DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 13, Issue 1
https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.101177
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281
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The Zero-Sum Game of Gender Justice and National Liberation: Anti-Gender Mobilization, Diasporic Harassment, and Academic Freedom after the 2026 Massacre of Iranians and the US-Israeli Attack on Iran

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Abstract
In January 2026, large-scale and nationwide protests broke out in Iran. The protests, which were violently suppressed by the state, killing thousands of people, revealed, once again, many people's desire for foundational change in Iran's ruling authority. Following the protests, on 28 February 2026, Israel and the US launched a military attack against Iran. The attacks, which were claimed to target key political/military leaders, killed many civilians, among them over one hundred children, in a strike on a girls' elementary school in the city of Minab, on the very first day of the war. My attention in this short essay is on one specific worrying trend that resurged in the aftermath of these tragic events: the suppression of academic freedom by a segment of the Iranian diaspora, especially targeting those in opposition to a patriarchal and imperial imaginary of a future Iran. In this short essay, I discuss how gender justice and intersectional thinking in and outside of the academy are some of the first and main victims of such repressive forces.

Keywords
Academic freedom, anti-gender, diaspora, Iran, US-Israeli war, violence, Woman, Life, Freedom

A woman was shouting 'Woman, Life, Freedom' beside me, and then a few men turned to her and said 'shut up! That's not relevant anymore' – an Iranian protester.

'Woman, Life, Freedom' is the slogan of separatists. Their time is over. Iran has just one flag and one slogan #JavidShah – a social media comment accompanied by the image of the Lion and Sun flag.

When this regime falls, be sure that we will not let people like you have a voice – a comment posted under one of my media contributions.

Regime whore – a comment posted under one of my media contributions.

Iran has one flag, and people have sacrificed for it. You should roll up the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' flag, just like the Palestinian flag, and shove it up your ass – a social media comment featuring an image of the Lion and the Sun flag.

In January 2026, large-scale and nationwide protests broke out in Iran. They were the last wave of reaction to the country's disastrous and worsening economic, environmental, and human rights conditions. The protests should be understood in relation to an undercurrent of an ongoing legitimacy crisis for the state and many Iranians' desire for a foundational change in Iran's ruling authority. In the first few weeks of 2026, the state imposed a widespread communication blackout, which meant that Iranians inside the country were disconnected from each other and from the substantially large Iranian diaspora. When the blackout was lifted, the brutality of the massacre was revealed through horrific images and videos depicting thousands of people brutally murdered by the state. Some videos, recorded by the killed protesters' family members and loved ones, circulated online. These videos showed heartbreak, desperation, and a deep sense of injustice. It is hard to overestimate the level and gravity of the trauma, grief, and horror that many Iranians felt, either on the streets themselves, through word of mouth, their networks, or images circulating on the news and social media.

For a few weeks, as a direct result of the brutal suppression and massacre of civilians, the protests stopped. But on February 22, 2026, as the new academic semester began, new waves of protests started, as large groups of students gathered across campuses, chanting slogans against the Islamic Republic of Iran (the IRI) and the country's supreme leader at the time, Ali Khamenei. Iran has long had a vibrant and continually active student movement, which has historically engaged with the country's politics and has often expressed solidarity with other protests (Jafari 2026), particularly labor and women's rights movements. Only a few days after the student protests were reignited, on February 28, Israel and the US launched a military attack against Iran. The attacks killed Ali Khamenei and many other key political and

military leaders of the IRI. On the very first day of the attack, missiles also targeted civilian spaces. Notably, 165 people were killed in a strike on a girls' elementary school in the city of Minab (McClure 2026). More than one hundred of the victims were schoolgirls.

Israel and the US presented the attack on Iran as pre-emptive, meaning they intended to remove an immediate nuclear threat from Iran. Experts have said persistently, however, that the attack is in blatant disregard for International Law and has no justification (Siddique 2026, Hathaway and Bönnemann 2026, Weiner and Driscoll 2026), and that there is no imminent nuclear threat posed by Iran (IAEA, 2026; The Atlantic Council, 2026). In the early days after the war began, the American president, Donald Trump, and his administration directly encouraged the Iranians to 'take over' and 'take advantage' of the situation (Bateman and Bush 2026, Baio 2026). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's regime-change and 'liberatory' agenda was even more clearly communicated. In a statement on February 28, he said, "We will create the conditions for the brave Iranian people to liberate themselves from the chains of tyranny. Therefore, I turn once again to you, the citizens of Iran: Do not miss this opportunity; it is a once-in-a-generation chance (…) The help you have prayed for, that help has arrived" (The Official Website of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office 2026).

While I am writing my essay against this background, my attention, in this case, is not focused on the reasons behind the protests, the extent of the massacre, or the developments around the ongoing war on Iran. I will only focus on one specific worrying trend that has resurged in the aftermath of all those events: the suppression of academic freedom and freedom of speech in the Iranian diaspora, especially when those speaking are in opposition to a patriarchal and imperial imaginary of a future Iran, including anti-war activists, academics, and private citizens.

Academic freedom in Iran has been primarily understood in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) violent and far-reaching surveillance apparatus that systematically censors, threatens, intimidates, imprisons, tortures, and kills intellectuals and academics (Rahbari 2024a). But this is not the only mechanism through which Iranian academics' freedom is suppressed, and diasporic mechanisms of silencing have been documented as well (Razavi 2023, Rahbari 2024b). The threat to this freedom is now intensified not only by the far-reaching and repressive censorship and intimidation apparatus of the IRI but also by extremist segments of the Iranian diaspora who dogmatically claim their version of Iran's imagined future as the only legitimate one. In this essay, I explain how what I call an 'alternative regime' functions and the mechanisms of silencing and suppression of academic freedom through which the current atmosphere leaves little space for critical, feminist, and intersectional voices.

The alternative regime: the return of the masculine savior

In the midst of the traumatic collective experience of mass protest and state massacre explained earlier, one narrative was rapidly crafted and established itself as the only true narrative of the nation's salvation. This narrative claimed that since all routes of social transformation are exhausted, regime change through US-Western military intervention is the only path to Iranians' liberation. The narrative is not solely present in the diaspora but was vigorously propagated by some members of the Iranian

diaspora on (social) media. This group claimed that most Iranians appeal to the US and to its president, Donald Trump, to act as the savior of Iran.

This narrative of Iran's liberation through Western military intervention is not new but an already present one.[1] This time, it was directly reinvigorated by Trump's 'Help is on its way,' comment on 12 January 2026, when he told Iranians to keep protesting (Spivey and Humphrey 2026). This narrative was consolidated through propaganda media machinery that blatantly supported a war and military intervention in Iran. Media outlets and satellite television channels, such as Iran International and Manoto (both based in the UK), were at the forefront of such propaganda (Bonyad and Farhang 2026). In addition to this, there are investigative reports that point to a covert Israeli-based digital-influence operation that uses fake social-media accounts and AI-generated content in Persian to promote this narrative (Johnson 2025, Megiddo and Benjakob 2025). This is not to say that support for a US or even Israeli intervention is entirely fabricated or foreign-backed. There is a segment of Iranians, both in Iran and within the large Iranian diaspora, who are staunch supporters of Israel (Rahbari 2025), and had already shown support for the Israeli and US attacks on Iran in June 2025 (Gupta and Wu 2026) during the so-called "12 Day War". My argument is neither about whether that sentiment exists, nor about how many sympathizers it has in the Iranian diaspora, but about the mechanism through which such a narrative attempts to present itself as the only viable narrative and fabricates collective consent for a foreign military intervention.

This savior narrative is intertwined, at its core, with two other claims. One being that, if saved by the US, Iran will turn into a Western-style "secular democracy," associated with the so-called "free world," and that achieving this democracy is only possible through the leadership of the son of the former autocratic ruler of Iran, whose reign was toppled forty-seven years ago in the 1979 Revolution. The narrative claims that the external installation of this person as a so-called "leader of a transition period" is the only way such a "secular democracy" is guaranteed. The promoters of this narrative include (although not exclusively) right-wing and monarchist voices. They aggressively position themselves either as the authentic representatives of "the true will of the Iranian people," or as the proponents of the only path to Iran's salvation, not by means of proving their popularity but by silencing everyone who attempts to speak against them (Gellner 2026; Tait, 2026; Eikelboom & Van Winsen, 2026; Klei, 2026; Kontraste, 2026).

The latter claim has already been criticized by others: it would be undemocratic or even impossible to concentrate power (again) in the hands of one person closely tied with Iran's former autocratic ruler (Alvandi, 2026; Grayewski, 2026), whose claim to political legitimacy rests on his bloodline, and who has called the 2026 protests in Iran "The Lion and Sun Revolution" which appropriates the large-scale protests as part of the nationalist Persian-centric movement ignoring the diversity of political orientations involved in them.[2] But it is worthwhile to reflect

[1] Calls for bombing Iran go back to at least a decade ago. One famous, and at the time, widely unpopular example of this was the moment an LA-based TV celebrity with an Iranian background called for Netanyahu to bomb Iran and faced backlash afterwards. Now about a decade after the "bomb the bad people" went online, such calls have become common practice: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jR63-jQjMG4

[2] He ended his post on his official Telegram channel on February 24, 2026, at 15:01 CET with "Long Live the Lion and Sun Revolution". In the same post, he also made a reference

on the former and the nature of the democracy that is here advocated for. Democracy, in this view, is not an ongoing project or a cultivation of pluralistic moral, social, and political standpoints, but something that will appear as soon as all conditions are met. So, in practice, democracy will simply happen after the war topples the current establishment and after the installation of the new 'leader' through a referendum and free elections. A democratic ethos is therefore not required before the final takeover. It is reduced to a number of actions/events or the outcome of these events that take place in a very linear way. In other words, in this view and in their public discourse on future imaginaries of Iran's politics, democracy itself, and the path to achieve it is not a point of discussion. Such discussions are considered unnecessary in the presence of a charismatic patriarchal leader. This rigid linear imagination is unsurprisingly not tolerant toward alternative voices. This means that the persecution of critical voices and marginalization of oppressed groups such as women and ethnic minorities by the supporters is not only tolerated until then but considered necessary to maintain unity and stay on the path of liberation. This is a dangerous game in which democratic ethos is sacrificed, and authoritarianism is redressed within the linguistic aesthetics of democracy.[3]

These claims and characteristics help us understand the principal and foundational tenets of this narrative. A group of media entities, diasporic Iranians, and organizations that heavily rely on this narrative have formed a political collective, an alternative epistemological and surveillance regime, that not only monopolizes the discourse around Iran's protest movements based on the above claims, but also aims to silence or sideline other views (Gellner 2026; Tait, 2026; Eikelboom & Van Winsen, 2026; Klei, 2026; Kontraste, 2026).[4]

To know how this alternative regime 'convinces' others, one must understand the affective resources it relies on, and how it justifies itself by tapping into different affective registers that have long-standing historical presence and prominence in the Iranian culture: victimization and suffering, and patriarchal-nationalist love. To combine the two: the alternative regime makes use of the vast and deep suffering of the nation to cultivate its myth of salvation through the masculine hero (i.e., the father of the nation; the king). As Leila Faghfouri Azar puts it eloquently, the use of the myth of guardianship and salvation, whether of divine and heavenly origin or in awe of military and "humanitarian" intervention, is based on the assumption that the suffering subject lacks legitimacy and the ability to self-declare (Faghfouri Azar 2026). The suffering subject, therefore, is declared externally too weak to save itself. In these narratives, the confiscation of suffering functions as a means to legitimize and normalize violence, repression, and murder

to his father's legacy, saying, "My father predicted nearly fifty years ago how future generations would judge him and his service. Today, you delivered history's answer. His soul is at peace, because he sees that the children of Iran are awake and are standing, with courage and awareness, to reclaim Iran." This statement shows that he sees his power as a continuation of the legacy of his father (note 'reclaim') and not necessarily a rupture from it.

[3] I have intentionally chosen not to address the notion of secularism in this essay because it does require a lengthier theoretical discussion that I cannot do justice to in this short essay.

[4] I use the term 'alternative regime' because its proponents employed modes and mechanisms of exerting authority that were eerily similar to those used by their archenemy, the Iranian regime.

on the one hand, and emergency, rape, and war under the guise of a liberating savior on the other (Faghfouri Azar 2026).

And when the appeal to those affective registers fails, the alternative regime attacks and attempts to silence everyone whom it perceives as against it (that is, whoever thinks differently) and uses media monopolization, misinformation campaigns, and the all-too-familiar methods of personal intimidation and name-calling of political opponents. This can lead to the creation of an atmosphere of abstinence and fear in which one either stays silent or joins a reductionist and binarized version of realities, because if not, then one is called a separatist, regime sympathizer/collaborator, leftist, sell-out, and so on. This happens at a moment of crisis when the loss of complexity and nuance is especially detrimental to knowledge production.

I consider it, therefore, crucial, perhaps more than ever, to be able to create space for complexity. The brutality of this regime cannot be downplayed, and neither can the devastation that has been, and could be further caused, as a result of the US-Israeli invasion of Iran. Foreign actors, including Israel, run intelligence operations inside Iran and benefit from its instability, but the people-led protests in Iran would have happened without their intervention. Some people (perhaps naïvely) welcomed the US-Israeli attacks on Iran out of a sense of hope, desperation, or what they perceived as a political impasse. Others find this war on Iran an extension of imperialist violence by hostile and genocidal states that have little to do with liberation and human rights. In fact, the claims of liberation almost entirely disappeared from the US President's discourse on war on Iran merely days after the war started. They were replaced by a discourse revolving around civilizational annihilation (Friedman, 2026).

The alternative regime pushes forward a flattened and singular explanation of why foreign military intervention and foreign political installation. When narratives insist on simplified explanations, they not only attempt to shape the way we understand the present time but also aim to manipulate the past (and through that, also the future). They, therefore, meddle with cultural archives and collective memory and sometimes even try to rewrite history (Messager, 2025; Gurel, 2025) by creating new myths. Under these circumstances, the long-standing waves of reform movement in Iran are reduced to a mere caricature of regime sympathizers and apologists. The well-documented impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy is pushed aside as regime propaganda or ineffective on the Iranian people's lives.[5] In this same line, the socially significant and meaningful gains of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising and the movements associated with it in areas such as women's bodily integrity and compulsory hijab get undermined and sidelined. This means that, similar to the 1979 Revolution, those who speak up about women's issues (most often women themselves) need to step aside for the male saviors to first rescue the nation, hoping that they will eventually be 'allowed to' speak.

[5] The impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy has been documented well, not as the sole or main reason for the current devasting state of the country's economy but as a major contributing factor. The impact of Iran's internal policies and wide-spread corruption are often found to have been very influential as well; read Ida Nikou's analysis here: https://www.merip.org/2026/01/governing-crisis-sanctions-austerity-and-social-unrest-in-iran/

Anti-gender diasporic harassment: from WLF to January 2026

Since the outburst of protests in Iran in January 2026, the proponents of what I have called 'the alternative regime' have been rallying under the Lion and Sun Flag – which is an old Persian flag appropriated by the Iranian nationalist movement – and the Israeli flag. They have also been chanting in praise of 'uncle' Trump and Netanyahu since the US-Israeli attack on Iran began. Such performances and expressions have presented a clear view into their necropolitics. There is a special type of denial in the nationalist Persian identity that despises Iran's history and geography because of its association with Islam and its Arab neighbors to the point of cheering its own annihilation to cleanse it from its Arab-Muslim elements (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, Rahbari 2025). This is rooted in the same type of anti-Muslim racism that calls Palestinians massacred by Israel 'kotlet'[6] and 'parasites' that need to be removed from the earth or suppressed to the degree that they won't pose a threat to those who are worthy of life.[7]

Besides this racist core, one slogan that has found prominence among this group exemplifies the necropolitical leanings of the alternative regime. Certainly, since the January 2026 massacre, the slogan 'death to the three "corrupt": the mullah, the leftist, and the Mojahed' has been chanted in several rallies and gatherings organized by its proponents. The slogan clearly brands what it calls "the left" together with the clerical machinery of the current regime and those associated with the People's Mojahedin Organization[8] of Iran as the unworthy. Videos, images, and online comments have been circulated by the proponents of the alternative regime targeting people, cars, journalists, and activists to either force them to adopt their views or silence them for holding 'leftist' opinions.

The rising levels of right-wing pressure that impact freedom of speech have a more severe effect on academics, especially (although by no means only) those engaging with questions of politics in the humanities and social sciences. Beyond the consequences of explicit targeted attacks, there is also an indirect but strong impact in the form of self-censorship present. In fact, in the past few months of 2026, I have had many conversations with multiple colleagues and students with an Iranian background, from my own university and beyond, who have been struggling precisely because of this. They find the costs of speaking up too high and choose silence, not because they do not feel a sense of responsibility to speak against the war or against the monopolization of the discourse around Iran, but because of the fear of being targeted and harassed. For them, intimidation and surveillance have

[6] *Kotlet* is an Iranian meat-based dish. The word has been frequently used online by Farsi-speaking users to refer to those killed by explosions and bombs, using dark humor to point to their flesh getting cooked.

[7] I have come across many other derogatory terms and comments online that dehumanize Palestinians. I find Puar's articulation of debility useful to understand how undermining a people's humanity leads the way to maiming, the dismantling of livelihoods and histories, and the slow genocidal destruction of life (Puar 2017).

[8] The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) is an Iranian Islamist semi-Marxist organization which has been reduced from one of the main opponents of the regime to a rather insignificant player in the opposition against the IRI. To read more on them, see Cohen (2013).

quite effectively led to their silencing. The source of this surveillance is, most tragically, not only located outside, but sometimes inside academic institutions.

One particular, but not unique, aspect of these attacks has been the silencing of anyone associated with the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement. The uprising known as Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) was one of the most powerful and intersectional political mobilizations in the contemporary history of Iran, building on a history of women's resistance and struggle for their rights pertaining to bodily integrity (Molana, Ranjbar, and Razavi 2023). While the question of female body has always been the center of Iranian women's struggle (Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2019), WLF was unique in the way that it foregrounded what had been pushed to the margins in previous movements in the name of 'political priority,' that is, the question of gender justice and marginalization of Iranian ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs, among others. While WLF was not a homogeneous movement and gradually gave birth to smaller strands, it was considered one of the most intersectional movements that the recent history of Iran has witnessed (Shams 2024).

There is documented literature about the harassment and silencing that women activists and academics experienced after WLF (Rahbari 2024b, Razavi 2023). They were politically targeted and harassed online both by the Islamic Republic and by mostly right-wing groups and individuals in the Iranian diaspora, who called them regime apologists and collaborators. Ironically, these accusations and targeting were made and done in the name of supporting the women of Iran. Now, once more, similar to that harassment and similar to how women's demands were sidelined in the 1979 Revolution (Sameh 2024), women's and gender issues have not only been sidelined, but also portrayed as a threat to the unity of the nation against the IRI.

The gendered nature of these targeted harassments is hard to miss, as Farsi social media has been flooded by sexist, homophobic, and misogynist language directed at diverse voices that do not align with the patriarchal male-centered savior narrative. This is not a new phenomenon, and examples of such derogatory language being used in protest spaces were also documented in WLF, but the phenomenon has reached new levels in the aftermath of the January 2026 massacre and the US-Israel attack on Iran. Profanities and sexualizing language are directed not only at the regime and/or its authorities, but also at protesters, activists, feminists, and academics who are perceived to be left-wing or those showing signs of association with the WLF movement. In my analysis of Instagram videos depicting such degrading language, I came across examples in which women carrying an Iranian flag with the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' written at its center were targeted by the proponents of the alternative regime. One video, which has gone viral in Farsi-speaking social media, depicted a woman shouting the slogan *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom), only to hear back a loud feminine voice from a mob who were verbally abusing her, 'Zan, *Jendegi*, Azadi,' replacing the word *Zendegi* (Life) with *Jendegi* (whoredom/being a whore).

In the past months, I have received comments and personal messages through my social media telling me that I need to keep quiet, or that I will be silenced after 'they' gain power. That the time for 'Woman, Life, Freedom' has passed, and it is a new era. That I, and my 'leftist camp,' are the real problem that needs to be taken care of. That if I care so much about Palestine, I should join them. I have come

across many other experts and academics experiencing this type of backlash for speaking up against yet another imperial-colonial US-Israeli war. I am also aware that such harassment *can* be effective. In fact, in addition to accounts I mentioned earlier of academics who self-censor, I have also heard from the many journalists I have interacted with during the past months that they, too, in their search for experts on Iran, have encountered Iranian academics who prefer not to speak to the media out of fear of harassment from within the diaspora. Iranian academics are, therefore, pressured to think about which ways of communicating their work are socially survivable rather than academically robust or politically relevant.

Only a few years after the achievements of WLF, the alternative regime presents a zero-sum game: it is only possible to join this singular narrative; otherwise, one risks being shouted at during events, harassed online, labelled complicit with the Iranian regime, and even the massacre of Iranians, a sell-off, or indeed, a whore. But perhaps the most dangerous and devastating part of the zero-sum game is creating a state of absolute desperation that traps people into subscribing to the most devastating of 'solutions.' Such a state of desperation and the belief that there simply is no way out without sacrificing lives[9] justifies unspeakable violence caused by war. This absolutely desperate state supports the Western-interventionist stance, as well as the alternative patriarchal regime and its systematic suppression of grassroots and democratic voices in the name of liberation.

Moving beyond this apparent impasse and escaping the zero-sum trap requires more than reactive critique. Simply responding to a dominant narrative can sometimes even reinforce it, or worse, reproduce the binary logic that sustains it. When every position is framed as either loyalty or betrayal, resistance itself can get swallowed into the same reductive framework it wants to critique. It is not enough to oppose a narrative or expose its violence over and over again. It is crucial to also build new imaginaries. Tragically, this necessary intellectual and political practice of cultivating new imaginaries is threatened by the systematic suppression of academic freedom. This happens at a moment when carefully and empathetically cultivated alternative narratives, coalitions, and better yet, institutions are crucial to be built to enable us to oppose the extremist, racist or fascist warmongerings of those for whom Iranian, Palestinian, Lebanese, and indeed historically marked bodies of the 'Wretched of the Earth' (Fanon 1963) are simply casualties in wars of colonial 'liberation' and capitalist domination. We need to think of ways to collectivize and sustain the work of those who are tirelessly resisting monopolization, genocide, fascism, and war.

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to the informants in Iran as well as the students and colleagues who shared their stories with me. I am also immensely grateful to Aysa Salmasi for her comments on an early version of this paper.

[9] Ironically, not in a self-sacrificial way, but by offering up others' lives as sacrificial objects.

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