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# Iran in a Geopolitical Field:

## Representation, Debate, and the Figure of "The People"

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# Introduction

This article asks a deceptively simple but analytically demanding question: how are struggles over Iran organized through claims made in the name of "the Iranian people", and what do these claims reveal about the conditions under which political life and interpretation are constituted? At stake is not only who speaks for Iran, but how such claims are produced, how they travel across unequal transnational arenas, and how they acquire authority as grounds for political action. Rather than treating representation as a secondary reflection of political reality, the article approaches it as a constitutive dimension of political struggle – one through which authority is claimed, violence is interpreted, and political positions are formed, fractured, and contested.

The argument advanced here builds on, but moves beyond, dominant approaches that have tended to analyse Iran through discrete analytical lenses – whether privileging authoritarian governance, emphasizing external coercion, or situating the country in a context of broader geopolitical rivalry. While each of these perspectives illuminates important dimensions of political life, they often proceed by isolating one axis of power from the others. This article instead argues that Iran cannot be understood as a bounded national case. It must be analysed as a geopolitical field in which external coercion and domestic authoritarianism operate not as separate domains but as entangled and mutually constitutive processes – shaping both the material conditions of political life (war, sanctions, repression) and the interpretive frameworks through which that life becomes legible.[1]

This tension between analytically separating these forces and encountering them as entangled in practice becomes especially pronounced in the current conjuncture, marked by recurrent protests, a deepening economic crisis, and a renewed escalation of geopolitical tension. Political mobilization now unfolds within a compressed field in which repression, sanctions, militarization, and diplomacy repeatedly intersect. Under such conditions, disagreement extends beyond positions on intervention to competing ways of ordering political reality itself: whether the primary task is to confront authoritarian governance and render state violence visible, or to resist imperial power and the geopolitical conditions that structure that violence. These orientations do not simply coexist; they shape what is foregrounded, what recedes, and how political claims are made intelligible.

It is within this fractured field that "the people" come into view – not as a pre-given political subject, as often assumed in policy discourse and transnational advocacy frameworks, but as an unstable object of representation mobilized across competing political projects: calls for intervention, claims to sovereignty, anti-authoritarian struggle, and anti-imperialist resistance. The invocation of "the people" does not resolve these tensions; it is the terrain on which they are organized.

The problem, then, is not only who speaks in the name of "the people", but how such claims are stabilized as knowledge and come to ground action in the name of others. Addressing this problem

1 See Ayça Çubukçu, "Notes on Campist Internationalism," *Verso Blog*, 22/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOMX; Farah Mokhtareizadeh, "Vijay Prashad's Iran," *Substack*, 17/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSNQW; Manijeh Moradian, "Feminist Uprising in Iran and the Politics of Solidarity," *Meridians* 25, no. 1 (2026): pp. 156–180.

requires attending simultaneously to the material organization of political life and to the interpretive infrastructures through which it is rendered meaningful.

The analysis proceeds in two parts. Part I examines the constitution of the contemporary Iranian conjuncture as a geopolitical field, arguing that war, sanctions, and authoritarian governance operate as mutually constitutive processes that reshape the conditions of political life from within. Part II shifts from the formation of this field to the conditions of its legibility, tracing how political claims are produced, circulated, and authorized across unequal transnational arenas, and how interpretation itself becomes a site of struggle over knowledge, authority, and political relations.

## Part I: Material and Political Conditions of the Field

The analysis begins with the material and political constitution of the field itself. Before asking how "the Iranian people" are represented, it is necessary to examine the conditions through which political life is organized, constrained, and fragmented. The following sections trace how war, sanctions, and authoritarian governance operate through one another, producing a terrain in which protest, endurance, incorporation, and exit emerge as unevenly distributed political possibilities.

### War, Intervention, and the Compression of Political Life

The US–Israeli military strikes of 28 February 2026 are situated within a tense context in which recurrent protests, a deepening economic crisis, and intensifying geopolitical confrontation have become increasingly entangled. They do not represent a sudden rupture, but emerged out of a longer trajectory defined by cyclical mobilization and suppression – extending from reform-era student protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s to urban unrest through the 2009 Green Movement, the protest waves of 2017–2019, and the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising of 2022.[2] Across these episodes, a pattern has hardened: waves of mass protest are met with forceful repression, followed by periods of apparent quiescence that mask rather than resolve underlying grievances.[3] Over time, this repetition has eroded confidence in institutional reform while failing to produce a decisive rupture, generating a protracted political impasse.[4]

The latest cycle, culminating in January 2026, initially emerged from conditions of acute economic precarity – rising inflation, wage erosion, and the tightening constraints of everyday life. Early demonstrations centred on material demands and localized grievances. Yet on 8 and 9 January, the protests took a different turn as calls circulated – most prominently through statements attributed to

2 Mohammad Ali Kadivar, Saber Khani, Danial Vahabli, Vahid Abedini, and Samira Barzin, *Contingency of Structures: Triggers and the Social Geography of Revolutionary Episodes in Iran 2017–2022*, 28/11/2025, https://acr.ps/hBy0N8Y; Nazanin Shahrokni, "Bodies in Revolt: Challenging the State in Iran", *Current History* 122, no. 848 (December 2023): pp. 323–328.

3 Paola Rivetti, "What Happens In-Between Mobilizations? Building and Organizing Contentious Politics at the University of Tehran (2007–2017)", *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 13, no. 1 (2020): pp. 586–606.

4 Hemn Rahimi, "From Indignation to Impasse: Decoding the Zhina Uprising with Spinoza's Theory of Affects and Group Consciousness", *Critique* 53, no. 4 (2025): pp. 549–569; Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings for 'Women, Life, Freedom': Over-Determination, Crisis, and the Lineages of Revolt", *Politics* 43, no. 3 (August 2023): pp. 404–438.

Reza Pahlavi, the exiled heir to the Pahlavi monarchy and a focal point for monarchist currents in the diaspora – that reframed mobilization explicitly in terms of regime change. These appeals, amplified through transnational media networks, contributed to a shift in both the language and perceived horizon of protest, even as participation on the ground remained heterogeneous and uneven. [5]

The state's response marked a qualitative escalation. Nationwide demonstrations were met with widespread arrests, the lethal use of force, and the systematic disruption of communication infrastructures, including extended internet shutdowns. Reports that circulated despite these constraints pointed to the scale and intensity of repression: families searching morgues for missing bodies, overwhelmed hospitals, and entire neighbourhoods subjected to intensified security control.[6] While precise figures remain contested – a question taken up later in this article – the magnitude of violence and the numbers of detention signalled an unprecedented deployment of force within this cycle, reinforcing the sense that the political field had reached a point of exhaustion.

Against this backdrop, calls for external intervention gained renewed traction. In some instances, these calls extended to explicit support for war as a pathway to regime change, framed through the language of rescue and imminent assistance – "help is on the way".[7] Such claims were often presented as relaying the demands of "the Iranian people", even as the conditions under which those demands could be articulated were themselves profoundly constrained. The 28 February US-Israeli strikes followed this trajectory – not as a rupture, but as an escalation that, as in June 2025, intervened in relation to ongoing diplomatic processes rather than following their collapse.

In this context, the strikes were justified by US and Israeli officials in the language of regime change and the protection of the Iranian people. They targeted state infrastructure, military installations, and senior figures within the governing apparatus, including Iran's Supreme Leader and high-ranking officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[8] Yet the violence did not remain contained within the institutional sites it ostensibly sought to neutralize. It unfolded across the social body. Coordinated aerial attacks struck major urban centres – including Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz – as well as smaller cities, bringing war directly into the spaces of everyday life. Among the most widely mourned casualties were schoolgirls in the southern city of Minab, killed when a missile struck near their school.[9] Their deaths illuminate a central contradiction: wars articulated as precise, targeted interventions traverse inhabited environments where civilian life cannot be disentangled from military objectives. What appears in strategic discourse as calibrated force materializes, on the ground, as the diffusion of violence across the infrastructures of ordinary existence – homes, schools,

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**5** Iran International, "Prince Pahlavi's Protest Call Draws Massive Online Traction", 8/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSNYZ

**6** See Amnesty International, "What Happened at the Protests in Iran?", 26/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSO72

**7** "'Help Is on Its Way,' Trump Tells Iranians as He Urges Them to Keep Protesting", *BBC News*, 11/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOf5

**8** Margaret Brennan, Elizabeth Palmer, and James LaPorta, "Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Killed in Strikes, Led Theocratic Regime for Decades", *CBS News*, 28/2/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOn8

**9** Elizabeth Melimopoulos, "Who Bombed the Iranian Girls' School, Killing More Than 170? What We Know", *Al Jazeera*, 12/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOvb

transport systems, and public space.[10] A war waged in the name of protecting the Iranian people did not terminate violence; it reconstituted it, adding a layer of destruction over a field already saturated with coercion.

At the level of the state, the immediate aftermath of the strikes was marked less by collapse than by rapid absorption. Provisional leadership arrangements were announced, chains of command were reconstituted, and the official discourse emphasized continuity and institutional resilience. To the extent that disruption occurred within governing structures, it was uneven and often transient. Yet this apparent stabilization did not signal the absence of shock; rather, it marked its redistribution. Dislocation was not eliminated but displaced – transferred outward from the formal apparatus of governance onto the social field it administers.

At the level of society, this transfer became both palpable and cumulative. In its less visible form, it appeared as infrastructural instability: disrupted banking systems, intermittent access to cash, suspended educational schedules, and uneven provision of basic services. Reports of abandoned detention facilities, where prison personnel fled bombardment leaving detainees without reliable access to food, medical care, or communication, underscored the fragility of institutional care once removed from the immediate reach of command.[11] These were not simply failures of administration but indications of how strain within the state is externalized into everyday life.

Alongside these diffuse disruptions, more direct forms of harm intensified. The war deepened an already pervasive security infrastructure: the existing internet shutdown was expanded, communication networks were further restricted, movement came under heightened surveillance, and checkpoints proliferated across urban space. Arrests continued under wartime justifications, extending pre-existing patterns of repression into a broader apparatus of securitized control.[12] Everyday spaces – streets, universities, workplaces – were reconfigured as sites of monitoring and regulation. Rather than simply emptying the streets of dissent, the wartime state sought to refill them with choreographed displays of nationalist and pro-regime mobilization, blurring the distinction between wartime governance and the ordinary repertoire of authoritarian rule.[13] As the state consolidated its grip over public space, opportunities for autonomous collective mobilization diminished. The street did not cease to be political; rather, its political possibilities became increasingly organized around state power rather than public contestation.

War does not simply intensify violence; it reorganizes the terms under which "the people" can appear at all. Even when waged in their name, it renders them partially absent, partially reduced, and partially rearticulated through mediated forms of visibility. What recedes are the conditions

10 Golnar Motevalli, Krishna Karra, Tom Fevrier, and Raeedah Wahid, "Satellite Data Reveal Scope and Scale of US-Israeli Strikes on Iran", *Bloomberg*, 22/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSODe

11 Joanna York, "'Panic and Fear': Iran Political Prisoners Face Increasing Danger Amid US-Israel War", *France 24*, 5/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOLh

12 Ghoncheh Habibiazad, "Iran Taking Steps to Prevent Anti-Establishment Protests, Tehran Residents Tell BBC", *BBC News*, 16/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSNPg

13 Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Why the Iranian Regime Owns the Streets", *Journal of Democracy*, 9/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOCT

under which ordinary people can appear as autonomous political actors in public sphere; instead more constrained and carefully mediated figures emerge, through which the people can be seen, spoken for, or instrumentalized.

In the months preceding the US-Israeli aerial attacks, images of protest – workers on strike, students mobilizing, women contesting state authority – circulated as signs of collective agency. Following the strikes, this field of visibility was reorganized. The means by which ordinary people were visible in public life shifted, giving rise to, four distinct modalities of appearance, each marking a different form of absence, reduction, or reconfiguration.

First, in media representations, the people appeared primarily as injured subjects. Images of bombardment, destruction, and mourning foregrounded suffering while displacing agency. The Iranian subject became legible through exposure to violence – counted among the dead, the displaced, the grieving – rather than as an actor embedded in an ongoing political struggle. Even when necessary, this register narrowed the field of recognition, reducing complex social life to scenes of humanitarian crisis.

Second, within the domain of war and diplomacy, the people disappeared almost entirely. Despite being invoked as the justification for military action, they remained absent from the arenas in which decisions about violence and negotiation were made. As diplomatic talks resumed in April 2026 in Islamabad, state actors oriented their agendas around deterrence, security, and strategic concessions, with little articulation of the political demands or lived conditions of the population in whose name violence was being enacted. War was waged on behalf of "the people"; diplomacy proceeded largely without them.[14]

Third, in transnational arenas – particularly within segments of the diaspora – the people appeared in a different, mediated form: as agents of endorsement.[15] Demonstrations in which participants carried US and Israeli flags, expressed gratitude to political leaders such as Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, or rallied around monarchist symbols and figures including Reza Pahlavi circulated widely as evidence of popular will. In these moments, "the people" were made visible as calling for intervention – yet this visibility operated through selective and amplified channels that elevated particular voices while standing in for a far more heterogeneous and internally divided social field. Agency was condensed and projected outward in ways that were both politically consequential and deeply uneven.

Fourth, state media and affiliated institutions organized gatherings in major squares and urban intersections, staging scenes of collective unity in the face of external threat. Interviews with participants emphasized support for the state, expressions of defiance, and the necessity of national cohesion against foreign aggression. As with other forms of mediated visibility, what appeared was

**14** See Suzan Fraser, "Iranian Official Says US 'Maximalist' Demands Stall Face-to-Face Talks", *Associated Press*, 19/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSNXj

**15** Andrew Gumbel, "'It's Not an Invasion, It's a Liberation': LA's Iranian Community Speaks Out After US Strikes Tehran", *The Guardian*, 1/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSO5m

a particular configuration of the social field – one that foregrounded unity, loyalty, and endurance in alignment with the imperatives of wartime governance.[16]

Between these poles, the heterogeneous civic mobilizations, labour struggles, and protest networks that had animated Iran's political landscape in preceding months retreated from view. War reordered the field of perception itself.

To grasp the present situation, then, requires moving beyond framing war as interruption or exception. It must instead be understood as constitutive of the political field itself: a force that reorganizes not only the distribution of violence, but also the terms of visibility, temporality, and political possibility.

This recognition, however, extends beyond war alone. If political life is shaped through the convergence of external coercion and internal rule, then the distinction between the "external" and the "domestic" cannot be sustained as an analytic starting point. The question that follows is how this entanglement is produced – and how it unsettles the very idea of a bounded domestic sphere.

## Sanctions, Governance, and Entanglement

This section takes as its point of departure the limits of approaching Iran as a self-contained domestic sphere. The forces shaping political life cannot be analytically separated into "internal" and "external" domains. Rather, external coercion and authoritarian governance operate as mutually constitutive processes that produce a shared field of power – one that reorganizes state authority, economic life, and the conditions under which political action emerges.

To treat these forces as distinct from each other risks reproducing what social scientists have long critiqued as methodological nationalism: the assumption that the nation-state forms the natural container of explanation, even when political authority, economic constraint, and coercive power are produced through transnational circuits.[17] Understanding the present situation therefore requires tracing how sanctions, militarization, and geopolitical confrontation reorganize governance from within, narrowing political horizons while strengthening the apparatus through which dissent is managed. Sanctions, in particular, offer a privileged lens through which this entanglement becomes visible. In both political discourse and everyday survival, they function as a kind of shibboleth – invoked to signal alignment, assign responsibility, and delimit the terms through which Iranian suffering is interpreted and acted upon.

Sanctions regimes have been neither episodic nor marginal. US economic restrictions began in the late 1970s, intensified through the 1990s and 2000s, and became far more comprehensive after 2010 in response to Iran's nuclear programme. The Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reimposed and expanded secondary sanctions,

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**16** See Amy Goodman, "'War on the Iranian People': Nationalism Grows in Iran in Defiance of Deadly U.S. and Israeli Strikes", *Democracy Now!*, 12/3/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOdp

**17** Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation–State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences", *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (October 2002): pp. 301–334.

targeting oil exports, banking systems, and access to global finance. What has taken shape is not a temporary measure but a prolonged regime of economic isolation that conditions state capacity, political calculation, and the texture of everyday life.[18]

Recognizing the structural force of sanctions does not absolve the Islamic Republic of responsibility. The state has repeatedly instrumentalized sanctions to deflect accountability for corruption, mismanagement, and repression, framing hardship as externally imposed while consolidating opaque systems of economic control.[19] The analytic task, therefore, is not to adjudicate blame, but to understand sanctions as a technology of power that generates social pressure and reorganizes political-economic relations – one that operates through, and is mediated by, authoritarian governance. External coercion and state power do not function as competing causes; they are articulated in practice, co-producing the conditions of social injury.

US policymakers have long described sanctions as an "effective" tool of economic statecraft precisely because they are designed to constrict revenue, induce hardship, and generate social pressure through the population. In this sense, sanctions function as a deliberate project of social compression: households are squeezed, livelihoods are destabilized, and the temporal and material conditions necessary for collective life are progressively degraded.[20]

Approaching sanctions in this way requires shifting the object of analysis. The concern is not the sanctification of the state, but the erosion of the infrastructures that make collective life possible: shared resources, social ties, public institutions, and the everyday capacities through which people sustain one another and imagine a future in common. Both sanctions and authoritarian rule corrode these conditions, not separately but in concert.

This dynamic became particularly visible during the Aban 98 protests of November 2019. Facing acute fiscal strain under intensified sanctions, the state abruptly removed fuel subsidies, framing the move as economic necessity. Gasoline prices surged overnight, triggering nationwide protests that were met with a violent crackdown, mass arrests, and a near-total internet shutdown. The episode revealed the convergence at work: sanctions narrowed policy space, but it was the state's decision to impose austerity and repress dissent, transforming economic strain into lethal confrontation.[21]

These pressures extend beyond policy decisions to the restructuring of state power itself. Sanctions have accelerated the consolidation of security-linked institutions, particularly those centred in and

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**18** Narges Bajoghli, Vali Nasr, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, and Ali Vaez, *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

**19** Maryam Alemzadeh, *IRGC and Terrorism-Related Sanctions: Why They Fail, What They Achieve*, Middle East Brief 160 (Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, September 2024), at:
https://acr.ps/hBxSOls; Mohammad Reza Farzanegan, "Effects of International Financial and Energy Sanctions on Iran's Informal Economy", *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2013): pp. 13–36.

**20** Nazanin Shahrokni, "Depleted Households: 'Domesticating' Economic Sanctions", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 14, no. 2 (2023): pp. 293–308.

**21** Saeid Golkar, "Authoritarian Upgrading in Action: Iran's Security Apparatuses After the Women, Life, Freedom Movement", *Digest of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 2 (2026): e70017.

around the IRGC. Financial isolation and the securitization of economic life have funnelled resources into militarized circuits operating beyond public scrutiny, producing a fused military–economic complex.[22] Over time, authority within these institutions has come to rest on mutually reinforcing foundations: regional military engagements, transnational networks, and control over key sectors of the economy. Sanctions, while invoked to deflect responsibility, have simultaneously strengthened these coercive infrastructures.

This consolidation is further embedded in Iran's regional engagements. Interventions in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon have functioned not only as sites of conflict but as infrastructures of rule – expanding strategic leverage while reinforcing domestic power structures.[23] While these engagements have contributed to regime resilience, they have also deepened inequality and resentment, entangling ordinary Iranians in geopolitical projects not of their choosing.

At the level of everyday life, these dynamics translate into a reorganization of social existence. A security-centred state prioritizes surveillance, policing, and emergency authority while diverting resources from social provision. Economic precarity expands alongside coercive capacity. Sanctions permeate daily life – shaping access to banking, digital services, remittances, and medical supplies – and in doing so reorganize social reproduction. The result is a condition of compression: shrinking margins, shortened horizons, and increased reliance on informal and securitized networks.

Under such conditions, collective action is transformed. Protest becomes more episodic, risks intensify, infrastructures thin, and for many, exit begins to rival voice as a political horizon. What is often framed as a tension between "sanctions versus the state" dissolves in practice: external pressure and internal governance operate together, and it is ordinary people who absorb their cumulative effects.

It is within this compressed terrain that protest acquires its particular form – not only in its targets but in its language. Slogans register the convergence of forces shaping everyday life. When the chant "No to Gaza, no to Lebanon – my life for Iran" resurfaces, it condenses how regional militarization and geopolitical confrontation are lived domestically through redistribution, scarcity, and constraint.[24] Rather than unfolding as separate domains, these forces become inseparable in everyday life, experienced as a single, entangled condition.

This entanglement can generate a zero-sum perception in which different forms of suffering appear to compete for recognition. Liberation comes to be imagined as subtraction rather than relation. For observers outside Iran, such expressions often become interpretive flashpoints. Some amplify them

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**22** Mohammad Reza Farzanegan and Nader Habibi, "The Effect of International Sanctions on the Size of the Middle Class in Iran", *European Journal of Political Economy* 90 (2025): 102749; Kayhan Valadbaygi, "Beyond the IRGC: The Rise of Iran's Military-Bonyad Complex", *Clingendael Institute*, 2/10/2025, at:
https://acr.ps/hBxSOtv; Kayhan Valadbaygi, "Neoliberalism and State Formation in Iran", *Globalizations* 19, no. 8 (January 2022): pp. 1–15.

**23** Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran and the 'Axis of Resistance': A Brief History", *Jadaliyya*, 19/5/2025, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOBy

**24** Eric Lob, Diba Mirzaei, and Hamid Talebian, *Iran in the Aftermath of the Twelve-Day War*, GIGA Focus Nahost no. 5 (Hamburg: German Institute for Global and Area Studies, 2025).

as transparent evidence of regime opposition, abstracting them from the conditions that produce them. Others dismiss them as nationalist or reactionary, collapsing expression into moral judgment. Both positions detach protest language from the material field in which it is formed.

A more adequate analysis treats these expressions as diagnostic – attempts to name how multiple forms of power converge. To reduce them to either pure voice or ideological error is to misrecognize the conditions under which they emerge.

Yet these conditions do not produce a unified political subject. Responsibility, vulnerability, and loss are unevenly distributed. The category most often invoked to smooth over this unevenness – "the Iranian people" – risks obscuring the differentiated social terrain it claims to represent. The question that follows, therefore, is not simply what is said in the name of "the people", but how this figure is constituted across unequal positions, and how those positions shape the meanings of protest, suffering, and political possibility.

## Who are "the Iranian People"? Differentiation, Incorporation, and Political Horizons

The figure of "the Iranian people" condenses not a coherent political subject but a socially differentiated field shaped by unequal exposures to coercion, incorporation, and precarity. What appears in political discourse as a unified collective is, in practice, composed of divergent social positions oriented toward distinct political horizons. The task, then, is not to recover a singular subject, but to trace how these differences are structured and how they shape the terms under which political claims are made and recognized.

The slogan discussed above already points to this uneven terrain. When protesters invoke "my life for Iran", they do so from distinct locations within a landscape shaped by sanctions, austerity, and coercive governance. The grievances condensed in protest language – falling wages, subsidy cuts, blocked mobility, foreclosed futures, and the risks of repression – are not evenly distributed. Yet the phrase "the Iranian people", so frequently invoked in policy discourse and solidarity claims, compresses these unequal exposures into a singular figure, masking the differentiated conditions that shape political stakes and possibilities.

Accounts grounded in sustained engagement with interlocutors in Iran make visible how these divisions are lived and navigated. At one pole are those whose biographies remain tethered to institutions of the Islamic Republic, although this attachment takes distinct forms.

One cluster is organized through incorporation into security and parastate networks, particularly those linked to the Basij. As earlier sections have shown, sustained geopolitical confrontation and sanctions did not merely constrain the state; they contributed to the consolidation of its security apparatus, elevating new cadres and strengthening institutions linked to the IRGC and allied networks. This consolidation has not only operated at the level of elite power, but has extended through processes of patronage and incorporation that bind segments of society to the regime's

institutional infrastructure. The expansion of these networks – particularly those linked to the Basij, whose membership is often estimated in the millions, with some accounts placing active participation at four to five million – has drawn economically marginalized youth into circuits of material and symbolic capital.[25] For some, affiliation follows prolonged exclusion from formal labour markets and mobility pathways, offering access to employment, education, housing, and communal belonging. Here, ideological commitment is often inseparable from institutional belonging. It is cultivated through organizational participation, social ties, and everyday practices, while also reinforced by the material opportunities and security afforded through incorporation into the regime's networks.

A second cluster is sustained through broader clientelist relations that extend beyond formal security institutions. Here, attachment to the regime does not necessarily rest on ideological commitment, but on the overlap between individual livelihoods and state-mediated distribution. Access to jobs, contracts, subsidies, and institutional protection ties segments of the population to the continuity of the existing order.[26] Even where dissatisfaction with state policy is pronounced, the risks associated with rupture – economic displacement, loss of access, or institutional uncertainty – make the persistence of the regime a condition of stability. In these cases, investment in the system reflects not endorsement, but entanglement: a pragmatic orientation shaped by dependence on state-linked structures of provision.[27]

Reformist currents – shaped by cycles of opening and closure during the 1990s and 2000s – remain invested in institutional continuity while advocating transformation from within. Reformist intellectuals, civil society actors, and segments of the diaspora continue to call for negotiated change, constitutional reform, and national reconciliation. For many who hold this position, the imperative is to preserve political dialogue, however constrained, rather than risk its foreclosure through revolution, war, or externally imposed regime collapse.[28] This orientation is grounded in a strategy that seeks to combine pressure from below with negotiation at the top – leveraging social mobilization while working through institutional channels to produce gradual transformation.[29]

Across these configurations, attachment to the regime does not take a singular form but is structured through differentiated relations to the state. These groups are positioned unevenly in terms of access, benefits, and expectations. As a result, they make different claims on the state, hold distinct expectations of its obligations, and benefit from the status quo in uneven ways. These differentiated

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**25** Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

**26** Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "The Impact of Sanctions on Household Welfare and Employment in Iran", *Middle East Development Journal* 15, no. 2 (September 2023): pp. 189–221; Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, *The Impact of Sanctions on Household Welfare and Employment in Iran* (SSRN, August 2022).

**27** Nazanin Shahrokni, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

**28** Arash Davari and Nazanin Shahrokni, "Reflections on the June 2025 War (Dossier Introduction): Of Crisis and the Search for Political Grammar in Iran", *Jadaliyya*, 11/9/2025, at:
https://acr.ps/hBxSOJB

**29** Tara Povey, "Reformism, Economic Liberalization and Popular Mobilization in Iran", *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 4 (2019): pp. 365–380; Paola Rivetti and Francesco Cavatorta, "The Importance of Being Civil Society': Student Politics and the Reformist Movement in Khatami's Iran", *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 4 (2013): pp. 645–660; Nazanin Shahrokni, "The Politics of Polling: Polling and the Constitution of Counter-Publics during 'Reform' in Iran," *Current Sociology* 60, no. 2 (2012): pp. 247–267.

positions also produce divergent visions of the regime's political future – ranging from preservation and consolidation, to managed reform, to cautious transformation without rupture. What binds them is not a shared ideology, but a common implication in the structures of the existing order; what separates them is how they inhabit, negotiate, and imagine the trajectory of that order moving forward.

Fragmentation persists within oppositional constituencies. Pluralist and democratic aspirations coexist uneasily with monarchist narratives that privilege a singular vision of national redemption centred on Reza Pahlavi, the exiled former crown prince. For some, particularly within diaspora media ecosystems and among younger generations with no lived memory of the monarchy, the Pahlavi era is reframed less through its documented authoritarianism – including the pervasive surveillance of the SAVAK secret police, the suppression of political dissent, and widening inequality during rapid modernization – than through a selective nostalgia emphasizing geopolitical alignment, secular nationalism, and economic stability.[30] Its appeal lies not only in dynastic continuity, but in the promise of reintegration into global circuits of mobility and legitimacy: a search for legibility and direction amid protracted uncertainty, a wager on rupture as redemption.

Within this orientation, political transformation is often imagined as contingent upon external force. Calls for intensified sanctions, military strikes against state institutions, or international intervention – framed through the language of humanitarian rescue – circulate alongside appeals to foreign governments to recognize alternative leadership in exile. In their most visible form, these positions have taken shape in diaspora demonstrations and public gatherings, where participants carried Israeli and US flags and expressed support for political leaders who framed military escalation as assistance to the Iranian people. References to intervention as "help on the way" condensed this orientation, recasting war as a mechanism for breaking the political impasse and enabling regime change from without. Here, external force appears not as escalation but as resolution – an exit from a stalemate perceived as unresolvable through internal political processes.

A different orientation emerges among those whose political consciousness is formed through direct encounters with repression and loss. This includes survivors and families of those executed in the 1980s prison purges;[31] members of the Bahá□í community subjected to continuous exclusion and surveillance;[32] and the families of protesters detained, injured, or killed across successive waves of unrest – from 1999 to 2009, 2019, and the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. For them, the state is not an abstract political structure but an enduring source of personal rupture and irreparable harm. Political goals are oriented toward accountability, justice, and recognition and are organized around the demand that those responsible for violence be named and held answerable. In this position, the

30 Alex Shams, "Our Man for Tehran", *Boston Review*, 6/8/2025, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSORE

31 Nasser Mohajer, *Voices of a Massacre: Untold Stories of Life and Death in Iran, 1988* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2020).

32 Reza Afshari, "The Discourse and Practice of Human Rights Violations of Iranian Baha□is in the Islamic Republic of Iran", in *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, eds. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 232–277.

possibility of reconciliation without reckoning appears untenable, and regime continuity becomes incompatible with dignity and memory.

Between and beyond these positions lies a wide and shifting terrain shaped less by explicit ideological commitment than by the pursuit of liveable futures. Some are animated by the erosion of social freedoms – seeking to inhabit public space without surveillance or moral policing.[33] These aspirations found powerful expression in the song *Baraye*, whose litany of ordinary desires captured a diffuse longing for an unexceptional life beyond constant constraint.[34] Others are driven primarily by economic compression: inflation, subsidy removal, unpaid wages, and shrinking purchasing power. Elsewhere, grievances stem from ethnic and regional marginalization, where demands for recognition intersect with histories of uneven governance and securitization.[35] For many, however, the dominant horizon is neither confrontation nor reform, but exit, as migration becomes a strategy of survival in response to futures perceived as foreclosed within the nation's borders.[36]

What cuts across these positions is a shared political mood and disposition: pervasive disillusionment with the Islamic Republic and fatigue with its everyday practices of rule. The prevailing mood is a brittle mix of cynicism toward authority, resentment with an increasingly unliveable status quo, and collective exhaustion. Yet this shared condition of disillusionment does not produce convergence; it refracts into divergent political projections, coping strategies, and calculations of risk.

The task, therefore, is not to reconcile difference into artificial unity, but to recognize how uneven experiences of coercion, patronage, exclusion, and loss shape the terrain within which any claim to speak "for the people" must be situated. The difficulty arises when one segment of society or one register of suffering is elevated as if it represented the whole collective. When a particular framing is treated as synonymous with "Iranian voices", one part quietly stands in for the whole. We may choose to foreground specific voices, but that choice should be explicit: these are the voices *we* amplify, not *the* voice of the Iranian people. Anything else turns selective representation into unacknowledged synecdoche, allowing the speaker's political commitments to appear as neutral representation rather than situated intervention. This is where the instability of solidarity claims becomes most visible: appeals to act in the name of "the Iranian people" – whether to justify intervention, advocate reform, condemn repression, or demand restraint – necessarily privilege certain experiences, constituencies, and imagined futures over others. Solidarity, in this sense, does not attach to a singular subject but moves across a fractured social field, where different groups are

**33** Asef Bayat, "A Women's Non-Movement: What It Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (May 2007): pp. 160–172; Nazanin Shahrokni and Spyros A. Sofos, "Mobilizing Pity: The Dialectics of Narrative Production and Erasure in the Case of Iran's #BlueGirl", *Globalizations* 19, no. 2 (2022): pp. 205–219.

**34** Nahid Siamdoust, "Women Reclaiming Their Voices for Life and Freedom: Music and the 2022 Uprising in Iran", *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 3 (July 2023): pp. 577–583.

**35** Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Saber Khani, *Uneven Incorporation: Ethnic Inequality Across Social Domains in Iran* (SocArXiv, Center for Open Science, 2026).

**36** Omid Asayesh, "Homo Emigraturus: Exploring the Collective Yearning for Migration, The Case of Iran", PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2024, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSNVD

exposed to distinct forms of violence, protection, and abandonment. Only by remaining attentive to differentiation can we avoid speaking *over* Iranians while claiming to speak *for* them.

The question that follows, then, is not only who "the people" are, but how their voices are mediated, translated, and reworked as they circulate across transnational arenas of knowledge and power. It is to this problem of mediation, interpretation, and the geopolitics of voice that the next section turns.

## Part II: Representation, Interpretation, and the Politics of Legibility

If Part I examined how political life is materially constituted within an entangled field, Part II turns to how that field becomes legible. The following sections trace how claims, images, numbers, and testimonies travel across unequal transnational arenas, where they are reworked into objects of knowledge, authority, and debate. The question is no longer only who speaks for Iran, but how particular accounts come to acquire force while others are marginalized or foreclosed.

### Where We Speak From: Mediation and the Geopolitics of Voice

This section turns to the conditions under which political life becomes knowable, interpretable, and actionable beyond its immediate context. The argument developed here is that political claims do not circulate as transparent expressions of lived experience; they are mediated through transnational infrastructures that reorder meaning as they move. What is at stake, therefore, is not only who speaks, but how speech travels – how it is translated, taken up, and reconstituted across unequal fields of visibility, authority, and power.

This section approaches mediation not as a secondary layer imposed upon an otherwise stable reality, but as constitutive of political meaning itself. Acts, images, and testimonies acquire force through circulation, and in doing so are detached, condensed, and rearticulated within institutional and geopolitical settings that shape their reception and effects. As these claims move across terrains, they enter systems of knowledge production – media platforms, academic discourse, policy arenas, and activist networks – that are structured by asymmetries of access and recognition. Meaning, in this sense, does not inhere in political acts themselves; it is produced through the pathways of their movement.

Attending to these processes shifts the analytic focus from origin to trajectory. It requires examining how political expression is reworked as it travels, how interpretive authority is distributed, and how certain readings come to stabilize while others are marginalized or foreclosed. What takes shape is a field in which interpretation is a site of contestation structured by institutional location and geopolitical position. The task, then, is to trace how claims about Iran are made to signify within this field – and how, in the process, the terms through which political life is understood are themselves transformed.

Once Iranian protest voices move beyond Iran, they enter infrastructures of knowledge that are anything but neutral: journals, social media platforms, newsrooms, funding regimes, activist networks, and policy forums embedded in global hierarchies of power. These institutional environments are sculpted by imperial histories, racialized security logics, and geopolitical confrontation. In turn, institutional and geopolitical locations shape how testimony is translated into action – often in ways that detach it from the political conditions of its emergence and repurpose it within agendas that may constrain, redirect, or undermine the struggles from which it arose. The question, then, is not whether to support protest movements or amplify their voices, but how to do so without allowing that support to be translated into forms of power that work against them or against others in their name.

This dynamic becomes visible when we follow how particular stories travel. The case of Sahar Khodayari – the "Blue Girl", who set herself on fire in 2019 after facing prosecution for attempting to enter a soccer stadium – quickly became a global symbol of gender repression.[37] Yet in becoming legible as a symbol, her story was also squashed. As it circulated across international media, human rights organizations, FIFA, diaspora networks, and even state discourse, a sustained feminist struggle over access to public space was reduced to an individualized narrative of suffering. What becomes visible when a struggle acquires a face? And what disappears when an entire movement is remembered through a single image? What was gained in visibility was accompanied by a loss of political depth: decades of organizing, negotiation, and everyday resistance receded from view as the movement became increasingly remembered through the portability of a single figure.

This logic extends beyond individual figures to the circulation of political symbols themselves. During Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom uprising in 2022, the removal and burning of the veil became a powerful symbol of resistance.[38] In Iran, where veiling is compulsory, unveiled bodies appeared as a visual register of defiance, condensing demands for dignity, freedom, and bodily autonomy.[39] Yet once those same images circulated in Europe and North America, they acquired different political functions. They were appropriated by far-right actors and folded into Islamophobic narratives targeting Muslim women broadly. A veil burnt in Tehran was a cry against state coercion – a shot aimed upward at power. A veil burnt in the Dutch parliament in the name of solidarity with Iranian women protesters became a spectacle of state authority – a shot aimed downward at Muslim women. The same object, the same flame, but radically different political trajectories. These contrasting trajectories reveal a broader structure: meaning does not inhere in political acts themselves but is produced through the pathways of their circulation across distinct geopolitical fields shaped by different actors, institutional logics, and audiences.

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**37** Shahrokni and Sofos, "Mobilizing Pity".

**38** Nazanin Shahrokni, "In Her Name: (Re)Imagining Feminist Solidarities in the Aftermath of the Iran Protests", *Feminist Studies* 48, no. 3 (2022): pp. 896–901.

**39** Nazanin Shahrokni, "Women, Life, Freedom in Iran," *History Today*, 11/11/2022, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOKW

These dynamics of circulation shape interpretation itself. Across scholarly and public debate, political struggles in Iran are approached through two dominant interpretive tendencies. One foregrounds the risk that images of revolt will be appropriated to justify Western intervention or racialized securitization. This concern is both real and necessary. Yet when it becomes the limit of interpretation, a paradox emerges: the imperial formations being resisted come to define the boundaries of what can be said. Political acts become legible primarily through their possible misuse, while the conditions they confront recede from view.

A countervailing tendency – an anti-authoritarian urgency – insists that the risk of appropriation cannot override the need to confront state violence. From this perspective, subordinating protest to its potential afterlives recentres external concerns and displaces the immediacy of repression. While understandable, this position can harden into closure when concerns about circulation and Islamophobic appropriation are dismissed as secondary or irrelevant – treating the harms enabled elsewhere as external to one's responsibility. To take solidarity seriously, however, is to recognize that it entails responsibility for downstream effects, not just intention.

The task, then, is not to choose between these axes, but to hold their entanglement in view – to develop an analytic language capable of naming both imperial and state violence without allowing either to disappear. Such a language must remain attentive to the institutional, economic, and coercive arrangements through which these forces are enacted and experienced, and to the mediated pathways through which they are interpreted.

Yet the possibility of such a language is itself conditioned by the field within which interpretation unfolds. What appears as disagreement is not simply a clash of perspectives, but an effect of a structured terrain in which meaning is produced through movement, claims are continuously reworked as they travel, and the authority to interpret is unevenly distributed. Under these conditions, debate does not take place on neutral ground: it is shaped in advance by the same asymmetries that govern circulation, recognition, and uptake. It is to these conditions of debate – and the pressures that narrow, redirect, and contest them – that the analysis now turns.

## In Defence of Debate: Knowledge, Method, and the Politics of Interpretation

While the preceding section traced how political claims are transformed as they circulate across unequal fields of mediation, this section turns to what follows from that circulation: the struggle over how those claims are interpreted, stabilized, and authorized as knowledge. Once meaning is understood as produced through movement rather than given at the point of origin, disagreement appears not as distortion but as an intrinsic feature of the field itself. The question, then, is no longer simply how Iran is represented, but how competing interpretations are adjudicated, constrained, or foreclosed – and under what conditions debate itself becomes difficult to sustain.

What has become increasingly apparent is not only the proliferation of disagreement, but a contraction in the space within which it can be meaningfully held. In moments marked by intensified repression,

recurrent protest, and escalating violence – now unfolding under the persistent horizon of regional war – the pressure to adopt clear, declarative positions sharpens. This pressure circulates through petitions, institutional statements, teach-ins, and public interventions that privilege coherence over hesitation. While such forms are often politically necessary, they tend to compress inquiry, recoding methodological caution as equivocation and analytic differentiation as moral ambiguity.

This contraction is further intensified by the infrastructures through which debate unfolds. Digital platforms reward immediacy and clarity, often at the expense of complexity. Within such environments, analytic emphasis can harden into a signal of allegiance, as though the framing one prefers were less an intellectual judgment than a declaration of political loyalty. Debate persists, yet the terms under which it can be expressed become increasingly rigid.

This narrowing matters because, as Part I has shown, the conditions shaping political life in Iran are themselves entangled. As interpretive space contracts, that entanglement risks being flattened into singular explanations – whether based on imperial domination or domestic authoritarianism – thereby obscuring the relational dynamics through which power operates.

The consequences become visible in concrete sites of analysis. One concerns the narration of life under war and repression. Documenting those who have been killed, wounded, detained, and who have disappeared remains indispensable. Naming victims resists erasure, counters desensitization, and challenges the bureaucratic reduction of violence to numbers. Yet when attention is paid only to spectacular rupture, other registers through which violence is lived recede from view.

War and repression are not limited to the event; they structure labour, schooling, housing, consumption, and mobility. To document ordinary practices is not to dilute violence but to show how it saturates the material texture of existence. When analysis considers only dramatic rupture – the viral image, the mass arrest, the body in the street, the bombed building – it narrows our understanding of how violence operates. Violence also shapes the quieter conditions under which resistance, retreat, calculation, and care take form. Attending to voices on the ground requires documenting not only defiance but also the material circumstances within which it is sustained, exhausted, recalibrated, or avoided.

In this context, attention to ordinary routines is sometimes said to risk normalizing war or repression, as though everyday life and violence were mutually exclusive. Yet for many Iranians, these domains are not separable. People continue working, shopping, repairing their homes, caring for elderly parents, queuing at banks or pharmacies, sending remittances, going to school, renewing documents, and marking birthdays not because life is normal, but because life persists in the midst of coercion and the disruptions of war. These acts take place amid securitized streets and checkpoints; in proximity to funerals, arrests, and airstrikes; alongside internet shutdowns, wage delays, and rising prices; and against the constant backdrop of regional escalation and diplomatic manoeuvring. Ordinary life is not outside war and repression; it is lived through it.

Sustaining life often requires holding contradictory registers together. One interlocutor, a teacher in a lower middle-class Tehran neighbourhood, described how a dinner gathering – divided on war, regime change, and leadership – deliberately avoided argument. Instead, discussion turned to practical calculations: stockpiling food in anticipation of another round of conflict, converting savings into gold, navigating internet disruptions, and joking about coded language used on phones. Such conversations are political but not spectacular. They are grounded in material, coercive and geopolitical conditions of everyday life – wages, prices, surveillance, censorship, (the threat of) war and kinship obligations – and in the need to continue living in the midst of profound uncertainty and disagreement. Documenting these negotiations shows how people not only confront but inhabit catastrophe.

A comparable contraction of inquiry becomes visible in a different register: the handling of casualty figures during the January 2026 protests. Verification was extraordinarily difficult amid systematic restrictions on information (including internet shutdowns, criminalized reporting, and limited access for journalists and monitors). Official Iranian figures place the death toll at roughly 3,000, while independent monitoring groups and diaspora-based documentation initiatives report several thousand confirmed deaths, and some medical sources and officials cited in international reporting suggest totals reaching into the tens of thousands. These disparities reflect the profound uncertainty created by internet shutdowns and restricted access to verification.[40]

In such conditions, numerical ranges reflect not only the available evidence, but methodological thresholds, institutional practices, and political investments in either rendering loss visible or obscuring it. Comparable epistemic dynamics have unfolded elsewhere. Casualty figures in Gaza have likewise been subject to prolonged dispute shaped by restricted access, the destruction of documentation infrastructures, and intense political contestation over verification.[41] In both contexts, numbers do not merely measure loss; they become sites through which authority, recognition, and legitimacy are negotiated.

In the Iranian case, disagreements over figures were further sharpened by the political considerations shaping competing analytic horizons. For some observers, elevated estimates became ethically imperative within a primarily domestic frame: insisting on higher numbers was seen as necessary to resist erasure by the state and to prevent violence from slipping into statistical minimization and unaccountability. In this view, methodological caution risked reproducing familiar patterns through which state violence becomes diluted or deferred.

**40** See Tess McClure and Deepa Parent, "Disappeared Bodies, Mass Burials and '30,000 Dead': What Is the Truth of Iran's Death Toll?", *The Guardian*, 27/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSO3G; Maziar Motamedi, "Narrative War: Who Killed Thousands During Iran's Nationwide Protests?", *Al Jazeera*, 19/1/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSObJ

**41** See Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf, "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential", *The Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 2024): pp. 237–238; Mohammad Mansour, "Gaza Death Toll Exceeds 75,000 as Independent Data Verify Loss", *Al Jazeera*, 18/2/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOjM

For others, scepticism toward elevated figures emerged from a differently scaled concern, centred on geopolitical circulation. This caution reflected anxiety about how numbers travel: how casualty figures could be folded into warmaking agendas, and how Western media and policy institutions appeared at times unusually willing to publicize unverified high counts in Iran while exercising greater caution or delay when reporting Palestinian casualties – figures that themselves have historically undergone successive upward revision as access improved. From this perspective, methodological scrutiny was understood as an effort to resist the instrumentalization of suffering within global information regimes.

Indeed, under conditions of repression and blackout no precise tally is possible; errors are likely in both directions. That uncertainty is not a reason to foreclose debate; it is precisely what makes sustained methodological discussion necessary. The point is not simply to settle on a figure, but to ask how such different numbers will be used in the world. Yet instead of opening such a space, the dispute hardened. Figures shifted from being objects of inquiry to being markers of political alignment.

Together with the pressures surrounding how war and repression are narrated, these disputes reveal a shared pattern: both narrative and quantification can harden into moral tests that compress complexity. In one case, the archive is flattened by privileging spectacular rupture; in the other, method itself is recoded as allegiance.

These epistemic disputes, however, unfold within a prior normative framework that should not be obscured by methodological disagreement: the question of state accountability. Disagreement over tallies does not absolve governing authorities of responsibility. Even if armed actors or "provocateurs" were present within crowds in the January protests, as officials repeatedly claimed, this does not displace accountability.[42] The state retains a monopoly over coercive authority and bears the primary obligation to protect its population. Responsibility therefore extends beyond individual acts of violence to include failures of prevention, the escalation of force, and the broader political and material conditions that produced unrest in the first place.

This is especially salient given the state's longstanding justification for regional interventions, encapsulated in the refrain "If we don't fight there, we will fight here." External warfare was framed as necessary to secure domestic stability; yet the same authorities that invoked distant battlefields to justify militarization failed to protect their citizens from lethal protest violence or to address the economic and political conditions that produced the January uprising. The claim that security required projection outward did not prevent insecurity at home. Responsibility for governance – and for the lives shaped and lost within its exercise – remains internal to the structures of rule.

Taken together, these disputes over narrative and number expose a deeper struggle over epistemic authority: who is counted, who is believed, and who defines what qualifies as responsible argument.

**42** See "Strange Figures and Unexplained Killings: Clues Mossad Infiltrated Iran's Protests," *Middle East Eye*, 1/4/2026, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOrP; "Iran Claims to Bust Mossad-Linked Cells Trying to Exploit Protests," *The Times of Israel*, 10/1/2023, at: https://acr.ps/hBxSOzS

Numbers, images, and testimonies do not speak on their own; they acquire meaning through interpretive frameworks that determine which sources are recognized as credible and which claims are dismissed. Authority, in this sense, is neither fixed nor given. It is constructed and contested across institutions, media systems, and political struggles, and stabilized through repetition, citation, and institutional endorsement. Protest movements in Iran, like insurgent struggles elsewhere, therefore confront not only regimes of governance but also regimes of legibility. When scholarly and public spaces treat particular framings as beyond question – whether by privileging certain metrics, dismissing inconvenient evidence, or narrowing the range of acceptable interpretation – they risk reproducing the very closures they seek to critique, constraining the political and intellectual openings that protest attempts to create.

These stakes clarify both the limits and the necessity of scholarly intervention. Academic argument rarely moves the levers of state power directly; it does not command armies, impose sanctions, or legislate policy. It operates on a different terrain, shaping the interpretive field within which those forces are understood, justified, or contested. The concepts scholars circulate, the comparisons they authorize, and the silences they maintain help structure the thinkable and the foreclosed. In moments of upheaval, this interpretive labour becomes especially consequential – not because it resolves political struggle, but because it shapes how that struggle is narrated, remembered, and taken up.

When we cannot direct power, our task is to render it legible. Defending debate, in this sense, is not a defence of abstraction but of collective thinking under pressure – and of sustaining the conditions under which disagreement can exist without being foreclosed.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that struggles over Iran take shape within a fractured and mediated terrain that cannot be reduced to a single object of analysis or a unified political subject. What comes into view instead is a field in which political life is simultaneously constituted and interpreted through overlapping forces – where material conditions and their representation are inseparable. Within this terrain, "the Iranian people" does not appear as a stable referent, but as a contingent figure – invoked, assembled, and reworked across competing political projects and transnational circuits of meaning.

What emerges from this analysis is a different way of apprehending political reality. Disagreements that appear to be competing interpretations are rooted in unequal positions within a field structured by asymmetries of power, knowledge, and circulation. Actors do not simply interpret the same landscape differently; they encounter distinct configurations of it, shaped by the conditions under which it becomes visible and knowable.

Seen in this light, the proliferation of claims made in the name of "the people" is not a distortion to be corrected, but a condition to be analysed. Such claims do not merely reflect political reality; they

participate in its production. They organize what becomes visible, what is rendered actionable, and what recedes from view. The analytic problem, then, is not how to recover a singular or authentic voice, but how particular voices come to stand in for the whole, and how these representations acquire authority across unequal terrains.

These arguments carry methodological consequences. Treating authoritarian governance and geopolitical intervention as separable domains obscures how they operate together to shape both constraint and possibility. At the same time, once meaning is understood as produced through circulation, interpretation can no longer be approached as neutral description. It unfolds within institutional and geopolitical settings that confer authority unevenly and structure what counts as credible knowledge. Analytic work thus shifts toward tracing how claims are taken up, validated, and amplified, and how certain interpretations stabilize while others recede. Political analysis, in this sense, becomes an inquiry into how knowledge is assembled across scales and how it participates in the constitution of the realities it seeks to describe.

This shifts attention toward questions of procedure: how inquiry is sustained without collapsing difference, how analysis remains responsive to entanglement without reducing it to moral polarity, and how engagement with political claims remains accountable to both their conditions of emergence and their trajectories beyond them. Under these conditions, analysis does not culminate in closure. It persists as a practice of holding open the space in which differentiation, mediation, and entanglement can be apprehended together – without being forced into premature resolution.

The contribution of this article, then, lies not in recovering the authentic voice of "the Iranian people", but in showing how that figure is produced, authorized, and contested within a geopolitical field where material constraint and mediated representation are inseparable.

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