

American imperialism and the oppression of Iran

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On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel, without even a formal declaration of war, launched a massive attack on Iran, striking military bases, government facilities and cities across the country. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in the initial assault, along with numerous other officials and an unknown number of civilians. Schools, hospitals, and cultural heritage sites were damaged or destroyed.

Within days, the United States had dropped 5,000-pound bunker-buster bombs on Iranian missile sites along the Strait of Hormuz. A US submarine torpedoed and sank the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean, a vessel the Pentagon knew to be unarmed, as it was returning from a multinational naval exercise that required participating ships to carry no ammunition. Eighty crew members were killed. It was the first ship sunk by an American submarine since World War II.

As of this lecture, the war has been underway for more than three weeks. More than 1,500 people have been killed in Iran, including at least 160 in an American missile strike on a girls' school. Over 4,000 civilian buildings have been damaged. In self-defense, Iran has responded with missile and drone strikes across the Gulf region, hitting targets in Israel, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world's oil ordinarily flows, has been effectively closed. Oil prices have surged past \$110 a barrel. The International Energy Agency has described the situation as the "greatest global energy security challenge in history." Twenty thousand seafarers are stranded in the Gulf. International shipping has ground to a halt.

President Trump has demanded Iran's "unconditional surrender." He has threatened to strike Iran's nuclear plants and power grid. He has declared that regime change "will happen." The United States Defense Secretary has said the military will not relent until "the enemy is totally and decisively defeated." American intelligence's own assessments, meanwhile, have concluded that Iran's alleged long-range ballistic missile threat to the United States is unfounded, with such capabilities requiring development until at least 2035.

The attack was launched on the very night that Omani mediators reported major progress in nuclear negotiations and that Iran had agreed, in principle, to zero out its enriched uranium stockpile. Iran's foreign minister had publicly stated that a "historic" agreement to avert war was "within reach." The United States chose war over a negotiated settlement.

The danger of a widening conflagration is not hypothetical, but rather an active variable in the calculations of every government on earth.

The historical parallel that imposes itself is not the Gulf War of 1991 or the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but August 1914. The First World War began as a regional conflict in the Balkans and expanded, through the logic of alliances, imperial rivalries and miscalculation, into a global catastrophe that destroyed four empires and killed 20 million people.

The mechanisms of escalation in the present crisis are no less dangerous. The interconnection of the Iran war with the conflicts in Ukraine, the South China Sea and the broader US confrontation with both Russia and China means that a single incident—a stray missile striking a NATO member, a naval confrontation in the Gulf, an attack on a nuclear facility—could trigger a chain of events that no government has the capacity to control. The working class and all of humanity confront a situation that Trotsky described so prophetically on the eve of World War II. The ruling class "now toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe."

This war is "a crime against peace," the first and most fundamental charge in the indictment brought against the Nazi leadership at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945–46. Of the 22 defendants tried at Nuremberg, 13 were found guilty of waging wars of aggression. Eleven were hanged on October 16, 1946. Hermann Goering, Hitler's second-in-command, escaped the noose by swallowing cyanide hours before his scheduled execution.

The chief American prosecutor at Nuremberg, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, opened the trial with words that remain the most authoritative statement of the principle that international law binds the powerful no less than the powerless. "The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes a grave responsibility," Jackson declared. "The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated."

Jackson insisted that the law established at Nuremberg could not be applied selectively. "While this law is first applied against German aggressors," he wrote, "the law includes, and if it is to serve a useful purpose it must condemn aggression by any other nations, including those which sit here now in judgment." And he stated, with a bluntness that indicts the entire subsequent history of American foreign policy, "Any resort to war—to any kind of a war—is a resort to means that are inherently criminal. An honestly defensive war is, of course, legal. But inherently criminal acts cannot be defended by showing that those who committed them were engaged in a war, when war itself is illegal."

By the standard Jackson articulated and the Tribunal enforced, the war against Iran is an aggressive war, launched without provocation, without authorization from the United Nations Security Council, without a declaration of war by the US Congress, and in violation of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity of any state. Iran had not attacked the United States. It posed no imminent threat to the United States. It was in the process of negotiating a comprehensive agreement.

The European imperialist powers are entirely complicit in this crime. Their differences with Washington, to the extent that they exist, are of a purely tactical character. The European Union issued a statement on March 1 that did not condemn the US-Israeli surprise attack but instead

denounced Iran's retaliatory strikes as "inexcusable." The European Council "strongly condemned Iran's indiscriminate military strikes" while calling only for "maximum restraint" and the "protection of civilians"—language addressed to both sides as though the aggressor and the victim of aggression were morally equivalent. Germany's Chancellor Merz described Iran as a "major security threat" and argued that decades of diplomacy had failed. France deployed its aircraft carrier to the region to "protect French interests."

For four years, these same European governments have denounced what they call Russia's "unprovoked war" against Ukraine—a war that was, in fact, hardly unprovoked, having arisen directly out of the relentless eastward expansion of NATO and the systematic effort to transform Ukraine into a forward base of operations against Russia. But let us accept, for the sake of argument, the Europeans' own framing. They have invoked international law, the sanctity of sovereignty and the inviolability of borders. They have imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia and supplied Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars in weapons. Yet confronted with an indisputably unprovoked war launched by their principal ally against a nation of 91 million people—a war that has killed more than 1,500 civilians, closed the world's most important shipping lane, and threatens nuclear catastrophe—they have not uttered a single word of opposition. The "rules-based international order" has been exposed, once again, as a euphemism for the right of the imperialist powers to make war on whomever they choose.

It is necessary to address the narrative that has come to dominate virtually all public discussion of this war—on both the right and the left. That narrative holds that the war against Iran is to be explained primarily, and in some versions exclusively, as the product of Israeli and Zionist influence over American foreign policy. According to this account, the United States has no independent interest in conflict with Iran, was manipulated or coerced into the war by Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli lobby, and would pursue an entirely different course in the Middle East if freed from this malign influence.

This interpretation has been advanced most aggressively by figures on the nationalist right. Tucker Carlson, the most influential voice in this camp, declared on March 3, 2026: "This happened because Israel wanted it to happen. This is Israel's war. This is not the United States' war." Carlson went further, asserting that "The United States didn't make the decision here. Benjamin Netanyahu did."

Colonel Douglas MacGregor, former adviser to the Secretary of Defense, has argued in the same vein. Speaking two days before the war began, MacGregor stated, "I think he recognizes that he has not much choice. We have to understand who put him into the White House and the enormous power and influence of the Israel lobby and the Zionist billionaires in the United States that contribute to it." In a post on social media after the war began, MacGregor asked, "For what? So Israel that started this insane war can drag Americans into a wider regional conflict?"

This narrative has been largely accepted, with varying degrees of sophistication, by the left-liberal opposition as well. Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University economist, has described the war as driven by "two malignant narcissists, Netanyahu and Trump," and frames the conflict primarily as an Israeli project for "Greater Israel" and regional hegemony. Figures such as Max Blumenthal and Chris Hedges, and organizations like CodePink, which adopted the slogan "We won't die for Israel's war," have framed the conflict in essentially the same terms as the nationalist right, that is, as a war fought for Israel, not America.

There is no question that the Israeli lobby is real and that it expends immense resources to influence American policy. There is also no question that Israel has sought this war for decades, that Netanyahu provided the intelligence on Khamenei's location that made the February 28 strike possible, and that the Israeli regime, which has practiced

genocide in Gaza and whose character is increasingly and unmistakably fascistic, bears enormous responsibility for the catastrophe now engulfing the Middle East.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been second to none in its opposition to the Israeli state, an opposition that dates back to 1948, when the Fourth International opposed the formation of the state of Israel. The struggle, ideological and political, waged by Marxism against Zionism dates all the way back to the 1880s. Trotsky himself described Zionism as the promotion of a reactionary utopia, with potentially catastrophic consequences. His warning has been realized.

However, the explanation of the war as not only primarily but even solely a product of Zionist influence is profoundly wrong—not only as a historical analysis, but as a political perspective. It leads, whether its proponents intend it or not, to an apology for and even alignment with American imperialism. If the problem is Israeli influence, then the solution is to remove that influence and replace it with a "good" foreign policy that defends genuine "All-American" interests. Foreign policy becomes a matter of hygiene—of purging a foreign contaminant from an otherwise healthy body politic. This perspective is closely related to the reactionary, and essentially antisemitic, tradition that asserts a fundamental distinction between healthy and productive Christian capitalism and parasitic, usurious, Jewish-dominated finance capital. It is no accident that Carlson's commentary has migrated, within days, from criticism of Israel's foreign policy to conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the American state.

In the case of the present war, the Israel-centric narrative detaches the conflict from any coherent historical, geopolitical, socioeconomic and class analysis of its origins, causes, and aims. It essentially abandons imperialism as an analytical framework. It entirely ignores the long and pernicious role of British, German and finally American imperialism in the oppression of Persia-Iran. The issue of oil—the material foundation of the entire conflict—is pushed into the background. It totally disconnects this war from the protracted struggle waged by the United States against Iran since 1979, aimed at reversing the results of the Iranian Revolution, which has included vicious financial sanctions, military attacks, the use of proxies—Iraq and Israel, as well as the Gulf States—and, finally, the past 35 years of wars waged by the United States and its NATO allies across the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

Moreover, the Israel-centric interpretation severs the link between this war and the ongoing preparations of the United States for war against Russia and China. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has stressed, the aim of the United States is to abolish all the residual traces of the social and democratic revolutions of the 20th century, and to reorganize the world under the hegemonic control of the United States. This project is driven not simply by evil intentions, let alone the madness and criminality of Donald Trump, but by the imperatives of American capitalism to reverse the protracted deterioration of the global financial position of the United States through war.

Trump himself was brought to power by the American ruling class. His presidency is the product not of a popular insurgency but of the deliberate decision by dominant sections of the financial oligarchy to install in the White House a figure willing to employ the methods of the criminal underworld in the conduct of both domestic and foreign policy. The Epstein affair, in which a vast section of the financial and political elite is implicated in crimes of the most sordid character, offers a glimpse into the social milieu from which this administration emerged.

The war against Iran is being conducted by a government that is itself the expression of the terminal degeneration of American bourgeois democracy. Inseparably connected to the global imperatives of American capitalism is the use of war as a means of violently suppressing domestic working class opposition to the ruling capitalist oligarchy and the entire structure of capitalist exploitation.

The war in Iran, which followed the attack on Venezuela and the ongoing efforts to strangle Cuba, neither of which is related to Zionist interests, has developed against the backdrop of the fascistic paramilitary violence of ICE, which has included the murder of American citizens and the brutal persecution of the immigrant population. The logic of this war is not merely the logic of the Israeli lobby. It is the logic of imperialism in its epoch of historical crisis.

To demonstrate this, one must review the actual history of the American relationship with Iran, a history that long predates the modern Israeli state and that is rooted not in Zionist machinations but in oil, geopolitical control and the class interests of American capitalism.

To understand why the United States has been waging war—economic, covert, and now openly military—against Iran for nearly half a century, one must begin not with ideology but with geography. Iran sits at the intersection of three critical zones of the world economy: Central Asia, South Asia and the Persian Gulf. It possesses the world's fourth-largest proven oil reserves and the second-largest natural gas reserves. Moreover, Iran commands the northern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow passage through which, prior to the current war, approximately 20 percent of the world's oil supply transited daily.

No serious strategist in Washington has ever failed to understand this. The struggle over Iran has never been, in its essence, about terrorism, about nuclear weapons, about human rights or about Israel. These have all served as pretexts, rationalizations and instruments. The fundamental issue has always been who controls the oil resources of the Persian Gulf, and on what terms.

The imperialist powers grasped this long before the United States entered the scene. Britain began extracting Iranian oil in 1908 through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which became the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and, eventually, British Petroleum. For the first half of the 20th century, Iran was effectively a British semi-colony. Its oil wealth was extracted by a foreign corporation, its politics were shaped by the British embassy and its sovereignty was nominal.

Germany, too, recognized Iran's strategic importance. Under the Kaiser, German capital competed for influence in Persia as part of the broader rivalry with Britain, a rivalry that contributed to the outbreak of the First World War. During the Second World War, the Nazis cultivated relations with Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose germanophile tendencies alarmed the Allies sufficiently to justify the Anglo-Soviet invasion of 1941. The British seized the southern oil fields; the Soviets occupied the north. Iran's sovereignty was, as so often, dispensed with when it conflicted with great-power interests. It was into this arena of inter-imperialist competition that the United States entered during the Second World War—and it has never left.

This is not a secret. The 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States stated it with unusual candor: "America will always have core interests in ensuring that Gulf energy supplies do not fall into the hands of an outright enemy, and that the Strait of Hormuz remain open." That single sentence, written by Trump's own national security apparatus, demolishes the claim that the United States has no independent interest in a war against Iran.

The strategic importance of Iran to American imperialism was recognized not in 1979, and not in 2001, but during the Second World War. In November 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin convened at the Tehran Conference—the first meeting of the Big Three—in the capital of Iran. The choice of location was itself significant. Iran had been jointly invaded and occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union in August 1941, and it served as the critical supply corridor through which American Lend-Lease material reached the Soviet front.

At Tehran, the three leaders issued a joint declaration pledging to respect Iran's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promising economic assistance after the war. But the conference also

forced Roosevelt to confront a reality that would shape American grand strategy for the next eight decades, that whoever controlled Iran controlled the gateway to the richest oil reserves on earth.

The first great-power confrontation of the Cold War did not occur in Berlin or Korea. It occurred in Iran. Under the wartime occupation agreement, all Allied forces were to withdraw from Iran within six months after the end of hostilities. The United States and Britain withdrew on schedule.

The Truman administration, which had adopted a posture of "toughness" toward the former wartime ally, treated the Iranian crisis as a test case for the emerging doctrine of containment. The United States pressured the Soviet Union through the newly created United Nations Security Council—one of the first issues the body ever considered—and through direct diplomatic confrontation. Under combined pressure, the Soviets withdrew in May 1946.

The significance of this episode cannot be overstated. Iran was the first arena in which the United States asserted its will against the USSR and prevailed. It established the pattern—the defense of Western access to Persian Gulf oil as a core strategic imperative—that has governed American policy in the region ever since. And it established Iran as an American client state, a status that would be formalized and deepened over the next three decades.

The critical episode in the history of US-Iran relations, the one that explains everything that followed, occurred on August 19, 1953, when the CIA and British intelligence overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and reinstalled the Shah as Iran's absolute ruler.

Mossadegh's offense was that he had nationalized Iran's oil industry. Since 1908, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had extracted Iran's oil wealth while paying the Iranian government a fraction of the revenue. When Mossadegh moved to reclaim national control of this resource, Britain imposed an embargo and blockade and then turned to the United States for assistance in removing him from power.

The Eisenhower administration, presented with the opportunity by the British and motivated by both Cold War fears and the desire of American oil companies to gain access to Iranian concessions, authorized the CIA to execute the coup. The operation, codenamed Ajax, was led by Kermit Roosevelt Jr.—grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and cousin of the CIA agent Archibald Roosevelt Jr., who would later surface as an adviser to David Rockefeller at Chase Manhattan Bank. Some 300 people were killed in the fighting in Tehran.

In the coup's aftermath, the Shah consolidated absolute power. The secret police, SAVAK, was created with CIA and Israeli Mossad assistance. Major General Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., father of the Gulf War commander, was sent by the CIA to train the security forces that would enforce the Shah's rule. Oil was reorganized under a new consortium in which five American companies now shared the spoils alongside the renamed British Petroleum, Shell and French interests. The crushing of Iran's democratic experiment had served its purpose. American capital now had direct access to Iranian oil.

The claim that the United States has "no interest" in conflict with Iran is refuted not only by the historical record but by the US government's own classified and published strategic documents, which have identified Iran as a critical American interest, and as a threat, continuously since the 1950s.

The documentary trail begins immediately after the 1953 coup. NSC 5402/1, the first comprehensive statement of US policy toward Iran after Mossadegh's overthrow, established the framework. Iran was to be maintained as a pro-Western client state, its military supported, its oil flowing to Western markets. By 1958, NSC 5821/1, adopted by the Eisenhower National Security Council, stated the matter with characteristic bluntness. It stated, "Iran's strategic location between the

USSR and the Persian Gulf and its great oil reserves make it critically important to the United States that Iran's friendship, independence and territorial integrity be maintained." The document authorized the employment of American armed forces to protect Iran's territorial integrity and political independence.

From 1953 until 1979, the Shah served as Washington's "Gendarme of the Persian Gulf"—the phrase used in American strategic doctrine following the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, which held that regional allies, rather than American ground forces, should police the developing world on Washington's behalf. Between 1970 and 1978, the Shah ordered \$20 billion worth of American arms—what one member of Congress called "the most rapid build-up of military power under peacetime conditions of any nation in the history of the world." Iran became the single largest customer for US arms exports. Grumman, Bell Helicopter, Northrop, Rockwell International and dozens of other American defense contractors made billions from the relationship. By 1973, an estimated 3,600 American technicians were working on arms-related projects inside Iran, with the number projected to reach 25,000 by 1980.

Chase Manhattan Bank, under David Rockefeller, syndicated more than \$1.7 billion in loans for Iranian public projects, approximately \$5.8 billion in today's dollars. The Chase balance sheet held over \$360 million in direct loans to Iran and more than \$500 million in Iranian deposits. The financial, military and intelligence relationship between the United States and the Shah's regime was not a diplomatic alliance in the ordinary sense. It was a system of imperial extraction and control, lubricated by arms sales and banking profits, enforced by a secret police trained by the CIA, and justified by the Cold War.

SAVAK, the instrument of internal repression, was notorious. It operated with what the record describes as a "loose leash" to employ torture against suspected dissidents. Hundreds of people were executed for political reasons during the Shah's final two decades in power. Thousands were imprisoned. And the population of Iran knew that the Shah's power rested not on any domestic legitimacy but on the 1953 coup and the continuing support of the United States.

The American relationship with the Shah did not exist in isolation. It was embedded in a broader Western alliance in which the major European powers, and particularly the Federal Republic of Germany, were willing and profitable partners. Under Chancellors Adenauer, Erhard and Kiesinger, the West German government cultivated close relations with the Shah's regime. Germany was a major trading partner and investor in Iranian infrastructure. The West German government received the Shah with the full honors of a democratic ally, despite his well-documented record of political repression, torture and murder. The Shah was anti-communist, he had oil to sell, and that was sufficient.

The complicity of the German state in the Shah's dictatorship was clearly exposed on June 2, 1967, when the Shah visited West Berlin during the chancellorship of Kurt Georg Kiesinger—himself a former member of the Nazi Party. Students and exiled Iranians organized a protest near the Deutsche Oper, where the Shah was attending a performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Agents of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, operating under the protection of the Berlin police, attacked the demonstrators with wooden staves.

The police then launched what the journalist Sebastian Haffner described as "a cold-bloodedly planned pogrom of a type which remained an exception even in the concentration camps of the Third Reich." The conservative Frankfurter *Allgemeine Zeitung* concluded that the police had "without any serious necessity responded with the planned brutality one associates with newspaper reports from fascist or semi-fascist countries."

During the assault, 26-year-old student Benno Ohnesorg—married, with his wife expecting their first child, and attending his first political demonstration—was cornered in a courtyard. Three policemen held him while plainclothes detective Karl-Heinz Kurras shot him in the back of the

head. Ohnesorg was unarmed. He had attacked no one. Hospital records were falsified, and an attempt was made to conceal the bullet wound. Kurras was tried and acquitted. It was not the West Berlin police chief's methods that were anomalous; Erich Duensing had been a staff officer in the Wehrmacht under Nazi Germany.

The murder of Benno Ohnesorg became the catalytic event of the German student movement and the broader radicalization of 1968. But for the purposes of this lecture, its significance lies elsewhere. It demonstrated that the Shah's apparatus of repression operated not only inside Iran but on the streets of Western capitals, with the active complicity of Western governments. The dictatorship that the United States had installed in 1953 was maintained not only by American arms and American money but by the collaborative support of the entire Western imperialist alliance.

When the revolution came in January-February 1979, it represented one of the most devastating strategic defeats suffered by American imperialism in the postwar era, comparable in its consequences, though not in its form, to the loss of China in 1949. In a matter of weeks, the United States lost its most powerful regional ally, its principal intelligence platform overlooking the Soviet Union's southern border, its largest arms customer, its gendarme of the Persian Gulf, and the cooperative framework through which American and British capital extracted Iranian oil wealth. The entire architecture of American power in the Gulf region, painstakingly constructed since 1946, collapsed.

The revolution was driven by decades of accumulated grievances against the Shah's autocracy, his SAVAK secret police, the vast corruption of the royal court, the dislocations produced by rapid but uneven modernization and the suffocating inequality of a society in which oil wealth enriched a tiny elite while millions lived in poverty. But the United States was inseparable from the Shah in the Iranian popular consciousness. The 1953 coup was a living memory. The tens of thousands of American military and corporate personnel in the country were a visible daily presence. The revolution, whatever its internal dynamics, was inevitably experienced as a liberation from American domination.

It is this loss—not any subsequent Iranian action—that explains the 46-year campaign of hostility that followed. The United States has never accepted the outcome of the Iranian Revolution. Every subsequent policy—the support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, the destruction of Iran's navy, the shooting down of a civilian airliner, the decades of sanctions, the assassination of Soleimani, the bombing of nuclear facilities and now the full-scale war of 2026—has been directed toward a single goal: reversing the strategic defeat of 1979, either by bringing Iran back under American control or by destroying its capacity to function as an independent state.

The Carter Doctrine of 1980, announced in the wake of the revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, declared that any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region would be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States and would be repelled by military force. This doctrine has never been rescinded. In January 2002, Bush designated Iran part of an "Axis of Evil," at a moment when Iran was actively cooperating with the US against the Taliban. The 2006 National Security Strategy warned that "all necessary measures" would be taken against Iran. The 2017 strategy named Iran alongside North Korea as a rogue state. The 2025 National Security Strategy, as noted earlier, designated Iran an "outright enemy" and identified Gulf energy as a core American interest. The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, passed with bipartisan congressional support, named Iran as a US adversary.

Iran has been among the top five most-referenced countries in every strategy document since 2006. This is not a function of any single president or party, and it is not a product of the Israeli lobby. It is an institutional consensus of the American national security state, maintained

across four decades, rooted in the material interests of American capitalism in Persian Gulf energy resources and regional military hegemony.

The geopolitical and economic interests that drive US policy toward Iran are hidden from the American people. In the imperialist narrative that dominates the US media, Iran is cast as the ruthless aggressor against a blameless America. According to this narrative, Iranian “terrorism” began with the unprovoked seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and taking of hostages in November 1979.

The immediate trigger for the hostage crisis that formalized the US-Iran rupture deserves close examination, because it reveals the class interests that drove American policy from the very beginning.

After the Shah fled Iran in January 1979, President Carter initially refused to admit him to the United States. Carter wanted to establish relations with the new government and was warned by his own embassy staff that admitting the Shah would endanger American diplomats in Tehran. The chargé d’affaires, Bruce Laingen, explicitly warned that the risk of the embassy being overrun was high. Carter himself, at a key meeting, asked his advisers what they would tell him to do “after the embassy was overrun”—acknowledging that he understood the likely consequence.

What changed Carter’s mind was not humanitarianism but a sustained lobbying campaign organized by David Rockefeller, chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank. Rockefeller’s team called the operation “Project Eagle.” He mobilized Henry Kissinger, who chaired a Chase advisory board; John J. McCloy, a future Chase chairman and adviser to eight presidents; Archibald Roosevelt Jr., a Chase executive and former CIA agent whose cousin had orchestrated the 1953 coup; and Richard Helms, former CIA director and former ambassador to Iran. The overlap between the CIA network that had installed the Shah in 1953 and the banking network that lobbied to protect its investment in his regime was not coincidental. It was the same network.

Rockefeller’s financial interest was direct and substantial. Chase held over \$1 billion in Iranian assets. The new Iranian government was demanding the return of these assets. A withdrawal of that magnitude could have created a liquidity crisis for a bank already struggling with financial difficulties. Rockefeller had every reason to prevent the normalization of US-Iranian relations.

Carter was also misled about the Shah’s medical condition. He was told the Shah was near death and could only be treated in New York. The examining physician subsequently confirmed that neither claim was true. The treatment could have been provided anywhere, including Mexico, where the Shah was already residing. On October 21, 1979, Carter admitted the Shah. Twelve days later, the embassy was seized.

After the seizure, Chase’s actions further inflamed the crisis. The bank refused to accept a \$4 million interest payment from Iran on its due date, then unilaterally declared the Iranian government in default on the entire loan without consulting the other banks in the syndicate, and seized Iranian accounts. The White House was not informed in advance. The Special Coordination Committee rushed to the Situation Room to deal with a crisis that a private bank had escalated on its own initiative.

The hostage crisis became the founding grievance of American hostility toward Iran. But its proximate cause was a decision driven by the financial interests of American capital—specifically, the determination of Chase Manhattan Bank and its chairman to protect billions of dollars in assets tied to the fallen Shah.

Within a year of the revolution, Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, and the United States sided with the aggressor. The Reagan administration determined that Iraq’s defeat would be contrary to US interests in the Persian Gulf. A National Security Decision Directive of November 1983 made the objective explicit, to project American military force in the Gulf and protect oil supplies.

On December 20, 1983, President Reagan dispatched Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad as his special envoy. Rumsfeld met with Saddam Hussein for 90 minutes, and the two men shook hands for the cameras—a handshake that became one of the iconic images of American foreign policy. At the time of Rumsfeld’s visit, the United States was secretly aware that Iraq was using chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers on an almost daily basis. There is evidence that the battlefield intelligence provided by the US helped Iraq calibrate its gas attacks more effectively. Rumsfeld did not raise the issue of chemical weapons with Saddam. Full diplomatic relations between Washington and Baghdad were restored 11 months later.

The Reagan administration removed Iraq from the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism in 1984—the same year it placed Iran on that list. The US Senate Banking Committee subsequently documented that the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations authorized the sale to Iraq of dual-use items, including chemical precursors and biological agents such as anthrax and bubonic plague. The administration also engineered the sale of Bell helicopters, ostensibly for civilian use; Saddam’s military used them to attack Kurdish civilians with poison gas in 1988.

When the US Senate unanimously passed sweeping sanctions against Iraq in response to the gassing of the Kurds, the White House killed the measure. The United States defended Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons until the very day Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

As Saddam Hussein should have foreseen, his collaboration with US imperialism did not protect him against US reprisals after he transgressed against American oil interests in Kuwait. Eventually, Hussein’s life ended at the end of an American rope.

In 1987, the US launched Operation Earnest Will to escort Kuwaiti tankers—Kuwait being one of Iraq’s principal financial backers—through the Persian Gulf. In April 1988, the US launched Operation Praying Mantis, the largest American naval engagement since World War II, which destroyed a significant portion of Iran’s navy. Three months later, the USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian airliner on a scheduled route to Dubai, killing all 290 passengers and crew. The United States never formally apologized. The commanding officer was later awarded the Legion of Merit.

Alongside the military violence, the United States waged a parallel war of economic destruction that has been continuous and cumulative since 1979.

The Clinton administration imposed a comprehensive trade embargo in 1995–96 and introduced secondary sanctions—the first attempt to dictate the commercial behavior of third countries. The decisive escalation came in 2010–12, when the Obama administration leveraged the dominance of the dollar to compel countries to reduce their Iranian oil imports or lose access to the American financial system. Iranian oil exports fell from 2.2 million barrels per day to 860,000. The economy contracted by 6.6 percent in 2012. The rial collapsed. Inflation reached 45 percent.

The 2015 nuclear deal, the JCPOA, produced a brief reprieve: 12.5 percent GDP growth in 2016. Then Trump withdrew from the agreement in 2018, despite Iran’s compliance, and reimposed everything. Oil exports collapsed by over 60 percent. The rial fell from 37,000 to the dollar to over 120,000. Per capita GDP dropped from \$8,000 to \$5,000 between 2012 and 2024. By 2024, 57 percent of Iranians were experiencing malnourishment. Seven million were going hungry.

US sanctions on Iran are, by the Congressional Research Service’s assessment, “arguably the most extensive and comprehensive set of sanctions that the United States maintains on any country.” They target every major sector of the Iranian economy. As one sanctions researcher observed, “Economic sanctions make authoritarian regimes more authoritarian.” The sanctions eroded Iran’s middle class while strengthening the security state.

This war marks an irrevocable turning point. The world that existed before February 28, 2026, is gone. The criminality of the entire “rules-based international order” has been laid bare for the world to see. An entire nation has been subjected to saturation bombing by the world’s most powerful military, in an act of unprovoked aggression, while the “international community” watches in silence or offers its complicity.

Consider the historical trajectory. When Nazi Germany bombed the Basque town of Guernica in April 1937, the horror reverberated around the world. Picasso painted his masterpiece in response. When the Luftwaffe bombed Rotterdam in May 1940, killing nearly 900 people, it was denounced as an act of barbarism that shocked civilized opinion. Today, the United States and Israel are conducting a sustained aerial campaign against Iranian cities—more than a thousand civilians killed, thousands of buildings reduced to rubble, a girls’ school obliterated—and the response of the so-called democratic world is to condemn Iran for firing back.

This is not a matter of warning about World War III, as though it were some future eventuality that might still be averted by appeals to reason or the election of better leaders. We are witnessing its rapid intensification. Ukraine, Gaza, Venezuela and Iran are not separate conflicts. They are fronts in a single global war being waged by American imperialism and its allies to reorganize the world under their hegemonic control, to abolish the residual traces of the social and democratic revolutions of the 20th century, and to crush, by force, any state or movement that resists subordination to the dictates of Washington and Wall Street.

We live in a world that Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht and, above all, Trotsky would understand very well. The same contradictions they analyzed—between the global character of the productive forces and the nation-state system, between the social character of production and the private appropriation of wealth, between the drive of each imperialist power to dominate and the impossibility of any single power achieving unchallenged hegemony—are driving the world toward catastrophe with the same remorseless logic they described a century ago.

The struggle against war is an international question. It cannot be waged only within national boundaries, and it cannot be entrusted to any existing government. No amount of protest, however massive, directed at the existing capitalist states will stop the drive to war. The mass demonstrations of 2003 did not stop the invasion of Iraq. The worldwide outcry against the genocide in Gaza did not stop it. Appeals to the “rules-based order” will not stop the bombing of Iran. They will not stop the relentless escalation toward nuclear war.

The decisive question—the only question that ultimately matters—is the development of revolutionary leadership in the international working class. This is not a new insight. It was the central conclusion drawn by Leon Trotsky from the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century, and it has lost none of its force. In the founding document of the Fourth International, the Transitional Program of 1938, Trotsky wrote:

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet “ripened” for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only “ripened”; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.

That assessment, written on the eve of the Second World War, defines with even greater precision the crisis of the present moment. The objective

conditions for the overthrow of capitalism are not merely ripe, they are, as Trotsky warned, beginning to rot. The alternative is not reform or revolution, but revolution or catastrophe. The task of building the revolutionary leadership of the working class—the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections—is the urgent, overriding, and inescapable political task of our time.



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