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Liberating the Women of Iran: The Regime Change Industry, Women's Rights and Imperial Wars

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Introduction

During the so-called "12-day war" of June 2025, many Iranians resorted to humor and irony to find some peace of mind in the midst of the bombings. While leaving Tehran because of the Israeli attacks, a friend commented that, at least, she was not out of the country where she would have had to fight against monarchists and their "nonsensical calls for regime change". In fact, to many in Iran and the diaspora, such talks were a potent reminder of past disastrous attempts at overthrowing and replacing regimes hostile to the US in neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Like in the case of Afghanistan, the legitimate aspirations to autonomy and self-determination of Iranian women have been used to justify a military attack against a state that repressed them. In his address to the Iranian people of June 13th, Bejamin Netanyahu (the ICC-wanted Prime Minister of Israel) concluded his speech by saying,

> "This is your opportunity to stand up and let your voices be heard. Woman Life Freedom. *Zan Zandegi Azadi*[1] [...] Israel's fight is not with you [...] our fight is with our common enemy, a murderous regime that both oppresses you and impoverishes you. Brave people of Iran: your light will defeat the darkness. I am with you, the people of Israel are with you" (Israeli PM, 2025).

Netanyahu defined the bombing of Iranian women, men, children, as an "opportunity" for the same to "stand up" against the regime in the name of "Woman Life Freedom". Furthermore, photos of Israeli soldiers and women pilots circulated on social media of them inscribing the name of Mahsa Amini, along with references to Kian Pirfalak—a nine-year-old boy shot dead in September 2022 during the Woman Life Freedom uprising—on a munition used during airstrikes on Iran (Truzman, 2025). The script (and the irony of it) did not go unnoticed.

We argue that such calls for regime change follow a pre-determined script which shows strong similarities with other instances of regime change in the past. Indeed, the "military attack cum regime change" pattern is not new, and its genealogy goes back to the colonial *mission civilisatrice*. More specifically, we focus on the role of the idea of "gender disorder" to justify the "regime change script" both discursively and materially in the case of the recent Israel-Iran war—that is, the idea that when racialized men oppress women, these are in need of external salvation through bombing.

We understand regime change as an industry which encompasses political and military forces, the media and civil society. It is as much about propaganda as it is about material relations of power—military might, economic reconstruction, resource exploitation. The regime change industry also needs people to animate it. In particular we examine the role of the monarchists, led by Reza Pahlavi[2], and the My Stealthy Freedom campaign, led by Masih Alinejad. Following Bacchetta et al. (2002) and Cohen's analysis of state denials of crime (1996), we pay attention to the co-optation of women within this industry and to how "gender disorder" is mobilized to deny aggression.

Gender Disorder and Regime Change

With Cohen, it becomes clear how the memory and the core message of a people's feminist uprising are being mobilized to justify a military attack. Cohen examines the ways in which states articulate their denial of having committed certain actions, usually human rights violations, even when evidence is offered (Cohen, 1996). Literal, interpretative and implicatory denials are discursive forms through which states deny, re-frame, and normalize their actions by saying that they either did not happen or were

1 Woman Life Freedom is the main slogan of the uprising that started in Iran in September 2022, following the killing of young Kurdish-Iranian woman Jina Mahsa Amini. It lasted several months and represented the fiercest challenge to the stability of the Islamic Republic to date. It had a strong feminist and anti-authoritarian tone.

2 Reza Pahlavi is the son of the king Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, removed from power by the 1979 revolution. Although he has not set foot in Iran since 1979 and lacks the backing of a broad popular movement, Reza Pahlavi positions himself as a potential figure to fill the "power vacuum" in the event of a regime change. The phrase "to fill the power vacuum" is one of Pahlavi's recurring rhetorical lines in several interviews. It has also become a point of satire among his opponents on social media. In Persian, *por kardan-e khalā* ("to fill the vacuum") phonetically resembles *por kardan-e khala* ("to fill the toilet"), which has only added to the mockery. Reza Pahlavi displays solid Zionist beliefs and is particularly appreciated by conservative and right-wing political networks in the West.

something else. There is a striking similarity with how military aggressions and unlawful violations of a state's sovereignty by other sovereign states have been framed as something else, usually as a necessary or "moral" intervention by a "civilized" nation to liberate local populations presented as deprived of political agency from injustice.

Such framing is often accompanied by discourses about gender disorder, pivoted around the representation of distorted masculinities and submissive femininities in need of rescue. Rosenberg (2002) reviews some historical examples. In 1898 US, iconography representing Cuba as a damsel in distress urged the American government to rescue Cuban women from Spanish brutal rulers, and during World War I German women were monstrified and represented as violent and murderous mothers. Ideas of "gender disorder" according to which men and women adopt "improper gendered behaviors" is ever-present since American imperial enterprises dating back to the Nineteenth century, such as the military occupation of the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Since then, in the US and elsewhere, the script about rescuing women and children has consolidated through military enterprises and ad hoc-created moral panics, whether around honor crimes (Abu-Lughod, 2011), identity (Zakaria, 2021) or femonationalist themes related to national values under threat (Farris, 2017).

The 2001 radio delivery on Afghanistan by Laura Bush is part and parcel of this tradition. In it, her mentioning of children not allowed to fly kites, women face-beaten for laughing or maimed for wearing nail polish, served the purpose of asserting that, thanks to US military intervention, women's life had improved. "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women", Bush declared, and concluded by saying that "I hope Americans will join our family in working to ensure that dignity and opportunity will be secured for all the women and children of Afghanistan" (Bush, 2001).

Waging war in the name of liberating a population to bring modernity and democracy in, is never disassociated from the rescuing of women and children from dangerous men. In other words, if regime change is the structure, the instrumentalization of women's rights and liberation is one of the narratives sustaining that very structure. Gender inequality and patriarchal violence are reframed as a circumstantial problem which can be solved through legislative reform after regime change, obscuring the imperial violence that facilitates it. Therefore, we can think of regime change as a structure of imperial expansion, sustained by the claim of eliminating gender disorder.

In the case of Iran, the "geopolitical other" *par excellence* (Pezeshki & Rasooli, 2025), gender disorder is framed in a very specific way, considering the mediatization of women-led uprisings such as Woman Life Freedom, which impedes the utilization of stereotypes representing racialized, often Muslim, women as submissive. In what follows, we turn our attention to the framings adopted by the regime change industry in the case of Iran.

The Industry of Regime Change in Iran

We theorize regime change as a structure that enables imperial warfare. We also theorize it as an industry, which counts on material and immaterial resources: politicians, intellectuals, journalists, policymakers, activists, as well as infrastructures, networks, organizations and funding. An example of how the industry may manifest is the Iran Disinformation campaign (@IranDisinfo). The campaign, known through its social media activism, was funded by the US Department of State and targeted Iranian-American experts critical of Trump's policy towards Iran or deemed to be "too soft" on the Islamic Republic. They were slandered, and disinformation about them was spread. While the Iran Disinformation project has been taken off the government's payroll, other organizations and actors replaced it, like Tavaana, a well-known monarchist platform (Mortazavi & Hussain, 2020).

Monarchists and other forces in the diaspora make no secret of their favoring a regime change and their willingness to "step in" and run the transition away from the Islamic Republic (Pahlavi, 2025a, 2025b, 20205c; Rajavi, 2025). Both the monarchists and the Mujaheddin—the most relevant actors favoring a regime change in Iran—issued plans for the post-regime change transitional phase, which ought to be placed under their leadership, and actively fundraised through them (First 100 Days, 2024; Ten Points Plan, 2006). What is important to emphasize here is that such plans have never been discussed with Iranians in Iran. The Iran regime change industry, in fact, exists out of the empire's geopolitical interests. Actors compete for imperial political benevolence and economic support. They do not need popular

legitimacy.

The industry of regime change in Iran utilizes several narratives. Women's liberation is a central one but along with it, we also have tropes centered on ethnic minorities' rights and liberation from state centralization, and on nationalism, pivoted on the idea of liberating Iran's "potential for greatness from the incompetence of the regime". Plans to territorially divide Iran according to ethnic fault lines are popular in Washington and Tel Aviv, and build on well-established policy traditions (Mamedov, 2025). Equally linked to regime change are plans to "Make Iran Great Again" or MIGA, an expression foremost utilized by monarchists well before Trump rendered it famous in a June 2025 post on his Truth Social, which read: "It's not politically correct to use the term, 'Regime Change,' but if the current Iranian Regime is unable to MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN, why wouldn't there be a Regime change??? MIGA!!!" (Trump, 2025; Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025). Nationalist narratives often utilize civilizational references to disavow Iran's Islamic identity and to elevate its Persian heritage and closeness to Christian and Jewish religious traditions. By doing this, such narratives (which resonate with those mobilized in the framework of the Global War on Terror, see Butler, 2009) follow a racialized logic where Muslim (and Arab, by extension) identity is constructed as "alien and inferior", while identities perceived as white and Western are constructed as fundamentally "free and superior" (Rahbari, 2025; Iranian Americans for Liberty, 2025; Pahlavi, 2025d).

Narratives around women's liberation are central to the regime change industry. They form a competitive discursive field, with many actors from the diaspora fighting for the funding and political credibility made available by different institutions, from national governments to private foundations. Particularly active is the My Stealthy Freedom campaign.[3] This is better understood as network with a core—Alinejad—and associated actors like private foundations, civic organizations, sympathetic influencers and policymakers that reinforce and amplify the message. While this network is extensive, for the sake of space, we will focus on Alinejad to examine how legitimate demands for rights are capitalized on in the regime change industry. We will focus on the 2025 Israeli-Iran war, although this narrative has been used by Alinejad since before.

Alinejad is probably the best-known figure associated with women's rights activism in Iran and a celebrated icon for advocates of regime change. In 2014, she launched the My Stealthy Freedom campaign, urging Iranian women to share photos and videos of themselves without compulsory *hijab*. These visuals garnered international attention, allowing Alinejad to present herself as the digital-age leader of the women's civil disobedience movement and to receive significant financial and political support (Alinejad, 2018). However, her work has been sharply criticized especially by Iranian feminists, who have highlighted how the fight against compulsory hijab predates Alinejad's co-optation of it for her own visibility. In this sense, Zanganeh (2018) defined Alinejad's feminism "opportunistic". Many have also questioned the political direction of her activism. Although Alinejad frequently identifies as an independent and humanitarian voice, in 2019 she met with then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a member of Trump administration. Despite Pompeo's support for the rollback of women's rights in the US, including reproductive freedom, he praised Alinejad's work on Iran. In 2022, during an interview with The New Yorker, Alinejad controversially claimed for herself the leadership of the Woman Life Freedom uprising (Filkins, 2022), drawing significant criticism from Iranian feminists and activists, who viewed the uprising as a collective struggle that should not be coopted by any single figure. In November 2022, Alinejad (2022) announced that she had met with French President Macron. She urged France to recall its ambassador, suspend nuclear negotiations, proscribe the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization, expel Iranian diplomats, organize a meeting with representatives of the Iranian opposition and "prepare the EU for a secular Iran". Many wondered how an independent women's rights activist could speak for the Iranian people, and how her activism could justify demanding broad intervention from Western governments to facilitate regime change in Iran. Her tendency to align with the interests of imperial powers while denouncing domestic repression led critics like Shohadae (2023) to describe Alinejad as a "modern American savior". This attitude also manifested in her support for Israel's assault on Gaza and genocide, framed as justified attacks against Iran-supported "terrorists" (Dabashi, 2024).

Alinejad's social media activity in the aftermath of Israel's 2025 attack on Iran was particularly rich. Between June 13th and the June 24th ceasefire, Alinejad published 46 Tweets (including retweets) on X and 157 posts on Instagram, in addition to a large volume of Instagram stories. Part of this material ridicules

3 See https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org

news and reports of Iranian officials being killed by Israeli bombs while ignoring civilian casualties—and when civilian deaths are acknowledged, the blame is immediately shifted onto the Islamic Republic rather than Israel. Alinejad also posted videos of herself urging the leader of the Islamic Republic to resign. In them, she asserts that the Iranian people are not enemies of the Israeli people, and claims that both have become "human shields" for the Islamic Republic. In line with her politics, Alinejad makes large use of the terminology adopted by Israeli and IDF propaganda, such as "human shields", "precision strikes", "targeted attacks" and "bombing for freedom".

The violence of the Iranian state against women is evoked as a justification for the legitimacy and necessity of bombing Iran until the Islamic Republic is replaced with a secular regime. On June 19th, Alinejad posted on X the picture of several women who had been blinded during the Woman Life Freedom uprising. In it, she addressed "all anti-war activists in the West" by accusing them of ignoring the regime's violence against women and of being "anti-Iranian people" when calling for an end to the war (Alinejad, 2025). A similar argument is fleshed out in a video posted on June 22nd, in which the deaths of Jina Mahsa Amini and female protesters during Woman Life Freedom—and the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan during the Green Movement protests, back in 2009—are directly linked to the necessity of ending the regime: "we call […] on the free world to stand with the people of Iran. If you want to end this war, there is only one solution: to end the barbaric regime in Iran" (Alinejad, 2025a).

While Alinejad's argumentative structure overlaps with Reza Pahlavi's, she only seldom mentions the phrase "regime change" and is much more careful in claiming for herself the political leadership of a transitional phase post-Islamic Republic. Alinejad's language centers "the people of Iran" which she constructs as a uniform collective, whose voice she delivers to a Western audience and whose will she embodies. In her discursive structure, support for the people of Iran and the necessity to end injustice, including gender apartheid (Alinejad, 2024), is code for support for external intervention bringing about regime change (Alinejad, 2025b).

Conclusion

Missing from the "regime change script" is the mention of the many women and men who endured great suffering during the Israeli military attack. Although narratives of suffering spread across social media, the proponents of regime change represented Iranians as a crowd cheering Israeli and American bombs, transformed into a humanitarian gift to "free Iran from the mullahs".

Some progressive and anti-imperialist organizations/groups also denounced that, while regime change narratives widely circulated, their platforms were censored. For instance, the leftist page Sedaye Mahi-ye Siah reported on June 19th that their posts criticizing monarchist celebrations of Israeli attacks and exposing a Zionist group's anti-Iran hymn, were removed despite gaining traction, suggesting that social media algorithms suppress dissenting narratives in favor of dominant pro-regime change propaganda (Black Fish Voice, 2025).

Others denounced that the many statements that civil society groups and political organizations based in Iran issued during the war, condemning both Israel's aggression and the structural violence of the Islamic Republic, were willfully ignored. In them, the co-optation of grassroots political and social struggles of Iranians, including Woman Life Freedom, was called out as an ill-attempt at silencing the activists who, from within, seek political change and demand the right to hold their own institutions accountable through sovereign mechanisms of democracy. Regime change, on the contrary, is built on the unaccountability of imperial warfare and of those who theorize and campaign for it.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize the fertility of thinking with "gender disorder" and monstrification to unveil the workings of imperial power and geopolitics. Imperial warfare does nothing to advance liberation from patriarchal violence. On the contrary, while monstrifying racialized men and instrumentalizing the legitimate desire for freedom of Iranian women, it offers more of the same medicine: contextual violence that reinforces structural violence through killing, dispossession, the impossibility of life. Carefully selecting which women can speak, it silences those voices that call for a radical rethinking of power. Through the promise of correcting "disorders" and through strategic denials, empires racialize and restrict the number of those who have a right to have rights.

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