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The Iran Question: War, Regime Change and the Price of Intervention

https://m.thewire.in/article/world/the-iran-question-war-regime-change-and-the-price-of-intervention

Alok Sheel August 24, 2026

File photo: In this image from video circulating on social media, protesters dance and cheer around a bonfire as they take to the streets of Tehran, Iran, on January 9, 2026. Photo: UGC via AP, File

As bombs and missiles continue to pound and destroy the heritage of one of the oldest and most sophisticated civilisations, and the civilian population and infrastructure suffer as collateral damage, the ongoing war in Iran and Lebanon raises a number of fundamental questions. What is the nature of the current regime in Iran? What are its strengths and weaknesses as revealed during recent domestic

unrest and now as it faces external aggression? What might the endgame might look like? Is there any justification for the Israeli-US attack on Iran?

Extremist regimes

The current Iranian regime came into being in 1979 through domestic insurrection and forcible capture of power, much like other extreme left-wing and right-wing regimes in the modern era. These insurrectionary regimes, that begin in response to widespread discontent, are driven by millenarian or utopian ideological visions of fundamentally reorganising existing society, through consent to the extent possible, and through increasing force and violence as necessary. These fundamentalist visions can be divided into two major streams.

The first is the left-wing revolutionary vision that pushes the modern enlightenment idea of human equality to its logical conclusion. This endeavour, however, runs into conflict with another major enlightenment idea, namely personal liberty: if you leave man free, inequalities multiply. This fundamental conflict results in extreme left-wing regimes becoming increasingly repressive. This was the experience of the first experiment of its kind in Russia in 1917, and has been replicated everywhere since. North Korea is a contemporary example.

Modern democracies have tried to find a middle ground between these two enlightenment ideas. This is how the conservative, centrist and social democratic variations of democracy evolved, with a varying mix of equality and personal liberty. Modern democracies are, of course, less than perfect. They are susceptible to being temporarily held hostage by populist demagogues. They are nevertheless the best and most advanced political systems extant today.

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The second is the right-wing counter-revolutionary vision. This rejects the core ideas of the enlightenment and seeks, instead, to revive some ideal society rooted in the past. What makes such regimes very potent is that despite their backward looking vision, they leverage modern organisational tools and technology to reorganize state and society. The right-wing regimes of Europe of the 1930s, most notably Nazi Germany and Italian Fascism, are examples of this. Iran, too, fits this bill, as the regime seeks to revive a supposedly pristine Islamic state and society.

The Taliban in Afghanistan and the ISIS in Syria also fell in this broad genre. These were, however, predatory regimes with an amorphous state, as a result of which they

collapsed easily. Not so Iran. It has survived for a period much longer than the Nazis and fascists, although not as long as Soviet Russia or North Korea. But who knows what the future holds in store?

Common to all these regimes, whether on the far left or far right, and what differentiates them from authoritarian regimes that rely on conventional bureaucracies to suppress any dissent, is their reliance on strong-armed paramilitary bands. These bands operate as a tightly organised domestic police devoted fanatically, or through mutual fear, to a supreme leader to scotch all dissent or the emergence of any semblance of a focal point or leader of resistance.

Soviet Russia had the Cheka that later evolved into the NKVD. Fascist Italy had the Blackshirts and OVRA. Nazi Germany had the SS and the Gestapo. North Korea has its Ministry of Social Security and Ministry of State Security. Likewise Iran has the IRGC and Basij. These organisations all stood (or still stand) outside and above the civilian bureaucracy and armed forces as a parallel state that reports directly to an all-powerful supreme leader, whether it be a Fuhrer or Duce, Stalin or Ayatollah. They collapsed only with the application of external military force or with the death of the supreme leader or both.

The North Korean regime has survived two leadership deaths because the supreme leader presides over a hereditary cult. The Soviet Union did not collapse through war or with the death of Stalin, but this was because state control gradually loosened over the course of the Cold War so that internal dissent to bring down the regime became possible. The Iranian regime is still extant.

The endgame in Iran

How might things pan out in Iran following the death of Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader for all but the first ten years of the current regime, after the neutralisation of Iranian air space and its air force and conventional navy, as well as a substantial degradation of its missile and drone launching and manufacturing capabilities?

First, the IRGC is a much more potent force than either the SS or the fascists. Apart from the repressive Basij domestic policing paramilitary, it has its own external intelligence and military wings that control missile and drone deployment, including from the mainland and through small naval vessels and sea mines. These can independently launch direct attacks on surrounding countries and the Strait of Hormuz.

A protester holds a portrait of the late Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah during a protest against the backdrop of Lebanon-Israel talks and the normalization of relations, in Beirut, Lebanon, Friday, August 7, 2026. Photo: AP/Hussein Malla

Second, the widely held view is that, learning from past experience, boots on the ground are needed to bring about a regime change. The allies had to march into the very heart of Germany and occupy it to ensure regime change. On the other hand, continuous aerial bombardment is likely to lead to a Gaza-like genocide and a failed state, as the regime forces are likely to merge into the civilian population, as happened in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Third, despite the existence of a supreme leader, the effective decision-making structure and firepower in Iran is reportedly quite decentralised, enabling regional decision-making. This innovation, known as the 'Mosaic Defence Doctrine', evolved through lessons learnt from the Iran-Iraq war, and later the American campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Even with boots on the ground, for which there is little appetite, and will likely prove to be political suicidal in America, it might need an extended military campaign to bring down such a decentralised military and repressive system. Another military innovation might be quickly required to deal with the problem at hand.

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It is primarily on account of the above three reasons that many international observers feel that regime change in Iran is unlikely to take place anytime soon. The mostly likely scenario is that the political opposition at home and economic disruption would be so great that all-out attacks on Iran and, consequently, the missile and drone attacks by Iran on Israel and the Gulf States would peter out. A war of attrition might continue during which Iran's domestic paramilitary forces would get degraded to the point the regime collapses, resulting in a failed state.

If external attacks on Iran cease before this point is reached because the political and economic costs of extended war are considered excessive, Iran would gradually build back some of its military capacity. Uncertainty and an uneasy peace, at best, would hang over the Strait of Hormuz, a choke point for several vital supplies beyond oil, even if some kind of reopening was negotiated.

Sovereignty, accountability and regime change

Right up to the early modern-era, conquests and interference in the affairs of other countries was commonplace. It did not help that religious and secular authority was combined in both the Christian (Pope) and Islamic (Caliph) worlds. However, the rise of Protestantism and the Henrician Reformation and the decline of Islamic empires gradually undermined the authority of both the Pope the Caliphate from the 16th century.

With the Treaty of Westphalia in the 17th century and the rise of nation-states in the 18th century, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states became an accepted principle of international law, although it was loosely implemented in practice. The Age of Imperialism further revealed that this principle in any case applied to Europe and did not extend to the colonies. To this day, the international hegemon, the United States, observes this principle mostly in the breach.

Non-interference in internal affairs nevertheless remains the cornerstone fig-leaf of international relations. It is for this reason that the international community has desisted from regime change in extremist regimes, even though these are very repressive domestically and can pose an existential threat to other countries or even the wider world. The Soviet Union gobbled up several independent neighbouring countries over the years and provided material support to left-wing militias in other countries.

Nuclear North Korea constitutes an existential threat to democratic South Korea through whimsical and unpredictable actions. Mussolini invaded other countries in pursuit of a grand design to reconstitute the Roman Empire. Nazi Germany claimed and occupied a number of neighbouring countries as part of the Third Reich and was in addition an existential threat to jews all over Europe, finally leading to the holocaust.

Iran, of course, has no such imperialist designs, but then the age of overt imperialism is long over. It arms and supports terrorist militias in several neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza. It is of course difficult to definitively determine whether these actions constitute an existential threat to some neighbouring countries or whether this is a defensive response to a perceived existential threat by Iran itself.

The question that arises in the circumstances is whether in such cases the international community should hide behind the fig leaf of the Treaty of Westphalia or is international community justified in enforcing regime change?

The enlightenment ideas of human equality and individual liberty are indeed noble and desirable and form the basis, though imperfectly, of the political organisation in modern democracies. That individuals in this day and age should be forcibly repressed by their governments is morally reprehensible, but it is nevertheless tolerated by the international community. In an ideal world, a global body like the United Nations should call out such regimes and conceivably coordinate their replacement with governments that have the people's mandate.

In a world that is less than ideal, such a regime change would be decided and enforced by global hegemons and there would always be the suspicion that this call is being made by the hegemon selectively in its own interest. In such circumstances it is perhaps best left to the people of repressive extremist regimes to change their own regime change themselves, however difficult that might be.

In the end, regime change was forced on Germany and Italy because they lost the war that was of their own making. The present regime in Iran, on the other hand, is not an aggressor but the victim of external aggression. It is worth noting that the German state was not allowed to fail after the war. The Eastern part was integrated into a functional state, howsoever repressive. In the western portion that devolved on the western allies, power was transferred back from the occupying forces to the German people through free and fair elections.

Economic reconstruction was also organised through the Marshal Plan that quickly put Germany back on its feet again. If regime change is forced on Iran by outside

powers this would be a good precedent to follow. As in Nazi Germany earlier, the Iranian people must not be forced to pay for the sins of their rulers that they had no role in selecting, for destruction of their livelihood and infrastructure by outside powers and for continuing insecurity on account of state failure.

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This article went live on August twenty-fourth, two thousand twenty six, at seventeen minutes past ten at night.

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