

Development-oriented middle class prevents collapse of Iranian society

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Iranian society in recent years has encountered economic difficulties and certain social fissures, yet the experience of the recent war

demonstrated that some dissatisfactions do not necessarily signify national rupture.

Ali Asghar Saeedi, sociologist and associate professor at the University of Tehran, in an exclusive interview with Iran Newspaper while emphasizing the role of historical memory, national identity, social resilience, and the formation of a cultural middle class, states that external threat activates more profound layers of Iranian identity, and this very phenomenon engenders national solidarity. He simultaneously warns that this social capital will prove durable only if, subsequent to the US-Israeli war on Iran, it is accompanied by reforms in administrative methods, economic reconstruction, and the provision of public welfare. The translated interview that you shall read below concerns this fundamental question: why, despite certain internal dissatisfactions, Iranian society achieved cohesion when confronted with external threat, and how might this social capital be preserved and transformed into development in the postwar era?

Ali Asghar Saeedi



A girl without hijab holds the famous Iranian flag of the Valiasr Street in Tehran that has symbolically changed hands and stayed upright without using a pole since March 29, 2026, in the midst of the US-Israeli war against the country.

MEHR



IRAN: Iran withstood the military aggression of the United States and Israel, and this very resistance prevented the aggressors from attaining their objectives. In what do you discern the secret and origins of this national resistance? Which components thereof appeared most worthy of contemplation to you?

SAEEDI: Your question, from the perspective of political sociology, historical sociology, and studies pertaining to social resilience, is extremely significant. Answering this question necessitates extensive field research, and I am unaware whether such research has been conducted. Nevertheless, if we endeavor to synthesize the viewpoints of specialists — what domestic analysts and experts have propounded to date concerning the secret of Iran's resistance under conditions of external pressure, prolonged sanction, internal social crises, and direct warfare — several principal axes may be accentuated.

The first, and perhaps most crucial, factor is that which in the lexicon of social sciences is designated the distinction between internal conflict and external threat. Numerous researchers maintain that Iranian society, notwithstanding certain cleavages in economic, political, and social domains, does not necessarily acquiesce to foreign intervention. In Iran's historical experience, from the Iran-Iraq War to diverse regional crises, a behavioral pattern has been observed whereby the populace, even if critical of the government, manifests a form of defensive solidarity when confronting external power. This phenomenon in political science is termed the "Rally Around the Flag Effect" — that is, at the moment of external peril, internal disagreements temporarily recede to the periphery.

The second factor is the substantial weight of Iranians' historical memory. Many Iranian sociologists have noted that Iranian society possesses a profoundly deep historical memory of experiences with foreign intervention — from the Russo-Persian Wars of the 19th century, to the coup d'état of August 19, 1953, and then the eight-year war. This historical memory has engendered in a segment of society, even under critical circumstances, acute sensitivity toward any project suggestive of partition, occupation, or external imposition. In other

words, history in Iran is not merely the past but partially constitutes contemporary political behavior.

The third component is that which some researchers term defensive nationalism. In many societies, national identity under ordinary conditions may appear feeble or diffuse, yet under external threat it suddenly becomes activated. In Iran, national identity comprises a synthesis of civilizational, historical, linguistic, and cultural elements that operate beyond everyday political cleavages. Even groups that are severe critics in domestic matters may, when they perceive the nation's territorial integrity to be imperiled, incline toward defense of the country as a whole.

The fourth factor is the capacity for social resilience arising from years of crisis. Iran is a society that has experienced decades of sanction, inflation, economic instability, and various regional crises. Some economists and sociologists contend that this very condition has produced a type of social adaptation to difficult circumstances. In the scientific literature, this phenomenon is denominated "social resilience" — that is, society learns how to preserve its primary functions even under intense pressures. A society that has long lived in crisis does not necessarily collapse quickly when confronted with a new crisis.

The fifth factor is the failure of external calculations concerning the relationship between populace and government. Some analysts believe that foreign actors typically assume the existence of social protests, economic dissatisfaction, or political cleavages will automatically lead to rapid collapse. Yet political sociolo-

gists have repeatedly asserted that social protest is not equivalent to the collapse of political order. Citizens may simultaneously criticize the government while also harboring serious concerns regarding national security, territorial integrity, or the country's future. This is precisely the distinction between "dissatisfaction with the government" and "acceptance of national ruin" — two phenomena that external analyses sometimes conflate. The sixth factor is the existence of informal networks of social solidarity. In Iran, unlike many modern individualistic societies, the extended family, local relationships, ethnic bonds, and especially religious networks and informal groups still play a significant role in preserving social cohesion. During crises, these networks can function as shock absorbers and prevent the rapid disintegration of social order. Yet the more important question is: how do people who protest economic, social, and political issues suddenly become cohesive? The answer of many theorists is that human beings simultaneously possess multiple levels of identity. A citizen may be dissatisfied with economic policies, social restrictions, or corruption, but when external danger is felt, a deeper layer of identity becomes activated: national identity and a sense of belonging to the homeland. In social identity theory, this is termed the "activation of superordinate identity under threat".

Ultimately, perhaps the most important lesson this experience demonstrates is that society ought not be measured solely through indicators of dissatisfaction. A society may simultaneously be dissatisfied, critical, angry, and pro-

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testing, yet still, at the moment of peril, possess a high capacity for collective cohesion. Protest does not always signify collapse; sometimes society maintains a clear distinction between "demanding internal change" and "resisting external pressure".

If we wish to summarize this discussion in the form of a sociological proposition, perhaps we might state: "Iranian society demonstrated that internal dissatisfaction does not necessarily signify national rupture; under conditions of external threat, the deeper layers of historical identity, collective memory, defensive nationalism, and the historical experience of foreign intervention can rapidly become activated and generate a cohesion unobservable under normal circumstances." This perhaps is the most crucial point that many external analysts have repeatedly overlooked in their comprehension of Iranian society.

The matters you have mentioned are all in some way connected to sociological discourse. From this same angle, please offer an assessment of the middle class in Iran and its performance during the war. After all, in modern transformations, the middle class is regarded as the engine driving societal change. How did you perceive the role of this class?

From the standpoint of political sociology and sociology, social classes are highly worthy of contemplation, and in my estimation, this is one of the most important variables that is frequently underappreciated in conventional analyses, particularly external analyses concerning Iran.

If we observe carefully, one of the significant transformations of Iranian society subsequent to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the formation and expansion of a new type of middle class — a class that, unlike the classical middle class predicated on economic ownership, relies not so much on economic capital as on cultural capital; a concept introduced into sociological literature by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This class encompasses a broad spectrum of academics, teachers, engineers, physicians, technical experts, specialized civil servants, cultural activists, owners of knowledge-based enterprises, technology specialists, and a large cohort of educated urban forces that, over the past four decades, have become one of the most important social forces in Iran. The first characteristic of this class is a high level of awareness concerning the political and economic complexities of the contemporary world. Owing to greater access to higher education,



Two Iranian women, who were participating in a nightly gathering in support of troops during the US-Israeli war against the country, hold signs that read in Persian, "From soldier to the commander: message received; we will stay in the streets."

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