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The War Against Iran: A Turning Point for Tehran and the International Order

How does this war reshape the Islamic Republic, expose the double standards of the international order, and crystallize civilizational conflicts?

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Introduction - the state of affairs and the dynamics of war

Whilst the war is still raging, the past few weeks have gradually revealed the elements of Iran's strategy, which lies somewhere between all-out war, proactive defence and a step-by-step response. In control of their own territory and the timetable, the Iranians are interweaving military, economic and political objectives,

employing a phased strategy and multifaceted responsiveness: to inflict deterrent damage on Israel and the US presence in the Middle East; creating a Russian doll-style, domino-effect chain of economic pressures to affect the United States, a Europe largely subservient to the US, the Gulf petro-monarchies, and ultimately the entire planet, with a view to provoking a convergence of pressures on the arsonists of the Middle East; to exhaust or even fracture Israeli society, and possibly turn it against its government's policies; to provoke a political crisis in the United States, which will inevitably arise when, beyond rising fuel prices, the true cost of the war – from the scale of destruction to the real number of dead and wounded – emerges from beneath the lid of war propaganda and media blackouts. On several fronts, with different timelines – the economic suffocation of the Gulf states, Israel's increasingly intolerable vulnerability, American casualties or the deterioration of the global economy – Iran is seeking to create tipping points that will allow it to end the war on its own terms.

For Iranians, the Iranian resistance represents an initial victory: a regional power is standing up to the world's leading power, employing every aspect of asymmetric warfare, making full use of its geostrategic environment and the global interconnectedness of trade, and mastering the various political, geopolitical, economic and psychological timeframes. Whilst Iran is suffering destruction, and although its economy will inevitably weaken, Iran already knows that its deterrent capability is effective and will remain so: its central geographical position and its natural resources will remain unchanged; the relevance of its strategy, as well as its technological capabilities, will also remain, and they will undergo developments and adaptations; and whilst Iran has not developed nuclear weapons, events are almost inevitably pushing it to consider nuclear protection, either by producing such weapons itself, by acquiring them from another country, or by placing itself under the nuclear umbrella of an allied nation.

The art and manner of extricating oneself from this war remain uncertain at present, even though, ideally, Iran intends to continue its actions until its adversaries show some form of renunciation or capitulation (even if disguised). It already has the means to exert pressure regarding its demands for concessions: a permanent guarantee of non-aggression from the United States and Israel, even though Iran's retaliation may in itself serve as a deterrent against future attacks; payment of reparations for war damage, even though Iran will be able to secure what will no doubt be denied to it through taxes on the Strait of Hormuz, its oil and gas exports, and new trade rules with its partners and neighbours; lifting of the sanctions imposed by the United States over decades, although Iran will likely not wait for a (perhaps hypothetical, and in any case complicated) lifting of sanctions to adjust its economic ecosystem; the right to nuclear enrichment under the Non-

Proliferation Treaty, assuming Iran still feels bound to respect a treaty that imposes constraints without offering benefits, and to cooperate with an organisation – the IAEA – whose role has proved ambiguous.

In several respects, Iran will come out on top either way. By bombing US bases in the Persian Gulf and Iraq, it aims to drive the Americans out of the region: either the United States decides to withdraw permanently, which will allow Iran to establish a new balance of power with the kingdoms or states of the region; or the US maintains a presence which, whatever form it takes, will inevitably be vulnerable, and will render vulnerable any territory hosting that presence. At sea, as from the coast, the Strait of Hormuz will remain under Iran's military control and will therefore remain a strategic asset, an economic lever and the graveyard of any armed force seeking to break an Iranian-imposed blockade. As for the Gulf states, which have grown rich and developed over the past decades thanks to the marginalisation of an Iran under economic sanctions, they have realised their structural fragility: so far from the United States, so close to Iran, they are at the mercy of a geostrategic paradigm in which Israel, a Western-oriented country, monopolises all Western priorities.

Israel and the United States believed they could bring down an 'Islamist regime'; it was the Iranian empire that struck back; the outcome will be a regional power, Islamo-nationalist in character, with its 'revolutionary' foundations more or less renewed, and its imperial-religious axis even more deeply entrenched. In negotiations, country's maximalist demands are almost never met, and Iran, even from a position of strength, will no doubt have to come to terms with reality on many points. Emerging from a conflict with one's head held high is one thing, but managing the post-war period often proves far more delicate and difficult. Beyond national unity centred on the defence of the country, political divisions, social tensions and economic problems will very quickly return to the forefront of the Iranian scene. As a follow-up to 'Why Iran has already won the war', published on 9 March 2026, this article aims to highlight some lessons from this war: for Iran, for global geopolitics, and for the Palestinian question.

A re-founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran ?

Deconstructing the 'Iranian regime'

If the objective was to overthrow the 'Iranian regime' through a 'decapitation strike', the operation had already failed by the first day. The main reason for this is a fundamental ignorance of Iran's political structure, and more broadly of its society

and culture, as already revealed by the misuse of the term 'Iranian regime'. Whilst it betrays a certain contempt (do we speak of the 'French regime' or the 'US regime'?), it implies two prejudices or two errors of judgement.

The first is that the Islamic Republic, founded in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has little legitimacy, as it is seen as a new system that has been artificially imposed, and which could therefore easily be undermined or even overthrown. The Islamic Republic is indeed a novel structure in its hybrid nature, combining democracy, a Jacobin republic and religious guidance. However, in its essence and functioning, it is rooted in ancient political experiences, organic traditions and structures. Its parliamentary system stems from the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1906, which saw the establishment of a Parliament and the drafting of a Constitution. One can even see in the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who readily consulted his community on certain decisions, the Islamic roots of a principle of consultation delegated to the people. The presence of religion within the political framework dates back to the 16th century, when the Persian kingdom became Shia and the monarchy was thereafter closely linked to a clergy that had, for centuries, served as the bedrock and guide of the Shia community.

The novelty – and the modernism – of the Islamic Republic lies in the institutionalisation of a supreme and dialectical form of religious guidance within a republican framework, although the concept of guidance in the Shia sense of the term is an ancient one, dating back in fact to the very emergence of the Shia schism following the Prophet's death in 632. Looking even further back, the connection between power and religion dates back to antiquity, when the Achaemenid and Sassanid kings claimed to derive their strength and wisdom from the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. As for its administrative apparatus, it suffices to recall that since the 6th century BCE, and even after the arrival of Islam, in the service of the Abbasid caliphs or Turkish rulers, Iranians have been accustomed to governing kingdoms and empires. Far from being merely a matter of technocratic competence, the Iranian administration, historically run by scholars with a wide range of knowledge, was also a vehicle for transmitting Iranian culture and thus a backbone of identity for centuries. Iranian administration was westernised by the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), but it is rooted in centuries-old traditions of governance and protocol. Finally, there is genuine continuity between the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic in terms of industrial and infrastructure development and the very principle of administrative modernisation.

The second misconception is that the Iranian government is like an island cut off from the people, and that it must rely on force to compensate for a crucial lack of legitimacy. That there is a disconnect between the people and the state is a well-

known fact, and as far as we can tell, it is a long-standing reality. In the 19th century, the Count of Gobineau wrote that Iranians 'will watch the most diverse governments pass over their heads with indifference, without taking any particular liking to one or the other' (*Trois ans en Asie*, 1859). This is, moreover, one of the reasons cited for the recurring authoritarianism of governments in Iran. In the absence of a social contract between rulers and the ruled, or of a fixed legal framework legitimising sovereignty, the authorities had to compensate for weak legitimacy through a strong, occasionally violent, presence. The population, for its part, organised into family units and structured in parallel by tribal, corporatist or religious affiliations, was content to endure and obey, without fear of occasionally revolting against royal policies deemed unjust or illegitimate. This creates a dynamic of divergence between a government intent on imposing its agenda and a population which, lacking a strong sense of civic duty, refuses to cooperate; this, in turn, leads to a rise in political authoritarianism and, consequently, to increased avoidance strategies and civic disengagement on the part of the population. In today's Iran, these socio-political issues can be observed to varying degrees.

However, the Pahlavi monarchy and subsequently the Islamic Republic, through proactive policies or sometimes unintentionally, have also narrowed this gap between the government and the population. The emergence of a middle class following industrialisation, urbanisation and the Westernisation of society, as well as the revolutionary policy that created a new generation of men and women (so-called 'Islamic feminism') involved in the life of the state and the country, have transformed the sociology of Iran, the economy of society and the relationship between individuals and politics. There are still divisions between the various branches of power (the deep state and republican life), between the elites and the population, and between authoritarian governance and a population that endures it or puts up with it. However, other factors help to organically bind Iranians together, starting with nationalism, which unites them in all crises threatening the country: this was the case during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), which saw Iranians unite to defend their country despite their political and even ethnic divisions; it is largely the case in the current war. For Iranians in Iran, change—whether political or social—will come from within the country itself, from its internal forces, not from abroad, and certainly not under the pressure of war. For them, protecting the nation's integrity against the current aggression does not mean acquiescing to all government policies: it is simply a matter of ensuring the survival of the homeland, a prerequisite for internal change which only the people living in Iran have the power and legitimacy to bring about.

Iran over the past thirty years and the Iran to come

The election of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997, followed by his re-election in 2001, reflected a country in transition. The rise of new generations, the lessons and disappointments of the Islamic Revolution, the advent of the internet, the growing realisation at the highest levels of government that nationalism was ultimately the greatest common denominator among Iranians, and President Rouhani's China-style policy (opening up the country through the economy) have shaped Iran over the last thirty years. A shift in doctrine has also emerged among conservative circles, which for two decades sought to moralise society and re-Islamise it, willingly or by force. Faced with a brain drain, with Iranians fleeing to the beaches and nightclubs of Türkiye, and with the emergence of a youth who had known neither the Pahlavi era nor their parents' revolutionary ideals, a shift in doctrine gradually took hold. Instead of a wholly repressive approach, successive governments chose to develop within the country what Iranians, young and old alike, sought to find abroad. The 2000s saw the gradual emergence of a leisure-oriented society, the construction of American-style shopping malls, the proliferation of coffee shops, the public intensification of cultural life (concerts, theatre, exhibitions, cinemas) that had previously been limited, restricted or even hidden, as well as greater permissiveness regarding alcohol, private parties, styles of hijab and the public display of affection by unmarried couples.

In many respects, society has experienced both a degree of liberalisation and the emergence of a new socio-political paradigm. Thus, in the early 2000s, men and women had to be separated at wedding celebrations, and only through corruption was it possible to have mixed-gender guest lists in private gardens; nowadays, some official organisations host wedding salons where men and women mingle, whilst others still maintain a physical separation of the sexes to reflect more traditional social groups, which in fact constitute the majority. The 2010s saw the emergence of a new generation of entrepreneurs, not always or necessarily religious, but fundamentally nationalist, who are part of a new kind of contract with the state: allegiance to the principle of the Islamic Republic in exchange for the freedom to develop their businesses. The relationship is a win-win: the state benefits from the contribution of the businesses created, a generation of industrialists flourishes, and nationalism serves as the 'natural' glue binding together individuals (state, para-state or private elites) with diverse and sometimes contradictory political or religious stances. Finally, politically, the Islamic Republic has adopted a discourse that is more imperial than pan-Islamic, more nationalist than religious,

demonstrating once again the intrinsic complexity of the Iranian system, which is at once a nation-state, an imperial republic, a religious homeland and a country of religions.

It is this Iran—a country in flux—that has come under attack. In light of the political and sociological changes in Iran, which the undersigned has been following since 2000, one might wonder about the country's future trajectory. The Iran-Iraq War may offer a point of reference. It was initiated by an act of aggression by Saddam Hussein, a Sunni president who feared the Iranian revolution might spill over into his country, which had a Shia majority. Against all expectations, the Iranians stood their ground, and the war established a new relationship between the political sphere, the military and the population. The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 showed that the Iranian army, one of the strongest in the world, was nevertheless unable to save the monarchy. Hence the creation, in the spring of 1979, of the Revolutionary Guards, followed in the autumn of the same year by a volunteer corps, the Bassij, to whom the new Islamic Republic assigned the sacred duty of protecting the Islamic Republic against any attempt at a royalist coup and against any enemy, internal or external, that might threaten it. The war with Iraq enabled the rise of the Revolutionary Guards, a land force that also became a naval and air force, and subsequently a military-industrial complex after the war. An entire generation of Iranian military personnel, officials and politicians was thus 'born' out of the Iran-Iraq War, learning to manage the country in a context of extreme crisis, and subsequently taking up positions of responsibility across the board – military, political, administrative, academic and otherwise. One might assume that the Israeli-American-Iranian wars will produce, at least in part, a similar effect: an old guard finds new prestige, whilst new generations are forged in the fire and acquire, through intense experience, unique military, managerial, diplomatic and political expertise. All this could revitalise an Islamic Republic which was originally founded on the restoration of a new identity, in opposition to Western (especially American) interference and in the name of a refocusing on age-old religious values.

Admittedly, 1979 is not 2026: this cannot simply be a revolutionary 'reset'. We cannot erase the socio-political changes of the last two decades: the prevalence of nationalism, the various processes of secularisation underway, the consequences of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, the economic challenges, and the cultural diversity of an Iranian society that is more Westernised and politically more mature than it was forty years ago. But one can speculate that the state's official discourse will capitalise on resistance to American-Israeli aggression and that nationalist pride and religious sentiment will be reinforced, leading to a resurgence of identity politics, a certain militarisation of the state apparatus and new cultural

imperatives. There is reason to fear that, at least for a time, the post-war security context will restrict the expressions of civil society, creating new forms of social control and a new regime of surveillance and censorship. This context will likely not be conducive to the exercise of Iranian *soft power* either, which—from tourism to various international initiatives—would contribute, at least in part, to offering an alternative perspective on the country. This is, in any case, a systemic weakness of Iranian politics. Despite all its cultural assets, and despite promising projects during Mohammad Khatami's first term (1997–2001), Iran has been unable, unwilling or incapable of developing an ambitious, coherent and efficient cultural or tourism policy, particularly aimed at Western countries.

The future direction of the national discourse will depend heavily on the new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei (born in 1969), son of Ali Khamenei, who was assassinated on the first day of the war. Little has emerged about the inner workings of this election, but it was undoubtedly largely dictated by circumstances. The choice of Ali Khamenei's son – Supreme Leader from 1989 to 2026 – ensures, against a backdrop of war and crisis, continuity in doctrines, allegiances and networks, despite the issues raised by a choice that resembles a dynastic succession. In a more peaceful context, the appointment process would undoubtedly have been more open. Trained by his father, Mojtaba Khamenei nevertheless belongs to a different generation, and the direction he sets for the country will depend on a complex set of factors, ranging from the state (mental, economic, cultural) of a complex nation to the new post-war balance of power and diplomatic relations. Insofar as the choice of Mojtaba Khamenei appears to stem from a sense of national urgency rather than a religious priority of orientation, the situation is reminiscent, in some respects, of his father's election. In 1989, Ali Khamenei was chosen for political rather than religious reasons: he did not then hold the rank of Ayatollah required for the position, and the 1979 Constitution was amended to allow an election that marked the start of a new – post-revolutionary – cycle for the country. By relying on the Revolutionary Guards and promoting the integration of clerics into state bodies, Ali Khamenei triggered complementary processes of the militarisation of society and the state integration of the clergy, which strengthened the country's internal framework, professionalised political actors and institutionalised the military-religious balance of power.

Even if the war brings Iranians closer together, post-war Iran will face its pre-existing challenges: considerable economic difficulties, caused by both the embargo and state and national dysfunction, compounded by the damage of war; a multi-tiered civil society, with differing or divergent interests and cultures; the tensions between Westernisation and traditionalism, state-sanctioned religion and secular nationalism, and family-centred values and individualism. The war will almost

certainly lead, amongst some sections of the elite, to a radicalisation of anti-Western and anti-imperialist rhetoric, which will weigh heavily on Iran's domestic political climate as well as on diplomatic endeavours. Another set of questions arises concerning the Iranian diaspora, mainly in Europe, the United States and Canada, which has formed in waves over the decades and maintains kaleidoscopic relations with Iran: ranging from opponents who celebrated the bombing of their fellow citizens by brandishing portraits of Reza Pahlavi and hoping for the 'fall of the regime', to economic migrants and patriots who are more or less critical of the Islamic Republic but nevertheless support the Iranian resistance. This war and its aftermath will certainly create new dynamics, first amongst Iranians in Iran and Iranians abroad, and then in relations between communities within Iran and outside it.

What the war against Iran reveals about the international order ?

Persia and the Western empires

At the time of writing, Iran has refused to negotiate and intends to continue its operations until it achieves its objectives. What are they? One might speculate that the aim is to secure a new balance of power significant enough to compel the United States and Israel to accept not only a ceasefire, but a genuine, lasting and guaranteed diplomatic solution to the conflict. Iran's analysis – having been attacked twice whilst in the midst of negotiations – is simple: only force will overcome force; only a violent response will quell any further temptation to attack. Without speculating on possible outcomes to the conflict – a multilateral agreement, US withdrawal, nuclear escalation, etc. – it is already possible to discuss the significance of this war within the historical moment we are living through: that of a geopolitical transformation, in which an order born of the Second World War, and more distantly of the Renaissance, is gradually changing, with the rise of other international actors (China, Russia, India, South-East Asia, Brazil), new configurations of 'non-aligned' nations (BRICS+), and globalised challenges (economic, technological, environmental, migratory, etc.) that affect the entire planet and countries that are more interconnected than ever before.

From the end of the Middle Ages, profound changes began to take hold in Europe, changes whose full effects would take centuries to unfold: a new relationship with religion following the rise of Protestantism and the 'religious' wars, leading to modern forms of secularism and universalism; the development of the modern state and nationalism, culminating in an international order of nation-states, rivals in

their interests, bound by diplomacy; a philosophical rationalism which, from Kant to analytical philosophy, gradually conceived of a universe devoid of metaphysics; scientific and technical development, giving rise to the 19th-century Industrial Revolution and the contemporary IT revolution, and affirming an essentially materialist and agnostic worldview.

This European model of development (the Westphalian geopolitical order, industrial capitalism, philosophical rationalism, scientific normativity) was gradually globalized through colonial empires stretching from the Americas to the Indonesian archipelago: initially by the Spanish and Portuguese in the 16th century, then by the English, French and Dutch between the 17th and the early 20th century. The first phase of Western imperialism, which destroyed the Aztec and Inca civilisations, was an alliance of the military, the missionary and the merchant. Then colonialism responded primarily to economic imperatives (the East India Company, the British Empire), projecting the competition between European nations across the entire globe. Everywhere, globalisation has brought about Westernisation to varying degrees: it has converted peoples to Christianity (the Americas), destroyed ancient cultures, and brought what we call modernity everywhere – technologies and industries, administrative organisations, economic systems, political concepts, and art forms. Everywhere, this Westernisation has created tensions and rivalries, syntheses and schisms: conflicts and compromises between tradition and modernity, religion and secularisation, local identity and foreign influences, the national and the international. Today, these issues remain, despite (and sometimes because of) the end of the colonial empires and the advent of a multipolar world.

It is in the light of this long history that one can understand Iran's position and the multifaceted challenges it faces. Persia was drawn into the history of European colonial empires as early as the 16th century. Western exploitation began, tentatively, with the Safavid capitulations (commercial privileges, sometimes excessive, granted to European merchants); it continued with Britain's stranglehold in the 19th century – Russia's rival in Iran and Central Asia – and then through America's dominant influence after the Second World War. European influence, which had been sporadic and marginal during the Safavid era, grew increasingly strong throughout the 19th century under the Qajars. The Pahlavi policy of forced Westernisation and secularisation gave rise to a series of social, cultural and economic fractures, such that the Islamic Revolution was a kind of backlash and a partly inevitable rebalancing. In contrast to an agnostic, individualistic and consumerist Westernisation, the Revolution sought to establish a different social contract based on religious values, to Islamise society as well as science and culture, and to make the country the imperial heart of Pan-Islamism and a champion of the oppressed. Often, these ideals were quickly disillusioned or distorted, and the

revolutionary excesses triggered diverse developments within a society driven by a tripolar identity (Iranian, Shia Islamic, Westernised) and which, due to its plurality, never allows itself to be confined to a unilateral and exclusive policy. Be that as it may, the Islamic Revolution sought to refocus the country along a sovereignist, non-Western and Islamic axis, even though the Westernisation of society has never ceased, and although the predominance of nationalist discourse over the last twenty years has given Iran the character of an Iranian republic rather than an Islamic one.

Iran and Western neo-imperialism

The current war highlights what was a founding principle of the Islamic Revolution: anti-imperialism, namely the condemnation of a global system that appears to be based on rules but is in reality largely subject to a Western-centric agenda and narrative. Whilst the international order has always oscillated between attempts at regulation, the law of the jungle and a global 'shopping mall', the current war merely reinforces, from the Iranian perspective, the perception of an order that is ostensibly multilateral but in fact fundamentally unbalanced and unilaterally dominated by the United States. Created by Westerners, who drew inspiration from European concepts of the nation-state and the type of inter-state relations established by the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), international institutions, laws and arbitration are of a variable nature. Theoretically based on legal equity, they are in practice dependent on power dynamics, geopolitical configurations, and the expansionist or hegemonic ambitions of certain powers.

For Iran, the nuclear issue illustrates this bias in international law, which is exploited by the most powerful nations to serve their own geostrategic interests. There are at least three different standards: between North Korea (proud to possess the bomb, and able to negotiate from a position of strength thanks to it), Israel (which possesses nuclear weapons but does not admit it, has not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and is not criticised by anyone for having initiated the nuclearisation of the Middle East), and Iran, which does not possess the bomb, has signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and submits to IAEA inspections, but which has received little in return and is treated as a rogue state. Indeed, when viewed through the lens of history, the Iranian nuclear issue can be interpreted as a pretext for a neo-imperialist policy, the heir to Western imperialism in the Middle East dating back at least to the 19th century, and which seeks to control, under any pretext, the energy, commercial and strategic crossroads that is Iran.

The rhetoric of 'democratising' Iran follows the same hidden logic. There is an intention to bring democracy to the Islamic Republic by bombing both civilian and military sites, yet no military action is planned to democratise the Saudi monarchy. Calling for a more 'friendly' Iranian regime (towards the United States) means nothing other than bringing Iran back into the US sphere of influence for geostrategic and economic purposes: to counter Russian influence and Chinese projects in the Middle East; to satisfy Saudi Arabia and the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which would inevitably be weakened and marginalised if Iran, a historic regional power, were to develop to its full potential. The current war is, in this respect, a neo-imperialist war that reinforces Iran's analysis of the international order: only the balance of power matters; voluntary or passive subordination to the United States and its allies is demanded, on pain of being sanctioned and ostracised; the system's Western-centredness fuels the hypocrisy of its rhetoric, whose leitmotifs (human rights, democracy, etc.) in fact legitimise predatory ambitions. It is perhaps no coincidence that, of all European countries, only Spain has vigorously, and against the tide, denounced the US-Israeli aggression. Having founded, alongside Portugal, the first colonial empires in the 16th century, Spain today has political movements that are sensitive to the issue of imperialism and for whom the Western attitude towards Iran is indeed part of a neo-imperialist agenda.

Iran, moreover, is also experiencing the divisions within the Muslim world. On 16 March 2026, the day before his death in an Israeli strike, Ali Larijani had issued an appeal to the umma, the Muslim community, calling on them to resist Israel and the United States. Iran's strategy in the face of the US-Israeli attack will undoubtedly earn it popularity among many Muslim populations. Coordination between Iran, Hezbollah, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen has also breathed new life into an 'axis of resistance' that many had come to believe was weakened and under control. Beyond the regional resurgence of alliances, fervour and ideals of struggle, one may nevertheless doubt that the call to the umma will have a significant impact within a constellation of Islamic countries with diverse histories, rival interests, and culturally and historically distinct forms of Islam. Ever since the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim community has been divided along religious lines (schism between Sunnis, Shiites, Kharijites, etc.), political lines (dynastic fragmentation of the Muslim world, followed by division into nation-states), ethnic lines (the Muslim world is a mosaic of peoples) and cultural lines (religion is always embedded in a culture that shapes its lived experience).

At the time of the Islamic Revolution, Iran, driven by a desire to project imperial influence, sought to become the spearhead of Islam in the world. However, it came up against the realities of realpolitik and divisions within the Muslim world. Iran is

a Shia Muslim country, whereas the majority of the Muslim world is Sunni. Religious convergence may be possible to a certain extent and under certain circumstances, but it cannot obscure or downplay the Sunni rejection of Shia Islam or the Shia accusation that Sunni Islam has deviated from the original form of Islam. The Iran-Iraq War was a prime example of these tensions, and indeed helped to revive an Iranian nationalism that Ayatollah Khomeini had intended to set aside in the name of the greater unity of the umma. Whilst Iran took up the cause of the Palestinians, the Palestine Liberation Organisation sided with Iraq against Iran; and whilst the revolutionaries denounced Israel as the 'Zionist state', the Middle Eastern outpost of Western imperialism, Israel provided financial and logistical aid to Iran in its war with Iraq.

One cannot, therefore, understand the assertive sovereignty and cultural protectionism of contemporary Iran without moving beyond a Western-centric discourse that claims to be the arbiter of civilisations, law and values. The world's cultural diversity is a daily reality, yet there is a culturalist egocentrism that seeks to view a Western-style country as the ultimate model of a state, a yardstick of civilisation and a benchmark for socio-identity development. Listening to or reading the countless analyses of this conflict, one cannot help but note the extent to which the overwhelming majority of them are subject to dominant paradigms, namely a Western-centric worldview and an American geostrategic paradigm. Consequently, there is a quasi-institutional ignorance or almost systematic bias regarding non-Western countries and cultures, underpinned in the worst cases by Islamophobia, cultural xenophobia or imperialist, even colonialist, disdain.

In light of the current conflict and its coverage in the media, one can of course see the influence of American and pro-Israeli lobbies, which for decades have funded, within think tanks, universities and the media, one-sided analyses of the world, riddled with blind spots and gaps, and which today serve as a war machine to accompany the bombs or obscure any nuanced and pluralistic perception of events. But more broadly, there is a projected image of Iran, oscillating between demonisation and Orientalist clichés, which has become a habitus that most journalists and television pundits adopt without reflection or questioning. This habitus fits into a broader framework: a Western-centric paradigm, rooted in the Westernisation carried out by European colonial empires from the 16th century onwards, and which, despite globalisation, tourism and postcolonial studies, still largely influences political circles and the media, even in certain non-Western countries. At the crossroads of fundamental issues, the Palestinian question also only makes full sense when viewed through the lens of a long and multifaceted history.

The many sides of the palestinian question

A geopolitical, religious and historical crossroads

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched a terrorist attack on Israel. The scale and sophistication of the attack came as a surprise, but this kind of action came as no surprise to those who had not forgotten the existence of the Palestinian issue that arose in 1948. The stalling of the Oslo process following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995), the gradual normalisation of relations between certain Arab-Muslim states and Israel, the continuation of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank in violation of all agreements, the demographic pressure in Gaza, and the complete indifference of Western diplomats towards a resolution of the Palestinian question, could only provoke an explosion of violence among those – the Palestinians – who felt themselves gradually forgotten by everyone. Through a triple effect of magnification, amnesia and oversimplification, the Western media have sought to reduce the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the attack of 7 October, erasing 75 years of history and all anthropological complexity. If the Israeli-Palestinian crisis is so significant, whilst there are so many other conflicts that have neither the same impact nor the same significance, it is because it lies at the intersection of several historical, religious and civilisational fault lines:

- **The colonialism-decolonisation divide.** Israel is a true democracy, but also a truly colonial state, with all that this entails in terms of violence (military, administrative, judicial, even cultural) and radical asymmetry between colonisers and the colonised. The multifaceted resistance of the Palestinians is also the latest manifestation of the decolonisation struggles that marked the years 1940–1970. In a press conference on 27 November 1967, following the Six-Day War, Charles de Gaulle stated that Israel "is organising, in the territories it has seized, an occupation that cannot proceed without oppression, repression and expulsions, and resistance is emerging against it there, which it in turn labels as terrorism. ' Everything had been said, and nothing has changed. To reduce Hamas or Hezbollah in this way to terrorist groups is to ignore the historical reason for their creation, the root and context of the violence, and to adopt a one-dimensional view that essentialises the Other whilst turning a blind eye to oneself. As we know, there is no precise definition of terrorism, for the realities of conflict are always multidimensional, and in violently charged and polarised environments, one easily becomes the terrorist in another's eyes. Whilst a particular action may be classified as terrorist in the light of certain ethical or legal principles, it is also important to shed light on its causes, intentions and ideological context: not to justify, exonerate or relativise it, but because only a dispassionate analysis will ultimately enable us to find relevant and sustainable solutions, whether diplomatic or military.

- **The divide between the Christian and Islamic worlds.** Since the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, Muslims have been perceived as military enemies, perpetually at war to expand the 'house of Islam', and as proselytising conquerors, threatening the Christian identity and the distinct culture of Europe and the West. The aim here is not to discuss what amounts to fantasy (Western Muslims as the 'fifth column' of the 'Great Replacement' of Christianity by Islam) or political invective (accusations of 'Islamo-leftism'), but rather to note that in many respects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is part of a long-standing Western mistrust of Islam. Unlike Islam, Judaism is not a universal religion of salvation: one can easily become a Muslim, but one is born Jewish, and conversion to Judaism is a process that is as long as it is exceptional. Furthermore, Israel is a highly Westernised country, whose historical foundations in the 19th century stemmed from immigration by Jews from Eastern Europe, and who were therefore culturally Europeanised. Compared to Islam, therefore, Westerners do not feel threatened by Jewish proselytism – which is, in fact, non-existent – and can embrace a Zionist cause – even in its religious form – without abandoning their Christianity. Furthermore, the cultural significance of Jews in European history, as well as the Western character of Israel – notwithstanding the influence of ultra-Orthodox Jews – means that Westerners apparently consider themselves closer to Israel than to any Muslim country; or, in any case, they readily join forces with Israel, setting aside repressed anti-Semitism and despite Israel's colonial violence, against an Islam perceived as an insidious and intractable threat.

- **The West *versus* the Global South, non-aligned countries, and the 'East'.** For Westerners convinced of their model of political organisation and social life, it is often scarcely conceivable that others might think differently, that non-Western countries might have a different history, and that the values, struggles or priorities of some are not (necessarily) those of others. Westerners view the creation of Israel as a providential compensation for the trauma of the Holocaust, whereas from the 'non-Western' perspective, this creation is perceived as a colonial injustice perpetrated by Western imperialism, creating further traumas (the Nakba) and emblematic of a reflexive contempt for Eastern and Muslim populations. The clash of viewpoints on the Israeli-Palestinian question, between the over-represented and over-publicised Western interpretation and alternative, less widely disseminated and marginalised viewpoints, is once again indicative of a divide between the geopolitical dominance of Western countries and the 'peripheralisation' of non-aligned countries, whether or not they have been victims of Western colonialism and imperialism.

- **The divide in memory, information and historiography.** When Muslims repeat that the Holocaust is a European story and that no concentration camp has ever stained Middle Eastern soil with blood, these remarks – which are strictly factual – reveal the fundamental gap between histories and the differences in historical consciousness. Holocaust denial is common in Iran, and President Ahmadinejad has acted as its spokesperson by describing the Holocaust as a myth. Lacking a proper understanding of history, this denialism fundamentally seeks to challenge the Western exclusivity of history and its interpretation. For Iranians, not all of whom are deniers, the Holocaust is, in any case, a Jewish and European story, not an Iranian one. They see the absolutisation of Jewish suffering as a historiographical monopoly that leads to obscuring the suffering of everyone else, from the Iranians themselves – the Iran-Iraq War, or the long-silenced suffering of the two World Wars – to the ghettoised pain of the Palestinians. The omnipresence of the Israeli perspective in Western media, politics, diplomacy and academia is thus perceived as a Western appropriation of history, with its cultural, strategic and (geo)political roots and consequences. Westernisation, in fact, does not merely consist of spreading political ideas (liberal democracies), technologies (the Internet), economic models (capitalist) or consumption patterns (Coca-Cola & Co.) across the globe: it also involves, sometimes subtly, imposing a Western-centric understanding of history, which makes Western history, its writing and its interpretations, a standard of knowledge, the measure of a sense of history and a hermeneutic reference for events. For decades, universities have been offering non-Western-centric and postcolonial accounts of history, but these works, judging by Western political decisions and diplomatic stances, ultimately have very little impact. Moreover, there is no point in simply reading books: one must also assimilate them so that knowledge of other cultures is not merely a catalogue of dates and facts, but an ability to understand another culture from within and within its own history.

Pro-Palestinian and anti-imperialist Iran

Since 1979, Iran has overturned the diplomatic paradigm established by King Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi. In the name of a pan-Islamic policy and an anti-imperialist stance, Iran has championed the Palestinians against Israeli colonisation. Consequently, it has delegitimised the State of Israel, now referred to as the 'Zionist State', which it regards as a country wrongfully created by Western imperialist engineering, self-legitimised through a modernist instrumentalisation of Judaism and an anachronistic interpretation of the Old Testament, and fuelled by lawless and boundless expansionist violence.

From the 2000s onwards, people liked to imagine that Iran was seeking to acquire a nuclear bomb to wipe Israel off the map, which made no sense either militarily or politically, and which, moreover, contravened religious, Qur'anic and theological imperatives. Iran seeks the dissolution of the colonial state of Israel, not the annihilation of the Jewish people. Iranians, as Muslims, are moreover bound to respect Jews, since the Quran requires respect for Judaism. Finally, in Shia theology, defensive war is prescribed, whilst offensive war is forbidden, as only an Imam, heir to the Prophet Muhammad, may declare it. However, the twelfth Imam, Imam Mahdi, disappeared in 941 and will return only at the end of time: in his absence, religious leaders cannot take the initiative to wage war, as they possess neither the authority nor the knowledge of one of the twelve historical Imams. Therefore, anti-Zionism is widespread in Iran, and though it may conceal a form of anti-Semitism, a common discourse condemns Israeli colonialism without seeking to harm Jews or reject Judaism.

There is still a Jewish community in Iran, mainly in Tehran, now reduced to a few thousand people, but one that is the heir to a thousand-year history in the Middle East. Elements of Iran's ancient history feature in the Old Testament (*The Book of Esther*), and the Muslim era saw the flourishing of a remarkable Judeo-Persian culture. During the Pahlavi era, there were very good (albeit unofficial) relations between Israel and Iran. The 1950s even saw the establishment of a security collaboration between Israel, Iran and Türkiye (the Trident organisation), aimed at countering the influence of Pan-Arabism. Iranians and Israelis share several cultural traits: neither Arab nor Turkish, they represent a form of cultural exceptionalism in the Middle East, sharing an ancient history (largely diasporic for the Jews) and a similar philosophical and cultural complexity (Jewish thought and Persian philosophy). Even from a religious perspective, there is a certain affinity between the Jews, a chosen people persecuted throughout history, and the Shiites, who claim to practise the true, original Islam and are, for that very reason, persecuted by the Sunni majority.

The geopolitical shift regarding Israel that began with the Revolution is of a religious nature (the defence of Muslim Palestinians against Zionist colonialism), even though religious, ethnic and cultural differences separate the Iranian Shia, of Indo-European origin, from the Palestinians, who are Arab and Sunni. The defence of the Palestinians is also part of a struggle against predatory Westernisation, which draws on the historical experience of Iranians since the early 19th century, from Anglo-Russian imperialism in Persia to the CIA-led overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh (1953). Not all Iranians share this struggle, even though they

all claim a form of national and cultural sovereignty. ‘Neither Palestine nor Lebanon’ has been a common slogan since the 2000s for those who wish to place Iran at the forefront of their concerns.

One must, however, be wary of both preconceptions and an overly naive interpretation. The fact that the Iranian government may have exploited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for domestic political or international diplomatic purposes should not obscure the genuine empathy for the Palestinian cause and the convictions of its supporters, which are all too easily dismissed as mere ideology or political manoeuvring. As a minority often under threat within Islam, the Shia feel true compassion for peoples oppressed by a superior power. On the other hand, whilst many Iranians attribute tensions with Israel to the choice of a militant defence of the Palestinians at the expense of diplomatic realism, it is also understandable that the demonisation of anti-imperialist Iran is part of a media war and propagandistic opportunism. Iran is not the first country to take a stand against colonialism, but Iranian support for Hezbollah, founded in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, is a godsend for those who wish, through a striking but dishonest shortcut, to portray Iran as a sponsor of international terrorism. Yet, let us reiterate, behind the defamatory, economic or military pressure on Iran lies the fundamental issue of control over the Middle East, which the United States has partly lost following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and which it will certainly lose even further with the current war.

Iran and Israel have long been regarded as two intelligent adversaries – that is to say, two countries whose political and military leaderships know each other well enough not to cross red lines or embark on irreversible military adventures. The Israeli-Iranian wars have demonstrated, not that the assertion was false, but that Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been politically influential since 1996, has significantly changed policy in Israel. Israeli society itself has changed, notably due to political shifts, the emigration of Israelis who could no longer live in Israel, and the immigration to Israel of Jews with more radical Zionist views. The wars of 2025 and 2026 also demystified the Mossad to a certain extent, while revealing an Iranian capability that, due to prejudice, had been underestimated or disparaged. Although experienced in carrying out extraordinary technical operations, the Mossad was nevertheless incapable of understanding Iranian society and the nature of governance in Iran: this ignorance or blindness is the fundamental cause of its failures, ranging from attempts to incite the Iranian population to rebel against its government to wars aimed at overthrowing the ‘Iranian regime’ and balkanising the country.

After 47 years of tension and two wars, with Gaza in ruins and the West Bank gripped by brutal and unjust settlement expansion, what can we hope for from a diplomatic solution? At the risk of appearing naive amidst so many voices promoting a power-based eschatology, the only lasting solution is a political one, even if it is embedded within a new 'Cold War' and a balance of economic and military tensions. Ideally, this would require a return to international law and the legal equality of states. On the one hand, reducing Israel's exceptionalism—at the crossroads of an abominable tragedy (the Holocaust), an unshakeable will to survive, a religious identity (the 'Chosen People') and a choice of geostrategic alliance (Israel, the only Western state in the Middle East), and which allows it to violate, with the silence or even the blessing of its allies, all rights—whether those of war or humanitarian law, or UN resolutions. On the other hand, to recognize Iran—a country under sanctions for decades—as a fully sovereign state, neither a pariah nor a "rogue state", and to reintegrate it into an equal and legally grounded diplomatic dialogue.

The creation of a Palestinian state, though more uncertain than ever, appears to be one of the few solutions to a Gordian knot involving multiple issues and often irreconcilable factors. Donald Trump's initiatives for Gaza, which impose a neo-colonial solution on a colonial problem, have no relevance whatsoever – neither historical, legal nor political. Whilst Israel will not disappear, as some Iranian leaders wish, Iran will not be reduced to ashes or even significantly weakened, as Israeli leaders hope. In a sense, the future of Israel, condemned by some of its leaders to perpetual war, is more worrying than that of Iran, a millennia-old country that has recovered from every invasion. Even more worrying is the rise of anti-Semitism, fuelled by the genocidal crimes committed in Gaza, the revelations of the Epstein case, Israel's influence over President Trump (via his son-in-law and daughter) or the media's outrageously pro-Israeli bias, and against which censorship or judicial convictions will be far less effective than international justice and diplomatic fairness. The future is unpredictable, but one can at least assume that all the scenarios currently being considered for Gaza – Israeli occupation, international trusteeship, a phased peace plan, etc. – will be called into question, if not thrown into disarray, by the equation posed by the end of the war.

Conclusions - What else will the media say about Iran ?

Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the media faced a major crisis of credibility, particularly in the United States, due to their largely pro-war coverage, which bordered on propaganda rather than journalism. Will the same be true after this war, given that most media outlets have – in various ways – embraced Israeli-

American warmongering, failed to exercise basic critical judgement, and perpetuated a biased and misleading view of the situation? We can hope for some degree of self-reflection, without harbouring any illusions about the media system and its players. Nevertheless, for media studies, Iran remains the most remarkable 'case study' there is. There are no other examples in contemporary history of a country that has been the subject of media campaigns of disinformation and manipulation that are so long-lasting and constant, so influential in the collective imagination, and so violent in their consequences.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has been subject to overwhelmingly negative media coverage, with few bright spots: these included the first term of the reformist President Khatami from 1997 to 2001, before President George W. Bush labelled Iran part of an 'Axis of Evil ' (2002), and then the two years following the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA). These tactics have confined Iran to a reductive narrative, one can study the variations and recurring themes over the decades:

- To claim that Iran is complex, yet reduce it to the most narrow-minded analyses, the most simplistic frameworks, and the most outdated information.
- To confine Iran to certain terms – 'regime', 'theocracy', 'Islamism' or 'dictatorship' – in order to short-circuit any attempt at a detailed explanation, to sentimentalise the debate, to undermine any nuance, and to perpetuate confusion between the terrorist Islamism of Islamic State (Daesh) or Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Republic.
- Seeing 'mullahs' everywhere, even where they are not present, and even when the policies pursued or the realities under consideration have nothing to do with religion.
- Never regarding the Iranian state as a normal state, but always ideologising its actions: seeing populism when it builds roads or labelling even its most secular diplomatic efforts as Islamist.
- Confusing Iran with Iraq or Afghanistan, in keeping with a time-honoured Orientalist principle: in the East, everything is the same.
- Denouncing the 'mafia' and the 'black markets' of the Revolutionary Guards, whilst forgetting that the embargo illegally prevents Iran from legally procuring goods and services.
- Interview only women wishing to remove their hijab, ignoring the majority of women in Iran who, for various reasons (religious, cultural, traditional, nationalist, etc.), love and wish to wear the hijab, a traditional garment with a

history stretching back a thousand years in the East.

- Denouncing the double-dealing of Iranian negotiators, without (wishing to) understand that the context and the very rules of negotiation, whether on nuclear issues or peace, are biased.
- Interviewing the Iranian diaspora about Iran, without asking what Iranians in Iran think both of their country and of this diaspora.
- Portraying Iran as an inherently aggressive state, when in fact, since Nader Shah's sacking of Delhi in 1739, Iran (Persia) has not attacked any of its neighbours: the Russo-Iranian wars (1804–13 and 1826–28) were due to the expansionism of the Tsarist Empire, and in the 20th century, it was Saddam Hussein (perhaps influenced by the United States and other countries) who attacked Iran in the autumn of 1980.
- Highlight events from late December 2025 to early January 2026 in which the 'Iranian government fires on its own people', whilst carefully avoiding any mention of the insurrectionary climate provoked by the Mossad and the CIA.

In the current media coverage of the conflict, these stereotypes are further amplified by a fantastical fabrication of reality fuelled by American-Israeli utopian ideals. Here and there, one encounters old prejudices. The aim is to report that the United States has bombed Iranian facilities, but to emphasise that the Iranians *claim* to have bombed Israeli or American sites: Western statements are taken at face value, whilst those of the Iranians are always placed in quotation marks, for obviously Westerners cannot lie whilst Easterners are incapable of telling the truth. Through a complete distortion of events, Iran is portrayed as the eternal aggressor, even when it is under attack, even when it is defending itself. When it comes to Iranians in the diaspora or refugees in Turkey, only their bellicose statements should be reported—those claiming that war is 'the only way to change the regime' and that one must see it through to the end to 'finish the job'. When discussing US-Israeli bombings, the focus is on technical, logistical or statistical aspects, so as not to have to mention the thousands of civilian infrastructures destroyed in Iran and to sidestep the moral implications of these strikes – in other words, the war crimes and crimes against humanity (such as the deliberate bombing of the school in Minab).

Certain narratives amount to classic military censorship: reporting on the destruction in Iran, and perhaps in the Gulf states, but almost never in Israel, except to downplay it or to portray the instigator of the conflict (Israel) as a victim; mentioning the thousands of strikes on Iran, without ever questioning their

effectiveness or success; highlighting Israeli victims, whilst anonymising Iranian deaths. On television programmes or in newspapers, only 'experts' or 'specialists' are interviewed whose paradigm is the 'Iranian regime', whose narrative is 'regime change' and whose outlook is the 'liberation of the Iranian people'. Arrangements will be made to ensure that a more nuanced analysis by a contributor remains in the minority, is disavowed by other specialists, reduced to a mere 'testimony', or subtly dismissed for its lack of empathy towards the experience of an Iranian woman denouncing the religious oppression of the mullahs. When it comes to discussing what is thought to be Iran, nothing beats the pronouncements – unchanged for decades – of an opposition diaspora, which is, however, merely one voice among millions, willingly disconnected from Iran and Iranians in Iran, and which often represents only itself.

It is therefore in alternative media outlets, such as The Grayzone in the United States or podcasts like Danny Haiphong, Deep Dive, Dialogue Works, Glenn Diesen, Judging Freedom or Neutrality Studies, that one will find relevant critical analyses. It is, moreover, in these media outlets that, since last autumn, we have heard the announcement and the near 'prediction' of what is unfolding before our eyes: the outbreak of all-out war, a regional conflagration, a rapid escalation spiralling out of control, and the absence within the US administration of an exit strategy – or indeed any strategy at all. This demonstrates, *a contrario*, that the narrative promoted by the mainstream media is largely, and sometimes exclusively, part of an information war based on ignorance, a barrage of prejudices and the ideological construction of an enemy (Iran) to be defeated. For those – academics, thinkers, witnesses – committed to a multilateral understanding of events, the climate is certainly a grim one. Writing history has become a dangerous sport: attempting analytical 'neutrality' exposes you to the hostility of all sides, whilst seeking to rebalance the debate plunges you under direct fire from the cheerleaders of war and 'regime change'. Try to shed light on the Russia-Ukraine conflict over the long term (from Kyiv, the capital of Rus', to the Minsk agreements in 2014), and you will be branded a Russian agent. Point out that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back to 1947–48 (or even much earlier), and you will be labelled an anti-Semite or accused of fuelling anti-Semitism. Advocate a multidimensional view of Iran, and you will be accused of 'defending the Iranian regime'.

The current war has shown itself to be total in every sense of the word: a regional conflict with global economic consequences, it is also a conflict over knowledge, worldviews and the sharing of information. For a historian, it is tempting to rationalise events and political decisions, but it is clear that Donald Trump's launch of this war was based on a combination of lies, manipulation, impulsiveness and stupidity. The historian Christopher Clark spoke of 'sleepwalking' to describe the

complex chain of causes that led to the outbreak of the First World War. We might borrow the same expression, adding to it the almost hallucinatory gap between (media and political) discourse and reality, and the practice of state-sponsored lying (in the United States) on an unprecedented scale. In this respect, this war is a landmark event in the transformation of the international order and of our understanding of it.

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