

The U.S. & Israeli War with Iran: What Is a Needed Approach for a Principled Socialist Left?

written by Frieda Afary | March 18, 2026

Below is the revised text of a presentation by Frieda Afary to the South African organization, Zabalaza for Socialism on March 15, 2026. You can also listen to the article by clicking on this **audio file link**

I. What has happened since the United States and Israel launched the latest war on Iran?

The United States and Israel started a new round of bombing Iran on February 28. Since then, they have bombed oil depots; oil facilities; Kharg Island, which is the export hub for 90% of Iran's oil (4-5 million barrels a day); military sites, missile and drone installations, police facilities; banks; a girls' school in Minab; hospitals; residential buildings; water desalination plants and world heritage sites.

On the first day of the bombing, Israel targeted the housing complex of Ali Khamenei, "Supreme Religious Leader," killing him, his wife, daughter-in-law, grandchild, and various government leaders. On March 17, Israel killed Ali Larijani, Iran's top national security official and Gholamreza Soleimani, the head of the Basij paramilitary force. On March 18, it killed Iran's Intelligence Minister, Esmail Khatib in another air strike.

Currently the United States has over 50,000 troops in the Middle East region and has just sent another 2,500 marines. It has sent fighter bombers and assault ships to the region. In the first 6 days, it spent \$11 billion on the war and continues to spend over a billion dollars a day on it. Trump has also spoken of sending U.S. ground forces into Iran.

Israel has started bombing Lebanon again and is sending ground troops there. It continues its genocidal war on Palestinians in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank.

Iran has retaliated by shooting missiles and drones at U.S. bases and military facilities in the region. Its Israeli targets were initially military targets. Now Iran is outfitting its ballistic missile with cluster munitions to bomb Tel Aviv homes, parks, businesses and roads. Iran has also targeted Gulf region oil facilities, oil tankers, hotels, airports and desalination plants. It has blocked the strait of Hormuz and has begun laying mines in it. It has appointed Mujtaba Khamenei, the son of Ali Khamenei, as the new "Supreme Religious Leader." Since January 2026, the Iranian government has cut off internet access for the public.

Over 2,000 civilians have been killed in the region so far. More than 1,200 are Iranians. Other civilian casualties are mostly in Lebanon. In the Gulf states, the casualties have been mostly among migrant workers.

Over 3.2 million people have been displaced in Iran and over a million displaced in Lebanon.

The costs of this war so far have been not only economic, with a 35% rise in the price of oil and the blockage of transit of other needed goods such as food and fertilizer. The cost has also been humanitarian. Tremendous and even irreversible damage has been done to water and air especially

in Iran where air pollution and water shortage were already severe. We have also seen damage done to world heritage sites such as the Golestan palace in Tehran.

Apocalyptic language based on Christian fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and Jewish fundamentalism is being used to motivate and recruit people to fight.

Artificial intelligence is being used in various ways, whether for bombing, shooting missiles or for generating fake videos to promote disinformation.

Globally, the Russian government has gained from this war because the price of oil has increased, and the Trump administration has lifted sanctions on Russia's sale of oil. Russia has also gained because the anti-missile systems that Ukraine and Europe were buying from the U.S. to help defend Ukraine against Russia's brutal imperialist invasion of that country are now going to the Middle East. Russia is also helping the Iranian government by sharing secret information about U.S. targets.

The Chinese government has also gained from this war, because the U.S. government will pay less attention to the Pacific Region and might even allow China to proceed with its plans to take over Taiwan.

II. Some Context on Iran 1979-Today, U.S./Israel and Global Shifts

Since its founding following the popular 1979 Iranian revolution against a brutal and authoritarian monarchy, the Islamic Republic has defined its reason for being as opposition to Israel and the United States. It has been a religious fundamentalist Shi'a and Persian nationalist entity which has also built strongly on misogyny and patriarchy. Anti-imperialist, and even anti-capitalist and revolutionary slogans have been used to promote authoritarianism and to destroy any progressive opposition.

Thus, in March 1979, shortly after the revolution overthrew the brutal monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers began the suppression of International Women's Day protests against the newly imposed compulsory hijab. During that month, a popular referendum declared Iran an Islamic Republic. The new government also began brutally crushing an uprising of the Kurds for autonomy in the North. Much of the Left continued to defend the Islamic Republic as anti-imperialist in the first two years after the revolution. The Islamic Republic, however, cracked down on the Left and killed and executed thousands of them starting in 1981. It also killed thousands more leftist political prisoners after the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. It continued to crack down on any progressive opposition and created a police state.

Since 2009, Iran has had five popular protest waves, each of which was brutally crushed. The first in 2009 after a fraudulent election, sought the reform of the system. The others in 2017, 2019, 2022, and the latest in 2026 sought the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. The 2022 uprising known as "the Woman, Life, Freedom" movement gained the most attention from the world because it was led by women burning their headscarves and had a strong emancipatory content. It involved labor and youth activists, national minorities such as Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs. The latest wave of popular protests in 2026 involved over a million people throughout the country and was crushed in the most brutal way. In the course of three days, in January 2026, the government killed at least 7,000 people and possibly 20,000 or more.

Iran has the highest execution rate in the world after China and has many political prisoners.

The Iranian regime has also used its talk of anti-U.S. imperialism and anti-Israel to crush progressive opposition in the countries in which it exerts influence.

Iran's regional imperialist project began in the early 1980s with its role in the founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and later its interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In the case of Syria, it backed the brutal Bashar Assad regime for 13 years by sending ground troops and crushing the Syrian uprising with the help of Russia. It has spent billions on funding Hezbollah and Hamas and Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria. Its support for Palestinians is only limited to promoting its own regional ambitions and does not include democracy or human rights for the Palestinian people. In the past few years, it has been selling drones and missiles to Russia for Russia's imperialist war on Ukraine. It has also been supporting one faction of the Sudanese army in the Sudanese civil war. It is currently supporting the Taliban while promoting hatred against Afghan refugees inside Iran.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was founded by Ayatollah Khomeini as an army outside the regular army. After the eight-year bloody and destructive 1980 to 1988 Iran-Iraq War in which over a million were killed or injured, the IRGC expanded itself and became Iran's largest capital owner/investor and the embodiment of the unity of the party, the army, and the state. It has 180,000 guards and is part of the larger Iranian army and police force of 1.5 million. Iran has the 8th largest army in the world.

The IRGC has spent an unknown amount on Iran's nuclear program. In June 2025, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that Iran had enough uranium enriched to 60% that could fuel ten bombs. After the June 2025 destructive and illegal U.S. and Israeli war on Iran, this nuclear capacity was severely weakened.

As far as the U.S. and Israel are concerned, there is no doubt that they are pursuing their brutal imperialist ambitions in the region. The Netanyahu government wants to crush the Palestinian struggle for independence and has been massacring the Palestinian people. The Netanyahu government is also against any Israeli Jews who believe in the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Palestinians based on equality.

Washington has its history of backing Iran's previous monarchical regime. The United States is also responsible for later invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the region, which led to the deaths and injuries of millions.

Both the United States and Israel have turned toward the direction of fascism. In the U.S. with the second Trump administration, we have a fascist government which controls the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. When I speak of fascism, I refer to Robert Paxton's definition in the *Anatomy of Fascism*. Fascist rule's distinct features are the mass rejection of reason and logic, the mass embrace of Social Darwinism or the belief in the superiority of one's nation or race and the so-called "Survival of the Fittest." Fascist rule also needs complicity on the part of the elites who bow to it. Fascist extreme nationalism and racism is expressed in a process of internal "purification" by demonizing, dehumanizing, imprisoning and killing members of a group/groups as "Other" or "the enemy within." This process goes hand in hand with external imperialist expansion/war, misogyny, disinformation, erasure of history, and rule by a strongman. Judging by these standards, in Israel too, the Netanyahu administration is run by fascists.

Both the U.S. and Israel want to collaborate with the Gulf states and Turkey to reshape the Middle East as a fully authoritarian capitalist entity without even paying lip service to democracy or human rights.

The Trump administration had thought that it would bomb Iran for a few days and make a deal with part of the IRGC in order to have an obedient regime in Iran. The IRGC however, has been planning retaliatory attacks for many years and bets on weakening the U.S. and Israel by lengthening the war. It also relies on a multipolar world with Russia and China increasing their imperialist power.

For Russia, which is a fascist and imperialist state, Iran has been an ally state to which it sells nuclear plants, arms, and from which it gets missiles, drones and services in promoting disinformation and terror around the world.

For Chinese capitalist imperialism, Iran is a source of cheap oil, petrochemicals, minerals, and an authoritarian ally. China and Iran signed a 25-year agreement in 2021 according to which China gets \$400 billion worth of Iranian oil at a highly reduced price in exchange for building oil and gas facilities and other infrastructure for Iran.

Based on the Trump administration's Strategic Doctrine, its open alliance with Putin in Russia's war on Ukraine, and its current lack of concern about a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it seems that these three superpowers have for now come to an agreement about their spheres of influence. This does not mean that the spheres of influence are eternal. Capitalism is not a stable system. It is about poles of capital competing with each other for the extraction and accumulation of monetary value from humans and nature, and entering more and more destructive wars in the process.

An ongoing war in the Middle East sucking in U.S. military and other resources and weakening it, is also very much in the interest of Russia and China as they concentrate on their own imperialist projects and capitalist exploitation of their subjects.

Faced with this reality, it is essential to have an understanding of the achievements, limitations, and possibilities of progressive forces in Iran.

III. Achievements, Limitations & Possibilities of Progressive Forces Inside Iran

The most important achievement has been the 2022 Woman, Life Freedom Movement which raised explicit emancipatory demands involving women, labor, education and the rights of oppressed minorities. That movement was brutally crushed with 20,000 arrests and the murder of over 500 participants.

Over the past twenty years, we have seen the growth of independent labor organizing in Iran among oil and petrochemical workers with temporary contracts, sugar cane workers, bus workers, teachers, and nurses.

Women have constituted 60% of college graduates and speak out forcefully for their rights despite living under an authoritarian, religious fundamentalist government and having only a 16% share in the official economy.

Political prisoners have been organizing inside prisons and writing letters and manifestos.

Iranian intellectuals have produced various translations of key works on philosophy and critique of political economy such as Marx's *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *Capital* in a new translation, as well as some important works on feminism. Other important works on Iranian history, sociology, politics, gender relations, and the rights of minorities have been written by various intellectuals, especially outside the country where they have had more resources and more freedom.

Some key limitations within Iranian progressives have been the following:

Persian nationalism opposes any effort to offer a plan for recognizing and codifying the rights of national minorities to the use of their language and natural resources.

Patriarchy and misogyny still lead to high rates of femicide, gender-based violence, and abuse.

The Iranian Left mostly reduces the concept of socialism to state control of property without any effort to address the alienation of the capitalist mode of production itself. Hence it stays at the level of simply advocating the replacement of private property with state property.

Many on the Left still reduce imperialism to Western imperialism only, and refuse to pay equal attention to Russian and Chinese imperialism as well as the Iranian government's own regional imperialist interventions in the past four decades.

Given these limitations, various retrogressive entities have appealed to the Iranian masses especially through the use of disinformation on social media and satellite television stations. Thus in the January 2026 uprising, when over 7,000 were confirmed killed by the regime, many people even among the working class were chanting monarchist slogans and calling on Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed king, to come back to Iran and bring them prosperity. Some prominent progressive intellectuals including feminists have also declared their alliance with Reza Pahlavi. Reza Pahlavi in the meantime has not only supported U.S. and Israeli military invasion. He has also been appealing to the IRGC for a number of years to join him in exchange for a full pardon and full participation in the new regime.

Five Kurdish parties have recently created a coalition to prepare themselves for the fall of the regime. While it is not clear whether or not they plan to fight on behalf of U.S. and Israeli forces, it is clear that they are deeply disillusioned with the prevalence of Persian nationalism in Iranian society.

Iran has some courageous and committed intellectuals that we have not heard from recently because they are either in prison or under house arrest or on furlough or parole. Most notable is Nasrin Sotoudeh, a feminist human rights attorney who has been a political prisoner for many years and is currently on parole. Iranian Kurdish women's rights activist, Pakhshan Azizi continues to face the death penalty and speaks out against the regime and U.S. military intervention. Narges Mohammadi, 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate is another feminist activist who has been silenced in prison for now.

Given the current brutal and expanding war and these real problems within Iranian society and the region, what can international progressives do now?

IV. What Can International Progressives Do Now?

First: Do anything you can to stop this war. Educate, speak out, protest, put pressure on your government representatives and independent intellectuals. In the case of the United States, public opinion is currently 60% against this war. Most people don't want to send their children to fight in the Middle East. Half the adult population is opposed to the Trump administration's attacks on and detention/deportation of innocent immigrants. There is also a great deal of anger about the ways in which mostly wealthy men including Trump, other politicians and even academics have collaborated with and benefited from the late Jeffrey Epstein's network for trafficking of women and girls for rape and sexual abuse. All of these questions need to be addressed in articulating an anti-war message.

Second: Reach out to progressives in the Middle East or Middle Eastern progressives abroad. Do not limit yourself to talking only about one struggle or one country in the Middle East.

Third: Oppose campism, take a clear stand against all global and regional capitalist-imperialist powers and defend the rights and humanity of the peoples that these powers are oppressing.

Fourth: Address key issues that are holding back our struggles: racial and ethnic discrimination,

patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, and capitalist alienation.

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<https://iranianprogressives.org/>

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Lectures on Humanist Alternatives to Capitalism, Racism, Sexism

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFN9JTxLGX7bWhQkA_p1Lml56Zq3gXoyr

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