

Beyond the Tragic Nature of Contemporary Uprisings in Iran

written by Nima Sabouri | January 17, 2026

Regarding the current catastrophic repression of the mass uprising in Iran, an urgent task is to stand collectively against further mass killings by the Islamic Republic, whether on the streets or in prisons. This must be aligned with a collective stance against any form of warmongering under the guise of saving the Iranian people.

On the Recent State Massacre of Protesters in Iran: January 2026

1. The Islamic Republic's Doctrine of Self-Preservation

For the people of a misery-stricken country, nothing is more dangerous than being ruled by a state whose highest goal is its own survival, by any means and at any cost. The horrific slaughter of street protesters in recent days is the latest proof of this reality regarding the people of Iran and the Islamic Republic. This trait is not an accidental characteristic of the regime, but a significant part of its nature and its drive for reproduction. The ideological foundation of this trait was laid by Ruhollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, he claimed that "preserving the Islamic state is the most obligatory of obligations," thereby issuing a religious license for the killings and massacres of political opponents in those years and the decades to follow. Since then, this procedure, utilizing the same religious pretext, has been a constant component of the Islamic Republic's governance.

Over time, the necessity of "preserving the Islamic State" gradually shifted from its initial ideological content toward protecting the exclusive economic interests of the ruling class. Today, while this still remains the "most obligatory of obligations" of the regime, it serves only the interests of the rulers and the regime elites rather than any divine purpose. Nevertheless, this religious language is maintained to grease the machinery of repression.

2. Absolute Governance Intensified by Geopolitical Hostility

The absolute governance of Ali Khamenei from 1989 to 2026 has been a clear manifestation of total loyalty to this doctrine. In every period of mass protest, he has ordered severe crackdowns without hesitation. During the recent 2026 uprisings, by emphasizing the need to "put the vandals in their place" (and later labeling them "terrorists"), he has once again officially sanctioned mass slaughter. A long-standing misfortune for Iranians is that their decadent state stands in permanent hostility toward the United States and Israel, despite an essential kinship in their natures. Because of these rhetorical and geopolitical conflicts, the oppressed people of Iran are often reduced to "cannon fodder", both in their daily struggles and - especially - during their mass uprisings. While one side hypocritically expresses sympathy for the protesters under promises supports, the other side seizes the opportunity to label the protesters as the "enemy's infantry," smoothing the path for brutal suppression.

In the current uprising, this ominous scenario is repeating itself. However, because the regime is at

its most fragile and aggressive point, the consequences are even more severe. While Khamenei would likely have ordered a crackdown regardless, Donald Trump's threats of military support for the protesters facilitated the implementation and expansion of this repression. Given the regime's legitimacy crisis, convincing the rank-and-file of the security apparatus to carry out mass slaughter required extra justification. Trump provided this for Khamenei, proving that *Despotism and Imperialism are complementary to one another*. Currently, the ongoing internet shutdown, intended to facilitate "slaughter in the dark," is framed as a defensive security measure against foreign influence. Simultaneously, there is a danger that Trump may initiate military aggression against Iranian territory. In such a case, defenseless civilians will be the first victims (as seen during the "12-day war" by Israel's invasion of Iran), and the weak prospects of the current uprising will fall into obscurity, buried under a wartime atmosphere (as "state of emergency") or the agency of external forces and their mercenaries (suppressing the agencies of the people).

3. Excursus: The Role of the 'Reformists' in Upholding the State Preservation Doctrine

The emergence of the so-called "Reformist" current in 1997 is often associated with Mohammad Khatami, but it was driven largely by previously unknown figures security experts and strategists from regime think tanks. Thanks to a boom in reformist newspapers, these figures became the intellectual elites of this state-led movement. Today, the betrayals of the state Reformists are clear. The emergence of Reformism in Iran was, from the start, a security project designed to advance a newborn neoliberal project and manage social unrest, such as various movements against the continuation of political deadlock in the post-war period, and the uprisings of the urban poor in the 1990s (in cities like Mashhad, Islamshahr, Qazvin and Qom).

President Khatami himself once stated: "If I have to choose between the people and the Islamic regime, I will choose the regime." This confirmed his loyalty to the doctrine of "state preservation". All pillars of Reformism (from Khatami, Khouini, and Shamsolvaezin to Abdi, Jalaeipour, Mohajerani, etc.) have proven they are soldiers of the IR-system first. During the uprising of Dec. and Jan. 2017, they humiliated the "revolt of the hungry" while advising the regime on "more rational" ways to survive. Now, as the slaughter continues, figures like Shamsolvaezin and Jalaeipour etc. label the uprising "Israel's second invasion of Iran," effectively washing away the blood of the innocent to justify further violence based on the regime's Self-Preservation Doctrine.

4. The Unfolding Trajectory of the Islamic Republic's Repression

The Iranian regime has accumulated a *backpack of experience* in suppressing dissent, protest and uprising, from the massacre of thousands of political prisoners (summer and autumn 1988), to the crackdowns of student protests in Tehran and Tabriz (June 1999), and 2009 mass uprising (Green Movement). This experience was later exported to Syria to assist the Assad regime in suppressing mass protests, as the foreman of the regional policies of the Russian government (the IR-regime's *superior partner*). Furthermore, the trajectory of the state's brutal confrontations with protesters since 2017 uprising, as the starting point of successive uprisings since then, indicates its commitment to mass killing, followed by systematic tortures and executions of the detainees. Given their brutality toward their own people, one can only imagine the extent of their actions in Syria, where - compared to the domestic arena - Iranian rulers were much less constrained by the need to preserve their political legitimacy.

Now, facing an accumulation of crises, the regime has prioritized a terrifying version of its survival

strategy, namely the self-preservation doctrine: war bullets fired at protesters' heads, corpses and the injured abducted from hospitals, and the refusal to return bodies – shot to death – to families. While the videos and reports published thus far reveal the apocalyptic dimensions of the repression, they undoubtedly represent only a portion of the total crimes against humanity committed by the regime, especially given the massive blackout of internet and mobile communications for over five days.

Both the intensified geopolitical tensions with the US and Israel, and the representation of this uprising in the mainstream media as a manipulated movement for the restoration of the Pahlavi monarchy (and thus inevitably pro-Israel and pro-US), have prepared the ideological groundwork for the regime to advance and expand its doctrine of self-preservation into this massive repression. The recent positions taken by the pillars of Reformism and some leftist currents and analysts, mostly pseudo-anti-imperialists, who present this uprising as 'Israel's second war against Iran,' clearly manifest the breadth of this ideological platform, while participating in its expansion. As they expand this narrative, the practical implication of their engagement is nothing less than discursive support for the wider slaughter of protesters (and the detainees).

5. Beyond the Tragic Nature of Contemporary Uprisings

All of this highlights the tragic nature of mass uprisings in our time: the oppressed and exhausted masses are forced to rise to reclaim/ensure their very survival, while their uprising is already surrounded by multilateral powerful enemies who mutually reinforce each other in the suppression and assimilation of such movements. The prominence of this tragic aspect in the fluctuations of the current mass protests in Iran has intimidated and confused a spectrum of leftist and progressive political forces, both within the Iranian and international contexts. Some have become entirely intimidated and disillusioned, and consequently passive, claiming – more or less – that the arena of this uprising is too polluted and treacherous to serve as their battlefield; Others, resorting to pseudo-pragmatic claims, have surrendered to the reactionary voices attempting to dominate the uprising (i.e., the monarchists), arguing that the first step must be to get rid of this regime at any cost. It goes without saying that a certain segment of the leftist spectrum, as in the past, merely advises and warns the rulers on how to prevent the emergence of future uprisings by implementing reforms aimed at blocking exploitation by 'foreign enemies' or imperialist powers.

However, if leftist forces believe in the possibility of historical transformation and the necessity of intervention toward its realization, they must begin by realistically acknowledging this tragic reality. Instead of clinging to purist or teleological imaginations of a promised, pure proletarian revolutionary uprising based on an abstract perception of the proletariat, they should begin casting a *new plan* from the ground of this very tragedy. If the term "revolutionary commitment" has any meaning, its practical manifestation is nothing but a commitment to the struggles of the oppressed – through independent strategic interventions – despite the hostility of the surrounding historical conditions. Despite these bitter conditions, or more accurately: precisely because of them, there are many tasks to be done, without these actions (if they constitute a "new plan") necessarily being integrated into dominant reactionary currents or condemned to being co-opted by the big powers. There is no high road for the Left to break out of its historical isolation and marginalization within the contexts of Iran and the Middle-East. Regarding the current catastrophic repression of the mass uprising in Iran, an urgent task is to stand collectively against further mass killings by the Islamic Republic, whether on the streets or in prison. This must be aligned with a collective stance against any form of warmongering under the guise of saving the Iranian people.

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