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Iran

Iran and the Western left

- Features -



Publication date: Wednesday 6 May 2026

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As occupations and wars intensify, anti-imperialism has become a key priority for the global left. This has raised questions about how to organise and mobilise a mass anti-imperialist movement.

Within the Western left, particularly socialists in the United States, a certain position is gaining ground that, at first, seems logical but ultimately undermines the left's cause. This position demands we offer unconditional support to regimes and movements targeted by imperialism, and regard any criticism of them as treason. The latest example is the support given to the Iranian regime, which has killed countless leftists, minorities and women over the years.

Before delving into the subject, one thing must be clear: when it comes to the Global South, any country facing imperialist aggression must be defended. Moreover, in the event of war or occupation, this defence must not be watered down. However, this does not mean turning a blind eye to the nature of the regimes under threat.

The position I was referring to equates anti-imperialism with support for the Iranian regime. It claims any criticism of the regime right now amounts to support for imperialism. Those who support this position employ quite sound arguments.

The most persuasive is that the Western left's primary responsibility is to curb the belligerence of their own states and that, in any case, we lack the power to influence the Iranian regime. Imperialist aggression will only push the regime towards an even more hardline stance; therefore, defeating imperialism is the best way to support the Iranian people.

This position is not only put forward by groups that opponents label as "campist" — those who take opposition to Western imperialism as their starting point on every global issue. Even some non-campists have used this argument.

While fundamentally correct, it nevertheless overlooks one crucial point. It is true that the Western left does not have the power to democratise the Iranian regime. But the left's stance on this issue directly affects the number and type of people we can draw into anti-imperialist organisation and action.

It is common to hear complaints on the left, such as: "Look at how huge the protests were during the Iraq War; compare that to the meagre turnout for anti-war protests today." It is truly disheartening that protests have not spread through the US, even as President Donald Trump threatens genocide. However, those who claim to be leading the movement should be asking themselves "where are we going wrong?", rather than blaming the people.

It would be easy to draw up a long list of differences between the current situation and the Iraq invasion, and argue these differences are why anti-imperialist sentiments have declined. However, this war is a continuation of a series of wars, including the one in Iraq.

The left must first be able to explain this continuity. Yet, explaining the broader picture — the retreat of the leading imperialist power and the violence this will inevitably unleash across the globe — and reframing public debate along these lines is a long and arduous path.

It is also a path that requires us to get a hearing among the public. That is why remaining silent during the wave of

violence unleashed by the Iranian regime in January, and allowing the monarchists in the diaspora to politically monopolise the response, was a major mistake by the Western left.

Rather than viewing those horrific massacres from the perspective of Iran's poor, workers, women, minorities and leftists, the Western left approached the situation simply from the point of view of "will this benefit the US?". This ultimately led into inaction. Taking advantage of this, liberals and conservatives were able to lend credibility to their empty rhetoric, saying things such as: "See, leftists are not bothered by the massacre of people."

It is not easy to disrupt this tactic, which mainstream voices often use. Given the resources at their disposal, they will always seek to distort events, even if the left takes the right position. Nevertheless, it is essential that revolutionaries and socialists adopt a clear stance against all forms of oppression and injustice, remain consistent with their principles, and bring together all left and progressive forces in a broad united front.

I reiterate: our absolute priority today is defeating imperialism. Uniting all leftists and progressives is crucial for this. There is no point in exaggerating our differences and weakening any anti-imperialism and anti-war united fronts we have built. Nevertheless, it is also evident that we have so far not been very effective in extending this unity beyond established activist circles.

25 April 2026

Source: [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewalinks](#). First published in Turkish at [Evrensel](#).

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