

# “Why Israel’s Attack on Iran Did Not Spark a Revolution”

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**By Alex Winston**

JERUSALEM—Summary of the article: The assumption that bombing Iran’s strategic infrastructure would immediately trigger a popular revolt shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how people behave under siege.

Some revolutions simmer and bubble under the surface, sometimes for years before erupting onto the streets. Others can appear out of nowhere and topple long-established governments within hours. When Israel launched its strikes on Iran’s nuclear and military infrastructure in the recent 12-day war, many in the West expected the Islamic Republic to buckle, politically, militarily, perhaps even socially.

There was a belief, particularly among exiled opposition leaders and Israeli commentators, that this was the long-awaited tipping point, the regime had suffered a humiliating defeat, and the Iranian people would seize the moment to rise up.

But the uprising didn’t come.

- No mass protests filled the streets.
- No coordinated rebellion emerged from within.
- And no part of the regime appeared to collapse from the shock.

For those watching from outside, especially in Israel and the United States, it was perhaps a sobering reminder that authoritarian regimes don’t always fall the moment they are weakened. In Iran’s case, there are complex, structural, psychological and logistical reasons, beyond the basic ‘fear of the regime’ reason, why a revolution may still be far off, despite the Islamic Republic’s current fragility.

- First and foremost, the assumption that bombing Iran’s strategic infrastructure would immediately trigger a popular revolt shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how people behave under siege.

During the first 48 hours of the Israeli operation, mass panic gripped Iran's urban centers. Around six million people fled Tehran, either back to their hometowns or to the safer northern provinces by the Caspian Sea. Supermarkets were emptied within days, and lines at gas stations stretched for hours. In some cases, families spent entire nights retrieving body parts from rubble following the airstrikes. Safety, food, and fuel became people's overriding concerns.

In such conditions, no rational person emerges from a bomb shelter to chant antiregime slogans. That isn't to say the people were supporting the regime, but, at that moment, they had more-pressing issues to deal with.

■ The timing of Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi's call for the regime's collapse, therefore, was perhaps mistimed.

His video addresses Iranians, during the course of the conflict, "from Khuzestan to Khorasan," to rise up and reclaim their country. Yet, despite its broad reach, his words failed to stir any significant public reaction, although many "underground" in Iran do show support for the royal.

Pahlavi, who on Wednesday announced that he will "convene a summit of national cooperation" on Iran sometime in the coming weeks, has stated his goal is not necessarily to return his family to the throne of Persia, but to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, whatever form that may take. The truth is that, even among those who oppose the regime, support for the monarchy is far from universal. Estimates suggest no more than 30 to 40 percent of Iranians back Pahlavi as a political figure.

The remaining majority includes republicans, ethnic nationalists, secular leftists, and others who see the monarchy as a relic of the past rather than a future solution. Some among the opposition also openly criticized Pahlavi for attempting to capitalize on an Israeli-led military operation, accusing him of once again seeking power with the backing of foreign powers, just as his grandfather and father had done.

■ Further complicating matters is the profound disunity among opposition groups.

There is no consensus on a vision for postregime Iran. Monarchists, republicans, leftists, ethnic separatists and former regime reformists all vie for influence and frequently attack one another. There is no shared transition roadmap, no agreed-upon interim authority and no widely recognized figure to rally around.

Even if the regime were to fall tomorrow, the opposition is in no position to fill the vacuum quickly or peacefully. The lack of unity and strategic clarity saps momentum and reinforces public caution. Many Iranians may loathe the Islamic Republic, but they fear chaos more.

■ Beyond the political divisions, the regime's shutdown of the Internet during the war was another decisive factor in stalling any potential uprising.

Without access to communication networks, Iranians were unable to coordinate protests, share information or organize resistance. Even routine family video calls became impossible. In these conditions, underground networks of opposition, many of which had been building since the Women, Life, Freedom protests, were cut off from one another. The lack of digital infrastructure possibly killed any potential momentum for a protest movement.

■ This is why some within the broader opposition focused not on protest, but on survival and community trust.

Activists in regions like Kurdistan began organizing neighborhood-level mutual-aid efforts: distributing food, providing first aid and protecting the vulnerable. The logic behind this makes sense: Only by being with the people and serving them during a crisis can the opposition earn their trust for the long-term goal of regime change. Had the war continued longer, this model could have scaled, but time ran out.

Then there is the condition of the regime itself, including the status of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Despite its military and intelligence losses, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remains intact for now.

■ It was humiliated by the Israeli assault.

■ Intelligence services were penetrated.

■ Launchers were destroyed.

■ Commanders were killed with precision.

■ Israel, notably, did not target the conventional Iranian Armed Forces, the regular military, often seen as more institutional and professional, but rather the IRGC: the regime's ideological and paramilitary vanguard.

This distinction is important. If one were to equate Iran's armed forces with the Wehrmacht of Germany, the IRGC is the Islamic Republic's SS—deeply ideological, deeply embedded and far more politically loyal to the Supreme Leader. Israel's surgical attacks focused precisely on the organs of repression, not national defense.

Khamenei himself fled into one of his reported 17 bunkers and was moved repeatedly in the space of 24 hours to avoid any attacks. He remains, reportedly, underground and isolated, with only a couple of videos released during the war, his communication to the outside world.

His son, Mojtaba, groomed as a possible successor, was also hidden in a separate location and did not emerge publicly. The regime's myth of invincibility, such as boasts that Iranian missiles would flatten Tel Aviv and Haifa in a matter of hours, lay in tatters. Khamenei's reputation has suffered a blow of cat-

astrophic proportions for the regime. But, even as morale faltered within the upper ranks of the IRGC, the system still did not disintegrate.

What is emerging now is doubt from within about the regime's leadership. There are those questioning why Khamenei should remain in control. He failed. He fled. He has become a liability.

And yet, there is no obvious succession plan. Mojtaba Khamenei lacks the clout, religious authority, and legitimacy to assume his father's mantle. Without Khamenei's direct micromanagement, a hallmark of his 30-year rule, no other figure commands the same authority across intelligence, media, the judiciary and the military.

### **Kleptomania**

This is further complicated by the nature of the Iranian regime itself. It is a kleptocracy controlled by overlapping mafia networks with economic and political power. Around 80 percent of Iran's economy is in the hands of entities controlled either by the Supreme Leader or the IRGC. This includes *bonyads* (religious foundations), military-controlled conglomerates and dozens of opaque holding companies that operate under the guise of public service.

Details of Iran's new budget bill, which came into effect on March 21 after Nowruz (the Persian New Year), were released by the Iranian government in April, and they underscore both the disproportionate allocation of oil revenues and national budget to Iran's military and security apparatus and the transfer of state-owned assets into their control.

Under the guise of "strengthening national defense," the IRGC has been entitled to a share of Iranian oil profits. This year marks a significant increase, accompanied by government authorization for the expansion of crude-oil deliveries to additional projects, such as Iran's nuclear program.

Experts estimate that the Revolutionary Guards control up to 50 percent of Iranian oil exports. The Central Bank of Iran reported earlier this year that Iranian oil exports totaled \$67 billion from March 2024 to March 2025, so there is money in those IRGC accounts.

There are also over 100 mafia-like gangs, each controlling parts of the oil, petrochemical, smuggling and import-export sectors. IRGC veterans or their family members lead many.

If Khamenei were assassinated or died suddenly, the power vacuum would not result in a democratic transition. More likely, it would lead to an internal scramble among these entrenched mafias. Iran could become a failed state, fragmented by internal feuds, ethnic unrest and outside interference. That prospect, far from inviting revolution, terrifies even some of the regime's opponents.

- Ethnic tensions would further complicate any postregime transition.
- Iran is home to tens of millions of non-Persian minorities: Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and Turkmen.

The central government has long suppressed ethnic identity in favor of a pan-Islamic narrative, but, with the regime weakened, these groups could seek greater autonomy or even full independence.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoan has shown interest in the Turkic-speaking provinces of Iran, particularly West and East Azerbaijan. Kurdish groups, long suppressed, may reignite calls for independence. In such a scenario, Iran risks unraveling. What begins as a revolution could easily devolve into ethnic conflict with foreign parties involved.

- The regime itself is now at a paradoxical crossroads.

- During the war, it made a calculated pivot toward softer domestic behavior. People who have spoken with *The Jerusalem Post* reported that officials and police were more polite and that enforcement of the hijab rule almost entirely vanished. The rhetoric shifted from Islamic zealotry to national unity, as it often does when a country comes under attack. The regime was trying to maintain domestic calm amid unprecedented external threats.

- However, now that the war is over, a major crackdown has been implemented.

Over 1000 people have been arrested, accused of collaboration with Israel, and executions have already been carried out. This back-and-forth approach creates a problem for the regime: If it remains gentle, people will expect more freedoms; if it reverts to brutality, the fear and anger may return stronger than before.

- Despite all this, Iran is not the same country it was before the war.

The regime is not the same regime, and the image of Khamenei as a divine, untouchable patriarch has been severely damaged. The IRGC's invincibility is in doubt. The intelligence services have been discredited. The myth of strength that the Islamic Republic spent decades cultivating was punctured in a matter of days. And, while the revolution did not come immediately, history shows that this is not unusual.

- Regime change, particularly in tightly controlled states, rarely happens in the midst of war.

- It occurs in the weeks, months or even years that follow, when the full cost of defeat becomes clear and when people have the time and space to organize.

- Things may well quieten down for the regime, only for one innocuous incident, months down the line, to spark the people's anger.

- A revolution may yet come to Iran. The Islamic Republic is weaker than it was one month ago. But the process will take time.