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Contemporary Wars

Reflections on their External and Internal Objectives

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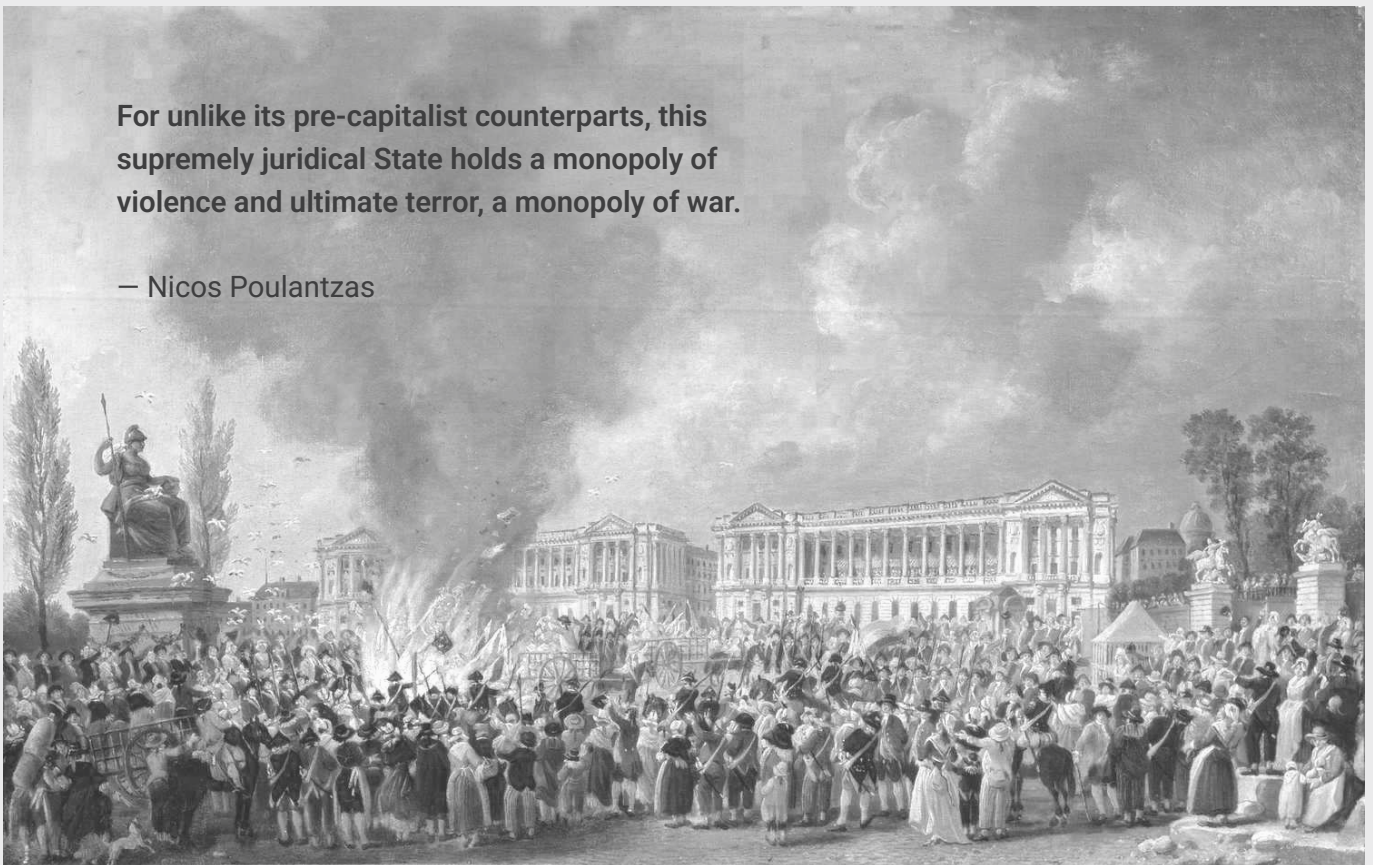
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For unlike its pre-capitalist counterparts, this supremely juridical State holds a monopoly of violence and ultimate terror, a monopoly of war.

– Nicos Poulantzas



Introduction

Wars have become one of the defining characteristics of our era. In our region, they have been so for decades. Given our long “experience” of living through them as victims, it may be time to reflect on the interaction –the mutually shaping relationship –between the external and international dimensions and objectives of these wars, on the one hand, and the internal dimensions and objectives tied to the political struggle for power within the states involved in them, on the other. This essay represents only a preliminary attempt – a form of “thinking aloud” –intended to move beyond conventional analytical frameworks. The focus here is on war between states, or between states and quasi-state actors, rather than on civil wars. **Its central hypothesis is that the relationship between the external and internal objectives of war is organic and structural in nature, such that neither dimension can be overlooked or underestimated in the analysis of any conflict.**

This requires a closer examination of the possible forms of interaction between these two sets of objectives, as well as an exploration of several key questions:

1. What is the direction of influence? Does it move from the external sphere to the internal one, from the internal to the external, or in both directions simultaneously?
2. How is the balance of influence structured between the two dimensions? Is one dimension determinant while the other remains subordinate?
3. What are the dynamics governing this reciprocal influence? Which factors and conditions are capable of redirecting trajectories or altering the direction of influence? And can the relative weight or positioning of each dimension shift over time in response to developments, advances, or setbacks on either front?

This analytical reflection unfolds against the backdrop is the ongoing war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, with a particular attention given to the Lebanese case, which will be addressed in a separate section later in the text.

The Glorification of War

The starting point lies in the “philosophical” and value-based premises through which war is viewed. In political science, international law, and political discourse, a distinction is generally drawn between wars considered *legitimate* and those regarded as illegitimate. **Legitimate wars** are typically framed as acts of self-defense or defense of territory. They also encompass wars of liberation, fought for independence or for the right to self-determination. In contrast, **illegitimate wars** are viewed as unjustified acts of aggression under international law. These include invasion,

occupation, or violations of one state's sovereignty by another, regardless of the justification invoked. This distinction is not simply a matter political justification; it is rooted in the principles of international law, despite the ambiguities and gray areas that often characterize that system. At the same time, it is shaped by the broader contexts and mechanisms through which wars are waged.

For instance, the U.S.-led (and allied) war on Iraq in 2003 was conducted without the institutional authorization from the United Nations and was therefore widely classified as an invasion and occupation. This designation remained in place until it was later modified following Security Council involvement and the participation of the United Nations in managing post-U.S. invasion phase. As a result, the terminology employed in UN discourse gradually evolved. For their part, **major powers** engaged in warfare today have introduced new concepts aimed at justifying their military actions. Among these are the idea of "preemptive war" against a perceived possible threat posed by the target state, the idea of wars fought for "humanitarian purposes," as well as wars justified as necessary to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, or human rights abuses committed by so-called "rogue states" portrayed as operating outside the framework of international law. In practice, these concepts are used as justifications intended to assign a moral dimension to what are fundamentally acts of aggression.

From the perspective of vulnerable states that are under occupation or attack —that is, states engaged in defensive wars recognized as legitimate under international law —the moral and ethical character of such defensive or liberation struggles appears far more direct, and in many respects almost self-evident.

Yet, there is a fine line between, on the one hand, a firm belief in the legitimacy of the right to self-defense and to the defense of one's rights, and actively exercising that right through all means permitted under international law, particularly resistance to occupation in all its forms, in pursuit of independence and self-determination, **and, on the other hand, the belief that war, any war, possesses an intrinsic moral value**, to the extent that it becomes a voluntary choice worthy in some cases of glorification. This constitutes one of the pressing dilemmas of the contemporary era, particularly as it is reflected in attitudes toward grave violations of the laws and rules of war established under international conventions. This is particularly evident in relation to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in wartime.

War Itself Is the Crime

The central argument advanced here is that **war itself constitutes the original and greatest crime. It is indeed the most horrific crime perpetrated by human civilization.**¹

¹ See the quotation from Nicos Poulantzas with which we opened this essay. It is taken from his book *State, Power, Socialism*. In the original French: « C'est cet État de droit, l'État de la loi par excellence qui détient, à l'encontre des États précapitalistes, le monopole de la violence et de la terreur suprême, le monopole de la guerre. »

In this passage, Poulantzas describes war as "terreur suprême" — "supreme terror" — a formulation that strips war of any moral value. Linguistically, the French term also carries connotations of intimidation (Terror is distinct from terrorism).

Nicos Poulantzas, *l'État, le Pouvoir, le Socialisme* (Les Prairies Ordinaires, Collection Essais, 2013).

Even the founders of international law and the architects of rules governing international diplomacy recognized that wars between states could not realistically be prevented altogether. What they sought, at the very least, was to establish rules and restrictions aimed at limiting the atrocities committed by belligerents, especially powerful and aggressor states, in the conduct of war. These constraints include prohibitions, and limitations on the use of weapons of mass destruction, as well as biological and chemical weapons. They also encompass protections for civilians, prohibitions against targeting embassies and diplomatic missions, healthcare facilities, schools and universities, and cultural heritage sites, in addition to rules governing the treatment of prisoners of war, among others.

All of these measures represent attempts at restraint. They cannot, however, be understood as implying that wars conducted within these rules— or wars in which no war crimes or crimes against humanity are committed — thereby become morally or politically acceptable. War itself remains a crime. War itself remains a violation of rights. The rules merely seek to prevent belligerents from descending into mutual annihilation, or from exterminating defenseless populations and erasing entire countries from existence.²

In this respect, we should adopt **a perspective different from the well-known proposition that “war is the continuation of politics by other means,”** as our friend Ghassan Salibi rightly argued in one of his articles³. War and politics— together with international diplomacy— are, in fact, two distinct ways of managing both external and internal interests. The first is rooted in war, violence, force, and coercion. The second, however, seeks to achieve objectives through peaceful means, including political or economic pressure, dialogue, mechanisms of international governance, and the peaceful democratic transfer of power within states.

The dismantling of political and diplomatic channels and instruments— whether through gradual obstruction and erosion, or through their abrupt and violent destruction by the open declaration of war— cannot be understood as a continuation of politics and diplomacy. Rather, it represents the assassination of diplomacy and the killing of politics itself, and no moral or ethical legitimacy can be ascribed to it. War destroys everything. It tears apart the social fabric and undermines the dynamics through which societies develop and advance. It also devastates the human psyche, as well as systems of values, ethics, and knowledge, among many other dimensions to which we shall return later.

2 Compare this with the Marxist conception, which exposes the class nature of the state: that it is a tool and instrument in the hands of the ruling classes for repressing, controlling, and exploiting the subordinate classes; while at the same time remaining necessary as a regulator of class conflict, since in its absence (as an organizing force), classes engaged in unchecked struggle could bring about their own destruction, mutual annihilation, and ultimately the destruction of society itself.

3 Ghassan Salibi, in his article “War, or When a Cursed Word Devours Three Other Words by Which Human Beings Live,” published in the Lebanese newspaper *Annahar* and reposted by the author on his Facebook page on 21 March 2022, writes: “How could you, men of thought, allow someone like Clausewitz to dominate political thinking, repeating after him like parrots that ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’? ... No, war is not the continuation of politics; it is a rupture with politics. ... The condition for politics to function is the neutralization of weapons, while the condition for war is the neutralization of politics. ... War begins when a despot decides to suspend politics because it no longer allows him to dominate and rule through its own mechanisms. Whether that despot is Napoleon, Hitler, Putin, Bush, Netanyahu, Assad, or Khamenei... Never believe that war is not a crime, however necessary or justified it may seem, wrote Hemingway.”

The Militarization of Foreign Policy: The United States

Beyond war itself lies the phenomenon of militarization, which extends well beyond the sphere of direct armed conflict. Militarization refers to the expansion of the logic, dynamics, and instruments of war into the domains of economics, politics, society, culture, and everyday life, until they permeate both the public and private spheres.

This process assumes multiple forms, two of which are particularly significant. **The first is the militarization of globalization, foreign policy, and international relations. The second is the militarization of society and people.**

The current U.S. administration under President Donald Trump arguably offers one of the **clearest examples of the militarization of foreign policy and international relations— in other words, the militarization of globalization itself.** Such a project becomes possible when it is driven by the world's most powerful military and economic power, capable of presenting its vision for managing global affairs as a supposedly "realistic" project, simply because it possesses the means to impose it by force, when necessary, even when that vision lacks the most basic foundations of legitimacy, or goes against science and reason.

Yet, such a course, when pursued by a superpower, cannot be explained solely as the product of personal delusions, even if that possibility cannot be entirely dismissed. It is also the result of a broader historical evolution within the core capitalist economies and within the neoliberal model of globalization that has prevailed since the 1980s. That model has reached its historical limits. Therefore, overcoming its structural crisis now requires breaking with the old rules and replacing them with new and far more brutal ones, as we see today. This reality is not altered by the extent to which such projects may carry the personal imprint of particular leaders, whether political rulers or billionaire economic magnates who exert growing influence over global affairs. What these actors increasingly share is a profound disregard for systems of human rights, democracy, international law, and the principles of justice and equality. For them, war, the use of force, and the impunity enjoyed by the powerful and the wealthy have evolved into enduring strategic choices rather than mere instruments of threat, as they were more commonly treated two or three decades ago. This has become one of the defining characteristics of what today may be described as the "capitalism of scarcity."⁴

⁴ In this context, one may refer to the concept of "capitalism of scarcity" (*capitalisme de la finitude*), a term used by Arnaud Orain to describe contemporary capitalism and to analyze the characteristics that distinguish it from the liberal and neoliberal forms of capitalism that remained dominant until the first decade of the twenty-first century. He writes: "Liberal capitalisms seek to regulate predation (that is, severe or savage exploitation) through a powerful and attractive ideological system: the promise of generalized material prosperity generated by the free market. Capitalism of scarcity, by contrast, is not burdened by such ideological or institutional considerations, nor does it regard economic warfare as merely a metaphor. What characterizes its natural condition is a state of affairs that is neither war nor peace. This capitalism always finds itself somewhere between the two, because it makes armed conflict its natural horizon, rather than an unfortunate exception occasionally deemed necessary to reinforce the rules of the market. It does not promise growth in wealth for all. Unlike liberal capitalisms, it promises peoples very little (almost nothing) other than the preservation or expansion of the power of states and private corporations. Whereas neoliberalism surrounded itself with a soothing (if contested) discourse about its supposed benefits and peaceful aims, capitalism of scarcity is openly predatory, violent, and rent-seeking."

— Arnaud Orain, *Le monde confisqué : Essai sur le capitalisme de la finitude (XVIe–XXIe siècle)*, Flammarion, 2025

In the case of the United States, its leading position within the global order means that the external objectives connected to international relations tend to outweigh the domestic considerations in the decision to wage war. Nevertheless, the internal dimensions are neither marginal nor secondary. As noted earlier, the shift toward the militarization of capitalism and globalization is, essentially, the product of the internal dynamics shaping the evolution of core capitalist systems. It also intersects with domestic political objectives tied to power and internal governance. In this context, war functions as a mechanism for freezing internal contradictions and redirecting them outward into confrontation. Rather than allowing such contradictions to generate positive dynamics within society and institutional life, they are transformed into divisive antagonisms that obstruct the dialectical processes through which societies, institutions, and policymaking normally evolve.

In this sense, **some of the domestic objectives behind the U.S. war against Iran may include limiting constitutional practice and strengthening presidential authority at the expense of Congress, including both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This war may also serve to preserve the current balance of political power while paving the way for broader forms of constitutional overreach** – One need only recall the attempt to storm the United States Capitol in 2021. At the same time, such escalation can function as a means of diverting attention from mounting domestic confrontations surrounding immigration policy and from the unconstitutional use of federal security agencies against Democratic-led states. It also contributes to the normalization of hate-driven and increasingly vulgar political discourse, while shifting public attention away from scandals linked to the Epstein files.

War also represents the most effective means of containing domestic political opposition to the current U.S. administration. In this context, the opposition's main slogan, "No Kings,"⁵ carries an unmistakable message. At its core, it represents a struggle to defend the Constitution and preserve institutional integrity. It is an attempt to resist the extension of the militarization of foreign policy into the American domestic sphere through violations of civil and political rights, the weakening of constitutional institutions, and the erosion of democratic norms and traditions. It is therefore possible to view **the administration's ultimate objective as an attempt to expand the militarization of foreign policy and external wars into the militarization of American society and domestic politics themselves.**

This raises a fundamental question: is war with Iran the end goal in itself, or is it merely a means for advancing domestic objectives aimed at consolidating prolonged dominance over political power, public life, and cultural discourse within American society? From this perspective, the internal struggle may ultimately constitute the more serious challenge to the ambitions of those currently in power in the United States. At the same time, it may also represent the principle point of vulnerability capable of obstructing this broader global project. It is likely that **domestic**

5 A reference to the protest movements and demonstrations organized by forces opposing the U.S. president's policies, which they view as exceeding constitutional limits, whether through the waging of wars abroad or the violation of civil liberties at home. The campaign adopted the slogan "No More Kings," a direct reference to what critics describe as the American president behaving more like a monarch than an elected head of state. As of the time of writing, the campaign had organized three major nationwide demonstrations across all 50 states—in June 2025, October 2025, and March 2026—with total participation estimated at more than eight million people.

opposition will prove more effective in disrupting such an imperial project than any imagined military victory achieved by another state on the battlefield.

The Militarization of Society: Iran

In the model of societal militarization, totalitarian ideologies – religious ideology in Iran’s case – play a central role. The aim is to penetrate the social fabric and reshape both political and popular culture from within, while gradually emptying concepts such as freedom, democracy, and accountability of their substance through multilayered systems of control rooted in a totalitarian religious doctrine. At the core of this doctrine lies the idea **of a perpetual sacred war against the enemy, as reflected in the cases of Iran and Hezbollah.**

The militarization of society is justified as a permanent revolutionary condition required to confront an ever-present existential threat, both external and internal. Mechanisms of political succession and power-sharing are suspended through external conflict, while positions of power and war are exploited to suppress, as much as possible, the emergence of alternative political options and trajectories that could threaten **a system fused with both authority and society through ideology and mass-control mechanisms. In this model, the militarization of society is foundational. It even precedes war with the external enemy. The enemy’s primary and most important function is to facilitate internal control over society itself. In that sense, fighting the enemy becomes a jihadist objective in its own right within the regime’s political and religious ideology, whether that translates into actual warfare or remains, for decades, a standing threat even in the absence of open war.**

In this model, war is not confined to its military dimension, nor is it fought solely through armies. It is a total war waged across every level and through every available means. When the state in question possesses significant capabilities and pursues an **imperial project aimed at establishing regional control in its own image, as is the case with Iran, the idea of expansion emerges as an extension and export of the “revolution” that brought the regime into existence.** Abroad, it is framed as an attempt to universalize this model as a path toward liberation from oppression. Yet, **the tools of expansion do not necessarily take the form of military invasions, territorial occupation, or the establishment of military bases under the institutional cover of ruling authorities, as in the first model – the militarization of foreign policy exemplified by the United States. Instead, expansion often operates through the replication of the societal militarization model inside other states and communities, or within a particular group in that society, on the basis of religious, sectarian, and ideological ties. This model is then politically and socially reengineered to serve the broader expansionist project (as seen in Iran’s support for militia-based and ideological models in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, among others). This model has, in many cases, proven more “effective” in advancing the regime’s objectives than military bases implanted in foreign environments.**

The strategy of militarizing society and domestic politics is not exclusive to religious movements alone; it has also been employed by nationalist movements, revolutionary national liberation

groups, socialist currents, and others. This suggests the existence of a broader underlying cultural pattern. In its most extreme form, this pattern frames legitimate or sacred war as a heroic struggle, reinforced through ideology, culture, propaganda posters, revolutionary songs, patriotic poetry, and social media, all supported by a broader system of values and behaviors that together shape a coherent worldview. This pattern is strengthened and disseminated through educational institutions and media systems in states where ruling authorities embrace such a path, or within specific factions operating inside states fractured by civil conflict.

In this context, the days of legitimate war, resistance, and fighting for liberation and justice are often **portrayed as a "beautiful time" or a "heroic age," not something recalled merely for remembrance or reflection, but something to be relived and revived.** Thus, slogans such as "No voice rises above the voice of battle," "America is the Great Satan," or "Israel is absolute evil" function not simply as political rhetoric or as mobilization for an imminent war. Rather, they serve as **mechanisms for shaping consciousness, directing behavior, and controlling political engagement, thus integrating society into the regime's domestic political project. Over time, force itself becomes sanctified within political and popular culture, as does a notion of heroism tied almost exclusively to combat. Martyrs and martyrdom are elevated to sacred status,** rooted in the belief that "what was taken by force can only be restored by force," that "armed struggle is the highest form of resistance," that "blood is stronger than the sword," and that "freedom's crimson gate is opened only by bloodstained hands." **In this way, "legitimate" war itself acquires a moral value that can approach sanctity, (as many wars throughout history have explicitly been called holy wars), becoming a way of life and a mode of resistance against what is perceived as universal injustice.**

Dual Militarization: Israel

Israel represents an extreme case of the fusion of both militarization models within the framework of its regional dominance project. On the one hand, it combines the U.S. model, namely the aggressive militarization of foreign policy accompanied by the institutional dominance of the far right. On the other hand, it incorporates features associated with the Iranian model, namely the militarization of society and a deep reliance on religious ideology.

On one level, the State of Israel built its institutions along liberal lines and developed its own institutional traditions within that framework, albeit with certain particularities. It also established a modern and highly advanced military modeled on those of the industrial capitalist powers. Through this structure, Israel fought wars against Arab armies, secured decisive victories, and expanded geographically through the occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories. It was likewise able to conclude treaties and agreements with neighboring states on the basis of the regional military balance produced by those wars.

At the same time, however, the Israeli right steadily expanded its influence both within society and across state institutions. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 marked a major turning point

in that trajectory, paving the way for the consolidation of the Israeli far right's control over state institutions. This is fully reflected in the current government of Benjamin Netanyahu as well. **The deeper factor behind this transformation lies in the gradual formation of the Israeli settler society itself. Built on the foundations of the Balfour Declaration and the Zionist project, this society was implanted in Palestine even before the creation of the state itself under the 1947 United Nations resolution. From the beginning, it was built as a militarized society grounded in a biblical ideology. This was a necessary condition to attract Jewish migration to Palestine and to lay the foundations of the state in its early formation. Later, as the state and its institutions became more consolidated, greater emphasis was placed on institutional structures in order to build a modern and advanced state aligned with international standards, while portraying Israel internationally as the Middle East's only "democracy" withing an otherwise authoritarian regional context.**

Prior to the 1947 United Nations resolution, Israel's war against the Palestinians took the form of an offensive settler war waged by the "Jewish community," through its armed militias, against Palestinian society within the framework of the British Mandate and its institutions. Following the establishment of the state through the UN resolution, however, and in light of the refusal of Arab states to recognize it, Israel adopted a different narrative--one that presented the state as engaged in a continuous defensive war against the Arab states, fought primarily through conventional warfare between regular armies in the modern sense (even though the societal dimension of conflict never fully disappeared).

Since its establishment, Israel has consistently operated as a war-oriented and militarized state, a condition that dates back to the earliest phases of organized Zionist immigration. What distinguishes the policies of the Israeli far right, however, is the intensified emphasis on biblical religious ideology and the further militarization of society in ways that reinforce public acceptance of wars against external enemies while simultaneously consolidating far right dominance domestically, to the extent that it becomes embedded within the very structure of the state and the political system. This is reflected in defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people; entrenching a system of apartheid against Palestinians; and advancing a settlement policy that has empowered settlers, while encouraging, organizing, and legitimizing attacks against Palestinians. It is also reflected in legitimizing the genocide in Gaza, and in legislation authorizing the execution or killing of Palestinians, including prisoners captured after October 7.⁶

Israel is waging its current wars under the banner of an expansionist and racially charged biblical ideology rooted in the concept of "Greater Israel," extending from Palestine into Lebanon and Syria, and reaching as far as Iran. Within this worldview, these conflicts are seen both as existential wars linked to the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and as the realization of a divine promise –regarded as even more significant than the Balfour Declaration – that grants Jews ownership of the land and legitimizes its possession as a sacred historical right rooted in scripture and beyond contestation.

⁶ The Israeli Knesset passed the law in final form on March 31, 2026. The legislation authorizes the execution of Palestinians convicted of murder, while exempting Israelis who commit the same offense from capital punishment. It also permits the execution of current Palestinian prisoners deemed "most dangerous," including those who took part in the October 7 operation and the war that followed. This means the law applies retroactively to acts committed before its enactment.

Between the Israeli and Iranian Models

The Israeli right has been successful in militarizing society through a biblical-religious ideology. **Even the agreements Israel has signed in recent years have increasingly been framed in religious terms, as reflected in names such as the “Abraham Accords,”** whereas earlier agreements carried political or geographic designations, such as Camp David Accords, Israel–Jordan Peace Treaty, or Oslo Accords. What distinguishes the militarization of Israeli society from its Iranian counterpart, however, is that **the Israeli model is based on a dynamic coexistence and synergy between ideological societal militarization and a modern institutional state that depends heavily on military power and advanced technology.** The Iranian model, by contrast, revolves around an unprecedented expansion of the religious-sectarian dimension embodied in the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, where religious, political, and military authority converge through hierarchical structures centered around the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Meanwhile, Iran’s “modern” state institutions often function more as supporting actors within a political theater. **They are assigned roles that do little to mask their limited influence within the country’s actual decision-making structure.** In this respect, the Israeli government – much like the current U.S. administration— continues to face genuine internal constraints that restrict its ability to fully realize its vision and political project.

The similarities between the Israeli and Iranian models lie primarily in their common dependence on religious ideology, albeit in different forms. Symbolically, Israeli political and ideological discourse oscillates between two promises: an earthly one represented by the Balfour Declaration, and a divine one embodied in God’s covenant with Moses regarding the Promised Land. The emphasis placed on either source shifts according to necessity. In Iran, by contrast, ideological and political discourse is far more unified. The ruler – the Supreme Leader – is viewed only as the representative of the ultimate sovereign, the awaited Imam Mahdi, whose return is expected at the end of human history. As a result, the capacity for ideological flexibility and plurality is significantly more limited than in the Israeli model. Before concluding this discussion, however, it is worth noting that the current right-wing administration in the United States also reveals a growing influence of religious ideology in both foreign and domestic policy, alongside the logic of business deals and transactional politics. Biblical influence, in its Christian Evangelical Zionist form, is gradually developing into a distinct form of religious fundamentalism that is being deployed more aggressively to justify wars.

In many respects, the current war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, –while fundamentally being a conflict over geopolitical interests, energy, and control over maritime routes – is also presented in a significant part of the ideological discourse of all three states as a confrontation between three rival fundamentalisms: Jewish, Islamic, and Christian/Evangelical Zionist. In other words, the conflict is framed as a war among three Abrahamic fundamentalisms. Is the Role of Individuals Entirely Marginal?

Wars against external enemies play a crucial role in creating the conditions necessary for remaining in power, while suspending or neutralizing institutional mechanisms that might challenge or

constrain that authority. In periods of peace and stable external relations –particularly when existential threats, whether real or imagined, are absent – the domestic authority of the “emperors of war” may gradually begin to decline. At the same time, wars as major strategic events do not erase the influence of narrow factional interests, nor do they eliminate the personal ambitions and individual calculations of influential leaders operating within this broader and highly complex landscape. This dynamic can be observed in all three states discussed above:

- **In the case of Israel**, the prime minister has repeatedly resorted to military escalation whenever he was summoned to appear before the courts on corruption charges. The significance of this dynamic became even more evident when the U.S. president publicly called on the Israeli leadership to suspend the trial, citing Israel’s major military achievements. This, in turn, indicates that Israel’s institutional mechanisms are not fully subordinate to the will of the far-right government.
- **In the case of the United States**, it is difficult to overlook the fact that **external confrontations** –involving Iran, Venezuela, and then Iran once again – together with the trade war against China and the broader policy of threatening multiple countries and regions, **have unfolded alongside domestic controversies surrounding the Jeffrey Epstein affair and efforts to shield the U.S. president from allegations of involvement. Nor can these developments be separated from the administration’s increasingly aggressive domestic agenda, marked by the escalation of hate-driven rhetoric (particularly against immigrants), the growing religious discourse rooted in Christian Zionism, or the fierce battles over appointments within the judiciary, the federal administration, and the military, alongside repeated resignations and dismissals.**⁷ These policies have, in turn, faced mounting resistance, reflected in campaigns such as “**No More Kings.**” Here too, institutional resistance continues to play an active role in challenging policies that instrumentalize military, political, or economic conflict as a means of suppressing domestic opposition and weakening “democratic” institutions and traditions.
- **In the case of Iran**, the regime has faced repeated waves of **protest** over the past two decades, some of which posed a serious threat to its survival, including the mass mobilization that followed the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022 and the protests joined by bazaar merchants in December 2025. Attention should also be given to internal power struggles within the regime itself, and the unresolved circumstances surrounding the mysterious **death of President Ebrahim Raisi** in 2024, and the continuing struggle over the succession to Ali

⁷ On March 4, 2026, at the height of the confrontation with Iran, the U.S. secretary of defense abruptly dismissed Army Chief of Staff General Randy George, bringing the number of senior officers removed under similar decisions to thirteen. Reports also revealed delays in the promotions of several officers, particularly women and officers of African descent. Attorney General Pam Bondi and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem—both among the strongest defenders of the president’s policies and political direction—were also dismissed, while Navy Secretary John Phelan resigned or was forced out following a dispute with the secretary of defense. (Source: press reports.)

Khamenei. All of this contributes to a broader atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the country's political leadership, particularly after the assassination of the Supreme Leader and other senior officials at the beginning of the current war. In this context, **the regime's need for confrontation with external enemies appears closely connected to the need to preserve power domestically.** However, there is an important distinction to be made. **The state institutions that exist alongside the authority of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard Corps remain comparatively weak and do not resemble the competition between rival political currents that plays out within the system itself in the United States and Israel (Republicans versus Democrats, or Likud versus Labor).** In Iran, by contrast, **opposition largely emerges from outside the regime's central power structure. This helps explain why protest manifests primarily in the streets rather than within parallel institutions, although current developments suggest that these internal contradictions could eventually spread into state institutions themselves.**⁸

A Tentative Conclusion: Back to the Starting Point

We thus return to the questions raised at the beginning of this essay. It appears evident that the relationship between the external and internal objectives of the contemporary wars discussed here is deeply organic cannot be separated.⁹ War is a complex phenomenon in which external and internal objectives intersect with political, economic, social, cultural, and ideological factors. Nor can the personal dimension associated with individual be overlooked, whether in terms of serving factional interests, or in relation to the personal inclinations and characteristics of decision-makers, as well as the degree to which they are able to control or override institutions.

The relationship between external and internal objectives is reciprocal: each shapes and reshapes the other, with both continuously exchanging roles in influencing immediate decisions and broader wartime developments. This interaction affects the level of violence employed, the shift toward negotiations, the extent to which ideology or populist rhetoric is mobilized, and even the choice between capitulation and self-destruction. Under certain circumstances, personal factors may become decisive in determining the outcome of conflict, particularly when broader strategic dynamics are neutralized or held in balance. A state of equilibrium –whether between the warring parties themselves, among rival forces within the domestic political system, or in the concentration of institutional authority in the hands of a single ruler –can, in specific circumstances, create conditions in which an individual ruler is able to make populist decisions

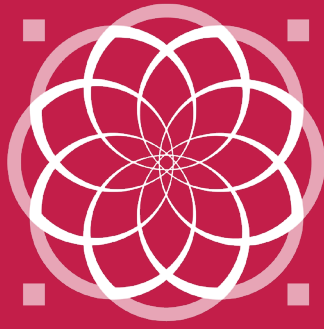
8 Signs of confusion, ambiguity, and internal contradiction emerged within the Iranian leadership during negotiations with the United States mediated by Pakistan. This was compounded by the volatile nature of the U.S. president's statements and threats, adding further uncertainty to both the trajectory of the war and the prospects for negotiations between the two sides.

9 Returning to the opening quotation from Nicos Poulantzas, he argues that the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of violence—which, in the understanding of Max Weber, constitutes the very foundation of the modern state—is itself the basis upon which war rests, insofar as war represents the exercise of that monopolized violence against other peoples and states. In this sense, the two are simply different expressions of the same violence, inseparable from one another, since any state or ruling authority necessarily pursues multilayered objectives, both external and internal, that cannot be reduced to a single dimension or isolated from one another.

outside established norms and institutional traditions, including decisions that may severely damage state interests or even amount to political suicide.

In practical terms, no state or belligerent actor fights only a single war. At a minimum, it fights two simultaneously: one against the declared external enemy, and another against domestic rivals in the struggle for power within the state itself. In more complex cases, multiple wars may in fact unfold at the same time.

It is with this idea that we conclude this essay, with the intention of later examining the broader framework developed here in relation to the current war in Lebanon and the events that preceded it.



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