support these fearless defenders in every possible way. This dark cloud over the country will lift, but darkness will remain over those who sided with traitors to the nation. Today, even remaining neutral is sheer folly and a lack of conscience. Contrary to the noise made by a small group, the majority of the Iranian people seek to cut off the hands of the aggressors.”

— Abdolkarim Soroush, March 8, 2026¹⁰

“Israel launched a military attack on Iran while Iran and the United States were engaged in negotiations; in reality, the attack aimed to disrupt those talks. The United States also bombed Iranian nuclear facilities during the discussions. The military actions of both countries against Iran violated international law. Yet the European Union did not condemn Israel’s aggression, and the German Chancellor even stated that ‘Israel is doing the dirty work on our behalf.’ The Islamic Republic may well have failed in Iran. But liberal democracy in the West has also suffered a severe setback following Israel’s brutal attacks on Gaza and Iran. International law, proclaimed human rights, ethics, and the United Nations have become empty concepts.”

— Mohsen Kadivar, January 16, 2026¹¹

¹⁰ <https://fa.shafaqna.com/news/2226843/>

¹¹ <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/iran-ajatollah-mohsen-kadivar-ueber-die-zukunft-wir-brauchen-keinen-obersten-fuehrer-a-90046e45-8736-481e-939a-4736d6fc7c1b>

The statement by Mohsen Kadivar, a reformist ayatollah in exile in the United States, underscores a fundamental contradiction in Western policy toward Iran: the attempt to export the model of liberal democracy is seriously undermined by the biases and values revealed in the destructive implementation of that very strategy. Consequently, one of the central motives of the Revolution remains intact—namely, the struggle against Western imperialism and interference, against what revolutionary intellectuals termed “Occidentalosis,” or the Western malady (*Gharbzadegi*)¹², which insidiously permeates minds at the expense of Iran’s fideistic and cultural values. To yield today to the appeal of Western influence—particularly that of the United States and Israel—would render Iran’s recent history meaningless. Even if the model of theocratic governance can be seen as intrinsically contradictory—inasmuch as the claim to rule in accordance with divine law tends to lead toward absolutism, dictatorship, and ultimately to the risk of eroding religion itself through its ideological instrumentalization—it nevertheless remains the case that, at a certain historical moment, the Iranian people rose up, in the name of Islamic values, against oppression, thereby producing a rupture that made social revolution possible. A revolution gives rise to a new form of subjectivity not in the sense of creating a standardized “new man” shaped by an ideology—such as the so-called “homo sovieticus,” a chimera of the Soviet Union—but rather in the sense of emancipation, that is, the enduring capacity of a people to express and sustain its antagonism.

The paradox of the Iranian Revolution lies in the fact that it was led by a social group that is virtually anti-revolutionary: the clergy, whose role is largely conservative in their role of preserving tradition and religious institutions. Only a minority among them adopts a reformist approach—those who emphasize the need to constantly renew the modes of transmission of tradition in order to better preserve it. Thus, the transition from the “first Revolution” to the counter-revolution—referred to as the “second Revolution”—occurred with striking rapidity, within a matter of months.¹³ Yet religion itself, particularly in its messianic dimension, which is especially pronounced in Shiism, conveys principles of ethical rectitude and the prophetic imperative to rise against *raison d’État* in order to uphold the order of justice. It was this that mobilized the Iranian people in 1978–1979; but does this still hold true, in one way or

¹² A concept developed by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in the 1960s around the notion of “dependence,” later taken up by a major intellectual figure of the Revolution, Ali Shariati (assassinated by the SAVAK in 1977). See some of his texts in English at: <https://www.shariati.com/kotob.html> For a summary of Al-e Ahmad’s book, see: <https://www.icit-digital.org/books/occidentosis-a-plague-from-the-west>

¹³ The term “first Revolution” refers to the events of 1978, culminating in the demonstration of 11 December, the day of Ashura (commemorating the death of Imam Hussein), when Iranians took to the streets in massive numbers—hundreds of thousands in Tehran and between six and nine million across the country—and the security forces did not fire a single shot. This phase extends until 11 February 1979, the date on which power was seized by the Revolutionary Council, supported by a large segment of the army. The “second Revolution” (*Enghelāb-e Duvvom*) marks a consolidation of power by the clergy under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini. It begins with the hostage-taking at the American embassy on 4 November 1979. At that point, a split emerged between proponents of clerical rule (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) and other revolutionary currents opposed to such a system of governance, including major religious figures such as Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari (who was subsequently placed under house arrest until his death in 1986). The hostage crisis served as a smokescreen for the Khomeinists, who used the occasion to push through the new theocratic constitution in December 1979. For a summary of the situation, see: Mohsen Milani, *Hostage Crisis*, Encyclopedia Iranica, June 11 2013, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hostage-crisis/>

another, today? Beyond the demand for greater justice, freer civic expression, and less corruption, do the majority of Iranians still support the Islamic revolutionary experience—a form of political life marked by a spiritual dimension, or what Michel Foucault described as a “political spirituality”? For the French philosopher (who observed the uprising on the ground as a press correspondent for nearly two years), even if this political spirituality—that is, the idea that within law, whether political or religious, there always persists an original “hidden” ethical meaning—had taken shape as a political will for rupture, it did not necessarily guarantee the success of an experiment in religious governance:

“Shiism is precisely a form of Islam which, through its teachings and its esoteric content, distinguishes between mere outward obedience to the code and a deeper spiritual life. When I say that they were seeking, through Islam, a transformation of their subjectivity, this is entirely compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already present and provided them with their identity. In the way they experienced Islam as a revolutionary force, there was something more than the desire to obey the law more faithfully; there was the will to renew their entire existence by reconnecting with a spiritual experience they believed to lie at the very heart of Shiite Islam. Marx is always quoted for his phrase about religion as the opium of the people. Yet the sentence that immediately precedes it—almost never cited—states that religion is the spirit of a world without spirit. Let us therefore say that Islam, in that year 1978, was not the opium of the people, precisely because it was the spirit of a world without spirit.”¹⁴

“I find myself at a loss when it comes to speaking of Islamic government as an ‘idea’ or even as an ‘ideal.’ But as a ‘political will,’ it impressed me. It impressed me in its effort to politicize, in response to present problems, structures that are inseparably social and religious; it also impressed me in its attempt to open up a spiritual dimension within politics. [...] In this will for an ‘Islamic government,’ should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new?”¹⁵

The debate over “reconciliation” or “contradiction” cannot be settled simply by noting the failure of the “Islamic Republic” experiment. It is undeniably a failure in terms of emancipation, freedom, and ethics—one should note that denunciation of corruption ranks at the top of Iranians’ (of all tendencies) criticisms, attributing their dire economic situation far more to corruption than to international sanctions.¹⁶ Yet one must also consider the collective social dimension, the effort to develop the country, the desire to overcome the poverty and obscurantism that had characterized the monarchy. Despite harsh international economic sanctions, the country has experienced remarkable economic, technological, and scientific expansion—from 170,000 university graduates in 1979 to 3.8 million today, ranking 61st

¹⁴ L’esprit d’un monde sans esprit » (entretien avec P. Blanchet et C. Brière), in Blanchet (P.) et Brière (C.), *Iran : la révolution au nom de Dieu*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll. L’Histoire immédiate, 1979, pp. 227- 241. *Dits Écrits* Tome III texte n°259 <http://1libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault150.html>

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, « A quoi rêvent les Iraniens ? », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no 727, 16- 22 octobre 1978, pp. 48- 49. *Dits Écrits* Tome III texte n°245 <http://1libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault143.html>

¹⁶ See, polls by the Center for International & Security Studies, Maryland University, made in Iran since 2012, <https://cisssm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications>

worldwide in innovation and 20th in scientific publications; with a diversified economy (hydrocarbons, automotive, armaments, aerospace, bio- and nanotechnologies, and artificial intelligence).¹⁷ This level of development has fostered a sense of national pride—polls indicate that a large majority of Iranians defend their scientific and technological achievements, including their nuclear rights—and it has also produced a substantial middle class (over 50% of the population), highly educated youth, and a scientific openness to the world. These factors, in turn, have promoted critical reflection, sociopolitical demands, and even public dissent.

The ongoing war is likely to strengthen national cohesion in Iran, but it will not eliminate the discontent that has only grown over the past twenty years. The spectrum of opposition ranges from grassroots popular movements denouncing corruption and social inequality, to institutionalized opposition within the regime (the reformist camp), to outright rejection of clerical governance or even of the Islamic Republic itself. This discontent cannot be measured by the occasional videos circulating on social media, showing people shouting “Death to Khamenei” from their balconies or protesters carrying Pahlavi flags. Rather, it is evident in the recurring waves of mass protests, with thousands of people taking to the streets approximately every three years, peaking in 1999, 2009, 2017, 2023, and 2026, and in the steadily declining voter turnout—40% in the first round of the presidential elections in July 2024 (50% in the second round) and 41% for the legislative elections that same year.

Of the 50% of voters who participated in the second round of the 2024 presidential elections, 55% voted for the reformist candidate Masoud Pezeshkian, and 45% for the ultra-conservative Saeed Jalili—so one could schematically suggest that slightly more than 20% of the population supports the hardline conservative faction of the regime (the Mojtaba Khamenei/ Pasdaran tendency). However, this does not mean that only 20% of the population remains attached to the formula of the Islamic Republic; the reformists are attached to it as well, as is the large majority of Iranians. Accordingly, the Center for International Security Studies at the University of Maryland which regularly makes opinion polls conducted in Iran, made one in October 2025 (published in December), which indicates: “Approximately half of the Iranians surveyed expressed trust in the authorities of the Islamic Republic. Fewer than four in ten believe that policymakers should ‘heavily’ consider religious precepts, but three-quarters wish for religious precepts to be taken into account at least in part. Two-thirds believe that women who do not wear the hijab should not be confronted.”¹⁸

An opinion poll remains a poll, it’s not a referendum—but it still provides some indication of underlying tendencies: if three-quarters of respondents wish for “policymakers to take religious precepts into account,” one can infer that the option of the Islamic Republic remains, more or less, validated. That said, such data do not clarify whether governance according to religious precepts should operate with or without a Supreme Leader, alongside an ideological-military body such as the Pasdaran. In any case, it is neither during wartime nor even in a

¹⁷ See : *Iran Economic Monitor*, Spring 2024, World Bank, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099051007102421530> ; *Iran Science Report*, UNESCO, 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/reports/science/2021/en/iran>

¹⁸ *Iranian Public Opinion Soon After the Twelve-Day War, December 20, 2025*, Center for International & Security Studies, <https://cisssm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-public-opinion-soon-after-twelve-day-war>

post-conflict period (while the threat of renewed war looms in the coming months), and under intensified economic sanctions, that Iranians are likely to take to the streets to demand regime change. Similarly, one cannot expect transformations to be imposed from above through a rebalancing in favor of the reformists. As long as the threat of war persists, the security-oriented and conservative retrenchment will leave little space for political opening. This dynamic is part of the American-Israeli calculation under their preemptive “worst-case” policy: maintaining a radicalized Iranian regime while delaying the emergence of a normalized, non-aligned to Washington regional order.

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