

Is It Islamophobic to Support Iranian Protesters?

written by Zeynab Ferdowsi | January 31, 2026

Almost all Shi'a mosques host Basij centers. Basij is the popular arm of the IRGC, directly controlled by "the Supreme Leader." These Basij centers are the primary reason Iranian protesters have been targeting mosques ...Iranian protesters do not need Israeli instigation when they have no political freedom, elections are rigged, the economy has collapsed, government corruption is systemic, and Islamic laws are forcibly imposed on everyone.

The 2025-26 protests are the largest uprising in Iran since the 1979 Revolution. Despite the estimate that the Islamic Republic has killed approximately 20,000 protesters over the course of two weeks, some in the international community still struggle to offer any words of support or meaningful solidarity with the Iranians. In particular, left-leaning groups have avoided expressing their explicit support for Iranian protesters. This is because of the claim that actions of Iranian protesters, such as the burning of mosques, stem from Islamophobia rather than anger and resentment towards their own government. Videos of Iranian protesters destroying several mosques have received more coverage than hundreds of body bags filled with protesters' corpses. As an Iranian woman born and raised in a religious Shi'a family, I would like to provide some context for these actions and thus refute the charges of Islamophobia against the Iranian protesters.

Why Are Iranian Protesters Burning Mosques?

"Supreme Leader" Ayatollah Khamenei claims that more than 250 mosques have been attacked by protesters.[i] The videos released by the governmental news agencies, such as *Mehr News*, *Mashreq News*, and *Tasnim*, show that this is an exaggerated number. *Shahrara News* claims that only in Mashhad, 43 mosques were damaged by protesters, but does not release even one photo or a video.[ii] Similar claims have been made by other governmental news agencies, but the videos that have been published so far belong to five mosques. These are the Seyyed ul-Shohada mosque in Pakdasht, the Sāheb ul-Zaman mosque in Yasouj, the Imam Ali mosque in Andisheh, the Abudhar mosque in Tehran, and the Mahdiyyeh mosque in Karaj.[iii]

All the burned mosques are Shi'a mosques, the religion of the majority of Iranians. No Sunni mosques have been targeted by the protesters. The difference between Shi'a and Sunni mosques in Iran is that the Shi'a mosques are connected to the Government and the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). The Government pays for the construction of Shi'a mosques, covers the workers' salaries, provides free utilities for the mosque, and exempts them from paying taxes.[iv] In contrast, Sunni mosques are almost entirely funded through donations and private sources.[v]

There are other important differences. Shi'a clerics in local mosques are selected and paid by the government,[vi] while Sunni clerics generally remain independent and are often critical of the Islamic Republic. In some cases, Sunni mosques have even become centers for protest.

Almost all Shi'a mosques host Basij centers. Basij is the popular arm of the IRGC, directly controlled by "the Supreme Leader." [vii] Any man or woman, under or over age 18, may join the Basij forces. One just needs to fill out a form to become a Basiji. These rank-and-file Basijis are not paid a salary,

but receive important benefits. The Basij centers receive a vast budget which can be used for recruiting others, holding ceremonies, printing their ideological publications and fliers, celebrating religious and political events, as well as decorating and providing food during these festivals. Basij members do not automatically become members of the IRGC. There is a lengthy interview process, and specific qualifications are required, depending on which part of the IRGC a potential member is joining.

In 2025, the Basij organizations had a budget of approximately 42 million USD, all of which was paid by the state.[viii] Considering the low value of Iran's currency, this vast budget allows the Basij to operate in schools, universities, governmental offices, hospitals, and places of worship. Shi'a Mosques are centers for recruiting Basij forces. But larger mosques also store and distribute weapons as well. This practice began during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, when volunteer men over the draft age as well as boys under 18 could enlist in the Basij at their local mosque. They were then sent to military camps for training and subsequently deployed to the war zones. After the war, the Basij not only kept their mosque-based centers but significantly expanded them so that now nearly every Shi'a mosque has a Basij center. There are approximately 54,300 Basij centers located inside mosques.[ix] General Haydar Baba-Ahmadi has stated that more than 79 percent of all Basij centers nationwide are based in mosques; an additional 5 percent of Basij centers are located inside Shi'a shrines.[x] During the 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement and now during the ongoing 2025-26 protests, multiple videos disseminated by BBC Persian and Iran International have shown Basij forces firing at protesters from the rooftops of local mosques.[xi] These Basij centers are the primary reason Iranian protesters have been targeting mosques.

The Mosques Destroyed by the Islamic Republic

The Islamic Republic itself has a long history of attacking mosques, particularly Sunni mosques. These actions have received little to no coverage in the non-Persian media:

The deadliest case was the attack on the Makki Mosque in Zahedan during the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests. On September 1, 2022, a 15-year-old Baluch girl was raped by an Islamic Republic commander while in police custody.[xii] In response, on September 30, 2022, the people of Zahedan gathered at Makki Mosque for Friday prayers to show solidarity with her and with Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman who had been killed by the Morality Police in Tehran. The security forces of the Islamic Republic then attacked the mosque and opened fire on worshippers, killing more than 100 people, including seven-year-old Hasti Narouyi.[xiii] During the 2025-26 protests, Makki Mosque once again became a hub for protesters. From there, Mowlavi Abdolhamid, the most influential Sunni cleric in Iran, delivered speeches openly criticizing the Islamic Republic.[xiv]

Sunni worshippers in the city of Khash, in the same province, showed solidarity with the murdered worshippers of Zahedan. They were also attacked after Friday prayers on November 4, 2022, an assault that resulted in 18 deaths.[xv]

The Islamic Republic has a long record of demolishing Sunni mosques. Notable examples include the Feyz Mosque in Mashhad (1993), the Javadiyyeh Mosque in Bojnurd (2007), the Imam Hanifeh Mosque in Zabol (2008), the Punak prayer hall in Tehran (2015), the Grand Mosque of Iranshahr (2020), as well as another Sunni prayer hall in Iranshahr (2021). In addition to these outright demolitions, dozens of other Sunni mosques have been repurposed as Shi'a places of worship, transferred to IRGC control, or permanently closed.[xvi]

Muhammad, the First Man to Burn Down a Mosque

But is it acceptable to attack a place of worship if it has become corrupted? The Quran itself says

YES.

Being born and raised in a religious Shi'a family in Iran, I spent years attending Quran classes. In these classes, we learned that the first person who ordered the destruction and burning of a mosque was Muhammad himself. He ordered the demolition and burning of the Dirār Mosque following a revelation from Allah. This story is well-documented in the Quran and early Islamic sources.

The *Surah At-Tawbah* (9:107-110) in the Quran strongly condemns the Dirar mosque, describing it as a place established by hypocrites “who set up a mosque [only] to cause harm” and explicitly commands Muhammad “to not ever pray in it”. Early Islamic historians and biographers, including al-Waqidi (c. 747-823), Ibn Hisham (d. 833), and al-Tabari (d. 923), record that after the revelation of these verses, Muhammad instructed his followers to destroy and burn the Dirār Mosque, which they did.[xvii]

This precedent demonstrates that the act of destroying a mosque that functions as a center of harm is not, in its essence, Islamophobic. Therefore, I was shocked by the reaction of the international Muslim community saying they could not support anyone who attacks a mosque under any circumstances, even though both the *Quran* and the *Sunna* show otherwise.

The Conditional Empathy of the “Left”

As a left-leaning graduate student, I am disappointed and disturbed by the hypocrisy and ignorance of the “left” when it comes to Iran. For the past three years, the left has insisted that criticizing Israel is not an antisemitic action. Yet many now refuse to criticize the Islamic Republic for fear of being labeled Islamophobic.

During the Israel-Iran war in June 2025, the left reacted quickly and publicly expressed sympathy for Iranians who were killed by Israel. In that 12-day war, Israel killed approximately 1,100 Iranians, including around 700 civilians. By contrast, the Islamic Republic has killed an estimated 20,000 protesters in just 17 days (December 28-January 13). Yet today, we see little empathy on the part of the left, unlike last June when Iranians were killed by aerial bombardments of Israel.

While the silence of left-leaning activists is deafening, it is not the worst reaction. In Pakistan and India, some Islamic groups have held protests in support of the Islamic Republic. Other activists have gone further, directly accusing Iranian protesters of being Mossad agents.

As someone who was born in Iran and lived under the Islamic Republic for decades, I personally knew some of the protesters in the 2009, 2017, 2019, 2022, and 2025-26 uprisings. They were college students, high schoolers, laborers, and ordinary Iranians, whose reasons to protest included EVERYTHING. Iranian protesters do not need Israeli instigation when they have no political freedom, elections are rigged, the economy has collapsed, government corruption is systemic, and Islamic laws are forcibly imposed on everyone.

If Israel were truly capable of coordinating such widespread protests across more than 150 cities and towns in Iran, why did it not do so in June, when it was under direct missile attack from the Islamic Republic? Why would Israel not initiate public protests at that moment to relieve pressure and force the regime to fight on two fronts?

Palestine has become a wedge issue in Iranian politics. Some leftist activists openly acknowledge that the protests in Iran are genuine, yet still refuse to support them, arguing that the IRGC is the only force that supports the Palestinians and arms Hamas. Meanwhile, the pro-Palestinian TV network, Al Jazeera attempted to portray normalcy in Iran by broadcasting a live report from Tehran on January 17, despite the fact that nearly 90 million Iranians were under a total internet blackout at

the time.[xviii]

The reason I am writing this article is not to attack the left, but to call for international support. The Islamic Republic's playbook for dealing with protests is brutally simple: first, it kills thousands of people in the streets to crush the uprising; then it follows up with mass arrests, trials, and executions to instill lasting fear.

Thousands of protesters have already been arrested and, as of January 18, face the risk of execution after being charged with the ultimate crime of *moharebeh*.^[xix] *Moharebeh* (fighting against Muslims and the Islamic state) is a concept derived from shari'a law. The term has been employed by the Islamic Republic as a catch-all accusation to refer to anyone who opposes the state. The charges of *moharebeh* may result in the death penalty for virtually any act of protest, even something as minor as kicking a police officer. This is precisely what happened to Mohammad Mahdi Karami, a 21-year-old protester who was convicted of *moharebeh* and executed on January 7, 2023, after kicking a Basij member.^[xx]

If the international community stops accusing Iranian protesters of being Islamophobic Mossad agents, We may have a chance to prevent further executions of Iranian protesters.

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Endnotes:

[i] <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c801p9n01j4o>

[ii] <https://shahraranews.ir/fa/news/387236/%D8%B4%DB%B3-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A2%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF>

[iii] <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6728839/%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%AF%D8%B4%D8%AA-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B4%D8%AA>

<https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6728839/%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%AF%D8%B4%D8%AA-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B4%D8%AA>

[iv] <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/electricity-shortage-crisis-in-iran/32454150.html>

[v] <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.isna.ir/amp/96021206912/>

[vi] Depending on their clerical status, different government bodies are responsible for appointing them. For example, Friday Prayer Leaders (Imam Jom'ehs) are selected and supervised by a committee appointed directly by the Supreme Leader. See <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/20285/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B6%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87>

[vii] Article 110 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[viii] The Basij budget in 2025 was 4,215,000,000,000 Iranian Tumans, which equaled 42,150,000 USD at the beginning of the Iranian year (March 2025). Due to the rapid devaluation of Iran's currency, the budget is now equal to 29,000,000 USD. <https://www.aznews.tv/%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%AC%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%DB%B1%DB%B4%DB%B0%DB%B4%D8%9B-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%B6-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87/>

[ix] <https://www.jambaran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-198/1351059-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

[x] <https://41001823.khabarban.com/>

[xi] https://www.instagram.com/reels/Ck_MJTdIHjR/ ; https://www.iranintl.com/fa/video/ott_4b3dd270bbab423f99bce1a76f730398

[xii] <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32054153.html>

[xiii] <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/739642> ; <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-63885726>

[xiv] <https://www.iranintl.com/202601235353>

[xv] <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/amnesty-international-s-statement-about-police-violence-against-the-people-of-sistan-and-baluchistan/32125277.html>

[xvi] See the list provided by Iran Human Rights Society at <https://iranhrs.org/%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%B6-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%9B-2/>

[xvii] Al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Tarikh wa al-Maghazi*, 1966, vol.3, 1046; Al-Tabari, *Tārīkh Al-Rusul Wa-Al-Mulūk*, vol. 3, 110; Ibn Hisham, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 1990, vol.4, 171-2.

[xviii] <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-883703>

[xix] <https://www.iranintl.com/202601181655>

[xx] <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-64196049>