

‘Iranian regime weakened by war but repression intensified post-ceasefire’

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‘The monarchist opposition led by Reza Pahlavi who supports Trump and Netanyahu, lost a great deal of its popularity after the airstrikes. His support for “liberation” by invasion proved to be a nightmare for common people’, says Frieda Afary in an interview with Alternative Viewpoint conducted by Farooq Sulehria.

Frieda Afary is an Iranian American socialist feminist activist, translator and writer. She is a public librarian in Los Angeles, where she runs philosophy and political classes for the community including young women activists and scholars representing Black Lives Matter, Latina, queer and labor activists. She is also active on her blog ‘Iranian Progressives in Translation’.

Could you describe the general political scenario in Iran before and after the war? The Iranian regime is celebrating victory? How do the Iranian citizens view this war?

Before Israel started bombing Iran on June 13, the majority of the Iranian public, which despises the Iranian government, had still hoped that this government would come to an agreement with the Trump administration over its nuclear program and allow for the removal of the sanctions imposed on Iran. Since Trump revoked the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2018, these backbreaking sanctions have hurt the Iranian public greatly.

By June 13, after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that Iran had made enough enriched uranium at levels close to what is needed for nuclear weapons to create fuel for 10 bombs, and after Iran turned down the Trump administration's offer for a joint nuclear enrichment program outside its borders, the Israeli government used these events as reasons to start large bombing campaigns. The Israeli bombings, conducted between June 13 and June 24, targeted infrastructure, nuclear facilities, ports, civilian residential areas, and locations associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Additionally, Israel carried out assassinations of senior military leaders and nuclear scientists in their residences.

Both the Israeli airstrikes and the June 22 U.S. B2 Stealth bombers dropping bunker buster bombs over Iranian nuclear facilities have done severe damage. This damage involves not only Iran's nuclear program and oil-producing capabilities but also its civilian residential areas, water, and food infrastructure. By the government's conservative estimates, over 900 Iranians were killed and over 4000 were injured. Israel even bombed the Evin prison,

which is the site where many progressive dissidents, including women political prisoners, are held.

Iranian citizens are traumatised not only by the bombings and damage but also by the Iranian regime's increased repression after the ceasefire.

What effects will this war most likely have on the Iranian regime? While the regime has survived and may appear strong, it, however, lost key regional allies, such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen, before the war.

There is no doubt that the Iranian regime has been weakened. The assassination of numerous high-ranking officials, IRGC leaders, and nuclear scientists by Israel illustrates the extent of Israeli infiltration into the Iranian government and its security apparatus. Nevertheless, the Iranian government still maintains proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen and possesses the capability to block or mine the Strait of Hormuz, which could obstruct the passage of oil and gas tankers to various regions, particularly Asia. It retains ballistic weapons with launchers, attack drones, and short-range weapons that can target U.S. military bases in the Middle East. Furthermore, Iran continues to receive military and economic support from Russia and China, who have been assisting it for years. In its relationship with Russia, Iran obtains weapons and nuclear power plants while supplying drones and missiles for use in attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

What is the popular perception among Iranians about the current regime, both in the country and in exile: Would the Ayatollahs gain some legitimacy after the recent attacks by Israel and the US?

At least 80% of the Iranian public opposes the current regime, perceiving it as corrupt, exploitative, and militaristic, with little regard for the welfare of the majority, who live in poverty. Furthermore, a significant portion of the population now advocates for the separation of religion and state, rejecting the idea of a religious fundamentalist government. Among Iranians in exile, a large majority have opposed the Islamic Republic for decades.

Although the government has organised large mourning ceremonies to create the illusion of popular support, its actual supporters comprise no more than 20% of the population. During the recent bombings by Israel and the U.S., the government—despite having constructed hundreds of miles of underground tunnels in Lebanon—failed to provide safe shelters for ordinary citizens. It was unable to ensure any degree of security. Rent and food prices, already exorbitant prior to the conflict, have surged even further. Additionally, the ongoing water shortage, which was already causing significant distress, has now become an even more pressing issue.

What are the probable effects on dissenters and the fight for democracy in Iran?

The government has announced that it has arrested over 700 individuals, accusing them of being spies for Israel since the ceasefire came into effect. In many instances, there is a lack of evidence to support these claims. The majority of those detained are young people, predominantly from Kurdish, Afghan, and Bahai backgrounds. Additionally, some of the arrested individuals were participants in the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom Movement’ during 2022-2023. According to human rights organisations, the total number of arrests may exceed 900.

Several political prisoners have been executed. Among them is Dr Ahmad Reza Jalali, a Swedish-Iranian physician and researcher, who has faced the death penalty for several years on what are widely regarded as false charges. He now faces the imminent threat of execution.

The Israeli government's bombing of Evin prison caused significant structural damage and resulted in the deaths of 71 individuals, including prison staff, political prisoners, family visitors, and local residents. Some of the remaining political prisoners have since been transferred to Gharchak prison, notorious for its horrific and inhumane conditions, as well as its contaminated salty water.

The immediate consequences of the bombings have been a marked increase in the repression of labour rights, women's rights, minority rights, and student activists' advocacy for democracy and human rights in Iran. There is a significant possibility that the loss of several key progressive leaders may occur during this period.

The monarchist opposition, led by Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former king, who aligns himself with Trump and Netanyahu, has seen a significant decline in its popularity following the airstrikes. Many ordinary citizens found his advocacy for "liberation" through invasion to be disconcerting. Furthermore, Pahlavi refrained from condemning the Israeli and U.S. bombings, instead praising them and expressing his willingness to assume the role of Iran's next leader.

What is the current role of the Tudeh party and other leftist outfits in Iran or in exile? What is the future path for the left?

The Tudeh party lost a great deal of its credibility in the years after the 1979 Revolution because it supported Khomeini and the Islamic Republic as anti-imperialist. The party continued its support until the arrest of its own leadership in 1983. Some Tudeh party members were also executed in 1984 and later.

There are other smaller leftist groups inside Iran that support labour and women's struggles, especially the "Woman, Life, Freedom Movement," which lasted from September 2022 to early 2023. Some youth and university students, who read and discuss translated works of Marx and post-Marx Marxists, engage in discussions about leftist ideas.

Various statements by progressive forces inside and outside Iran have condemned both Israel/U.S. and Iran in this war. A statement by Nobel Peace Laureates Narges Mohammadi and Shirin Ebadi and several Iranian filmmakers issued soon after the bombings opposed nuclear power and war and called for ending the Islamic Republic. Statements by workers and writers' groups inside Iran have also condemned all the powers involved. A statement by various Iranian intellectuals inside and outside Iran took a similar principled position and also critiqued Iranian progressives for not having taken a strong stand against nuclear power and weapons since the inception of international concern over the direction of Iran's nuclear ambitions more than two decades ago. You can see the translation of that statement on my website: iranianprogressives.org.

It is true that President Trump is highly unpredictable, but do you see any prospect of US-Iran rapprochement? How will Israel react in the coming days?

A rapprochement with the U.S. is conceivable; however, it is improbable that Iran will reach a long-term agreement with both the U.S. and Israel. The opposition to the U.S. and Israel has been fundamental to the Islamic Republic’s identity since its establishment in 1979. Additionally, Iran is a member of the BRICS alliance alongside Russia and China.

Rafael Grossi of the IAEA asserts that Iran has merely postponed its nuclear proliferation ambitions by a few months. Both Israel and the U.S. possess nuclear weapons, yet Israel is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Furthermore, Israel and the U.S. have been implicated in the widespread violence against Palestinians in Gaza, undermining their claims to moral superiority.

For progressives globally, taking a principled stance in this conflict necessitates opposing the militarism, imperialism, authoritarianism, and human rights violations exhibited by all these powers.

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