The limits and paradoxes of solidarity: some notes on the Iranian uprising and genocide in Palestine

Gholam Khiabany

What does it mean to profess solidarity while denying sovereignty?

On 13 January 2026, Donald Trump told Iranian protestors 'help is on its way'.[1] As this issue of *Soundings* was going to press, the USA and Israel started bombing Iran, and Israel has intensified the bombing of Gaza and seizure of lands in Lebanon, Syria and West Bank. Having recently kidnapped the president of Venezuela and his wife in order to seize Venezuelan oil, Trump has said he wants to choose the next head of state of Iran. This erasure of the will of the Iranian people highlights the reality of the imperial 'expression of solidarity' with which this article is concerned.

With the deepening crisis of global capitalism, we are witnessing a great moving far right show and the increased hardening of political power globally.

DOI: 10.3898/SOUN:90-91.16.2025

In trying to reassert their authority at global and national levels, imperial states are establishing national political systems that tear up even their own unliberal rules, both domestically and internationally. The political consensus and order of the post-World War 2 era, which demonstrated its fragility and uncivility in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, is disintegrating further in this new phase of imperial rivalry, intrastate civil war and the permanent state of war between nations. One of the ways in which the imperial states seek to maintain their authority is through 'humanitarian' interventions, in which acts of aggression are presented as 'help'. But there are also more subtle justifications for imperial state 'solidarity', when the rhetoric of liberation and equality is invoked without apparent ulterior motive, as we discuss below.

The facade of democracy that has long been present in order to restrain the democratic will of the population is crumbling; and it is no surprise that the erosion of democratic life appears most egregiously in Europe and US - and that it is there that the sense of loss of something that was once present is all the more acute (unlike in the countries that are still striving for democracy). And yet those democracies were always at the best partial: the democratic swindle in the aftermath of the great bourgeois revolutions in nineteenth-century Europe involved the introduction of laws to restrict the franchise and the movement of ordinary people, and to reintroduce censorship, and they did little to undermine the wider forces of political repression. Liberal democracy was limited from almost the moment of its origin, and contained many exclusive clauses. We know well that the idea and the exercise of democracy has existed alongside genocide, slavery, colonialism, and the exclusion of large sections of population, in particular women. And the extension of democratic rights to the population, where and when it has been given, has come about as a result of the immense struggles of the popular classes against capital.

In the current global turmoil, responses to the prevailing sense of despair have been varied. Although established political norms are increasingly fragile, there are still opportunities for a renewal of politics and democracy. Witness the significant impact of the uprising in the United States in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020, or, in 2026 following the murders of Renee Nicole Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, not to mention the enormous expressions of solidarity with Palestinians against the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The authoritarian turn has indeed engendered a significant sense of solidarity.

Many democrats living within the imperial powers have contested their violent acts of repression, both at home and internationally. These and other words and deeds of solidarity have been the subject of fascinating debates and discussion by scholars and activists. This article discusses some these debates within the context of official European states' responses to two significant crises in the Middle East - in Palestine and Iran (though it has not been possible to discuss responses to the recent attacks). Taking inspiration from Edward Said's 'Permission to Narrate', it builds on some of the existing scholarship on the limits and paradoxes of solidarity - including western states' concern with saving Muslim women.[2] It looks at the implications of the imperial states' criminalisation of expressions of solidarity with Palestine but encouragement of expressions of solidarity with, and support for, Iranian women; and it argues that these different responses are partly informed by the civilisational racism that has dominated western states' policies since 9/11.

In 1984, Edward Said suggested that Palestinians did not have 'permission to narrate': their articulate narrative of exile and colonisation was absent from discussion, and remained unintelligible within the Euro-American world. This situation has not significantly changed, and the question remains of who it is that gets to speak/narrate; who gets noticed; which grievance is recognised as legitimate; and which conditions and agents serve to help or hinder the right to narrate. Narration is by definition a public process.

These are the contexts in which this article examines the limits and paradoxes of solidarity, with a particular focus on Iran and Palestine. It argues that, in looking at the responses of imperialist states to Iran (where they claim to want to save Muslim women) and Palestine (where they are actively involved in the erasure of Palestine), we can observe some of the persisting legacies of empire and its imperial interests.

Debating solidarity

Solidarity is everywhere and exploding in a number of ways: in quantity, in political terms, and as an area of academic inquiry. Invoking solidarity has indeed produced some vivid examples of unity. Equally, despite the long historical association of the idea and expression of solidarity with progressive forces, right-wing organisations and parties have also invoked solidarity - including against migrants and refugees, Muslim communities, Covid vaccines and transgender people. It is therefore understandable that solidarity has come to take a central place in academic and

political discussions in recent years.

In an article entitled 'Solidarity Now', published in *Boston Review* in 2023, Mie Inouye argues for solidarity 'across lines of domination', and not just within and amongst one class/social group.[3] For her, the act of organising, being there, engaging with others and being open and receptive to them is crucial; what is important is not so much already existing shared interests: rather, it is the search for common ground that can unite different social groups with different interests. Such an account of the power and the necessity of social plurality, of course, builds on a long tradition of critique of particular understandings of the notion of social unity in societies.[4] But the *Now* in the title refers to the reality and complexity of recent debates on race and class, and the theoretical and practical challenges that are posed by the Black Lives Matter movement amongst others.

Tackling the issue of difference as a central and ever-necessary task of coalition building has been discussed by black and feminist activists for a very long time. Nearly four decades ago, bell hooks argued for the necessity of social endurance for oppressed women - to recognise the tensions and difference while mobilising together and learning from each other. For hooks, laying the foundation for political solidarity depended on 'struggle in a truly supportive way to understand our differences, to change misguided and distorted perspectives'.[5] For Iris Marion Young too such recognition was critical to the realisation of social justice.[6] Young critiqued David Harvey's singular emphasis on class solidarity as a solution to the existing tension between a politics of difference and a politics of solidarity. Instead, she articulated a concept of 'differentiated solidarity', in which the differences between clusters and communities would pave the way for developing contingent solidarities. Examining a wide range of interpretations of feminist solidarity, Jo Littler and Catherine Rottenberg also discuss the theoretical and practical tensions within practices of solidarity, and suggest that feminist solidarity 'involves some orientation toward the other which, to different degrees, recognizes difference'.[7] For them feminist solidarity also involves 'facilitating gender relations that are more just', and it 'incorporates the critical dimension of common interest and mutuality'; 'it can be constituted before, during or after 'action', and must remain reflexive since it 'will always take place in a particular and historical context'.[8] Littler and Rottenberg's insistence on the importance of temporality in the creation of solidarity also draws attention to the specific political and historical contexts in which solidarity can

be constituted. Inouye suggests that 'there can be no solidarity across lines of domination, as the interests of those who dominate diverge from the interests of those who are dominated'. This divide generates a cruel paradox: 'On the one hand, solidarity is an essential component of struggles for justice, but on the other hand, actually existing injustice renders it impossible'.[9] It is with this paradox in mind that Inouye questions whether solidarity is possible when motivations for organising diverge. Perhaps we could invert this question and ask if different motivations necessarily make any expression of solidarity insincere and therefore void.

Since the postcolonial critique of white-centric approaches looms large in discussions of difference, it may be useful here to briefly look at a 'South-South' or 'racialised-racialised' example of the expression of solidarity. In examining the relationship between Hizbullah and Palestinians, Laleh Khalili pays particular attention to different models of alliances between different actors with different motivations. According to Khalili:

> Hizbullah's shifting and overlapping identities (as anti-imperialist movement, Islamist or pan-Arab organization, and Lebanese political party) have influenced its solidarity relations, while its occasional use of its substantial moral and material authority - sometimes even in coercive form - has circumscribed solidarity.[10]

This question of the fluidity of the identities of actors who express their solidarity with each other is an important one that is often neglected. But more crucial questions for Khalili are the impact of power relations on the dynamics of solidarity, and the compatibility of the identities of actors and the conditions of struggle. In a situation in which one part of an alliance has authority (moral and material) over a partner, there is always a danger that the more powerful can co-opt the other. Such co-optation involves 'attaching the less powerful actor to the project of the more authoritative one, without necessarily fulfilling the interests of the former'.[11] In such an unequal relationship, Hizbullah's priorities always override those of Palestinians , while its 'championing of the Palestinian cause accrue it symbolic capital, allow it to consolidate its power in the Lebanese political domain, and secure it prestige and support in the region'.[12] Khalili also notes that Hizbullah is not the only ally that is keen to exert its own vision of what the Palestinians should do. The example she gives here is the International Solidarity Movement, which, while it has been appreciated by many Palestinians, is also criticised by many of them for its

privileging of non-violent strategies of mobilisation, and for seemingly impugning Palestinian militancy.

Questions of difference and identity certainly appear differently when the struggles in 'non-democracies' receive expressions of solidarity from inside the belly of the Western imperial beast. The justification for military intervention in Afghanistan as a response to the terrorist attack of 9/11 remains a stark example, the lessons from which are urgent today, as Western intervention to facilitate regime change in Iran and elsewhere is back on the political agenda, once again justified on the basis of 'saving' populations from their rulers. The cynical argument by the Americans and British that the oppression of women in Afghanistan was a justification for invading the country fed into the legitimisation of what is now widely recognised as a disastrous invasion which caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and 'liberated' no one. This claim of 'feminist' 'solidarity' was backed, for example, by the rare appearance of US First Lady Laura Bush on the radio on 17 November 2001, championing the 'liberation' of Afghan women from the Taliban, and Cherie Blair denouncing the burqa as the symbol of the oppression of women in Afghanistan two days later.[13] We should be extremely wary of calls today to liberate a people through the agency of Western bombs. Such manipulation of a liberal political concept - in this case gender equality - and its subsequent transformation into a tool of imperialism, is nothing new: as Rahul Rao reminds us, imperialism always had a 'non-territorial ideational dimension, expressed in projects such as civilizing mission'.[14] As he argues, the civilising mission has always aimed at integrating the colonised into the circuit of capital and imperialism. Civilising the peoples of colonies - making them modern - continues to involve their 'becoming like the west'.[15]

Today, this civilising mission is increasingly presented under the banner of humanitarianism. But this version of humanitarianism is mostly mobilised to sustain precisely the oppressive hierarchy that social movements aim to smash. Such kinds of 'support', whether by governmental or NGO intervention, may present themselves as the 'lesser evil' (as Eyal Weizman highlights with reference to border regimes), but their outcome is to de-politicise and commodify the suffering of the people who are the target of such intervention, and to undermine the agency of communities.[16] Meanwhile, political upheavals in 'non-democracies', and the suppression of the rights of women, ethnic minorities, LGBT+ and other groups, become a political

opportunity for a wide range of self-professed humanitarians to gain symbolic capital and prestige. But, for example, as Rao highlights, the motivation for the 'rescue' narrative in the case of international support for prosecuted gay people in Iran may have less to do with international interest and solidarity than with US internal politics. Supporting a politics of imperialism in the colonies/periphery as a mechanism for winning full access to citizenship at home is hardly a new tactic. Long before people in the US began to wave the flag for LGBT+ rights in the colonies, western feminists and suffragists had also assumed that their participation in the imperial civilising mission abroad might help their own demands for equal rights at home.

A brief look at current struggles in Iran and Palestine can provide some examples of the limits and paradoxes that this section has highlighted. While I have no intention to over-generalise from the experience of the diasporic communities, it is nevertheless crucial to point out that many of the Iranians in exile who have been given permission to narrate what they perceive to be the history of Iran are desperate for their own full integration within the imperial states in which they live. For this reason they may sometimes be complicit, or act as pawns, in imperialist civilising missions. In contrast, exiled Palestinians still have no permission to narrate. I will return to this point later. Before that a closer look at the two contexts and locations is necessary.

The case of Iran

It is generally assumed, and with good reason, that significant numbers of social movements and struggles remain invisible. This means that particular gendered, classed, and racialised realities of global capitalism remain unseen. Thus media representation of women has in the past been virtually absent in what is now indiscriminately referred to as the global south. However, within Iran since 1979 women have rarely been absent or invisible. The struggle of Iranian women for their equal rights under the Islamic Republic started immediately after the collapse of the monarchy, with a wave of demonstrations against compulsory hijab. Since then, women in Iran have been and remain the biggest and the most consistent constituent part of opposition to the Iranian state. The other strong and visible challenge to the new state in 1979 came from different nationalities inside Iran and in particular Kurdistan.

What made the Jina uprising in 2022 so powerful is precisely the convergence of these two important and historic struggles. The dynamics of this mobilisation added new layers to the already complicated nature of Iranian politics. What the uprising highlighted - again - was the fact that in Iran, the state and the nation are often each other's nemesis, locked into fierce political confrontation. The term 'nation' here refers to a country's citizens, its publics, making a distinction along the lines of Arendt's contrast of the political and the polis - or *res publica* - where citizens act together to manage their own affairs, and the state, which holds the monopoly on violence and engages in rulership over its citizens.[17] This is in many ways the defining pattern of Iranian history, both before, and certainly after, the 1979 revolution. Even this distinction needs further nuance when a *res public* faces the state unmediated, in physical proximity, as has been happening as the autumn of 2022 has been playing out. What is the appropriate language for this confrontation? Iranians called it a 'revolution'.

The September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa (Jina) Amini sparked a nationwide response from young women and their allies and counterparts, the biggest popular mobilisation in Iran since the 1979 revolution. A population armed with little but slogans found itself confronted, yet again, by beatings, tear gas, rubber and metal bullets, arrests, imprisonment and death. According to one report, during the Women, Life, Freedom uprising at least 469 people, including 63 children and 32 women, were killed by Iranian state security forces within the space of two months.[18] This is a very conservative estimate, and the number of deaths was likely much higher.

Nevertheless, there were a huge number of images, moving images, sounds and stories available to anyone who cared to look. For example, #Mahsa Amini and the accompanying slogan broke all Twitter records, passing 300 million retweets in less than two weeks.[19] Newspapers and broadcasting channels also covered the protests extensively.[20] And the performance of international solidarity, especially by women, was also colossal. At a moment when women are facing conservative backlashes in many countries (including the erosion of Roe v Wade in the US and abortion restrictions elsewhere; high levels of domestic and public violence against women; and the trolling and stalking of women on digital platforms), there is little doubt that Iranian women's agency prompted recognition of the attacks on women's rights, livelihoods and well-being almost everywhere. And such international connection,

and the solidarity it generated, is symbolically significant.

However, the differential consequences of some of the mimicking actions of 'solidarity' in the West are rarely noted. Brave young women inside Iran taking off their scarves, brandishing them on the street, burning them, and cutting their hair in defiance, can bring down upon them the full weight of the regime, its security forces and its facial-recognition technologies.[21] Global female film-stars and political figures lightly trimming their hair in public acts of solidarity, even shaving their heads completely, face no such consequences.

It was not just the public expressing these sentiments: various states and politicians across the world were also quick to condemn the Iranian state and express their support for Iranian women. The Council of Europe issued a number of statements calling on the regime to abide by international law and stop the violent crackdown;[22] and the EU urged Iran 'to clarify the number of deaths and arrested, to hold those responsible accountable and provide due process to all detainees', arguing that the killing of Mahsa Amini should be investigated 'in an independent and transparent manner' and 'any proved responsible for her death must be held accountable'.[23] Germany immediately summoned the Iranian ambassador and passed on the same message as the EU Council, while German officials said they would consider all options against the Iranian regime, including further sanctions.[24] The French president went even further, stating: 'Something unprecedented is happening. The grand children of the revolution are carrying out a revolution and are devouring it'.[25] In order to reduce the impact of Iran's internet blackouts, the US eased some of its sanctions to allow greater provision of technology services to those inside Iran. And a song by Shirvin Hajipour which had become the poignant anthem of the uprising won the new best song for social change special merit award at the 2023 Grammys. Jill Biden, the First Lady of US at the time accepted the award on Hajipour's behalf.[26] Public expression of support for Iranian women widely benefitted from the strong official statements issued by the US and European states. States' policies and interests can indeed help or hinder expressions of solidarity.

There are specific features of the Iranian regime and its standing in the circuit of imperialism that complicate the visibility of the women's movement and political struggles inside the country. The longstanding tension between the Iranian state and the US and its allies is evidently the most prominent factor. Even before the recent attacks, this was not just a question of discourse, not just a bad-tempered relation:

it had real, and sometimes dire, consequences for the Iranian people, including through the impact of sanctions on the daily lives of ordinary Iranians. The Iranian state has cynically exploited this hostility to promote a state-sanctioned version of anti-imperialism. At the level of publicity, burning the US flag is an almost daily occurrence. The streets of Tehran and other major cities in Iran are filled with anti-American graffiti and murals. It is impossible to switch on the TV or radio in Iran, open a newspaper or browse an official website without coming across images or texts condemning the United States of America. Religious and security officials find it necessary, indeed essential, to criticise, dismiss and even issue threats against the United States and the 'west' in their speeches. The Islamic Republic has promoted and encouraged a particular form of anti-Americanism and anti-west discourse in the last four decades. No other country - not Cuba, Vietnam, or Chile, for example - has ever demonstrated such discursive hostility. The Iranian state's anti-imperialist rhetoric has certainly hindered expression of solidarity for anti-state movements from sections of the left, at both the regional and global level. It was precisely for this reason that the Iranian visual artist and filmmaker Shoja Azari concluded his article about the Jina uprising with this warning:

> The current revolutionary movement in Iran is a wake-up call to the left. It calls for international solidarity and opportunity for 'Another Now' as Iran gears up for the possibility of yet another social revolution. The oligarchs, harmonious with their state representatives in the West, have been waiting for forty years and are lining up to take advantage of Iran's vast market while the left watches from the sidelines. Will the left *once again* betray the revolutionary aspiration of the Iranian people?[27]

Danny Postel had raised similar concerns long before the wave of uprisings in Iran from 2009 to the present day.[28]

It is also important to note that, in contrast to the monarchy - or the Israeli government for that matter - the current regime doesn't have any international friends. The full support of Western governments and media during the various uprisings has to be understood in this context. Lest we forget, international media interest made Iran the lead item in the news during the first two weeks of the Iranian uprising in 2009. In those weeks only Michael Jackson's death could temporarily push Iran into a second spot on European and American newspapers

and TV channels. And #iranelection was the highest-ranking hashtag on Twitter for over a week following the election, again only momentarily dropping to the second spot after Michael Jackson's death. Keen to 'support' the Iranian uprising, the US State Department even urged Twitter to reschedule its planned 90 minutes maintenance service.

In contrast, the international media failed to report the Tunisian revolution of 2010 for weeks, and the sole offer of support came from French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie (which was addressed to Ben Ali to help him to 'restore order' rather than offering support for the uprising). Not a single Western government initially supported the Tunisian and Egyptian people, and when they finally did, it didn't come close to the level of their support for the Iranian uprising. The expression of 'solidarity' for the people of the region has everything to do with the proximity of the ruling elites to Western imperial interests.

Criminalising solidarity with Palestine

In the case of genocide in Gaza, despite the overwhelming European (and global) public support for a ceasefire, Western politicians and mainstream media continue to express their unqualified support for the state of Israel in words and deeds. In the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israel's military revenge has resulted in the killing of over 70,000, of whom at least 20,000 are children. The published reports also indicate that more than 169,000 have been injured.[29] To this we should add the assaults and destruction of hospitals, schools, universities and the entire essential infrastructure in Gaza. As a result, life expectancy in Palestine dropped from an average of 75.5 years to 40.5 years during the period between October 2023 and September 2024.[30] Based on this estimate, which the authors themselves recognise as conservative, life expectancy in Gaza is 26 years less than in war-torn Sudan and 18 years less than in Somalia. Previously, and before the current genocide, Richard Horton, editor in chief of *The Lancet*, had highlighted, and objected to, the erasure of Palestine from the World Health Organisation's flagship *World Health Statistics 2022*.[31] This erasure is part of the elimination process of Palestinians from their land, map and history since the Nakba.

Since the ceasefire that officially started on 10 October 2025, Israel has attacked Gaza on an almost daily basis, killing over 400 Palestinians and injuring over 1000.[32] A ceasefire of this kind is a reminder of the so-called peace process that came into

effect as part of the disastrous Oslo Accords (1993-2001). Between 1993 and 2023 the movement of Israel's borders and army across the lands of the Palestinian people resulted in a threefold increase in Israelis living in settlements, from 250,000 to over 750,000. Yet Israel's clear and constant breaches of the agreements they have signed up to have received virtually no censure from the imperial countries of the West.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the role that France, Britain and Germany played in the colonisation of Palestine and redrawing of the map of the region has also been erased.[33] The Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 had all the hallmarks of colonial policy: it was done in secret, and with 'little regard to geography, ethnicity, religion, or much else beyond self-interest'.[34] A year later, in November 1917, came the Balfour Declaration, issued by the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour; as Edward Said commented, this was a decision 'made by a European power, about a non-European territory, in a flat disregard of both the presence and wishes of the native majority resident in that territory'; it took 'for granted the higher right of a colonial power to dispose of a territory as it saw fit'.[35] And while the imperial states today equate expressions of solidarity with Palestine with antisemitism, they try to erase their own long history of antisemitism and colonialism in shaping the Middle East in their own image and interests.

In July 2025 Chancellor Friedrich Merz even complained, without a hint of irony or shame, that the large numbers of migrants that had come to Germany had brought antisemitism to the country. Merz's grandfather, whom he has described as impressive personality, was a member of Nazi Party.[36] While failing to recognise the genocide in Gaza, Germany is simultaneously distancing itself from responsibility for the Holocaust, while the other imperialist powers also try to erase their own abhorrent antisemitism. The responses of Britain, France and Germany, not to mention the US, to the mass prison of Gaza being turned into a mass grave, has been an overwhelming support of Israeli actions in every sense, and a demonisation of Palestinians and their supporters.

In the five-year period 2020-24, Israel was the world's fifteenth largest importer of major arms, a significant shift from its ranking of 34th a decade earlier. The United States is the main supplier of arms to Israel (69 per cent), followed by Germany (30 per cent) and Italy (1 per cent).[37] Since the establishment of the state of Israel the United States has given $300 billion in foreign aid, and recently agreed to provide Israel with $3.8 billion per year through to 2028, including $500

million per year for missile defence.[38] Germany's support for Israel, as Liz Fekete has suggested, can't be explained by a simple reference to Germany's attempt to atone for the Holocaust.[39] In defending 'the right of Israel to defend itself', Keir Starmer even went as far as suggesting that Israel had the right to cut off water and power from Gaza. Such brutal and unflinching solidarity with Israel is of course based on shared interests as colonising and imperialist powers. And yet such expressions of solidarity with Israel can't be sustained without criminalising solidarity with Palestinians. The US, Britain, Germany and France, in particular, have used existing anti-terror legislation or drafted new laws (such as proscribing Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation) to extend criminalisation to those that are taking their state to task for their complicity in genocide. This criminalisation has included increasing levels of censorship and surveillance; further restrictions on freedom of speech and the right to protest; the unprecedented use of police powers; deportation and the revoking of the right to remain and citizenship; and the cancelling and uninviting of artists, musicians, academics and celebrities who have raised a voice against genocide. The oppression of Palestinians by the 'only democracy' in the Middle East has never been so intertwined with the assaults on the most basic democratic rights of British, French and German citizens.

Solidarity and the colonial legacy

I would like to conclude by highlighting a different aspect of the crucial paradox that Inouye and others have identified. Current levels of injustice in both Palestine and Iran have everything to do with colonial and imperialist intentions and material interests. As attacks on Iran are at times justified in the name of preventing the Iranian regime from killing protesters, and as the new 'vision' for rebuilding Gaza is presented by the US and Israel, the question of who is allowed to speak and decide is ever more urgent. The Nakba, and its devastating present-day repeat in Gaza, is of course no longer a matter of the right to narrate. It is not as if the stories and accompanying images of the catastrophe in Gaza can be denied. Neither Israel nor the imperialist powers that have sustained it feel the need to deny what has happened and is still happening since the Nakba. Unwilling to deny the brutal reality of a settler-colonial state, they have shifted gear and actively justify the ongoing Nakba. There is simply no shame. The survival of the settler state is all that matters.

The ongoing and permanent war against Iran is equally bereft of any ethical consideration. Even before the recent attacks, the sanctions had seriously weakened the Iranian people, and placed them between the rock of an Islamic state and the hard place of imperialist malice. The narrative and the choice offered by the imperial powers here is even simpler: choose between dictatorship or imperialist intervention (as if they are mutually exclusive).

In both cases it is people and their agency that is being denied and erased. Safeguarding imperialist interests in Iran is served by the pretence of support for Iranian protesters, and in Palestine by criminalising solidarity.

Rashid Khalidi has suggested that since 2023 'another element has emerged … the unequal value that Western elites place on Israeli lives (coded as 'white') on the one hand, and Arab lives (coded as 'brown') on the other':

> The egregious double standard has produced a toxic, repressive atmosphere in the spaces dominated by … elites in the United States, notably the political arena, corporations, the media, and university campuses.[40]

The racialisation of Iranians is no less visible. As we have noted, Donald Trump's noises against the Islamic Republic's brutal crackdown on protesters in January 2026 included urging Iranians to protest because 'help was on its way';[41] while Scott Bessent, US treasury secretary, actually took credit for the protests in Iran, suggesting that the US sanctions had worked: 'This is economic statecraft, no shots fired, and things are moving in a very positive way here.'[42] Leaving aside for one moment the complete reversal of this position in little more than a month, Bessent here was effectively celebrating the disempowering of the Iranian people, and Iranian women in particular. Meanwhile, Trump's offer of support was used by the Iranian regime as an excuse to kill, injure and arrest thousands of people and further demoralise the entire population of the country.

A related paradox in the case of Iran is the mismatch between local context and concerns and the framing and reception of these concerns outside the geographical boundaries of the local. In the case of the protests in Iran, the overwhelming feeling *outside* the country has been one of support, solidarity and encouragement. Yet the positive international coverage and support should not obscure a number of contradictions and dilemmas. The responses to the Women, Life, Freedom

uprising and the 2026 protests clearly demonstrate the danger of a local struggle being assimilated into something completely different, and hijacked/subjected to colonial interpretation and intervention. The patronising supporting statements encouraging Iranian women with such phrases as 'Go Girls!', or welcoming them 'to the 21st century' is precisely the equation of being modern with being western identified by Rao. What is being recognised and encouraged here is in fact the erosion of difference. The western obsession with Iranian women has turned them into Iran's Big Ben or the Empire State Building. And this reification of Iranian women's struggle against tyranny is the very opposite of solidarity. As Leila Abu-Lughod has demonstrated, the practice of constructing (some) Muslim women as 'cultural icons' has not only been used to simplify the complex realities of Middle Eastern societies; it has also been used as an excuse for military interventions that are partly justified by the need to 'save' Muslim women.[43] Since the 9/11, such 'cultural icons' have come to represent the dividing line between 'us' and 'them', modern and traditional, civilised and barbaric. The same logic is applied to Palestinian women, but in a different way.

The regime of representation is tied directly to imperial interests. Thus Western journalists have used their lack of access to Gaza (as if it was something natural) to dispute or underplay Israeli atrocities in Palestine. Yet their lack of access to Iran has hardly prevented them from covering events in Iran in detail. Liberal societies spawn liberal media that are supposed to be independent, to investigate and hold power to account, but there are other priorities, values and allegiances in tension with that aim, which prevent scrutiny outside of the frame set by states. (In the case of war this is even more evident - and Iran and Palestine certainly fall into this category.) For Palestine in particular this has meant no scrutiny at all. The coverage of both Palestine and Iran demonstrates that media doesn't need to be owned and controlled by the state for it to submit to and mimic the official line. This paradox is not novel, but it has a huge impact on the kind of solidarity that is emerging or being allowed to emerge.

In addition to the limits that are set on the possibility of solidarity, we might also want to direct our attention to the undeniable overlap of the fate of citizens in the centre and periphery. This argument is not a mere slogan, arising from a desire for solidarity between the oppressed at the global level. It is a recognition that something has changed in recent years. In the past, aggressive imperialist interventions and lootings, and all major wars, were usually accompanied by

policies favourable to the poor at the domestic level. As Stephen Eric Bronner has pointed out with particular reference to the United States, the Spanish-American war of 1898 was followed by a range of 'progressive legislation'; the vote for women came after World War I; the Second World War produced GI bills and was followed by welfare reforms in Europe; and various programmes associated with the 'Great Society' accompanied the Vietnam War.[44] Domenico Losurdo has similarly argued, with reference to settler colonialism, that 'the expropriation, deportation, and decimation of the natives … made it possible for poor whites to access property, so that the reigning political power in the USA, already sheltered from attacks from without, did not have to fear the threat harboured by bitter internal social conflicts'.[45] Furthermore, the condition of existence for the social stability and the rule of law for the white community was the complete lack of rights for enslaved Africans and free blacks.

But the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, the various military interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the escalation of drone warfare and other technological killing devices, have not been followed by policies favourable to the working classes in the West: instead they have been accompanied by the most regressive and brutal attacks on democracy, an increase in the range of state surveillance, a greater intolerance of dissent, and even the imposition of colonial-style emergency laws. The stark reality of the criminalisation and violent repression of solidarities in the US and Europe is undeniable. But the question of war against Palestine or Iran is no longer about being 'there': it is 'here' too.

Gholam Khiabany is Reader in Media and Communications, Goldsmiths University of London. He is the author of *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity* (2010); co-author (with Annabelle Sreberny) of *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2010); and co-editor of *Liberalism in Neoliberal Times: Dimensions, Contradictions, Limits* (2017) and *After Charlie Hebdo: Terror, Racism and Free Speech* (2017). He is an editor of the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Notes

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