

The Art of Changing the Game

Reclaiming the Human-Rights Discourse from the Islamic Republic and Building Legitimacy for Iran's Freedom-Seeking Opposition

A Strategic Analytical Paper

Prepared on the basis of the framework proposed by Mr Peyman Bakhshayesh, MD, PhD, MBA

May 2026

Central thesis: The Islamic Republic has managed, through a combination of domestic repression, anti-colonial narrative, the Palestinian issue, cultural relativism, and exploitation of the West's historical guilt, to move itself in the eyes of parts of global opinion from the position of a government that violates human rights to that of a "victim of Western pressure." The mission of the Iranian opposition is to reverse this game: to return the centre of the narrative to Iranian victims, universal human rights, and the Iranian nation's right to freedom, secularism, and self-determination.

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Executive Summary

The central question of this paper is why the Islamic Republic, despite its long record of repression, executions, political killings, structural discrimination against women and minorities, and export of a violence-centred ideology across the region, can still draw on the symbolic capital of “resistance” in parts of freedom-minded Western public opinion; while the Iranian opposition—which is often modern, secular, patriotic, pro-Western, and aligned with the legal and political civilisation of Europe and North America—has not yet been able to organise that same moral capital in its own favour.

The short answer is that the Islamic Republic has combined three arenas: first, the arena of domestic repression and the production of fear; second, the geopolitical arena, where it portrays itself as a victim of the United States, Israel, and the West; and third, the arena of Western political psychology, where it exploits historical guilt over colonialism, Islamophobia, and the failures of Western foreign policy in the Middle East. The result is that part of the Western audience has imagined the Islamic Republic not as a repressive government ruling over the Iranian people, but as an “anti-imperialist” or “pro-Palestinian” force.

The way to change the game is not for the Iranian opposition simply to retreat into identity-based, monarchist, republican, or anti-left slogans. The more effective path is to reclaim the moral and legal field from the Islamic Republic: names, faces, case files, mothers seeking justice, political prisoners, women who are victims of gender apartheid, persecuted minorities, victims of execution, and their families must be moved to the centre of the global narrative. The Islamic Republic must be presented not as a “state opposing the West,” but as a “government committing crimes against its own citizens.”

In such a framework, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi should likewise be presented not as an instrument of the United States or Israel, but as the political face of a national, secular, rights-based, and democratic liberation movement; a movement whose aim is not ideological revenge, but the transition of Iran from an ideological and quasi-totalitarian regime to a legal, electoral, pluralist, and reconciliatory order.

1. The Problem: Why Does the Killer Sit in the Seat of the Oppressed?

In international politics, “moral reality” is not created by raw truth alone; it is created through narrative, image, symbolism, victimhood, and the capacity to organise public opinion. From the first years after the 1979 revolution to the present day, the Islamic Republic has been accompanied by waves of executions, elimination of opponents, repression of political prisoners, proxy wars, and harsh social control. Yet in sections of the global left, academic circles, anti-war movements, and even some human-rights networks, it still benefits directly or indirectly from the image of a “victim of sanctions and Western pressure.”

This apparently strange contradiction is the result of a long operation of narrative construction. On the one hand, inside Iran, the Islamic Republic has operated through repression, execution, forced confessions, torture, gender discrimination, and security control. On the other hand, outside Iran it has presented itself not as a repressive government, but as a “regional resistance” against Israel,

the United States, imperialism, colonialism, and global bullying. As a result, the regime's external image in parts of Western public opinion has become profoundly detached from the lived experience of Iranian citizens.

To change this situation, the Iranian opposition must understand that the issue is not merely "information." The issue is competition over the moral frame. As long as the Islamic Republic can place itself in the seat of the victim, its crimes are pushed to the margins of the foreign audience's mind. But if the opposition can bring the real victim back onto the stage—the Iranian people, women, young people, political prisoners, execution victims, and families seeking justice—then the moral field changes.

2. The Pillars of the Islamic Republic's Discursive Advantage in the West

2.1 Appropriating the Anti-Colonial and Anti-Imperialist Narrative

From the beginning, the Islamic Republic presented itself not merely as a religious government, but as an anti-colonial revolution. This image was attractive to sections of Western political generations shaped by memories of the Vietnam War, Cold War coups, European colonialism, and the Palestinian issue. In the 1970s and afterwards, political Islamism was able to present itself as an alternative that was neither Soviet communism nor the modern, developmental nationalism of states such as the Pahlavi government. This position allowed Islamists to use the language of justice, the dispossessed, opposition to domination, and the right to self-determination.

Yet this narrative contained a fundamental contradiction from the outset: a government that spoke abroad about the freedom of nations suppressed the freedom of its own nation at home. This gap must become the central point of the opposition's media and diplomatic work. The key question for a Western audience should be this: how can a government that represses its own women, executes political prisoners, pressures minorities, and destroys free elections claim to represent Palestinian freedom, global justice, or moral resistance?

2.2 The Palestinian Issue as a Moral Shield

The Palestinian issue has been one of the Islamic Republic's most important discursive shields. In many Western academic, media, and street-mobilisation spaces, Palestine has become a symbol of victimhood, anti-colonialism, and critique of power. Through ideological, financial, and military links with forces such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and other regional networks, the Islamic Republic has attempted to place itself at the centre of this symbolic constellation. Official and research sources in the West have also documented Iran's regional influence network and its links with groups in Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen [5–7].

The Iranian opposition must not fall into a false binary: defending the rights of the Iranian people is not in conflict with defending the rights of Palestinian civilians. The opposition's strength should be to define human rights non-selectively. The precise message should be: we oppose the killing of Palestinian civilians, we oppose antisemitism, we oppose hostage-taking and terrorism, and we also oppose a government that uses Palestinian suffering to repress Iranians. This framework removes the Islamic Republic from behind the moral shield of Palestine.

2.3 The Misuse of Cultural Relativism

Another instrument of the Islamic Republic is the political use of cultural relativism. Whenever compulsory hijab, discrimination against women, repression of minorities, execution of protesters, or torture of prisoners is discussed, direct and indirect defenders of the regime try to reduce the issue to “cultural difference” or “Western Islamophobia.” This is precisely the point at which the opposition must intervene with conceptual precision: criticism of the Islamic Republic is not criticism of Islam as personal faith; it is criticism of the fusion of religion, state, repression, and the security apparatus.

In today’s world, torture, unfair execution, rape in detention, enforced disappearance, shooting protesters, structural discrimination, and repression of women are not matters of cultural relativity. They are matters of international law and universal human dignity. United Nations reports and human-rights organisations’ reports on the repression of the 2022 protests and its aftermath have spoken, in precisely this framework, of widespread violations and, in some cases, crimes against humanity [2–3].

2.4 Turning Sanctions and Foreign Pressure into a Cover for Domestic Failure

The Islamic Republic attributes every domestic crisis to foreign pressure: inflation, poverty, capital flight, corruption, environmental collapse, the water crisis, unemployment, and recession. Sanctions have undoubtedly imposed heavy costs on Iran’s economy and on people’s daily lives, but the official narrative of the regime deliberately conceals structural corruption, rentier economics, the prioritisation of military and regional projects, and the suppression of meritocracy and economic freedom.

The opposition must use precise language: the issue is not that sanctions have no effect; the issue is that the Islamic Republic uses sanctions as a political shield to hide inefficiency, corruption, and repression. It must be shown that even non-sanctioned revenues and domestic capacities have been spent not on public welfare but on preserving the security, propaganda, and proxy apparatus.

2.5 Exploiting the West’s Historical Guilt

Europe and parts of North American public opinion confront the legacy of colonialism, slavery, Middle Eastern wars, and foreign-policy failures. The Islamic Republic has used this historical memory and placed itself in the position of a victim of that same history. This is an effective psychological technique: if the Western audience feels guilty about its past, the regime can neutralise criticism of its domestic repression with labels such as “neo-colonialism,” “Islamophobia,” or “interventionism.”

The opposition’s answer should not be the denial of colonial history. The correct answer is this: criticism of Western colonialism must not become the whitewashing of Eastern despotism. The Iranian people must not be sacrificed to European guilt. If the Western conscience is truly awake, it must also hear the voice of the Iranian victim, not only the voice of a government that hides behind anti-Western slogans.

3. The Opposition's Strategic Error: Handing the Moral Field to the Enemy

Despite possessing enormous human capital, specialist figures, a broad exiled society, lived experience of repression, and natural affinity with the free world, the Iranian opposition has not sufficiently captured the moral field. Part of this failure comes from organisational fragmentation; part from historical wounds; and part from unresolved disputes over 28 Mordad, Mossadegh, Mohammad Reza Shah, SAVAK, the 1979 revolution, the Iran–Iraq War, monarchy, republic, the role of religion in government, and the place of the left in Iranian history.

But the deeper problem is that the opposition sometimes enters precisely the field that the Islamic Republic wants: identity war, historical revenge, labelling, symbolic elimination of rivals, and arguments over the past instead of building the future. In such circumstances, a Western audience that is sensitive to the language of human rights, pluralism, and reconciliation may distance itself from the opposition, even if it is also dissatisfied with the Islamic Republic.

Therefore, the strategic principle must be clear: every message that makes the opposition appear violent, vengeful, paramilitary, totalitarian, or indifferent to the rights of opponents ultimately benefits the Islamic Republic. Every message that presents the opposition as rights-based, humane, modern, secular, pluralist, friendly to the West, and friendly to the Iranian citizen changes the field in favour of the people of Iran.

Strategic Table: Fields That Must Be Reclaimed

Field	Islamic Republic Narrative	Opposition Counter-Narrative
Palestine	We represent resistance and the oppressed.	Using Palestinian suffering to repress Iranians is not defence of Palestine; it is political exploitation.
Sanctions	The Iranian people are victims of Western pressure.	The Iranian people are simultaneously victims of sanctions, corruption, repression, and the regime's regional adventurism.
Culture and religion	Our critics are Islamophobic and culturally interventionist.	Criticism of a repressive religious state is a defence of freedom of conscience and personal faith.
The opposition	The opposition is an instrument of the United States and Israel.	The opposition represents the Iranian nation's right to freedom, secularism, free elections, and human dignity.
Regional security	We create deterrence.	Proxy networks, a war economy, and export of ideology have destroyed the security of Iranians and the region.

4. How to Present Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as the Leader of Iran's Liberation Movement

The Islamic Republic tries to portray Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi not as an Iranian figure and symbol of national transition, but as a “puppet of the United States and Israel.” This propaganda attack is psychologically understandable: the regime knows that if a single, calm, modern, secular, and dialogue-capable figure can build a national and international coalition, the regime's monopoly over the narrative will be broken.

The response to this attack should not merely be personal defence. The framing of presentation must change. In international language, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi should be presented as the leader of a national liberation movement; a movement that seeks neither civil war, nor ideological revenge, nor the imposition of the final form of government before the people have voted. The central message should be this: he symbolises the transition from the Islamic Republic to the rule of law, free elections, separation of religion and state, and Iran's return to the family of the free world.

This presentation will succeed only if, alongside the Crown Prince, republican, constitutionalist, liberal, nationalist, women activists, workers, students, ethnic and religious minorities, and families seeking justice are also visible. The more pluralist and rights-based Iran's freedom movement appears, the less effective the accusation of foreign dependency becomes.

5. The Strategy for Changing the Game: From Reactive Defence to Moral and Legal Offence

5.1 Turning Criminal Case Files into Legitimate Political Capital

The opposition should not merely say that the Islamic Republic is bad; it must show, through case files, documents, images, names, dates, and human narratives, what the Islamic Republic has done. In this process, the massacre of political prisoners in the 1980s and in 1988, the repression of students, the Green Movement, November 2019, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, and new waves of repression must be transformed into an organised legal memory. Amnesty International's reports on the 1988 massacre and United Nations reports on the repression of 2022 are important legal and media assets [1–2, 4].

This capital must be translated into language that a Western audience can understand: “a mother seeking justice,” “a student who was killed,” “a woman blinded by pellets,” “a prisoner executed after torture,” “a family denied the right to mourn.” Successful politics emerges from the concrete human being, not from abstract statistics. Statistics are necessary, but it is faces and names that awaken public conscience.

5.2 Non-Selective Human Rights: The Key to Disarming the Islamic Republic's Propaganda

The Islamic Republic succeeds when it places the opposition in the camp of warmongering, revenge, or unconditional support for foreign powers. The way to neutralise this attack is to make non-selective human rights the central axis of the opposition's message. This means defining the

defence of the life of the Iranian, Palestinian, Israeli, Kurd, Baluch, Baha'i, Jew, Muslim, non-believer, woman, man, homosexual, and dissident within one unified moral order.

Such language is intelligible to the European and North American conscience. It also enables the opposition to recruit allies inside universities, trade unions, parliaments, media, and civil institutions in the West without falling into the regime's propaganda trap.

5.3 Separating the People of Iran from the State of the Islamic Republic

One of the most important common mistakes in the West is to identify Iran with the Islamic Republic. The opposition must constantly clarify this boundary: Iran is a civilisation, a nation, and a historical society; the Islamic Republic is an ideological and security state. The Iranian people are not enemies of the West, not enemies of Jews, and not enemies of freedom; many of them have been repressed precisely because they sought freedom, dignity, and connection with the world.

This distinction must be repeated in every public message: indiscriminate sanctions against the Iranian people are not the solution; appeasement of the regime is not the solution either. The solution is targeted pressure on the repressive apparatus, support for civil society, support for free internet access, sanctions against human-rights violators, documentation of crimes, and recognition of the Iranian nation's right to a democratic transition.

6. An Operational Messaging Map for Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America

To change the game, the opposition must move from emotional reaction to organised messaging operations. This operation must have several layers: legal, media, academic, parliamentary, artistic, and street-level. The aim is that every audience, in its own language, encounters one truth: the Islamic Republic is a government that violates human rights, and the people of Iran deserve freedom.

6.1 Evidence Packs for Parliaments and Parties

For members of the European Parliament, the British Parliament, the Canadian Parliament, and the United States Congress, short and documented packs should be prepared: one page on executions, one page on political prisoners, one page on repression of women, one page on the proxy network, and one page on the opposition's political solution. These packs must be non-sloganeering, well-sourced, precise, and usable in parliamentary speeches.

These packs should rely on sources that are credible for Western audiences: reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, British parliamentary reports, research institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations, and official government reports. Opposition reports are also important, but they must be supported by independent and international sources.

6.2 Rebuilding Media Language

Media language must move away from purely internal slogans. For a Western audience, phrases such as "freedom for Iran," "end gender apartheid," "no to executions," "the right to choose one's clothing," "the right to free elections," "support political prisoners," "justice for victims," and "separation of religion and state" are far more powerful than intra-Iranian historical disputes.

At the same time, language that frightens the audience must be avoided: political purges, revenge, total elimination of rivals, paramilitary clothing, threats against opponents, or reproduction of security-state language. Such images and words are exactly what the Islamic Republic needs to frighten Western public opinion.

6.3 Coalition with Awakened Western Consciences

The opposition must speak with anti-war forces, feminists, minority-rights activists, trade unions, academics, journalists, human-rights lawyers, Jewish groups opposing antisemitism, secular Muslim groups, and defenders of freedom of religion. The aim is not to make all of them monarchists or republicans; the aim is to align them against the Islamic Republic as a government that violates human rights.

This coalition forms when the opposition does not present itself as a force of revenge and war, but as a force of life, law, freedom, secularism, and national reconciliation. In such a framework, even those who oppose the policies of the United States or Israel can stand with the people of Iran and against the repression of the Islamic Republic.

6.4 Caution in Historical and Security Claims

In political writing, one may refer to the Islamic Republic's ideological and security networking, but in the international arena only claims that are evidentially supportable and legally defensible should be used. For example, the Islamic Republic's links with Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iraqi groups have been widely examined in credible Western sources [5–7]. But regarding cooperation with some European groups, such as Basque, Irish, German, Italian, or Spanish groups, categorical generalisations should be avoided unless specific and credible evidence is provided.

The strategic principle is this: every weak claim can damage the credibility of strong claims. The Islamic Republic must be condemned through case files that are legally strong, understandable to the media, and morally indefensible.

7. Conclusion: Victory Through Possessing the World's Public Conscience

To date, the Islamic Republic has managed with considerable skill to turn the narrative game in its favour: the killer of Iranian citizens has presented itself as the victim of imperialism; the oppressor of women has presented itself as the defender of Palestinian justice; the ideological and security regime has disguised itself as the representative of culture and independence; and the system that has driven the country into poverty, fear, and isolation has hidden its own incompetence behind sanctions and the foreign enemy.

The art of the Iranian opposition is to reverse this game. Not by imitating the regime's violence, not by paramilitary displays, and not by exhausting historical disputes, but by capturing the moral field: human rights, truth, justice-seeking, women's dignity, the right to life, the right to choose, the right to a free vote, separation of religion and state, and the Iranian nation's right to a modern and humane future.

If the opposition can present Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi and other freedom-seeking forces within the framework of a national, secular, rights-based, pluralist, and reconciliatory movement, the accusation of foreign dependency will collapse. At that moment, the issue will no longer be “the West against Iran”; the real issue will become visible: the Iranian nation against a government that has taken Iran hostage.

Changing the game means returning truth to the centre of the stage. The truth is that the people of Iran are the principal victims of the Islamic Republic. The truth is that Iranian human rights must not be hidden under the shadow of Palestine, sanctions, war, cultural relativism, or Western guilt. The truth is that freedom for Iran is not an American or Israeli project, but the natural and historical right of the Iranian nation.

Alternative Titles for Publication

1. The Art of Changing the Game: How Can the Iranian Opposition Reclaim the Human-Rights Discourse from the Islamic Republic?
2. From Victimhood Performance to Justice-Seeking: The Battle of Narratives Between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian Opposition
3. Reclaiming the Western Conscience: A Human-Rights Strategy for Iran’s Freedom Movement
4. How the Islamic Republic Cast Itself as the Victim — and How the Opposition Must Change the Game
5. The Iranian Nation Against the Hostage-Taking Regime: A Framework for the Opposition’s International Legitimacy

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