

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict, and Media

**A Conversation about Iran in a Time of War:
A Battlefield of Narratives**

Shahriar Khonsari & Cherian George

Abstract: In November 2025, Shahriar Khonsari was one of the scholars who responded to the call for abstracts for this journal's special section. His abstract was accepted, but because he lives in Tehran, Iran, following through was more complicated for him than for most contributors. On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched massive strikes against his city and country. The Iranian government's internet shutdowns temporarily cut off our communication with him. He nevertheless managed to submit a manuscript in March. Given the extraordinary circumstances, the editors decided that the standard review and revision process would be unreasonable. Furthermore, we knew that he would have valuable perspectives to offer that could not be captured in a standard academic article. Therefore, what follows is an edited interview with him by guest editor Cherian George. It is based on an email interview followed by a Zoom conversation conducted in mid-May 2026. It incorporates ideas from his submitted paper but also goes beyond, to discuss the challenges of critical scholarship in the midst of war.

Keywords: Iran, war, nationalism, anti-imperialism

Author information:

Shahriar Khonsari is a photographer and writer in the fields of media and communication. He holds an M.A. in Photography from the University of Art, Tehran, and an M.A. in Communication for Development from Malmö University, Sweden. His academic pursuits reflect a deep commitment to using visual media as a tool for social change and development.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8140-6560>

E-Mail: khonsari2000@gmail.com

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Cherian George:

For you, nationalism and conflict are not an abstract or theoretical issue. There is a war happening around you. So, I should start by asking how this war has affected you and your loved ones?

Shahriar Khonsari:

Fortunately, my loved ones and I have not been physically harmed. I have experienced war before, but this time when a bomb fell in my neighbourhood, it felt like an earthquake, like nothing I have experienced before.

War impacts how the person feels about his/her security, future prospects, and interactions with others. It alters people's outlook on themselves, their place in society, and their participation in politics. As for me, I will forever live in dread of the results of war. No matter what mundane chores I have to do, there is no way that I will not think of safety and all sorts of things that may happen.

Even when daily life remains unchanged, there is always an underlying tension and an ongoing sense of uncertainty – fear of losing security, fear of the unknown, and fear of disruption of a peaceful way of life. At the same time, war affects how we perceive our identity, place in this world, and obligations.

This makes war and nationalism very personal. War alters the nature of day-to-day existence, making you less secure and forcing you to look at the future and your relations to others in a different way. War is a part of family discussions, relationships between friends, and even our routines.

War thus undermines the distinction between public and private domains. No longer does it concern some abstract events in politics and history that occur externally. It influences the way people communicate, their fears, aspirations, and outlook on the future. It is difficult to convey this properly to someone who hasn't experienced it.

Cherian George:

One of the stated objectives of this war on Iran is or was regime change. The regime in question emerged from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, widely regarded as one of the most important events of the 20th century. Its meaning, though, is a matter of interpretation. It has been seen as announcing the arrival of political Islam: a revolution that installed a fundamentalist theocracy. But it is also seen as a major milestone in 20th century decolonisation. So, depending on which narrative we privilege, Iran's response to the U.S.-Israeli attack could be regarded as a holy war or an anti-imperialist struggle. I imagine both narratives probably co-exist in Iran today?

Shahriar Khonsari:

Yes, on the one hand, Iranian media loudly recognise cosmopolitan struggles against domination, such as Palestinians' plight or African anti-colonial movements, but on the other hand, they remain fundamentally ethnocentric and Sharia-centric.

The "holy war" rhetoric is still evident — we become martyrs, we go to heaven and things like that. But when addressing a global audience that includes Christian people, they know they cannot say this is a holy war. So, anti-imperialist rhetoric

becomes one of the core languages used by the state's media to articulate Iran's position in the world and explain the world itself.

According to this narrative, Iran represents a country that is being attacked by an imperialist power and yet, at the same time, represents a moral example for the region. Western interference in the Middle East, economic sanctions, Israeli military operations, and U.S.-led pressure become part of a broader historical process designed to subordinate Iran and its region to the West and to ensure its dependence on the imperial centre.

This strategy predates the current war. It goes back to the "12-Day War" in June 2025, when Israel and the U.S. bombed Iranian facilities. Iran deliberately fashioned narratives targeting regional publics, diasporic communities, and global South audiences whose perceptions matter for Iran's international standing.

Cherian George:

In this battle for hearts and minds beyond its borders, Iran, like other authoritarian states, has invested in international media outlets to project its voice outwards. Can you tell us more about how Iran uses its external media?

Shahriar Khonsari:

Press TV was established as the English language broadcaster of Iran and, right from its inception, it was seen by Iranian authorities as an alternative to the hegemony of Anglo-American news channels and their consistent omission or even misrepresentation of viewpoints that originated from Iran and other countries in the region. The intended audience for Press TV has always been foreign, and specifically, those who subscribe to a critique of Western power, imperialism, and warfare. It tries to cater to the interests of listeners from the developing world who have their own history of colonisation and sovereignty struggles. It also targets politically disenchanted and sceptical individuals in Europe and North America who do not trust mainstream Western media.

It presents Iran not as an isolated state characterised by authoritarianism, but rather as a player in an international struggle against subjugation. This requires placing the focus on topics such as the situation in Palestine, economic sanctions, the actions of the United States of America, double standards, and resistance. The channel seeks to cast Iran as a voice for those who have been oppressed by presenting a challenge to the power structures of international media representations.

From the start of the 12-Day War, Press TV had a heavy focus on such themes as sovereignty, deterrence, and victimhood: portraying Iran as a country that is subject to attack but able to respond effectively to it.

Press TV also focuses on Western hypocrisy. By comparing reactions to attacks on Iran with the silence or the selective approach taken when it comes to other acts of violence in the Middle East region (particularly Palestine), the network attempts to make the 12-Day War a symbol of something greater. It portrays Iran not only as a target but also as part of the anti-imperialist resistance movement.

Cherian George:

Western hypocrisy is a soft target that China's external media and especially Russia's RT have been able to pursue with some success. Even in my country, Singapore, which is in many respects pro-U.S., Chinese propaganda mocking Western double standards in international affairs gets an appreciative audience. Much of this propaganda is not through state media such as CGTN or China Daily but via social media memes and reels. And this seems to be also the case with Iran. In this war, Iran's social media posts seem to resonate with even Western audiences. One Guardian report¹ said that Iran's Gen Z tech warriors are winning the propaganda battle by producing witty memes and posts ridiculing Trump. Is this something new for Iran? What's behind this trend?

Shahriar Khonsari:

Yes, I do believe that there is indeed something quite novel here, although caution needs to be exercised when making claims of novelty. The regime has been waging its own information war against its opponents for many years now. Its means have ranged from the official broadcasting service on Press TV to other propaganda machinery spread across different parts of the world. The difference lies in the approach and the cultural awareness of this kind of propaganda, especially online.

In today's day and age, propaganda is less about authority or repetition and more about the ability to spread messages. A humorous meme ridiculing Trump's actions or the double standards of the West might reach an audience far beyond anyone interested in pro-Iranian propaganda. In other words, the message will not be viewed as the messaging of the Iranian state anymore but rather as a witty joke or a clever idea that coincides with people's views on their politicians or the country's enemies.

I believe that some combination of factors is responsible for this development. First, it is a matter of generation and aesthetics, where younger internet producers understand the language of online attention much better than the official state media organisations. Second, it is a question of strategic importance: understanding that modern narrative warfare is conducted across different platforms and not merely through news broadcasting. Lastly, Iranian political propaganda can connect with the global zeitgeist of scepticism towards official media, disappointment with Western foreign policy, and ironic online politics.

Furthermore, humour creates a specific advantage, since it allows lowering the defences of the audience. For example, memes can express political points of view in a more relaxed way rather than through official arguments, and sarcasm can be much more devastating in a political campaign than any kind of argument. If the United States is shown to be violent and hypocritical, as well as ridiculous, that would have an effect online.

On the other hand, one must be cautious when calling this a clear-cut "win". Viral videos are not always convincing videos, nor are all videos appearing to support an

¹ Wintour, P. (2026, April 15). Viral victory: Iran is beating the land of tech bros in the social media wars. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/15/iran-beating-us-social-media-wars>

Iranian narrative directly produced by Iranian authorities. However, it is evident that the narrative strategy employed by Iran has adjusted to a different type of media landscape where influence is gained less through top-down broadcasting and more through immersion in everyday digital culture. While the anti-imperialist message itself is hardly ground-breaking, the packaging of this message into a meme-based, ironic format, and its delivery through social media platforms is certainly more contemporary and perhaps more influential for Western audiences than traditional forms of state-sponsored media.

Cherian George:

Let's talk more about the anti-imperialist narrative. I think it resonates globally, and not just among Muslims. We know that within the U.S., most Americans do not support the war², and many relate this massive error to the imperial presidency that Donald Trump is intent on installing. Then there is the State of Israel's criminal conduct in Gaza and the West Bank, and its "forward defence" strategy in southern Lebanon, which seems to amount to an occupation. It should be no surprise that many people around the world believe that Iran's enemies deserve the "imperialist" label. Does that make Iran "anti-imperialist"?

Shahriar Khonsari:

It is not anti-imperialist. When you are against the U.S., you become friends with China. We know how China treats Muslim Uyghurs. If you are anti-imperialist, you should be against that too. But we don't talk about it. Iran is also friends with Russia. When Russia attacked Ukraine, we helped the Russian army. Some people say that Iran even sent some military personnel there. Iran is not anti-imperialist. We just use such discourses to say we are doing the right things.

Such narratives are closely related to Iran's doctrine of the "Axis of Resistance". Iranian media sees the activities of Hezbollah, Hamas, and other affiliated militant groups not only as separate actions but also as manifestations of collective resistance to imperialism and Zionism. The Iranian TV network Al-Alam hired Syrian journalists to give Iranian viewpoints on the Syrian civil war, giving strength to the idea of an "Axis of Resistance". This allows Iran to gain an international dimension in the narrative. The country is seen not only as an object of exploitation by Western powers but also as the core of an international resistance movement.

When discussing its position in the world, Iranian media uses terminology that refers to international justice, global oppression, and liberation struggle. In other words, the terminology sounds universal and even cosmopolitan in nature. Cosmopolitan journalism is supposed to highlight global justice, celebrate diversity, and help us understand each other across cultures. However, when speaking about resistance from inside the country, Iran draws sharp lines between political belonging, nationality, and ideology. They push aside ideas that don't fit the state's revolutionary narrative.

² How public opinion on the Iran war has evolved. IPSOS, April 17, 2026. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/how-public-opinion-iran-war-has-evolved>

So, there are these ethical and political dissonances in an internationalism that appears counter-hegemonic at the global level, but at the same time brutally refuses the very basic rights and diversity of its own citizens. Its “cosmopolitan” position is an empty one as it is based not on universal humanist values. It is put forward merely as a strategic tool for regime survival instead of sincere global justice.

Cherian George:

Domestically, how has the state and its media used nationalism at this time of war?

Shahriar Khonsari:

The IRIB is the national broadcaster. It is a fortress of conservative and hard-line loyalty to the Supreme Leader. Externally, Iran has Al-Alam and the news agency IRNA. They do not just report events but interpret them according to the narratives of resistance, sovereignty, sacrifice, and historical victimhood.

In domestic politics, this approach accomplishes multiple goals. First, it contributes to what can be referred to as the “rally around the flag” effect. In times when Iran finds itself involved in military confrontation or under foreign pressure, state media sources focus on the themes of national unity, perseverance, and allegiance to the political authorities and, in particular, the Supreme Leader.

The discourse of resistance is useful to legitimise Iran’s responses, such as its blocking of the Hormuz Strait, as morally motivated action. The experience of suffering becomes political. According to this narrative, it does not demonstrate the inability of the nation, but proves that Iran is subjected to pressure as a result of its unwillingness to submit.

The regime realises that revolutionary Islam has not been successful in bringing the country together. As a result, it turns back to nationalism to reach those Iranians who are more in touch with Iranian civilisation than with the clerical state. For example, at his first public appearance after the 12-Day War, then-Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly asked a religious eulogist to perform “Ey Iran”, a pre-revolutionary patriotic song. Protesters had used “Ey Iran” as an anthem to rally against the regime. The song is also part of Iranian diaspora culture. The state’s attempt to hijack this secular patriotic symbol was part of a strategy to combine its revolutionary identity with a deeper historical memory.

During the 12-Day War, Tehran Municipality erected a statue of Arash the Archer on Vanak Square. Arash is a legendary character from the Shahnameh (Book of Kings) whose story is that he gave his life by turning his soul completely into an arrow to defend Iran’s borders. The story of Arash dying to save the border was used by the state to present the state’s survival and holding on to national territory as a heroic victory.

In November 2025, the government erected a colossal sculpture in Enghelab (Revolution) Square. The area is mostly used for Islamist and revolutionary iconography, but the new statue depicted the Sasanian King Shapur I accepting the surrender of the kneeling Roman Emperor Valerian.

Thus, the state is trying to appeal to secular patriots who hate the clerical system but might be moved by the cause of national survival. By appropriating the anthems and

great heroes that were a source of inspiration for the regime's critics at home, the state reveals that it has its back against the wall. It is unable to gain the legitimization it needs through real politics and therefore is forced to resort to the trick of performative nationalism. The shift in focus from revolutionary Islam to a hybrid national identity reveals that the survival of the state no longer depends on the steadfastness of its ideology, but instead on the extent to which it can conceal its serious structural weaknesses by means of symbolic misdirection.

Despite the civic and unifying nature of this kind of patriotism, it is still defined in a rather narrow way through ideological commitment, religious identity, and security-based nationalism. Thus, while the government claims to speak on behalf of the nation, it simultaneously determines who belongs to it and what forms of political activism are legitimate.

Cherian George:

Now that you have raised the topic of the state's intolerance of dissent, we should talk about your own safety and the safety of other critical writers and photographers.

Shahriar Khonsari:

I already lost my university job five years ago. I was an adjunct professor teaching photography and history of art. And one day they said, sorry, you cannot teach anymore. So I cannot make a living inside academia. Taking photos can be very dangerous. They can accuse me of being a spy and execute me. Because of my family, I censored myself. I stopped using a professional camera.

I started to write more. I believe they don't read academic works. But if you write in some major news agencies, they're going to find you and they're going to arrest you. It's really sad. Because we have lots of great people. They could write great stories, essays and great books about our issues in Iran. But nobody is there to do it.

Cherian George:

Using an academic venue like this may be safer but it is not without risk. So where does your courage come from?

Shahriar Khonsari:

I don't know, maybe because I saw many things and I think we should do something about that. You see the government's responses to people's uprisings. Last year was one of the worst. For me, the 2009 protests [after the disputed presidential election] was a turning point. Before that, we thought we can change something. After that, there was hopelessness, and people said that we should do something outside this system. I felt I should do my part. I'm old, around 50. I cannot be some kind of guerrilla fighter or something like that. But I can write.

Cherian George:

Thank you. Although it's impossible to do proper public opinion polls in Iran, do you have a sense of whether the Israeli and U.S. attacks have made Iranians more

patriotic? Do you know Iranians who were previously determined to fight the regime, but are now more focused on national survival?

Shahriar Khonsari:

Yes, I believe that there is indeed a genuine, albeit perhaps temporary, sense of patriotism in times when Iran faces external attacks. Such events do not necessarily result in increased support of the regime in any substantial and long-term way, but it certainly may be the case that those individuals who strongly criticise the Iranian regime nevertheless pay more attention to their country's survival, its integrity, and security.

In such cases, people may stop paying attention to certain political distinctions and may be less critical of repressive actions or corruption committed by the regime while simultaneously rejecting the application of force from abroad as an appropriate response. Indeed, attacks on one's nation serve the regime well by making the population regard them as defenders of their nation and hence reduce dissent.

Therefore, yes, it is possible for some Iranian citizens to suddenly switch their priorities from fighting the regime to ensuring safety, integrity, and survival of the nation when they face such threats.

On the other hand, such consequences should not be exaggerated. There is great mistrust towards governmental structures in Iran as well, and people perfectly understand that their government exploits threats from abroad in order to justify its actions and legitimise its power domestically. And here one can feel love towards one's motherland but at the same time complete estrangement from the state. There is an important difference between one's attachment to the country and allegiance to its government.

Cherian George:

I am guessing that this rally-around-the-flag effect may be partly due to successful state propaganda, but is probably also due to the death and destruction that Iranians see with their own eyes.

Shahriar Khonsari:

Yes, it certainly appears to be both. Iran's political elite is certainly accustomed to using moments of crisis as opportunities for unity and struggle against a common enemy. However, propaganda becomes more potent when it is tied to something real, and this is when the second point comes into play.

If there are air strikes, casualties, damages to infrastructure, or the constant threat of everyday life becoming chaotic at a moment's notice, these situations create true feelings of vulnerability and danger. In this context, even those who are opposed to the government will find that their main concern is not changing the political situation but rather ensuring safety for their family, society, and the nation itself from this destruction.

Thus, when a person who has spent many years criticising the government sees civilians suffer, or being threatened by the wider war, or realising how expendable the

lives of Iranians are considered by other nations, they might have an intense reaction for reasons not only driven by propaganda.

That is what makes the rally effect powerful. The government provides the interpretation framework, but the emotional drive often originates from personal experiences.

However, it is frequently only a short-lived phenomenon. After the initial shock wears off, however, most citizens revert to their earlier negative assessments of the government due to the fundamental issues of legitimacy, oppression, and distrust.

Cherian George:

And what is the collective, unmediated experience of the war that makes Iranians angrier with Israel and the U.S. than with their own government?

Shahriar Khonsari:

People see death, injury, destruction of property, scared citizens, and destruction of the routine way of life. During such situations, the initial feelings of hostility will arise towards the outside entity that is responsible for such actions. No propaganda is required for people to be angry towards the state or states that impose violence on them through bombs, intimidation tactics, or economic sanctions.

Moreover, there is a psychological logic behind this reaction. While people can be as critical of their state as much as they wish to be, there is a certain sense of violation when an attack is committed from an outside source. It is easier to rebel against a repressive or corrupt state. On the other hand, when people feel that other states are imposing misery upon the country, anger arises out of a sense of indignity as well as fear – that the lives of Iranian people are expendable, their sovereignty does not matter, and their lives are sacrificed due to international politics.

War also shrinks the focus of moral attention. At the point when there have been some attacks, people tend to concentrate less on the underlying issues related to the crisis and more on the most obvious source of the problem. Thus, if houses are blown up and civilians are murdered, the external enemy gets more attention in terms of emotions than it normally should do despite all the dissatisfaction with the internal political regime.

Under the conditions of attacks, internal dissatisfaction seems secondary, not because these feelings diminish at all, but just because survival is more important at the moment. One might think like this: “I still oppose this government, but for now we are being attacked.” This way, people tend to feel less critical about the internal political situation, which looks like an identification with the government, while in fact, they demonstrate solidarity with the whole country as well.

Cherian George:

Although I have never experienced war, I can relate to the point you make about the sense of helplessness when your society is caught up in international conflict. At a discursive level, I saw this in Hong Kong where I work. In 2019 there was an uprising in Hong Kong that was largely domestic. But it very quickly got framed as part of the geopolitical contest between China and the United States. Once that happened, I

found it was impossible to discuss the city's future in terms of Hongkongers' own interests. Any point of view would not be judged on its own merits, but always in terms of whether it scored a point for China or the West. You had to take sides, and if you didn't, you had to stay silent, or risk being attacked as being on the other side. In this way, Hong Kong ceased to be a real place inhabited by 7 million people. It became an icon, relevant only for what it represented geopolitically.

Shahriar Khonsari:

Yes, this is happening to Iran, very profoundly. Instead of being viewed as a society of more than eighty million people with many different political agendas, social tensions, and problems, Iran is always spoken about in symbolic terms within the broader context of geopolitics, with some calling Iran an anti-imperial resistance while others seeing it as an authoritarian theocratic state that plays out the proxy struggle of larger powers. Speaking about Iran as a society in its own right becomes much more difficult.

At this point, positions begin to be evaluated in terms of what they symbolise geopolitically. Criticising Iran might mean getting associated with the call for sanctions, intervention, or a certain civilisational view on Islam and authoritarianism. If one criticises Israel or the USA or mentions the existence of any sort of external pressure, then such a position will be perceived as a form of apologia of state repression.

Iran is no longer a social reality but becomes a projection screen for other people's moral and strategic fantasies. Internally, the state exploits this phenomenon by claiming that opposition is helping the enemy. Externally, many analysts reduce Iranian society to a monolithic narrative that conforms to their own ideological preconceptions. In effect, this creates a dual deconstruction: the first involves the reduction of social complexity, while the second entails the elimination of the capacity of the Iranian people to envision political alternatives beyond regime affiliation or foreign collusion.

I believe that this is one of the most corrosive consequences of geopolitical crisis. It is not just about violence and repression, but it is also about linguistic colonisation. It becomes increasingly difficult to make a distinction between solidarity and exploitation, between criticism and propaganda, between national self-preservation and state legitimacy. For the average person, it may very well generate precisely the scenario you have mentioned: when every utterance is made to conform to a geopolitical balance sheet, silence may begin to look like the safest alternative.

Indeed, that would be my answer. Iran operates within global discussions as more of an abstraction of conflict than an actual society with its own complex internal divisions. The task, then, is to try to restore Iran into a place where real people live, rather than a symbol of civilisation, opposition, and threat.