The Pahlevan and the World: Iran's Moment to Define Itself

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Among the nearly two hundred nations on earth, only a handful carry what might be called a character — an identity so distinct that it precedes them into every room. Think of Germany and the mind reaches for discipline and precision. Think of Japan and it finds honour, restraint, an almost aesthetic devotion to craft. The French bring to mind elegance and an unapologetic confidence in their own culture. Russians conjure endurance — a people shaped by vast frozen distances and centuries of bearing the unbearable. These are not mere clichés. They are compressed histories, built through literature, war, philosophy, and a collective will to be seen in a particular way.

Iran, at this extraordinary juncture, has arrived at its own such moment.

What it has passed through in recent years would have broken most nations. Decades of maximum pressure. Sanctions designed not merely to weaken an economy but to humiliate a people into submission. And then, in the span of less than twelve months, two wars — both launched by nuclear-armed powers, both aimed at its heart. Iran's nuclear infrastructure was struck from the air; its leadership targeted; its supreme leader killed. In response, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, and the world felt it immediately — in fuel prices, in rerouted cargo ships, in emergency sessions of governments that had assumed they could watch from a safe distance. As negotiations continue and ceasefire terms remain contested, one fact is impossible to ignore: Iran has not collapsed, has not surrendered, has not begged. It absorbed blows that would have dismembered lesser states and remained, battered but unbowed, at the table. In the long memory of nations, moments like these become founding myths — the raw material from which identity is forged.

But Iran does not need to fabricate a myth. It already has one.

The figure of the pahlevan lives at the heart of Persian civilisation. He is not simply a warrior. In the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi — that magnificent epic which kept the Persian language alive through a thousand years of conquest — the pahlevan is something richer and more demanding: a champion who places his strength in the service of justice, who protects the weak, and who never raises his sword without cause. Rustam is not merely mighty; he is responsible. The pahlevan's power has an ethic attached to it, and that ethic is precisely what distinguishes him from a strongman.

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This tradition runs deeper than literature. It lives in the culture of javanmardi — roughly, the way of the noble man — and it is inseparable from the reverence Iranians hold for Imam Hussain, that most profound symbol of principled resistance against tyranny. What is remarkable is that this reverence crosses the fault lines of religious practice. Religious and secular Iranians alike recognise in Hussain something that speaks to the Persian soul: the willingness to stand, to refuse, to say no to illegitimate power even when the cost is everything.

The identity draws on a second, equally deep current. Within Islamic mysticism, the concept of futuwwa — spiritual chivalry — articulates the same ideal from within the interior life of the faith. The great masters of that tradition, Persian sages who shaped the soul of Islamic civilisation, defined futuwwa as the highest station of the journeying soul: to accept one's own trials without complaint, to hold oneself accountable while forgiving others, to give without calculation, to place the dignity of others above one's own comfort. The ideal fata — the spiritually chivalrous man — was exemplified not by a conqueror but by Ali ibn Abi Talib: selfless, courageous, incorruptible. In this understanding, futuwwa is not a social code alone; it is a discipline of the self, a way of being in the world that demands constant inner refinement. The physical champion and the spiritual wayfarer, in the Iranian tradition, are not opposites. They are two faces of the same archetype — and together they form an ideal of rare completeness.

This is the identity waiting to be claimed.
The world, it must be said, is ready for it. We live in an era of breath-taking moral disorder. Wars of choice are launched during active peace negotiations and rebranded as self-defence. Entire populations are bombarded while international institutions debate procedure. Corruption — from the hidden financial networks of the powerful to the long-suppressed files of those who abused the powerless — has so thoroughly corroded trust in the old centres of authority that cynicism has become the default idiom of public life. Artificial intelligence now makes the killing of the nameless faster, cheaper, and more deniable than ever.

The strong do as they will. The weak suffer what they must. And presiding over much of this disorder is a new kind of political narcissism — leaders who mistake cruelty for strength, spectacle for governance, and impunity for greatness, who reach, without embarrassment, for the imagery of kings.

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It is telling, then, that within the United States itself, one of the most powerful civic movements of recent years has coalesced around the simplest possible demand: No Kings. Millions of Americans took to the streets in what became, by most counts, the largest single-day protests in American history — many explicitly linking their government's conduct abroad to the same logic of unchecked power they were resisting at home. That a republic founded on the rejection of monarchy feels compelled, two and a half centuries later, to restate that principle in the streets is not a minor political curiosity. It is a civilizational signal — evidence that the hunger for principled power, for something resembling a chivalric ethic in the conduct of nations, is not a peripheral or romantic aspiration. It is a universal need, felt even at the heart of the empire.

Into this landscape, the emergence of a nation that can credibly embody responsible power, principled resistance, and the protection of the vulnerable is not merely an asset for Iran. It answers a genuine hunger in world public opinion. Iran has already demonstrated, through the sheer consequences of its resistance, that a nation acting on principle can command the world's attention without possessing the world's largest navy. Governments across four continents have been forced to reckon with the reverberations of a conflict they did not choose and cannot easily resolve. People across the Global South — across cultures that never forgot what it means to be on the receiving end of empires — are watching closely, and many of them are not watching with the sympathies the Western press assumes.

What makes this moment particularly striking is that this popular standing has been earned against extraordinary odds. For decades, a sustained and well-resourced effort has been made to fix Iran in the world's imagination as a rogue state — a threat to be contained, a regime to be isolated, a civilization to be reduced to its most alarming headlines. Securitization became a kind of industry: academic frameworks, think-tank reports, cable news segments, and diplomatic communiqués all working in concert to ensure that when the name Iran was spoken, fear preceded understanding. And yet something remarkable happened. The propaganda did not hold — not everywhere, and not among everyone.

Across the Arab street, across sub-Saharan Africa, across Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, popular sympathy has moved in a direction that Western governments

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find difficult to explain and uncomfortable to acknowledge. Polls that receive little airtime in Western capitals consistently show Iran's resistance framing resonating with hundreds of millions of people who have their own memories of being on the wrong end of an enforced international order. But the shift has not been confined to the Global South alone.

Something has been moving in Western public opinion too — quieter, less acknowledged by mainstream outlets, but unmistakable to anyone paying attention to where attention actually flows.

Iran's Lego animations, produced with sardonic wit and aimed squarely at the corrupted machinery of Western governments, became among the most shared political content on social media platforms whose algorithms were never designed to favour Tehran. Young people in Europe and North America — the same demographic that grew up being told Iran was an axis of evil — watched, shared, and laughed. The animations worked not because they were Iranian but because they were honest, and because the targets. It was a form of “cultural diplomacy” that no foreign policy establishment had anticipated and no sanctions regime could touch: the power of being, in the eyes of a disillusioned global public, the one country willing to say plainly what everyone else was only thinking.

A significant part of that resonance is inseparable from Gaza. When a genocide unfolded in real time — documented on mobile phones, narrated by its victims in their own voices, watched by a world that found its institutions incapable of stopping it — Iran's public posture of solidarity with the Palestinian people read, to vast audiences, not as rhetoric but as consistency. Here was a nation that had said, for decades, that what was happening to Palestinians was a civilizational crime, and that history was now, gruesomely, confirming.

Whether one agrees with every dimension of Iran's regional policy or not, the moral credibility it accumulated in the eyes of ordinary people across the Muslim world, and well beyond it, is a geopolitical fact.

Credibility of that kind is not manufactured by press offices. It is built, slowly, through the perception that a country means what it says — and it can be squandered just as slowly, or with remarkable speed, depending on what comes next.

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Iran's task now is not only reconstruction and diplomacy. It is something more deliberate: the conscious articulation of who it is.

The raw materials are extraordinary — an ancient civilization, an undefeated spirit, a literary tradition that already gave the world its most complete portrait of the noble champion, a recent history that no propagandist could have invented, and a reservoir of global goodwill that decades of demonization failed to drain. The question is whether Iran can meet the moment its own endurance has created — whether it can translate the instinctive admiration of the many into a coherent identity that the world can understand, and that Iranians themselves can inhabit with pride.

And if Iran succeeds in this, the effect will not stop at its borders. Every civilization carries within it a sleeping archetype of the noble protector. The Arab tradition has its muruwwa and its memory of Ali. The Turkic world has its alp, the valiant warrior-guardian of the epics. The African Sahel has its traditions of the griot-remembered hero who fights for the powerless. Even in East Asia, the codes of the knight and the samurai speak to the same deep human longing — power bound by obligation, strength answerable to honour. These traditions have been suppressed, ridiculed, or simply forgotten under the weight of colonial modernity and the cynical realpolitik that replaced them — but they have not died. When a nation of Iran's stature consciously revives and lives its own chivalric identity on the world stage, it does not merely represent itself. It gives permission to others. It reminds nations across the region and beyond that they too possess the cultural vocabulary to imagine power differently: not as domination, but as responsibility; not as impunity, but as honour.

The pahlevan, in this sense, is not a national symbol alone. He is an invitation.

The pahlevan does not boast. He does not need to. His actions have already spoken. What remains is to give that action a name — and to carry it, with full awareness, into the world.

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