

COUNTERPUNCH

The Iran War and America's Fascist Rebirth

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The onset of "Operation Epic Fury" against Iran was accompanied by a promise to keep America safe from a rising Iranian nuclear threat. President Trump announced "major combat operations," claiming that nuclear talks with Iran had failed after just days, and that "our objective is to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime."

The conflict has destabilized neighboring countries, with hundreds of Iranian missiles fired at Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar as Iran announced it was targeting U.S. "military assets" in the region. Reporting also suggested that Iranian missiles have targeted civilian infrastructure in neighboring countries. The New York Times reported that "U.S. officials reaffirmed that there would be no letup in the American and Israeli strikes" after nearly a week of conflict, "which they said had devastated Iran's ballistic missile program and its naval fleet." CBS reported that "Americans are being urged to leave 14 countries in the region because of 'serious safety risks.'" Human rights

reporting within less than a week of the onset of U.S.-Israeli strikes estimated that more than 1,000 Iranian civilians were killed.

The stakes of this conflict extend well beyond Iran's alleged nuclear threat, and Trump's justification for war does more than invoke national security. The structure of his argument reflects a governing logic associated with fascist politics, in which national death is declared, enemies are cast as existential threats, and executive authority expands in the name of survival. Fascism is not reducible to uniforms or formal dictatorship. It is defined by a recurring pattern: the nation is described as degraded, rebirth is promised, enemies are framed as mortal dangers, and emergency becomes the justification for concentrating power.

Roger Griffin famously defined fascism as palingenetic ultranationalism, the myth of national rebirth after periods of alleged decadence and decline. Classical fascist movements did not merely lament decline; they treated civilizational decay as a condition that demanded rupture. Rebirth was not merely ornamental language but a structural horizon that directed political action toward the reconstruction of the state. Violence was justified as regenerative because it was tethered to an institutional project that sought a new political order.

Trump's rhetoric adopts the language of decline and rebirth yet departs from this classical model in a decisive way. In his second inaugural address in January 2025, he declared that "America's decline is over." In this week's State of the Union, he also described the United States as "a dead country" before his return to office. These statements frame the nation in biological terms, casting it as lifeless and degraded while positioning executive authority as the animating force capable of restoring vitality. Legitimacy is measured in terms of life and death rather than institutional continuity.

The crucial shift lies in how we understand this nation's future. Classical fascism tied its rhetoric of rebirth to a concrete institutional horizon that aimed to stabilize a new political order. Trumpism also invokes rebirth. Restoration is proclaimed even as the emergency of rising fascism intensifies. But the nation is described as revived while simultaneously portrayed as perpetually endangered. No defined constitutional reconstruction follows the promise of renewal, and no stable institutional horizon anchors the announced transformation. In this formation, the promised glory of a new future becomes rhetorical rather than substantive.

What replaces the nation's declared decline is a form of survival politics. The central political question ceases to be what kind of order will be built and becomes whether the nation will live or die. Executive authority is justified not by reforms in institutional design but by the need to confront ongoing "dangers." When a nation is described as "dead" and adversaries are characterized as embodiments of terrorism and death and hate, survival is elevated above law. Immediate force appears necessary, and restraint appears reckless.

Robert Paxton has asked whether leaders normalize violence and erode institutional constraints

through a process of gradual escalation of extremist ideology and politics. Repeated invocation of existential danger to justify unilateral military action in the absence of clear evidence of an immediate threat lays waste to constitutional limits and reshapes public expectations of executive authority. Violence gradually shifts from an extraordinary response to a routine instrument of foreign policy, as we see in multiple conflicts in Venezuela and Iran initiated in less than a year, and in the militarization of domestic policy with ICE attacks on American cities and their peoples. With Operation Epic Fury, U.S. strikes reveal a political formation in which national death is declared, survival is elevated above the law, and executive authority consolidates through the normalization of continuous emergency. Crisis becomes the condition through which governance proceeds.

Contrary to Trump's rhetoric about rebirth and protecting lives, U.S. actions in Iran constitute a war crime. The United Nations Charter holds the status of Constitutionally protected law in the U.S. since the nation ratified it after World War 2, and as recognized in the Supremacy Clause, which holds foreign agreements and treaties ratified by the U.S. to be part of the highest law of the land. The UN Charter, codified on principles of preventing unlawful aggression, clearly states that the use of force by one country against another is only lawful under two circumstances. One is if the UN Security Council authorizes force, which it did not in the case of the U.S. strikes against Iran. The second is if the use of force is in "self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a member of the UN."

The Trump administration claims to be protecting Americans from an Iranian threat. But no international monitors have ever documented that Iran has nuclear weapons. And U.S. leaders for decades have claimed that Iran is perpetually on the brink of developing nuclear weapons, making a mockery of the claim that there is an imminent threat from the country. Jason Stanley has argued that fascist politics relies on enemy construction and the normalization of a permanent threat. We see this with Iran via administration saber rattling over its two terms about an imminent Iranian threat that fails to materialize. When imminence stretches indefinitely, notions of "crisis" lose their substance and become an enduring feature of governing.

Americans who oppose Trump's actions in Iran will find little reason to hope that most of his supporters will sour on Trump's aggression, or participate in a larger anti-war movement to build public opposition to this war. During Trump's first term, nearly two-thirds of his supporters indicated there was nothing he could do as president to make them not support him. Similarly, during his second term, an Associated Press poll from late February of this year found that 60 percent of Republicans shared "a great deal or quite a bit" of "trust" in Trump to "make the right decisions about the use of military force" against alleged external threats. And nearly as many Republicans in a late February YouGov poll indicated that they supported U.S. military force against Iran. Once the strikes began, partisan support grew, with 77 percent of Republicans supporting Trump's strikes, despite nearly 6 in 10 Americans disapproving of military action.

Republican support is unlikely to wane when the President receives unqualified support from his base, even as most of his supporters embrace blatantly contradictory foreign policy positions when prompted to do so by Trump himself. For example, in a national poll that we designed that was conducted in late 2025, we found that 64 percent of Republicans agreed with Trump's promise to "end the endless wars in the Middle East." Yet, 65 percent of Republicans also supported "the Trump administration's bombing of Iran's enrichment facilities based on the promise to keep Americans safe from nuclear threats."

These sentiments reveal Trump's incredible Orwellian power to foster confusion and contradiction among his supporters in pursuing foreign wars. This conclusion is not surprising considering the cult-like mentality expressed by two-thirds of his supporters that Trump can't say or do anything that would cause them to not support him.

Rising fascism means governing through crisis. The nation is depicted as in a state of perpetual "death," while external adversaries are framed as existential threats to its survival. Executive power is the instrument of restoration, and legal constraints are discarded. Supporters can accept even contradictory foreign policy positions because the organizing logic is not policy coherence but the superior judgment of the leader.

Fascism doesn't require the suspension of elections or the formal declaration of dictatorship. It operates in a constitutional order that is hollowed out of constraints against the leader. The repeated invocation of national death provides the moral urgency for the expansion of executive power, while the promise of rebirth remains perpetually deferred. The ongoing strikes against Iran cannot be dismissed as an isolated episode of foreign policy excess. They exemplify a governing logic in which crisis authorizes force, survival is elevated above law, and executive power consolidates through continuous emergency.

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