

# On Iranian Political Prisoners: Two Blades, and Who Gets to Hold the Scissors

written by Siyavash Shahabi | September 4, 2026

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On 20 August 2026 the Guardian published an open letter to political prisoners in Iran under the title “To Iran’s political prisoners, trapped ‘between two blades of a scissors’.” It condemned the US and Israeli war and the sanctions regime, and it condemned executions, arbitrary arrests and torture inside Iran, calling on the Islamic Republic to halt the executions and release political prisoners.

Within days it had split part of the international left. One signatory publicly withdrew, three names were reportedly removed from the published list, and doubt was raised over whether one of the imprisoned signatories had knowingly signed.

Everything turned on one image: the Iranian political prisoner caught between the two blades of a pair of scissors.

Read as a comparison of states, the objection has obvious force. US military and economic power, its position in the world system and its record of intervention in Iran are not on the same scale as the power of the Islamic Republic, and Iran did not start this war.

But the image was never a comparison of states.

## Who is between the blades?

On 24 June 2025, the day after Israel bombed Evin prison, the labour activist and former political prisoner Keyvan Mohtadi wrote about the people still held inside. His wife, the labour organiser Anisha Asadollahi, was one of them. He described families desperate for news and demanding the prisoners’ release, and worried at the same time about relatives caught between the two blades of the scissors. A few lines later the image stops being figurative: “We are truly being cut between the two blades of the scissors.” Farah Mokhtareizadeh’s essay “Who Names the World? Anti-Imperialism and Iran’s Political Prisoners” follows that sentence back to its source and reads its grammar closely; it is the fuller account of what this section can only state.

The subject of that sentence is not one state set against another. The subject is “we”, and the people it covers are the ones who wanted independent unions, a free press and an end to the executions, and who are now being asked to wait.

He is not ranking the strength of two governments. He is describing where he is standing. One force may be a hundred times stronger militarily; that does not take the key to the cell out of the other force’s hand.

So the disagreement is not really about symmetry. Almost nobody in this argument claims that the two carry equal weight. It is about whether imperialist aggression suspends every other power relation inside Iranian society for the duration. Some critics of the letter answer yes, and their answer is about timing: Iran is under attack now, and raising prisons and executions at this moment serves the powers doing the bombing.

## **The enemy as the test of a demand**

Western powers have repeatedly used women's rights, political freedom and the repression of minorities to justify sanctions and intervention. That history is real, and Iran has seen it more than once. But once the possibility of foreign misuse becomes the test of whether a domestic demand is legitimate, something strange follows.

Washington need only speak up for a political prisoner and defending that prisoner becomes suspect. It need only mention the repression of women and the women's movement has to explain its position on US policy. It need only mention Iranian workers or minorities and the question shifts from the grievance to its likely users.

At that point imperialism has not merely captured a demand. Some of its opponents have let it decide which demands may be raised at all. The stronger the foreign threat, the less room the society under pressure has to speak about the pressure it lives under at home. Through its threats and interventions an imperial power acquires something close to a veto over the domestic politics of another society.

## **Who defines the Iranian experience?**

A large part of modern anti-colonial thought grew up against a relationship in which people in the West of Asia live the experience while intellectuals at the global centre decide what it means. An Iranian goes to prison, and someone else explains where prison belongs in the main contradiction. A worker goes on strike, and someone else measures whether the strike helps the right geopolitical side. A prisoner says he is caught between two blades, and someone outside the prison explains that he has misread his own image.

None of this comes from anti-imperialism as such, which managed for a century to ask who paid for a war. It follows from a break with class as the unit of analysis, and, with it, from the experience of the people under discussion. Once the question of who stands where in relation to wages, ownership and the state has left the argument, the only subject still available is the state.

Where that break came from is a longer story than this article can carry: the retreat of much of the Western left from workplace politics after the mid-1960s, the aftertaste of Stalinism, the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each is contested and each needs its own piece. What matters here is the residue, because it is what makes the next move possible.

Opposing the war waged by your own government is a responsibility. It is not a second right, and it confers no authority to decide which part of political life an Iranian may speak about at the same time. But citizenship is too narrow a way to describe the problem. The position is open to anyone with a secure place in the circuit where anti-imperialism is written, funded, translated and rewarded, and an institute in Delhi or a journal in São Paulo sits inside that circuit as easily as a panel in New York. What defines it is the claim to speak for a society without being answerable to that society, and without cost if you are wrong. Nobody in the circuit is going to be sentenced in a courtroom inside Dastgerd or Evin.

The claim has a domestic twin. The Islamic Republic also insists that it embodies the nation, that opposition originates abroad, and that the meaning of a protest is settled by the state rather than by the people who protested. An anti-imperialism that adopts the same premise, treating a state's doctrine as a society's voice, is not simply describing Iran inaccurately. It borrows an authoritarian relation and re-exports it as solidarity. The colonial habit gives the centre the meaning and the periphery the experience; the authoritarian one only sounds newer, since the ruled may suffer but may not interpret. In either direction the move is the same. Someone else holds the right to say what your life means.

## **The petrol test**

The rule can be tested against a live policy.

The government is changing fuel policy by cutting quotas rather than announcing higher prices. According to Ali Nikzad, deputy speaker of parliament, the decision taken in late August 2026 keeps the 60-litre quota at 1,500 tomans, cuts the 70-litre quota priced at 3,000 tomans to 50 litres, and cuts the 30-litre quota priced at 5,000 tomans to 15 litres. The government spokesperson, Fatemeh Mohajerani, denied any decision to raise the price of petrol and said that structural reform would be gradual and would not shock household budgets.

The effect is not in doubt. Every litre removed from a subsidised tier is a litre bought at a higher one, and fuel prices reach well past car owners into transport, distribution and services, in an economy where purchasing power is already falling.

Wealth here is not evenly spread. On the 2024 figures in the country sheets of the World Inequality Report 2026, the bottom half of Iran's population holds 3.9 percent of total wealth, the top ten percent 63.1 percent and the top one percent 29 percent. Average wealth per head is about 31,000 euros at purchasing power parity; for the bottom half it is around 1,200.

Now turn the argument about enemy exploitation around. If the danger is that the United States may use social anger to destabilise Iran, why does that danger enter the analysis only at the moment people protest? A policy that raises the cost of living in wartime produces the anger Washington hopes to exploit. The analysis should begin with the policy, not with the person who later takes to the street against its effects.

In practice it runs the other way. While the state is increasing economic pressure the language is structural reform, energy imbalance, the need to manage consumption. Once the pressure turns into protest, the foreign enemy enters the frame.

## **A protest that has not happened yet**

On 31 August 2026 the head of the judiciary, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei, spoke about protests that had not begun. The enemy, he said, was seeking through what he called its mercenaries inside the country to disturb public security and start unrest, and if such an error occurred the response would be firmer than in any previous period.

The protest has not happened and its meaning is already assigned. Petrol may set it off, or wages, or inflation, or unemployment. The explanation is prepared in advance, and it is always foreign enemy and domestic agent.

This is more than a threat. It is a method for reading society, one that explains anger by its relationship to an enemy rather than by the policy that produced it. The relation between state and

society drops out of the picture, and the relation between the country and a foreign enemy takes its place.

Here the government's security argument and one form of foreign anti-imperialism arrive at a similar result without sharing a purpose. The government says the enemy can use the protest, so the protester is suspect. That anti-imperialism says the enemy can use the protest, so solidarity with the protester is suspect for now. Either way, the reason for the protest disappears.

## **The money that takes no test**

At the end of August, Iran's police information centre announced the arrest of a man identified only as "A. L.", described as one of the ringleaders of the so-called trusty networks. According to the police account he took foreign currency from exports, failed to meet his obligations to the banking system and spent years in hiding; the debt attributed to him exceeds 300 million euros, roughly 70,000 billion tomans. No court has ruled on the case, and the allegations remain allegations.

The individual is not the point. Nobody handles that much export revenue without a network of financial, commercial and institutional connections. The trusty networks grew up around the problem of moving currency under sanctions, and the pattern is not confined to one file: in the first four months of the current Iranian year some four billion euros were added to the stock of overdue and unmet currency obligations.

So why must a worker who demands higher wages or an independent union first pass an anti-imperialist test, while a network moving hundreds of millions of euros in public resources faces no test at all? If the issue is society's capacity to resist imperialism, then weakening that society, concentrating wealth and moving resources beyond public oversight belong in the discussion. If they do not, society is no longer the unit of analysis. The state is.

## **Which Iran?**

One version of anti-imperialism reads the world as a map of states. The United States is the hegemonic power, Iran stands against it, and every domestic act is judged by its effect on that confrontation. On this map the Iranian state slowly takes the place of Iranian society.

They are not the same thing. A state can genuinely resist US hegemony in a specific conflict and still govern a society where labour activists are prosecuted for organising and where officials describe protesters as agents of the enemy before any protest has taken place. Accepting the first does not erase the second.

There is a silence in this argument that is easy to miss, because it concerns something that is never said. The critics have almost nothing to say about the repression of the Iranian left itself. Not its prospects, which nobody is claiming are good. The plain record of it: the mass arrests that began in 1981, the prison executions of 1988, the labour organisers still being prosecuted today for organisations they belonged to years ago. An argument about anti-imperialism in Iran that never once touches what happened to Iranian socialists is a strange sort of argument.

Two explanations are available and neither is comfortable. Either the Iranian left is not thought to exist as a current worth accounting for, or a left discourse inside Iran is not treated as something Iran produces at all, so that the categories are assumed to arrive from outside and anyone using them locally must have picked them up somewhere else. The second is the colonial premise in its exact form, and it does not have to be stated to be operating. Either way the result is the same, and

it is not an accident of emphasis. The one force in Iranian society whose politics is organised around class rather than around the map of states is the force these positions cannot see.

While the war continues, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court in Isfahan has sentenced ten defendants to death at first instance in the case known as Shohada Square, among the heaviest sentences yet handed down against those detained in the protests of Dey 1404 (December 2025 and January 2026). Six others received long prison terms, and for the sixteen defendants the prison sentences total 256 years.

The rulings can be appealed. According to the human rights agency HRANA, most of the defendants were not known political activists and several owned or worked in shoe shops around the square; no defendant was charged specifically with the two deaths that occurred there; defence access to the file was restricted; and the hearing was held inside Dastgerd prison rather than in a courthouse. One of the men now facing execution told the judges he had been tortured under interrogation.

The precedent is close at hand. In a separate Isfahan case, five defendants from the same protests were executed between 19 July and 20 August 2026, two of them in public. Amnesty International had already warned that the state was escalating its use of the death penalty against protesters after the January protests and the start of the war.

For those sixteen, the question of the right moment is not abstract. The foreign government will not stop the war when domestic repression ends, and the domestic government will not stop the repression when the foreign war ends.

## **The real question of the scissors**

The problem with the critics is not that they insist on the imbalance of power. The imbalance is real. The problem begins when the imbalance is used to give the Iranian state political priority over Iranian society.

In that framework the anti-war movement in the West no longer only confronts its own government, military budget, sanctions regime and arms industry. It also decides, on Iranian society's behalf, which conflict is now the main one, which protest should wait and which demand might serve the enemy. That is where a critique of power turns into the management of someone else's politics.

The political economy of war in the United States and Europe is entirely material: which firms profit, which governments finance it, which classes pay for it, and how sanctions, the financial system and the arms industry work as instruments of power. There the anti-war movement faces a real structure and has real leverage. The Islamic Republic is not the answer to that problem. A state can stand against an imperialist power while suppressing independent parties, trade unions, free media and organised protest, and neither fact cancels the other or suspends it.

Once the unit of analysis moves from social relations to the state, domestic repression becomes secondary. The question is no longer who holds power inside Iran and who pays for it, but where the Iranian state sits in the global balance. That is why a policy which generates anger can be called an economic necessity while protest against it is judged by the risk of enemy exploitation, and why a threat to crush protests that have not happened counts as a domestic matter while support for the same protesters becomes a geopolitical one.

The argument was never about two blades. It is about who has the right to reduce a society to an extension of somebody's foreign policy. The anti-war movement stays outside colonial logic for as long as it aims its criticism at the structure of power it actually belongs to. Past that line, deciding

how another society should fight its own government is the old right of the centre to set the limits of politics at the margins.

Which is why the image caused such trouble. Not because it made two states equal, but because it put Iranian society back into a picture in which the politics of states had left no room for it.