

## Iran, Ukraine, and the Realities of Resistance & Regime Change

### Description

*This article, published in [Small Wars Journal](#) in mid-2025, examines the limits of externally driven regime-change strategies through a comparative analysis of Iran and Ukraine. Drawing on Ukraine's experience of bottom-up resistance, the authors argue that durable political transformation depends on long-term civic mobilisation rather than state-centric or decapitation-focused approaches. The piece challenges prevailing Western whole-of-society resilience frameworks and contends that meaningful change in Iran can only emerge from indigenous social forces, with external actors playing a supporting rather than directing role.*

### Regime Change Return

In the aftermath of Israel and America's [12 Day War](#) with Iran, regime change is once again in the headlines. [Proponents](#) for regime change in Iran argue for the wholesale destruction of the Islamic Republic, with the supporting logic being that Iran's sitting government will never be a viable interlocutor for peace, human rights, and counter-proliferation. [Detractors](#) recoil from the idea, warning against a repeat of history after the catastrophic failures of similar efforts in the Global War on Terror.

Common to the bulk of public discourse, most notably among skeptics of regime change, is the assumption that regime change would be led by [outside forces](#), and conducted as a top-down decapitation strike against the leadership of Iran, focused on creating an externally imposed new government. This approach to regime change is a critical mistake. It is rooted not only in the toxic legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in the prevailing zeitgeist within American and European defense circles, where [whole-of-society resilience](#) and civic agency writ large are primarily conceptualized as government-led activities. These statist assumptions need to be acknowledged and corrected, as they are shaping efforts toward preparedness and action in ways that undermine the true potential of civil society in scenarios as diverse as NATO's defense against Russia and policy debates over the future of Iran.

Conventional wisdom across the United States and Europe, captured most famously within NATO's [Resistance Operating Concept](#) and theory of [Total Defense](#) embraced by the Nordic states, posits that it is the role of the state to cultivate societal resilience and orchestrate civil resistance. This paradigm is built upon an assumption of robust state-society relations and cohesive trust across the

civil-military interface. To its credit, it offers a powerful organizational framework where those conditions exist.

But what if they do not? Across the Black Sea Region, in Taiwan, and in the United States itself, it is unclear how these concepts can be applied. Tensions between governments and the populace, between militaries and civil society, are pervasive and powerful. This begs the question: how are societal mobilization and civil resistance supposed to happen when the state and civil society are at odds, or where fault lines in the human terrain preclude any sort of “whole-of-society” endeavor? More broadly, in philosophical and practical terms, do we *really* want the government to act as the architect and orchestrator of civic agency?

## Resilience & Resistance in Ukraine

This debate, and likewise current speculation over regime change in Iran, must look to the realities of Ukraine. [Ukrainian resistance](#) is universally hailed as the gold standard of state-society collaboration in wartime, and sustained whole-of-society mobilization. Indeed, this dynamic has been Ukraine’s greatest strategic asset in its war against Russian aggression—insofar as the military and financial support provided by the West that has sustained the Ukrainian state would have been unthinkable if significant segments of Ukrainian society had welcomed the Russians, ran from the fight, or simply hid in their homes in search of relative safety. President Zelenskyy rose to the occasion and spoke for his country on the international stage, but his remarkable performance would have been for naught if the Ukrainian people had not spontaneously mobilized *en masse*.

Where did this societal capacity come from? Contrary to the foundational assumptions of the Resistance Operating Concept and Total Defense, it was not developed or orchestrated by the Ukrainian government. Quite the opposite—it was the outgrowth of three decades of societal agitation against the abuses and corruption of the Ukrainian state.

Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, Ukrainians have fiercely resisted tyranny through powerful uprisings. In 1990, students launched the [Revolution on Granite](#), taking to the streets to demand democracy from a dying Soviet system. In 2001, the [Ukraine without Kuchma](#) movement erupted against a corrupt president’s authoritarian grip. The 2004 [Orange Revolution](#) saw millions reject a rigged election, forcing a fair vote. Then, in 2013-2014, the [Revolution of Dignity](#) exploded when a pro-Russian regime sought to divert Ukraine’s westward geo-economic trajectory back toward Moscow.

These actions, which can be understood as recurring efforts toward “regime change,” were the process through which Ukrainian society developed the connective tissue and muscle memory to resist

aggression that has been on display to the world since the 2022 full-scale invasion. It was an organic process through which the Ukrainian people embraced and refined their agency to shape the future of their country.

At present, Ukrainian society is working alongside the government in an existential fight for the survival of the Ukrainian nation. This is a radical break from the past. Looking ahead, there is every reason to expect a reversion to the norm—wherein a post-war civil society will hold its government to account for Ukraine's failures to prepare for the full-scale invasion, and for errors in the prosecution of the war. Depending upon the ultimate outcome of the war, a regime change—in one shape or another may once again be on the menu.

## Implications for Iran

What does this mean for Iran? Iranian civil society, like its Ukrainian counterpart, has generations of experience in spontaneous societal mobilization against tyranny and corruption that go back to the fall of the Shah and the founding of the Islamic Republic. More recently, the [Green Movement](#) of 2009 and the nationwide uprisings that followed the murder of [Mahsa Amini](#) in 2022, coupled with recurring societal mobilization across the country in response to [economic hardship](#) and [environmental degradation](#), all demonstrate that the Iranian people have built up their own connective tissue and muscle memory to demonstrate and resist.

Discussions about Iran's future should be focused on precisely this—not externally orchestrated decapitations. Concurrently, bridges should be built between Ukrainian civic leaders and resistance practitioners and their Iranian counterparts. The two peoples share a common cause—namely freedom and dignity—and [common enemies](#) as well. Encouraging developments are already unfolding, as Ukrainian resistance practitioners have documented [their lessons learned](#) for Iranian citizens. Time is of the essence, however, as the Islamic Republic is poised to conduct a [sweeping, brutal cull](#) of its domestic opponents.

## Which Way Forward?

For the West, what will support to resistance look like in Iran? How will it draw from the realities of resistance in Ukraine? The only viable path to a new Iran is one charted by the Iranian people, in a grassroots campaign against the Islamic Republic. What is the role of Western states in supporting this process? Alternatively, what aspects of support to resistance might be better left open to society-to-society engagement?

Questions over the future of Iranian governance, and likewise NATO's prevailing assumptions about the appropriate relationship between state and society and between military action and civic mobilization, require a reset—one that not only accounts for the realities witnessed in Ukraine, but also the appropriate role of the government in democratic nations. It is one thing for Western states to engineer resilience within their electrical grids and supply chains. But government-led social engineering is something quite different, prone to blowback and unintended consequences, and rightly anathema to free societies.

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*The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.*

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