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# Woman, Life, Freedom Movement and the Pathology of Diaspora Opposition: Retrotopia, Co-optation, and Misrepresentation

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## Abstract

This article critiques certain factions of the Iranian diaspora opposition for embracing retrotopia—a romanticized, imagined past that reflects present despair and future anxiety. Instead of supporting Iran’s civil society, some rely on foreign powers, promote archaic nationalism and monarchist nostalgia, or advance ethnic exceptionalism, thereby distorting the emancipatory ideals of the Zan, Zendegi, Azadi (WLF) movement. Their rhetoric often glorifies war, employs exclusionary and patriarchal discourses, and undermines pluralism, gender equality, and indigenous democratic change. These factions are identifiable as an “opposition against the movement,” obstructing rather than advancing emancipatory change. The Israeli-American war on Iran (June 2025) further exposed their alignment with external aggression, as well as their strategic confusion, ethical bankruptcy, and detachment from Iran’s grassroots post-Islamist vision of pluralism, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords:** Retrotopia; “Opposition agonist Movement”; Zan-Zendegi-Azadli (WLF); Indigenous Democratic Change; Diaspora; Post-Islamism; Agonism

## Introduction

This article critically examines segments of Iran’s diaspora opposition within the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement, with a particular focus on the Iranian-Canadian diaspora. The article explores the extent to which the movement’s ethos and goals are represented—or misrepresented—by the diaspora, highlighting a disconnect between the WLF’s ideals and the actions of certain factions. Beginning with a conceptualization of the WLF movement, identifying its six defining characteristics as a paradigmatic shift in Iranian society, the article then goes on to analyze how diaspora engagement aligns with or diverges from these principles. Finally, the article concludes with an assessment of the diversity and limitations within the Iranian-Canadian diaspora opposition.

## The Woman, Life, Freedom movement: a paradigmatic transformation?

In 1978, the French philosopher Michel Foucault asked, “What are the Iranians dreaming about?”<sup>1</sup> His question, posed during the Iranian Revolution, captured the aspirations of a

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, “What are the Iranians dreaming about?”

people yearning for freedom, justice, and dignity, framed within a broad and inclusive interpretation of Islam. Nearly half a century later, after profound societal transformations in post-revolutionary Iran, this question has resurfaced in the context of the WLF movement, which was sparked by the tragic killing of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini in 2022: *What are Iranians dreaming about here and now?*

The WLF movement is far more than a revolt against authoritarianism; it embodies a paradigmatic shift in Iranian society, demanding gender justice, *bodily* autonomy, and civic rights in unprecedented ways. To grasp the depth of this transformation, it is essential to highlight six defining characteristics of the WLF movement. First, Mahsa's identity—Kurdish, Sunni Muslim, young, and from the marginalized class and city of Saez—embodies the intersectionality of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and economically disadvantaged Iranians. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's feminist concept of the “matrix of domination,” Mahsa symbolizes systemic injustices in post-revolutionary Iran, uniting diverse groups across gender, class, religion, generation, and ethnicity against state oppression.<sup>2</sup> The slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom” (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) captures the movement's essence: a broad, inclusive fight for justice, dignity, and liberation. It echoes Michael Hardt's assertion that “*Zan + Zendegi = Azadi*,” encapsulating a transformative feminist call for justice transcending borders and ideologies, and representing a *matrix of emancipation*.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the WLF movement critiques the Iranian state as an anachronistic regime, highlighting a deep generational and cultural gap. Youths, alongside other Iran's subalterns, feel the ruling Islamists have “colonized” their lives, imposing outdated policies.<sup>4</sup> The movement underscores the irrelevance of hegemonic sociocultural values in addressing contemporary needs.

Third, the movement defies all forms of top-down authority, including *velayat-e faqih*, patriarchal values, and traditional legitimacy. Its anti-authoritarian ethos challenges religious orthodoxy and archaic political regimes, such as monarchy. The WLF motto and ethos are powerful antipodes to traditional, modern, religious, and secular forms of *velayat*!

Fourth, the movement is uniquely woman-centered, prioritizing gender, bodily autonomy, and love in a mass resistance movement—an extraordinary stance in the Middle East and North Africa, which is often characterized by entrenched patriarchy. The movement's defiance of compulsory hijab laws symbolizes a broader struggle for women's bodily autonomy.

Fifth, the movement embodies a *glocal* phenomenon, merging local sociocultural realities with global ideals of justice and human rights. It challenges Orientalist portrayals of the Middle East and rejects Western-centric universalism, Islamist and secular conservatism, and postmodern cultural relativism that deny the universality of gender justice, demystifying the notion of Muslim and Middle East exceptionalism.<sup>5</sup> The WLF's slogans originated in Kurdistan, a marginalized region, and spread to major cities, symbolizing a *glocal* struggle against patriarchy, authoritarianism, and a vision of Iranian homegrown modernity.

Finally, the movement represents a *post-Islamist* moment in Iran, signaling disillusionment with state-imposed Islamism and a desire for spiritual and bodily freedom. This shift embraces a pluralistic, inclusive identity, rejecting rigid religious interpretations in favor of a “*khoda-ye rangin kaman*” (rainbow god)—a metaphor embodying beauty, plurality, inclusivity, ethics, and spirituality beyond state orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> The poem “*Khoda Nur-e*” (God is Light), which gained prominence during the WLF movement, captures this spirit:

<sup>2</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Mahdavi, “Iran: A Post-Islamist Society Revolts against an Islamist State.”

<sup>3</sup> Hardt, “Michael Hardt supports Iran's Nationwide Movement.”

<sup>4</sup> Bayat, “A New Iran Has Been Born.”

<sup>5</sup> Mahdavi, *The Myth of Middle East Exceptionalism*.

<sup>6</sup> The term “rainbow god” (*khoda-ye rangin kaman*) gained significance during the WLF movement, originating from the heartfelt imagination of Kian Pirfalak, a nine-year-old boy whose tragic death in the state's violent crackdown on protests left a deep emotional impact.

God is Light/God is Mahsa/God is the Sultan of Hearts Nika  
 God is in the streets today/It is courage in our hearts  
 God is Toumaj/God is Saleh  
 God today are two wings/With which we must fly/Otherwise it'll be a sin  
 God is the hair in the wind/God is the prosperous Iran.<sup>7</sup>

The *Rangin Kaman*, or rainbow metaphor, reflects the cultural, political, ethnic, religious, and class diversity present in contemporary Iranian society; a diversity also evident in the WLF movement. Therefore, it is essential to avoid both homogenizing and romanticizing the movement, as it encompasses a broad range of perspectives, spanning the right, center, and left of the sociopolitical spectrum. Yet, the WLF slogan encapsulates the movement's ethos and spirit, providing a powerful reference point for critically examining the movement and its supporters both within Iran and in the diaspora.

So, *what are Iranians dreaming about today?*<sup>8</sup> They dream of a society where justice, including gender justice, is ensured; bodies are free from state control; love—both bodily and spiritual—is decriminalized; authoritarianism gives way to democracy; and multiple cultural and historical identities are celebrated, not policed. The WLF movement embodies this vision, signaling a new paradigm for Iran's future. However, to what extent does the diaspora opposition genuinely represent the movement's spirit?

### **Diaspora opposition: representation or “retrotopia”?**

#### ***Diaspora opposition as lifestyle: antagonism vs. agonism***

In “Opposition Against the Movement: A Pathology a Political Illness,” Asef Bayat argues that the diaspora opposition within the WLF movement suffers from a political disease, positioning itself against the movement it claims to support.<sup>9</sup> This opposition, often composed of “professional” diaspora political actors, asserts leadership over the movement without reflecting the everyday struggles of those on the ground in Iran. Living in exile and disconnected from Iran's sociopolitical realities weakens the diaspora's understanding of the movement's context.

While the diaspora opposition has played a supportive role at times, its internal fragmentation and hostility diminishes its impact. Some factions focus more on what they oppose rather than on building a coherent vision of what they seek, often resulting in divisiveness. Their primary concern is not advancing the movement but ensuring their own survival. Over time, this self-preservation has transformed the opposition into an *identity, lifestyle, and survival strategy*. Consequently, instead of serving the movement, the diaspora opposition uses it to sustain themselves abroad. This self-proclaimed vanguard opposition shows little regard for grassroots movements, positioning itself as the leader and architect of the future order, regardless of the views of ordinary movement supporters.

Bayat highlights the importance of “imagined solidarity” within the opposition, where different individuals and groups project their specific demands onto broader slogans. However, this solidarity often marginalizes weaker voices and is unstable; once the movement's primary enemy is removed, disagreements over the meaning of slogans and demands resurface. To address this, Bayat advocates for Chantal Mouffe's concept of “agonistic” engagement, in which groups view rivals not as enemies (antagonism) but as

<sup>7</sup> Dabashi, *Iran in Revolt*, chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> For a good representation of people's demands during the WLF movement, see the song “Baraye” (Because of, or For the Sake of) by singer/songwriter Shervin Hajipour.

<sup>9</sup> This section is significantly based on Bayat, “اپوزيسيون عليه جنبش: آسیب شناسی یک بیماری سیاسی”. Āsaf Bayāt, “Apuzisiyon ‘Alāye Jonbesh: Āsīb-shenāsi-ye Yek Bīmāri-ye Sīyāsī”. Diaspora Opposition: Representation or Retrotopia.

adversaries for productive competition (agonism).<sup>10</sup> This approach encourages coexistence by recognizing and negotiating, rather than eliminating, differences. An effective diaspora opposition must move away from vanguardism, or self-perceived pioneering, and instead support grassroots movements. This shift would foster an agonistic approach, encouraging more civil and constructive dialogue within the opposition.

Additionally, the diaspora opposition suffers from a political syndrome rooted in the mentality of an “easy overthrow” of the state.<sup>11</sup> While this mindset has offered short-term hope, it leads to long-term disillusionment, as the opposition consistently overestimates the likelihood of regime collapse and underestimates the challenges of transforming Iranian society.

### ***Diaspora opposition: “retrotopia” as an imagined past***

Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “retrotopia” explains the nostalgia permeating a section of Iran’s diaspora opposition. In *Retrotopia*, Bauman contrasts the utopian pursuit of a perfect future society with the growing longing for an *idealized and imagined past* that never really existed.<sup>12</sup> This nostalgia arises from the instability and anxiety caused by rapid social, economic, and technological change. In the age of “liquid modernity,” where social structures and relationships are fluid and unstable, people often seek refuge in a mythical, more secure past. The retrotopian ideal promises stability, but it is ultimately an illusion of a simpler, more cohesive life.

Bauman warns that retrotopia can be politically dangerous. Movements fueled by nostalgia often exploit fears of the future, offering simple, yet misleading, solutions to complex issues. While promising to restore a sense of community, these movements tend to rely on *exclusionary* ideals, reinforcing divisive and *reactionary* politics. The retreat into a glorified past stifles meaningful social progress and suppresses creative solutions to contemporary problems.

A segment of Iran’s diaspora opposition seems trapped in this retrotopian syndrome, particularly in its embrace of a nostalgic vision of the Pahlavi dynasty. The failure of Islamism to provide sustainable economic development, protect social freedoms, and ensure ordinary wellbeing (*zendege-ye ma’mouli*) has fueled disillusionment, giving rise to pro-monarchy sentiments. This retrotopian vision of the past is idealized as a period of stability, security, and prosperity, projecting the Pahlavi era as the only viable solution to Iran’s current crises and dismissing progressive future-oriented plans.

Pro-monarchy factions within the diaspora opposition often ridicule future-oriented progressive solutions, instead focusing on resurrecting a past disconnected from Iran’s current realities. A significant decline in social cohesion and solidarity have contributed to the rise of a populist retrotopian pro-monarchy movement in both the diaspora and Iran.

Parts of Iran’s diaspora opposition, in sum, suffer from internal division, self-serving opposition, and a dangerous retreat into an imagined and nostalgic past. To advance the struggle for justice and freedom in Iran, a shift towards a unified, grassroots-based, agonistic opposition is crucial.

### **The diversity and deficit of the diaspora opposition in Canada**

The Iranian diaspora in Canada, particularly in cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa, and Edmonton, has demonstrated a wide range of responses to the WLF movement, offering both unity in opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran and deep ideological divides

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

<sup>11</sup> حسین باستانی، “ذهنیت سرنگونی آسان حکومت” Hossein Bastani, “Zehniyat-e Sarneguni-ye Asan-e Hokumat”.

<sup>12</sup> Bauman, *Retrotopia*.

around the key issues of regime change, ethnic rights, separatism, foreign intervention, economic sanctions, the role of religion in the public sphere, and the function of the monarchy.<sup>13</sup> While some members advocate for unity across ethnic lines, others push for greater autonomy or separatism. Furthermore, views on engagement with the US and Israel are divisive, with some seeing such engagement as strategic and others viewing it as unethical and counterproductive.<sup>14</sup> These ideological differences underscore the fragmented nature of the diaspora's political vision. Despite these divisions, Hamed Esmaeilion—an Iranian-Canadian activist who tragically lost family members on PS752 (the Tehran-Kiev flight shot down by the IRGC Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, killing all 176 passengers)—became a leading voice of diaspora political engagement, organizing two major rallies in Berlin and Toronto, each drawing between 50,000–100,000 participants from the diaspora. Esmaeilion organized large-scale protests, including the “Human Chain for Freedom” event, which linked Canadians across various cities in solidarity with Iranians.<sup>15</sup> After a rally in Toronto in March 2023, new sanctions were imposed on Iranian officials and the state's “morality police.” The diaspora advocated that Canada should not be a safe haven for the financial transactions of Iranian government officials and their family members.

Some members of the Iranian-Canadian diaspora continue to advocate for the restoration of the monarchy under Reza Pahlavi. Driven by nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary era, such royalists have waved the Lion and Sun flag alongside images of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son, Reza Pahlavi, at rallies. In some cases, even the Israeli flag has been displayed in solidarity. Reza Pahlavi himself has visited Canada to meet with supporters and lobby Canadian policymakers to impose tougher sanctions on Iran and support regime change. However, the idealization of the Pahlavi era remains a contentious issue, with some critics accusing royalists of downplaying the human rights abuses committed under the Pahlavi regime.

The diaspora opposition in Canada also consists of the secular left and advocates of ethnic and national minority rights in Iran. These groups have seized on the momentum of the WLF movement to push for greater ethnic autonomy, social justice, and recognition of the rights of Iran's minority groups.<sup>16</sup> While these demands are grounded in a legitimate critique of Iran's systemic injustice toward minorities, they have been criticized for prioritizing ethnic autonomy and, in some cases, separatism at a time when broader unity is seen as necessary to achieving democratic change. Critics argue that this focus undermines Iran's national sovereignty, especially when foreign powers might use such crises to

<sup>13</sup> Iranian-Canadian diaspora members who were active during the WLF movement include human rights activists, lawyers, and scholars with diverse views, from conservative right to liberal center and left of the center. Such members include Hamed Esmaeilion, Masih Alinejad, scholar-activist Arash Azizi (the latter two are US-based, but with strong ties to the Iranian-Canadian diaspora), Kaveh Shahrooz, Nazanin Afshin-Jam MacKay, and Payam Akhavan (international lawyer and former UN prosecutor), among others.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Masih Alinejad's meeting with then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2019 and Reza Pahlavi's visit to Israel and meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu on April 16, 2023 have remained extremely controversial.

<sup>15</sup> Esmaeilion left “The Georgetown Coalition” in April 2023 after social media attacks from Reza Pahlavi's supporters, leading to the coalition's dissolution on April 26. Formed on February 10, 2023, the coalition launched the *Mahsa Charter* and the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran (ADFI), and included Pahlavi, Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmaeilion, and Nazanin Boniadi, with online support from Ali Karimi and Shirin Ebadi. Internal disputes over national unity and ethnic rights, along with Pahlavi's trip to Israel, led to the coalition's swift collapse.

<sup>16</sup> During the WLF movement in Canada, the democratic, independent, and principled left, represented by figures such as Professor Saeed Rahnama of York University, played an active role. The influence of leftist groups, such as Fedai supporters, however, was minimal. Similarly, Kurdish, Azeri, Baloch, and Arab activists also had only a nominal presence, advocating for ethnic rights, coalition-building, and criticizing both the Iranian state and opposition groups for neglecting minority issues. Some carried ethnic flags and condemned systemic discrimination and poverty in their regions.

threaten Iran's territorial integrity. Moreover, the rigid ideological slogans pushed by these groups, often associated with strict political party agendas, are seen as misaligned with the goals of ordinary Iranians involved in the WLF movement.

Another faction within the Iranian-Canadian diaspora is the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), a group long associated with opposition to the Islamic Republic. The MEK's Canadian supporters have organized rallies and online campaigns to promote their agenda of regime change. Such efforts often divert attention from the grassroots nature of the WLF movement, instead focusing on the MEK's goal of regime change at any cost. The MEK's alignment with foreign governments, particularly the US and Israel, has led to accusations that the group is out of touch with the desires of the Iranian people. Furthermore, the MEK's controversial past, including its cooperation with Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran-Iraq War and its armed struggle, have caused significant friction within the Iranian-Canadian community, with many reluctant to join events dominated by MEK supporters.

### ***Exile and illusion: a critique***

The Iranian-Canadian diaspora opposition to the Islamic Republic faces some criticism, most notably the absence of unity and internal cohesion. Key points of contention include support for either a secular republic or the return of the monarchy, but, more crucially, disagreements over strategies such as economic sanctions, foreign intervention, the rights of ethnic and national minorities, and the role of religion in the public sphere. The idealization of the Pahlavi era, with Reza Pahlavi as a central figure, continues to be a major divisive issue. Most royalists downplay human rights abuses committed under the Pahlavi regime—often whitewashing atrocities committed by SAVAK and its key figure, Parviz Sabeti, who resides in LA—and present Reza Pahlavi as the only viable alternative to the current regime; a *retrotopian* view that ignores the complex political aspirations of most Iranians today. Critics argue that this perspective is dismissive of the progressive, future-oriented ethos of the WLF movement, which emphasizes the need for democracy, pluralism, and social justice.

The emphasis on Reza Pahlavi, however, has led to the marginalization of other political voices and perspectives within Iran's opposition. Despite its symbolic figure, Reza Pahlavi lacks a clear, inclusive political platform, making it difficult for him to unify the opposition or represent the diversity of political viewpoints in Iran. His lack of personal charisma and leadership, combined with a failure to present a concrete political plan, has further limited the potential for a coherent, effective opposition. This lack of leadership has left the diaspora opposition fragmented, struggling to form a unified political force with clear goals.

Over-reliance on Western governments and Israel to implement sanctions and promote regime change is one of the most contentious issues within the diaspora opposition. While lobbying the Canadian government for sanctions brought attention to the movement, this strategy often overlooks the importance of grassroots efforts in Iran. "Outsourcing" the struggle for change to foreign powers undermines the Iranian people's ability to lead their own democratic movement. Moreover, economic sanctions, which are often portrayed as a tool for pressuring the Islamic Republic, primarily harm ordinary Iranians. Sanctions have contributed to the weakening of Iran's middle class and subaltern groups, who are essential to driving domestic democratic change from within. Instead, sanctions have reinforced the crony capitalist cliques of the Iranian state, entrenched corruption, and bolstered the mafia economy.<sup>17</sup> Opposition figures inside Iran, such as Mostafa Tajzadeh, Saeed Madani, Mostafa Mehraeen, Ahmad Zeidabadi, Nasrin Sotoudeh, and Nobel Peace Prize winner

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent critique of economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool, see Bajoghli, Nasr, Salehi-Isfahani, and Vaez, *How Sanctions Work*.

Narges Mohammadi, have resisted US sanctions and foreign intervention while advocating for peaceful political change. Their principled political positions contrast with the more interventionist approaches of diaspora groups, underscoring the importance of supporting internal movements rather than relying on external forces.

Its lack of a coherent, inclusive leadership is another key criticism of the diaspora opposition. Unlike the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) in the pre-1979 era, which helped mobilize activists and shape future political leaders, the current diaspora opposition suffers from an absence of a charismatic, principled leadership capable of uniting diverse groups and developing a clear political vision. The younger generation of activists has rejected hierarchical structures in favor of “horizontalism,” but this has led to a lack of organization and direction. Furthermore, many members of the older generation remain disconnected from newer members of the diaspora, creating a generational divide within the opposition. Disillusion with politics has led many recent migrants to disengage entirely, further fragmenting the movement.<sup>18</sup> In sum, for the diaspora opposition to have a lasting impact, it must work toward an “agonistic” perspective to foster dialogue between its diverse political factions. A more inclusive, future-oriented political discourse is needed to represent the goals and aspirations of the broader Iranian public. The movement’s success will depend on developing a coherent, charismatic leadership, a strong organizational structure, and a set of inclusive political ideas that reflect the values of democracy, pluralism, and social justice. Until the diaspora opposition can address these shortcomings, the alternative remains inside Iran, where the struggle for political change continues to evolve in the face of great challenges.

## Conclusion

In *Retrotopia*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that romanticizing an “imagined” past often reflects present uncertainties and future anxieties. This insight is crucial to understanding the challenges within the Iranian diaspora opposition. Some factions have lost faith in Iran’s civil society, turning instead to foreign powers. The right-wing populist discourse of such factions reflects a hopelessness and unwillingness to envision a progressive future. This retrotopian tendency overlooks the possibility of a realistic and hopeful future for Iran.

Among the discursive problems within some segments of Iran’s diaspora opposition, two stand out. First, there is an archaic, romanticized nationalism that seeks to resurrect the Pahlavi monarchy by idealizing a past that never truly existed. Second, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community,” some diaspora factions have reinvented, imagined, and essentialized ethnic identities within Iran, thereby undermining national sovereignty and territorial integrity and further fragmenting the movement. Both approaches are deeply flawed and problematic.<sup>19</sup>

Idealization of the past and calls for swift regime change ignore potential consequences and often reflect opportunism. Certain actors, driven by personal gain over genuine political engagement, have weakened the WLF movement’s impact in the diaspora. While the WLF movement aims to create an emancipatory space free from oppression, diaspora rhetoric sometimes glorifies a patrimonial monarchy, relies on foreign powers, and employs exclusionary and violent language, including explicitly gendered and abusive speech. This contradicts the WLF’s core values of gender equality, bodily autonomy, and love.

Initially, the WLF movement was recognized for its grassroots activism, transcending ethnic, religious, and political divides while championing justice, civil rights, and gender equality. The movement attracted secular and religious Iranians alike. However, certain diaspora factions have co-opted the movement to promote pro-monarchy, Western-centric,

<sup>18</sup> Azizi, “The Fiasco of Iranian Diaspora Politics”; Azizi, “Opposition politics of the Iranian diaspora.”

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

ethnic separatist, and anti-leftist narratives. These groups have distorted the WLF's image, shifting its focus away from indigenous and inclusive democratic change from within.

The WLF movement represents a post-Islamist moment in Iran, a pluralistic vision harmonizing the sacred and secular—captured in the metaphor of a “rainbow god.” Yet, some in the diaspora show little commitment to a pluralistic society in which religious, secular, leftist, and conservative groups can coexist. This lack of inclusivity undermines the potential for an authentic, indigenous Iranian modernity and a *glocal* renaissance rooted in diversity and peaceful coexistence.

Some diaspora factions' reliance on support from the US and Israel alienates Iranians who oppose foreign interference and overlooks the crucial role of Iran's civil society. By co-opting the WLF movement, these factions mislead international policymakers, deepen mistrust among Iranians skeptical of foreign-backed regime change, and distort the movement's objectives. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to invoke Asef Bayat's concept of “*opposition against the movement*” to describe a sizable segment of Iran's diaspora opposition today.<sup>20</sup>

During the 12-day Israeli-American war on Iran (June 13–24, 2025), certain members of the Iranian diaspora became vocal mouthpieces for Israeli and American aggression. Led by monarchists aligned with Reza Pahlavi, who infamously met with Netanyahu in April 2023 amid the ongoing genocide in Gaza, this group wants regime change at any cost. They applaud war, dismiss civilian casualties, justify the bombardment of Iran's infrastructure, and envision a “secular democracy” built atop the rubble. In effect, they advocate for nothing short of “Iranians without Iran,” liberating an abstract concept of “Iranians” at the cost of obliterating Iran. Openly welcoming the invasion of Iran, such diaspora members naively hoped that the invasion would spark a mass uprising against the ruling authorities. Yet, even the people they claim to represent did not rise up to support the invasion, endorse Reza Pahlavi, or revolt against the state.<sup>21</sup>

Monarchists' post-invasion gathering in Munich on July 26, 2025, exposed just how profoundly out of step this segment of the diaspora opposition is with the emancipatory spirit of the Zan, Zendegi, Azadi movement. Around 100 individuals spoke at the gathering, but rather than offering serious political or sociological analysis of Iran, the region, or the world, the event was dominated by exaggerated praise of Reza Pahlavi. One particularly troubling scene captured the tone of the gathering: a speaker performed prostration before Reza Pahlavi, declaring, “You are my Kaaba!” Reza Pahlavi himself preferred to be referred to as “the father”—an unmistakable echo of patriarchal, even totalitarian, ideology. The fabricated flag displayed at the event, merging the banners of Israel, the UK, the monarchist version of Iran, and even the emblem of SAVAK (the shah's notorious intelligence and security apparatus), symbolized the strategic confusion, ethical bankruptcy, and reactionary nostalgia of this diaspora faction. These spectacles only confirm that this diaspora group has learned little from Iran's paradigmatic shift. Their glorification of patriarchy stands in direct opposition to *zan*; their endorsement of war and destruction negates *zendegi*; and their promotion of submission and personality cults betrays the very idea of *azadi*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “اپوزيسيون عليه جنبش: آسیب شناسی یک بیماری سیاسی” . Āsaf Bayāt, “Apuzisiyon ‘Alāye Jonbesh: Āsīb-shenāsi-ye Yek Bīmāri-ye Sīyāsī”.

<sup>21</sup> Mahdavi, “Iran's Response to the Israeli-US Invasion; Mahdavi, “Yes to the People, No to Neofascism.”

<sup>22</sup> نسخه کامل همایش همکاری ملی برای نجات ایران به میزبانی شاهزاده رضا پهلوی . Noskhe-ye kāmāl-e hamāyesh-e hamkāri-ye mellī barāye nejāt-e Irān be mīzbāni-ye Shāhzāde Reżā Pahlavī.

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