

Anti-Imperialism without the Working Class

written by Siyavash Shahabi | August 10, 2026



Campism begins the moment anti-imperialism loses its subject. Some current accounts of Gaza, Iran, and Syria show this moment clearly. Defense of a society under attack slides into political defense of the targeted state. The state replaces the working class. A geopolitical map replaces social struggle. A media-ready expert replaces the worker, the woman, and the local activist in the fight. In this shift, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan stop being societies. They become a stage. Their people no longer produce politics. They turn into raw material for other people's narratives.

Campism separates the critique of imperialism from class and hands it to a geography of false camps. The world splits into two sides. On one side stand the United States, NATO, Israel, and allied Western states. On the other side stands any force in opposition to them. This map quickly erases something decisive: the class relation inside each society. The Iranian worker, the Afghan woman, the Syrian teacher, and the Palestinian political prisoner stay visible only as long as they do not disturb the camp narrative.

In this logic, a state's hostility to U.S. foreign policy replaces the whole society. National sovereignty replaces social emancipation. Resistance gets consumed in place of class organization. The critique of imperialism should reach an understanding of the global mechanics of capital, war, energy, and media. Instead it stalls at the level of loyalty to one camp. The result is clear. Forces who call themselves anti-imperialist sometimes slide into defending a state at the exact moment that they should stand with the workers and the poor of the society under attack. The state they defend has repressed the same society.

This slide comes from a deeper crisis. Some currents no longer know how to turn anti-imperialism into a social force. When the fight against the imperialist state at home grows weak, external states and movements become the stage for compensating defeat. The defeated left in London, Paris, Berlin, and New York stares from a distance at states in conflict with Washington. Its real targets sit at home: the war machine, the arms industry, the pro-war media, and its own ruling party. Anti-imperialism falls from class politics into geopolitical spectatorship.

The Priority Is Anti-Imperialism, Not the Target State

The priority of the fight against imperialism comes from the nature of the aggression. It does not come from the nature of the target state. A target state might be reactionary, anti-worker, misogynist, and capitalist. None of this gives imperialism the right to attack, sanction, bomb, or forcibly reshape a society.

Imperialism does not act on morality. Imperialist states do not attack weaker, peripheral states out

of concern for the freedom of women, the rights of workers, democracy, or local religion and culture. These are the language of legitimation. The material cause lies elsewhere: control of the regional order, energy routes, credit and debt, the arms industry, profitable reconstruction after ruin, and the consolidation of the global hierarchy of capital. An imperialist attack comes from the structure of the political economy of imperialism. It does not come from a moral assessment of the target state.

For this reason, the critique of the political economy of the attack must stay fixed on imperialism. If the target state is repressive, this repression holds an independent truth. It needs examination and critique from the standpoint of the working class, women, and the poor of the society itself. This repression does not explain a right to foreign attack. The imperialist state uses internal oppression as moral evidence for intervention. Its intervention does not get organized for the emancipation of those same people. A foreign attack does not free a society. It places the society in a new order of dependency, ruin, debt, and securitization.

The Marxist formula must stay clear. The aim is the defeat of the imperialist project, not the political victory of the reactionary state. The aim is the defense of the society under attack, not the defense of the domestic ruling class. The aim is resistance to foreign domination, not a class truce at home. Resistance to imperialism is the name for defending a society's right to determine its own fate. It is not the name for whitewashing a despotic state.

The foreign bomb creates the anti-imperialist urgency. The domestic baton creates the need for class independence. The first denies the right of foreign aggression. The second denies the domestic state's right to seize resistance. Socialist politics takes the society back from both sides: from the imperialism seeking to reshape it from outside and from the domestic state seeking to keep it subdued from within.

The Leninist Reading and Class Independence

The Leninist reading of the anti-imperialist struggle turns into a caricature of itself once it splits from class independence. Lenin did not understand imperialism as the bad foreign policy of one particular state. He saw it as a stage of capitalism. At this stage, monopoly, finance capital, the export of capital, and competition for spheres of influence appear as war, occupation, and the repression of weaker nations. From this angle, an imperialist attack needs understanding through the logic of global capital, not through the moral claims of the attacking state.

This same tradition gives no license to glorify the bourgeoisie or the states ruling over oppressed societies. The national bourgeoisie and peripheral states use the language of independence, national sovereignty, and resistance to deceive workers and silence social struggle. A state under pressure from imperialism does not for this reason become the representative of its people's emancipation. It is at once a target of foreign domination and an agent of domestic domination.

Inside the imperialist country, the main task for those who claim solidarity with the oppressed is to weaken their own state, the war machine, NATO, the arms industry, and their own border regime. This task does not permit them to treat the despotic state under attack as the representative of its people's emancipation. The fight against imperialism in the West must organize against the West's own imperialist structures, not in defense of the Revolutionary Guards, Assad, Putin, or any other repressive state in conflict with Washington.

In a society under oppression or attack, the fight against foreign domination does not mean a class truce with the domestic bourgeoisie. Workers, women, teachers, and political prisoners hold no right to give up the right to organize, to strike, to criticize the state, and to fight security capital in the name of national unity. Class independence means defeating imperialism without glorifying the

target state. It means fighting domestic repression without becoming the infantry of imperialism.

This is the point campism runs from. Campism fails to distinguish between resistance to imperialism and political defense of the target state. It either whitewashes the target state for its hostility to the United States or reduces the state's domestic critics to tools of imperialism. In both cases, the working class and independent social forces get erased.

From Class to Camp

Campism is the product of the left's defeat in the West. It failed to organize the working class against finance capital and the war industry. It failed to build combative unions against NATO and sanctions. It failed to link the anti-war struggle with the struggle against poverty and privatization. It failed to hold the relation between anti-imperialism and socialism.

A large part of the anti-imperialist language in the West broke away from the workplace, the union, and the factory and moved to the seminar, the journal, and the podcast. This move is not in itself a problem. The problem began when language took the place of power. A theory unable to connect to strikes, organizing, union pressure, and a shift in the social balance starts to need external symbols to preserve its sense of radicalism. Campism is one form of this need. Instead of building power against imperialism in the West, it borrows the power of external states.

Organizing the working class is hard. It demands organizing, losing, and fighting union bureaucracy. It demands building a balance of forces in the workplace, the hospital, the school, and the street. It demands turning the different languages of suffering, labor, gender, and migration into a shared project. The camp is easier. It splits the world map into two sides and gives a feeling of power from a distance. A state has a flag, an army, a spokesperson, and a show of power. The working class is more scattered, more difficult, and in need of real political work.

On the camp map, the anti-U.S. state replaces the horizon of socialist struggle, and geopolitical position replaces the class relation. What the state does to its own workers fades to the margin: how it turns temporary and blank contracts into the norm, how it builds gender discrimination into the economy, how it destroys independent organizing, how it controls women, how it concentrates public resources in the hands of security capital. The main question is no longer which class commands and which class pays. The question becomes where this state stands against the United States.

Anti-imperialism becomes classless here. The working class stays in the slogan but disappears from the analysis. People speak about the workers of Iran, Syria, or Palestine. When those same workers speak against their own state, against privatization, against unpaid wages, against compulsory hijab, against subcontracting, and against the repression of independent organizing, they become a nuisance to the camp map.

Internationalism or Substitution?

Internationalism is a division of emancipatory labor. It is not the handing of emancipation to someone else. Workers, students, and political activists in the West must target their own imperialist machine. Workers, women, and social activists in Iran must take back the right to resist foreign domination from the repressive domestic state, and at the same time keep their independence from interventionist projects. These two struggles must connect. One must not replace the other.

Campism inverts this relation. It turns the people of Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, or Palestine into a field for compensating the weakness of the left in the West. It expects them to carry the historical weight of a struggle the Western left abandoned half-finished at home. In this view, the society under attack

must remain endlessly resistant, heroic, ready for sacrifice, and ready to pay the price. Its right to exhaustion, its right to criticize, its right to disagree, and its right to demand bread and freedom get taken away.

This substitution speaks the language of solidarity, yet it builds an unequal relation. The left in the West defines and interprets the struggle, and the people of the oppressed society are supposed to be symbols. If they oppose their own state, they fall under suspicion. If they speak of war and sanctions alongside domestic repression, they become complicated and illegible. If they speak in one breath of religious despotism and compulsory hijab, of sanctions and privatization, of the foreign bomb and the domestic prison, they disturb the camp map.

Class internationalism begins from this complexity. Instead of choosing between imperialism and the local despot, it targets the chain of domination in each concrete situation. In the West, it targets the imperialist state and its own war capital. In Iran, it targets the Islamic Republic and domestic security capital, without granting legitimacy to foreign war and sanctions. In Palestine, it targets settler colonialism and Israeli apartheid, without turning Palestinian society into a classless symbol or a tool of regional states.

Inverted Orientalism and the Symbolic Consumption of Resistance

Classical Orientalism saw the people of the East as children, backward, and in need of Western rescue. Inverted Orientalism reproduces the same power relation with admiring words. The East is no longer a child. It is a hero. It no longer needs rescue. It is obligated to resist. Still it holds no right to define itself from inside its own real contradictions.

In this image, resistant Iran, resistant Syria, resistant Palestine, and the Global South turn into classless wholes. Worker and capitalist, the subordinated woman and patriarchy, prisoner and jailer, commander and soldier, the state and the repressed society all dissolve into a single image. This image might be anti-Western, but it is not necessarily anti-capitalist. It might speak against the United States, but it does not necessarily stand with the working class.

The imperialist liberal wants the people of the region to be victims for the West to rescue. The campist wants the same people to be heroes who fight imperialism in place of the Western left. One turns them into children, the other into myth. Both strip them of the right to complexity, contradiction, exhaustion, criticism of their own state, and political independence.

Here solidarity turns into symbolic consumption. People's suffering is not heard for its own sake. It gets consumed to give meaning to someone else's moral and political crisis. The Iranian woman is supposed to be seen only when she is useful in the Western debate on Islamophobia. The Iranian worker is supposed to be seen only when he speaks against sanctions. The Palestinian is supposed to be seen only while playing the role of the perfect victim or the perfect fighter. The Syrian is supposed to be either a supporter of the state or a hireling of the West. These are different forms of one erasure.

An anti-imperialism failing to break inverted Orientalism ends up serving exactly what it claims to fight: the denial of the subjecthood of oppressed people.

Iran: Resistance to Imperialism, Independence from the Islamic Republic

Iran is one of the clearest fields of this crisis. The Islamic Republic stands under pressure from the imperialism of the United States and Israel. War, sanctions, sabotage, and economic blockade are real, and they demand unambiguous opposition. At the same time, the Islamic Republic has built a capitalist order: security-based, religious, anti-woman, and anti-worker. These two statements are

not contradictory. The truth of Iran today lies in the simultaneity of both pressures.

For the different currents of the left in the West, the task is clear: to fight their own states, NATO, sanctions, the arms industry, and the policies turning Iranian society into a field of pressure and poverty. This task needs no looking toward the Islamic Republic and no attempt to justify it. Defending the people of Iran against foreign attack is not a defense of the Revolutionary Guards and not indifference to compulsory hijab, political prison, subcontracting, and execution.

For Iranian forces abroad, the same distinction is vital. Opposition to war and sanctions must not turn into silence about domestic repression. Criticism of the Islamic Republic must not get translated into the moral language of the Western war machine. A class choice is never standing beside the despot and the repressor of the working class. This same choice is also never closing one's eyes to the imperialist structure using the suffering of the Iranian people to rearrange its own power.

The main question in Iran is not where the Iranian state stands against the United States. The question is which class pays the cost of this confrontation. Who endures the sanctions? Who pays for the inflation? On whose bodies does the security economy settle? Whose work, bread, and future would a possible war destroy? Who must stay silent in the name of national sovereignty? Who is stripped of organization, strikes, and freedom in the name of national security?

The Islamic Republic wants to turn resistance to foreign domination into its own political property. Imperialism wants to turn internal oppression into a license for its own intervention. Emancipatory politics must break both seizures. Resistance to imperialism must be taken back from the state and returned to society. Criticism of the Islamic Republic must break from the language of the Western bombers and sanctioners and return to the language of labor, women, freedom, organization, and daily life.

Iran is not only a state and not only a geopolitical field. Iran is a society of oil and petrochemical workers, teachers, pensioners, protesting women, justice-seeking families, and millions of people living between foreign pressure and domestic repression. Any anti-imperialism failing to see this society is not emancipatory, even when it speaks against the United States.

Palestine, Syria, and the Limits of Real Solidarity

Palestine needs understanding with double care. Defending Palestine is defending the right of the Palestinian people to emancipation from settler colonialism, apartheid, occupation, and slaughter. This defense must not collapse into a symmetry between the colonizer and the colonized. Israel is an occupying and killing power. The Palestinians are a colonized people.

This truth must not turn Palestine into a classless symbol. Palestinian society holds the right not to be only a victim or only a fighter. It holds the right to be a worker, a woman, a refugee, a feminist, a critic, secular, religious, and a seeker of social justice. Real solidarity with Palestine means material struggle against the states, companies, universities, arms factories, and media in the West backing the occupation, the blockade, and the killing. Defending Palestine needs no defense of Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Islamic Republic.

Syria was another example of the failure of the campist method. A part of the Western left failed to see Syrian society in its real complexity: the Assad state, imperialist intervention, armed fundamentalism, Russian bombing, the role of the Islamic Republic, Turkish intervention, the defeat of the councils, and the destruction of popular forces. Everything was reduced to one simple formula: the West against Syria. In this formula, the real people of Syria fell to the margin: the

prisoners, the refugees, the women, the workers, the local councils, and the forces opposed both to jihadism and to Assad.

The lesson of Syria and Palestine for the discussion of Iran is clear. Anti-imperialism must hold several repressive powers in view at once, without flattening their analysis onto one moral level. It must stand against colonialism, occupation, sanctions, war, and intervention, and at the same time take the oppressed society seriously inside its own class, gender, and political contradictions. Real solidarity does not reduce a society to a state, resistance to a leader, and a people to a symbol.

Rebuilding Anti-Imperialism from Below

The way out of campism is not a return to interventionist liberalism. Criticism of despotic states must not be handed to the language of Western rescue, sanctions, bombing, and regime change from above. In the same way, the fight against imperialism must not collapse into a defense of local despots. Both paths erase society. One in the name of freedom, the other in the name of resistance.

Rebuilding anti-imperialism from below means a return to the real subjects of struggle. In the West, this means organizing against NATO, the war industry, sanctions, the militarized university, and the war media. It means turning moral anger into material pressure: strikes, work refusal, exposure, campus occupation, union pressure, the cutting of institutional cooperation, and direct links with the labor and social forces of the societies under attack.

In the society under attack, rebuilding anti-imperialism means taking the right to resist back from the state. It means saying the foreign bomb holds no right to decide our future, and the domestic state holds no right to shut our mouths in the name of security and national sovereignty. It means defending the worker, the woman, the teacher, the prisoner, and the migrant against both pressures. It means being anti-war from within life, not from within loyalty to a state.

Campism is not a disease of anti-imperialism. It is a sign of the loss of its class base. When the fight against the imperialist state inside the West grows weak, external despotic states become a substitute for social power. The answer to this deadlock is not a defense of the liberal bombers. The answer is rebuilding anti-imperialism from below. The Western left must disrupt its own imperialist machine. The forces of the society under attack must take the right to resist back from the repressive domestic state. Resistance to imperialism is the name for defending the people. It is not the name for whitewashing the rulers.