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The Empire Versus Iran: Which Side Are You On?

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Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Fifty-eight years ago in Chicago, I marched down State Street with other antiwar protestors heading toward the site of the Democratic National Convention and made three discoveries. The first was that having a very large, truck-mounted M2 Browning 50 caliber machine gun pointed at you by U.S. Army troops is scary. The second was that CS tear gas makes it very hard to breathe. The third was that U.S. civilians like us were subjects of the same Empire that was then subjugating the people of Vietnam. Some of the soldiers understood this as well. When ordered to deploy to Chicago to suppress the demonstrations, 43 of them – all Black servicemen — refused to leave

Fort Hood, Texas, were tried for mutiny, and were sentenced to hard labor in the prison stockade.

I learned in the sixties that despite personalized slogans and chants (“Hey, hey, LBJ, How many kids did you kill today?”) the war in Indochina was not Lyndon Johnson’s or Richard Nixon’s war. It was an ultra-violent struggle to preserve and extend the U.S. Empire, with the Americans acting as successors to the French, the former imperial rulers of Vietnam. In the same way, the current “war of choice” against Iran waged by the U.S. and Israel is not just Trump’s or Netanyahu’s adventure but another imperialist campaign led by the Americans, this time acting as successors to the Middle East’s British and French colonizers.

Not just Trump’s war but the Empire’s. Why is this description important? Because other characterizations lead well-meaning opponents of the war to misunderstand it and to advocate ineffective cures for the systemic disease that produces it. For example, if the war in Iran is primarily a product of Trump’s megalomania or Netanyahu’s desire to stay in office, the cure is to replace these rulers with calmer, more diplomatic, more enlightened and liberal leaders. Right?

Wrong. The quality of leadership can make a difference, but if the system that the leader serves is an empire, he or she will finally act like an emperor. It was Lyndon Johnson, elected in 1964 as a liberal “peace candidate,” who began a war of choice against Vietnamese rebels that killed several million Vietnamese and more than 50,000 U.S. combatants. A generation later George W. Bush, the “compassionate conservative” who insisted that “America has never been an empire,” invaded Afghanistan and occupied Iraq, killing and maiming close to a million civilians in those state-building interventions. Bush’s successor, Barak Obama, an icon of liberalism and diplomacy, conducted more than 500 drone attacks against suspected terrorists in Asia and Africa without Congressional authorization and presided over the destruction and dismemberment of Libya by U.S. and NATO forces. And Joe Biden, his former vice-president, supplied Israel with weapons and intelligence used for genocide in Gaza, vetoed anti-Israel resolutions in the Security Council, struck the Houthis in Yemen with U.S. missiles, and authorized military operations labeled “counterterrorist” in 77 other nations.

With liberal diplomats like these as his predecessors, it’s no wonder that Donald Trump decided to run for president as a peace candidate! Perhaps, even as Trump sinks more deeply into the Iranian quagmire, he still believes that he can end the “forever wars”

fomented by the “deep state.” But his own imperial style bears witness to the fact that the state that he claims to command is no longer a republic. It is quite clearly an empire – a violence-generating entity with a complex political, economic, and military structure that includes some 800 U.S. bases in 90 countries, an armaments budget larger than those of the next ten heaviest military spenders, and a list of deceased war victims running into the millions.

The structure and violence of empire

Even as volatile and idiosyncratic a ruler as Trump discovers that his leadership role is largely defined by the system that encompasses it. The fact that this president is a flag-waving ethno-nationalist with fascistic inclinations makes his transformation from would-be peacemaker to imperialist warmaker highly likely. But the transformation and the wars that attend it are not just manifestations of Trump’s personality and ideology; they are also products of the Empire’s deep structure.

The outlines of that structure are well known. Imperial institutions are designed to project the power of a ruling elite beyond a nation’s borders to subject less powerful territories and peoples to its economic, political, and cultural control. Since ancient times, hierarchy is the name of this game, with a center dominating subordinate peripheries and a warrior class empowered to enforce that domination. Today, the imperial elite is composed of two major components: oligarchs and politicians, with the military an important but subordinate element of that leadership. The oligarchs are driven by the “iron laws” of the late-capitalist system to invest in and exploit peripheral nations. The politicians provide the empire with taxpayer funds, civilian and military manpower, and (to the extent possible) popular ideological consent. Together, these leaders create and fund a military-industrial complex that enables the imperial state to overwhelm its opponents with violent force.

No doubt, some leaders are more violent or crazier than others. Nevertheless, no matter who leads, the imperial structure generates three characteristic types of violence: rebellion/repression, civil and regional wars, and world wars. First, imperial domination naturally provokes resistance, and rebels must either be bought off or slaughtered. Second, since imperialism tends to unite the natives in opposition to foreign rule, imperial rulers seek to turn local groups against each other using “divide and rule” strategies that produce civil and regional wars. Third, especially in modern times when the capitalist economy has become global, imperialism generates competition between empires that spawns world wars.

The current U.S.-Israeli assault on Iran illustrates all three types of violence:

Rebellion/repression. Whatever political or personal reasons Trump may have had for attacking Teheran in 2026, Iran has been on the Americans' "enemy list" for decades. This is not because of the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions, theocratic ideology, or malicious hostility to the U.S. or Israel. The imperial elite considers Iran an enemy because since 1978, when the Iranian people overthrew the U.S.-installed Shah, Iran has been the principal source of resistance to American schemes to dominate the region using Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States as proxies. Wars such as the current campaign against Iran are commonly portrayed as defensive responses to "terrorist" violence, but they are aggressive wars of choice: the choice repeatedly made by the elite to protect and expand the Empire.

Divide and rule: This classical imperial strategy was used by the British in Palestine and Iraq and by the French in Lebanon and Syria to keep the locals divided. Successive U.S. administrations have employed similar tactics to favor Israel over Palestine and the Muslim states and to back conservative Sunni Muslim regimes against less "cooperative" Shiites. In Iran the Americans and Israelis have also encouraged and armed non-Persian groups such as the Kurds, Azeris, and Baluchs to rebel against the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, the Iranian drones now wreaking havoc in the Gulf States are a response to the establishment of at least 15 major U.S. military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman. Once again, "divide and rule" leads by a direct route to regional war.

World war: Like recent U.S. military operations in the Caribbean and Venezuela, the Trump regime conceived of the Iran War as a short-term "excursion" that would demonstrate America's and Israel's overwhelming military power at little cost to the attackers. Clearly, this was a gross miscalculation – but even if the U.S. had been better prepared, regional conflicts of this sort almost always threaten to go global. They challenge and alienate competitive Great Powers, weaken peacemaking institutions, and stimulate the formation of hostile multinational blocs. This is what happened in the Balkan wars that preceded World War I and in the regional wars of the 1930s that led to World War II. Again and again, imperial rulers like Trump come to believe that they are avatars of order and masters of the global environment. Again and again, at a ghastly human cost, these beliefs are exposed as delusions.

The war in Iran, Israel, and the fallacy of "wag the dog"

What has been said thus far makes it clear, I trust, that the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran (which has now spread into Lebanon) is a classic imperialist war of aggression. Yet some

critics and opponents of the war, including analysts whose work I admire, insist that “It’s Israel, Stupid!” These commentators, whose views range from moderately left to far right, allege that for one reason or another having little to do with empire — Donald Trump’s impulsive egotism, Benjamin Netanyahu’s con man persuasiveness, the financial clout of the pro-Israel Lobby, the Christian Zionist hope for the Second Coming — the US has been tricked or pressured into fighting “Israel’s war” against Iran. Even [Jacobin](#), which advertises itself a socialist journal, reviews the alleged evidence for this theory and comes to the “inescapable conclusion that America is fighting this dreadful and rapidly escalating war not *with* Israel but on its behalf.”

This is not only inaccurate; it is slow-witted. It is what people say who have no real understanding of what imperialism is and how it works. Empires have subjects, some of whom (since it divides and rules) are also clients. Client groups of long standing are often favored by the imperial elite and have some influence over them; a list of such favorites would include the Tlaxcalans in Spanish-dominated Mexico, Tutsis in Belgian-dominated Rwanda, Maronite Christians in French-dominated Lebanon, Brahmins in British-dominated India . . . and many more. Israel has been a favored client group of the U.S. since 1948, when Harry Truman became the first leader of a Great Power to recognize the new state. Especially favored clients may succeed now and then in embroiling the elite in their local disputes. But the notion that they are tails wagging the dog – that the empire’s rulers will fight major wars on their behalf at the expense of their own imperial interests – is absurd. Worse than that, such an overestimation of the power of imperial subjects implies an equally serious underestimation of the power of the elite.

What sort of evidence is there for the “dog-wagging” theory? Its primary source is an allegation by Secretary of State Marco Rubio that Netanyahu threatened to start the war against Iran himself, exposing U.S. assets in the region to retaliation, so that Donald Trump had no alternative but to join in. But even if Netanyahu made such a threat, of course Trump had alternatives! He could have threatened to leave Israel hanging in the wind or to cut off its military aid, and the American public, most of whom opposed the war, would have applauded. If Netanyahu uttered such words at all, he was undoubtedly making a debater’s point, understanding that Trump was high on his Venezuelan escapade and previous bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities, and that he loathed and despised Iran’s “terrorist regime,” believed that he could win a short air war, and had his own plans for reorganizing the Middle East as an American satrapy. That the U.S. president would have given in to an Israeli threat out of fear of Iranian retaliation is simply not credible.

The dog-wagging theorists, as mentioned earlier, range from ultra-conservative America Firsters, several of whom have a nasty fixation on alleged Jewish conspiratorial plots, to self-declared leftists with a disconcerting habit of asserting that groups that they oppose are in the pay of some foreign power and are not sufficiently concerned about “America’s national interests.” One wonders if these “progressives” have ever heard of revolutionary internationalism or read an essay by Lenin called entitled “Imperialism: The Last Stage of Capitalism.” If they had, they would be forced to consider the possibility that, whatever America’s true “national interests” may be, the country is currently ruled by a capitalist oligarchy whose very existence depends upon maintaining and expanding a global empire, and who are making untold billions manufacturing the high-tech weapons being used to destroy the infrastructure of the only major nation in the Middle East openly opposed to their imperial “Abrahamic Alliance” and “Board of Peace” schemes. If U.S. rulers can fight a war against that enemy that relies on Israeli intelligence sources, exposes Israelis, but not Americans, to hypersonic missile attacks, and places Israeli boots, but very few American boots, on the ground, it will be playing the classical imperialist game in classical imperialist style.

No, the tail does not wag the dog. The dog-wagging theorists would do well to consider the remark often attributed to the Austrian socialist, August Bebel: “Antisemitism is the socialism of fools.” Just because the Zionists have mis-defined and weaponized antisemitism by equating it with anti-Israelism doesn’t mean that it has ceased to exist, and the idea that an all-powerful Jewish State and Jewish Lobby are dictating policies of war and peace to the world’s most powerful empire is right out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. There *are* Jewish oligarchs, Jewish weapons manufacturers, and corrupt, power-addicted Jewish politicians; I wish there weren’t. But they do not dominate or manipulate the capitalist oligarchy or the American state and empire that do its bidding. If we want to get rid of that empire, we will have to reform that state. And if we want to reform that state, we will have to dispossess that oligarchy – or at least subject it to popular control.

These are necessities that people who don’t like to think about the Empire feel free to ignore. It’s a lot simpler and less troubling to blame the system’s failures on some hidden minority-group conspiracy than to recognize that this system’s masters, as American as apple pie, exercise their mastery right out in the open. Even before the advent of Trump, the oligarchs had ceased hiding themselves away in hedge-fenced mansions and disguising their interests power. Our imperial masters openly boast of their billions, openly invest in planet-destroying, humanity-denying enterprises, openly pay the massive political bribes we call “campaign expenses,” and openly finance the armed services and weaponry needed to

maintain a globe-girdling, war making empire. It's not a conspiracy, I guess, if you do it in the open. Just a social class doing what it needs to do to stay on top.

Iran is not just Israel's war, friends. It's not even America's war. It's the Empire's.

Which side are you on?

If the Empire, despite its peaceful pretensions, is essentially a machine for violence, how can it be overthrown or changed? The Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, made himself famous (or infamous) a few years ago by advising people interested in change to "Think, don't act." Amended to "Think first, then act," this advice makes good sense when figuring out how to oppose modern imperialism. Perhaps because so many U.S. commentators still tend to deny that their nation is also an empire, we have more questions than answers about how empires operate, how they expand or decline, and – especially – how they end.

In a book called *The Fall of the U.S. Empire – And Then What?* (2009) the Norwegian peace theorist Johan Galtung tried to answer several of these questions. Before the Cold War ended Galtung was one of the few analysts to predict that the Soviet Empire would collapse because of its internal contradictions. In the early 2000s he made a similar prediction for the U.S., pointing to four contradictions that tend to reinforce and exacerbate each other: an increasingly expansive, expensive military system that tends to outrun its economic base; an economic system overdependent on exploitation and losing its creative edge; an increasingly authoritarian, non-participatory, polarized political system; and a narrow-minded cultural chauvinism that undermines alliances and alienates most of the world.

The upshot, Galtung thought, was that the U.S. Empire was almost out of business and would soon collapse of its own weight. But he also recognized that empires in crisis often produce desperate movements of right-wing reaction very unlike the liberal, "soft landing" approach adopted by Russia's Mikhail Gorbachev. Moreover, in predicting a relatively fast and early end to America's global hegemony, the Norwegian theorist left unanswered some questions of great interest to opponents of the Empire. For example:

To what extent does the relative prosperity of people in wealthy regions like North America and Europe depend upon the oligarchy's control of markets and extraction of super-profits from dominated regions? How can we assure our fellow citizens that eliminating the Empire will enrich us, not impoverish us?

Can a failing capitalist system be reconstructed, as many progressives and some conservatives think? If so, what structural reforms will be needed to eliminate imperialist violence? What reforms would increase the power of working people to control the system and direct production toward peaceful, humane uses?

What sort of nonviolent actions could demonstrate and effectuate popular opposition to class-based militarism, ethno-nationalism, and the dehumanization of alleged enemies? How can we move toward abolishing the Empire and creating new forms of transnational collaboration?

Happily, talking about such issues is no longer taboo – at least, not as taboo as it once was. If polls are to be trusted, the U.S.-Israel war in Iran is the most unpopular military intervention in the history of American imperialist wars, with disapproval rates exceeding 60 percent of those polled. In this atmosphere one hears Empire – the E word – uttered by libertarian Republicans as well as progressive Democrats, with even centrist Democrats inclined to question the formerly sacrosanct prerogatives of the “imperial presidency” and military establishment.

The problem, however, is a deep ambivalence about attacking the capitalist establishment and the state that it controls – an ambivalence seems fueled by a fear of jeopardizing the identity, social status, prosperity, and global leadership role associated with images of “America the Great.” In the United States this is true not only of Trump supporters but of self-declared anti-Trumpers such as the New York Times’ senior reporter Steven Erlanger, who says this in a recent front-page article: “As a superpower with global responsibilities, the United States cares deeply about energy supplies and the safety of its Persian Gulf allies” (NYT, 3/22/26). Note the choice of words: “superpower,” not empire; “global responsibilities,” not global ambitions and interests; “Persian Gulf allies,” not Persian Gulf satellites or subjects.

With friends like this, as the saying goes, one doesn’t need enemies. In opposing the war in Iran, our goal at this juncture has got to be to oppose the Empire as well – that is, to raise our compatriots’ *empire consciousness* as well as encouraging their opposition to Trump’s cruel and thoughtless policies. To move in this direction two practical suggestions are worth considering:

Target the oligarchs as well as the politicians.

We ought to stop fixating so monomaniacally on Trump’s craziness, Netanyahu’s craftiness, Hegseth’s fanaticism, and other real but painfully partial explanations for this disastrous war. The goal should be to help educate others about its most potent cause: the capitalist elite’s need for global domination. The White House and state capitals are not the only effective sites for antiwar demonstrations. The oligarchs can be confronted at their headquarters and places of business (and pleasure) by protestors able to explain why they are war criminals as well as unprincipled profiteers. Opponents of the Empire can also organize selective boycotts of their products, beginning with those produced by vile technoligarchs such as Sam Altman (Open AI), Peter Thiel, and Alex Karp (Palantir), who are raking in unprecedented profits from the killing. We can and should demand that Congresspeople advertising themselves as democrats stop accepting their campaign contributions and start investigating the connections between the billionaires, the military-industrial complex, and our endless wars.

Give Iran and other opponents of the Empire critical support.

The age-old question is that of the old labor union song, “Which side are you on?” There are conflicts in which one does not want to or need to take sides – but struggles like the war in Iran require a partisan commitment. One does *not* have to approve of a regime to support it strongly against an empire waging an immoral, unnecessary, inhumane war – one of a series of aggressive attacks dictated by the imperial elite’s desire for global supremacy. Many Americans seem unaware of the concept of critical support: the notion that one can be deeply critical of a party to conflict and yet work to protect it against the depredations of a more powerful and dangerous enemy. But this is exactly what the U.S. government and people did in World War II when they supported the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany (a good decision, one might add, since the USSR won the war in Europe at a cost of more than 20 million of its citizens). First, defeat global oppressor; then, defeat the local oppressors.

Asking “which side are you on” has the additional benefit of helping to wean people from a false patriotism – actually, a form of state-worship – that is a key weapon in the Empire’s ideological arsenal. The command to “support out troops,” when obeyed, instantiates the principle that whatever the nation does is right. It has the effect of constructing the nation as a family-like community entitled to sacrificial loyalty, and, at the same time, making the Empire disappear from popular consciousness. Of course, when the Empire disappears, so does the oligarchy, and we go back to talking about war and peace as matters solely

dependent on the wisdom or foolishness, “strength” or “weakness” of political leaders.

The current war is going from bad to worse for the American and Israeli imperialists. Good! Let’s continue to oppose it and hope for its early end. But don’t let the Empire off the hook. The only way to end these endless wars is to replace international relationships based on elite domination and mass dehumanization with associations based on equality and affection. Abolish the Empire! This may sound to some like “pie in the sky.” But it’s the key to our survival and advancement as a species.

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