

The Rising Appetite of American Imperialism

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Abstract

This paper will examine the U.S.-Iran war, which was declared on February 28th, 2026, under the lens of class system theory, which is a Marxist ideological structure that believes that international conflict is rooted in the material interests of a niche group of economic elite that profit from strife and therefore help shape the public opinion around it. One can trace back this conflict to the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 to the Shah era, to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the growth of the Islamic Republic, all the way to Operation Epic Fury that is going on today. This paper argues that the economic potential of oil, weapons manufacturers, and the elite's stake in the financial channels of the Middle East has shaped U.S. policy to a greater degree than democratic decision making or real security breaches. Using levels-of-analysis theory with class system theory, and taking supporting evidence from provided class resources as well as the documentary film "Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers", this paper closes that this conflict was not a result of unavoidable political differences but rather stems from the influx of economic interests the Western world holds, which keeps the Middle East political unstable and accelerates global hegemony.

The Rising Appetite of American Imperialism

On February 28th, 2026, the United States of America and Israel began a joint military insurrection, dubbed “Operation Epic Fury” by American military operatives, which began with the armed barrage that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei within hours (Shah et al., 2026). Rapidly, the conflict had escalated to include the Hezbollah and the Houthis, closed the Strait of Hormuz for trade, and guided the world to what one scholar called an intensification of the worst debt crisis in modern history (Smith, 2026). To the American public, this conflict came as a surprise; for the Iranian people, it was simply a new leaf of a very old pathway going back to 1953. Analysts are on polar opposites when it comes to determining where relations went awry, and more importantly, the root cause for the conflict. Fox News journalist Steve Forbes believes it lies in the radical, hierocratic personality of Iran’s rulers and their nuclear ambitions (Forbes, 2026), while Foreign Policy in Focus writer Phyllis Bennis identifies it as an illegal conflict stemming from aggression that was unlawfully declared as war without any congressional or United Nations support (Bennis, 2026). Closer to the middle of this opinion spectrum holds realist disses that blame the Trump administration for strategic incompetency (Lissner & Rapp-Hooper, 2026) and Marxist accounts that put the war as a result of the problems of global capitalism.

This paper asserts that class system theory is the most complete and all-encompassing account of why these two nations are at war in 2026. Class system theory, as we have declared here, says that a small class of economic elites, consisting of those affiliated with oil, arms manufacturing, or international financial investments, are invasively powering state policy. This groups’ agenda lies in extracting profits with the national sphere, which is rooted through whipping up public sentiment for particular policies, including war, that serves their desires

rather than any “national interest” (Marx, 1977). When considered with Iran, this theory can help explain the 1953 coup, which enriched the pockets of British and American oil leaders, as well as the 2026 crusade which has increased Gulf sovereign wealth funds, Western defense contractors, and cloud-computing firms, at the disregard of its impact on Iranian lives and the American treasury (Baroud, 2026; Prashad, 2026). This paper continues by tracing the conflict’s history, using levels-of-analysis theory and class system upon this timeline, bringing in supporting evidence from a war documentary, and ending with a thorough conclusion of whether this conflict was avoidable and what it heralds for American hegemony.

Historical Background to the Conflict

Operation Ajax (1953)

To find the earliest signs of this conflict, we must go back to the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a coup arranged by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) after he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Ervand Abrahamian’s rendition of these events talk about how coup was a direct result of the ideological differences between Iranian nationalist requirements to tap into their country’s primary resource, and the interests of British and American oil capital, which saw nationalization as a repugnant precedent that couldn’t happen (Abrahamian, 1982). Class system theory sees Operation Ajax as a textbook case of it: an elected government snatched the profits of the concentrated capitalist strata, and that class used intelligence apparatus of multiple states to remove the danger, place a malleable leader in Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and restore Western domination. These operations were completed under a layer of confidentiality amongst a small circle of officials and operatives, which is exactly what makes sense in the broader patterns of class system theory when elite monetary interests are interrupted by democratic

rejuvenation in peripheral countries.

American Support for the Shah (1954-1979)

Declassified intelligence files from the period after the coup show how deeply invested Washington was in monitoring any new developments in Iranian internal politics. A 1960 National Security Council briefing on Iran, created seven years following the coup, was checking how the Shah changed his cabinet, his conversations with Moscow, and whether his regime was “too weak” to withstand Soviet demand (Central Intelligence Agency, 1960). This form of meticulous surveillance of a different nation’s domestic affairs has no precedent or parallel in classical democratic foreign policy; this highlights how United States policy toward Iran during this time period was overseen incessantly by an intelligence and foreign-policy elite while keeping the public in the dark. In exchange for these services, the Shah generously reimbursed the West with renegotiated oil contracts and offered the United States an arms partnership, solidifying a previously unstable relationship where Iranian oil revenue just got pumped into Western markets and manufacturing, which is something modern class theorists now label as “petrodollar recycling” (Smith, 2026).

The Islamic Revolution (1979)

The general consensus sees the Islamic Revolution and its consequent hostage crisis as evidence to show the persistent and perennial nature of antagonism withing Iran’s political environment. Forbes (2026) even designates the embassy takeover as Iran’s “mission statement” that represents the broader definition of Iranian politics rather than being an anomalous event. Class system theory, however, proposes a fresh perspective. The Shah’s governance coupled drastic economic disparity with authoritarian actions needed to preserve it; in particular, his “White Revolution” channeled wealth to a select few investors and SAVAK’s domestic

intelligence network. The revolution that replaced him united secular leftists, bazaar business owners, and clergy all under a single coalition attempting to work against their collective economic grievances and oppose foreign-backed absolutism, all before the clerical leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took back control (Abrahamian, 1982). Seen under the light of class system theory, 1979 was not a conflict between two sovereign countries but instead a domestic class revolt against an unruly elite backed by foreign investments, which mainstream media has consequently reframed as a tale of religious radicalism rather than talking about the conditions that created it.

The Rise of the Mullahs (1980 - Present)

Even following 1979 where the local government stood staunchly against American interventionism, elite material interests remained a continuity in how it changed diplomatic relations in a way that cannot fully be explained if just viewed under an ideological lens. For instance, the Reagan administration privately sold arms and munitions to the Iranian government it had previously denounced all to fund the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the broader conflict of the Cold War, labelled the Iran-Contra affair (Byrne & Kornbluh, 1993). Declassified documentation of the relationship shows that the mere opportunity for war profiteering worked against the government's declared foreign policy, aligning with class system theory's claim that the interests of the privatized elite often work independently, and sometimes even against, official state ideology for the sake of profits.

Israel's Connection to the Conflict

When discussing the primary drivers of this entire debacle, it would be ignorant not to acknowledge the role Israel has had and their influence on American political elite. Stephen Zunes's examination of congressional records for the past two decades revealed an interesting

tidbit: not just Republican war hawks, but top Democrats also advocated for the escalation of the situation against Iran as well as providing unconditional support of Israeli measures, regardless of who made the first move. Even vice-presidents and senators have been a factor in this trend, from Kamala Harris labelling Iran as America's "greatest adversary" to Hillary Clinton's 2008 criticism of attempts at diplomacy (Zunes, 2026). Class system theory sees it not as two parties unifying against a communal danger, but rather a planned decision made by political insiders. Since the elite share the same interests in terms of maintaining Israeli military dominance, they have successfully been able to control what is considered acceptable political debate for both parties.

Contemporary Iran: From Khomeini to War (2015 - 2026)

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action partially held back Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lenience in sanctions, which worked until the Trump administration recommenced a pathway to potential aggression. Tensions sharply rose succeeding Israel's June 2025 "Twelve-Day War", consisting of attacks on Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure, which was ensued by a wave of anti-government activism in Iran between December of 2025 and January of 2026 that was brutally suppressed (Coates, 2026; Prashad, 2026). Claiming that Iran's nuclear inventory and missile holdings were dangerous, the Trump administration officially authorized Operation Epic Fury on February 28th, 2026; the initial barrage resulted in the death of Khomeini and tens of his bureaucrats, which led to the rise of his son, Mojtaba Khomeini, to follow in his father's footsteps (Shah et. al., 2026). A conditional ceasefire was luckily declared on April 8th after 40 days of grueling combat, but analysts consider it as an unstable relationship that has a more temporary effect than a permanent one (Dubowitz & Cohen, 2026; Prashad, 2026). This recent outburst of violence is just yet another example of the

defining trend that prioritizes petroleum, weapons, and placing the financial elite on a political pedestal unearthed by the last seven decades of disagreement.

Theoretical Construct

Levels of Analysis

Kenneth Waltz's levels-of-analysis substructure explains international quarrels by looking at some of the causes at the individual level (psychology and choices of leaders), the state level (national political structures and ideology), and the system-wide level (how power is distributed amongst nations on the international scale) (Waltz, 1959). While this paper proposes a more class-theory-centric approach, each level has some contributions that could be argued as the trigger of the war: at an individual level, both Donald J. Trump's and Benjamin Netanyahu's mindset to maintain political survival matters (Baroud, 2026); at the state level, Iran's religious governing anatomy and its domestic legitimacy dilemma impacted their decisions (Prashad, 2026); at the broadest level, the way power is distributed amongst the U.S., Israel, Russia, and China determined how far they were willing to go as far as escalating goes (Bondar, 2026; in Shah et al., 2026). Class system theory reads that global politics are not as impacted by individual countries as they are impacted by a global elite that transcends borders, often made of industrial leaders in the oil, arms, and finance industries, who do not necessarily have a set of goals but end up impacting foreign policy around the globe.

Class System Theory Applied

At the core of class system theory is the economic system that supports it: capitalism. Karl Marx's analysis on how an overabundance of wealth gets accumulated by a very small capital-owning minority. As Marx says, "'the workman... labours, expends labour-power; but his labour, being no longer necessary labour, he creates no value for himself. He creates surplus

value which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of a creation out of nothing" (Marx, 1977, p. 159). Workers in industry produce more value than they need to sustain themselves, and this extra value is then collected by those who control the means of production. When considered under an international scope, it is easy to see why concentrated wealth, whether it is the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company of seven decades ago or the investment portfolio in the Gulf today, will always shape public policy to maximize their returns.

The 2026 war features this theory quite exuberantly simply because the beneficiaries are super well-documented. Adam Hanieh's analysis of this quarrel with Truthout talks about how the Gulf has become a global melting pot of investments that are "deeply embedded in international equity markets, real estate, infrastructure, private equity, technology, and debt markets" and turning oil revenue into monetary assets through petrodollar recycling (Smith, 2026). A CSIS documentary on the war's unplanned outcomes agrees with this picture from a mainstream perspective, bringing to light that the United States has immense holdings in with Saudi Arabia's Investment Fund, Abu Dhabi's Investment Authority, and Mubadala. The very same report mentions that the Iranian Revolutionary Corps has plainly pressurized cloud-computing companies like cloud-computing firms including Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Nvidia, Apple, and Google, and that investment firms such as Lockheed Martin and the therapeutic distributor Stryker have already been targeted by Iranian-linked cyberattacks (Shah et al., 2026). This is all reinforcing class system theory, considering that these firms and corporations are depicted as strategic stakeholders in war meant to be about nuclear proliferation is super strong evidence that those holding global finances on a string, not national security, sit at the fulcrum of the war's stakes.

Phyllis Bennis's previous examination of the U.S.-Iran relationship predicted this pattern about two decades before the current war, asserting that repeated U.S. military threats against Iran needs to be understood under the wider background of regional dominance and gaining control of Middle Eastern oil fields rather than being a pure response to Iranian goading (Bennis, 2009). Max Elbaum's fresher assessment for Common Dreams makes a similar point about the political economy of the bloodshed. He contends that both pro-war and "anti-MAGA" groups of the American political elite are reaching a conclusion stating that keeping America at the forefront of modern military capabilities is the path to national security and affluence, which is a supposition that aids the militarized capitalist class instead of the American public that has to fund the war through taxation, inflation, and fatalities (Elbaum, 2026).

Manufacturing Consent: Media and Propaganda

Class system theory also argues that these rich elite that stand to benefit from the war do not just influence global politics economically, but also through concocting public consent. The sources we used for this paper elucidate this mechanism intensely just from the extreme polarization within the media. Forbes states that "the blood-soaked fanatics running Iran... know all too well Iran is getting crushed militarily," shaping the war as a necessary crusade against an immoral regime (Forbes, 2026). Mark Dubowitz and Ben Cohen of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies advance that Washington has the "upper hand" and should immediately reject any attempts at Iranian compromise (Dubowitz & Cohen, 2026). Victoria Coates of the Heritage Foundation depicts the war's early yields as evidence that analysts who urged significant caution in instigating a conflict with Iran for the past couple decades were dead wrong (Coates, 2026). All of these aforementioned accounts make the escalation look like a long overdue decision. On the flip side, Phyllis Bennis relates the war as a transgression against both the U.S. Constitution

and the United Nations Charter (Bennis, 2026), and Vijay Prashad recounts it as “the miscalculation of the century,” contending that Iran foresaw and withstood the presuppositions engrained in the American war plan (Prashad, 2026). Each of these groups’ opinions are manufactured by institutions, whether it be a corporate media network, an advocacy-funded foreign policy outlet, or an independent left publication. Class system theory theorizes exactly this narrative-driven competition, where the average citizen’s understanding of the conflict is shaped by these messages by these institutions backed by the same people who stand to profit by the war, instead of looking at the plain material facts.

Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers

Robert Greenwald’s 2006 documentary *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* provides additional historical evidence for the repeated sequence of events class system theory picks out, taken from the most recent American conflict in the area at the time. The film details how private contractors such as Halliburton subsidiary KBR, Blackwater, and Titan secured huge, often no-bid, contracts during America’s occupation of Iraq, and how these contracts effected the various logistics of the war, including troop deployment, base construction, and security objectives that often did not fulfill, or even directly contrasted, defined military standards (Greenwald, 2006). The film’s chief assertion, which perfectly matches up with the tendencies we see today in the U.S.-Iran conflict of 2026, is that private corporations stood to profit from the war in the so-called name of democracy and national security. Just like how KBR and Blackwater profited significantly from the occupation in Iraq even though the initial basis to do so (weapons of mass destruction) was never verified, CSIS analysts now say that Lockheed Martin, Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, and various Gulf sovereign wealth funds play a big role in the war’s architecture (Shah et al., 2026). This pattern that was documented through this film is pervasive

through each of these past decades in the 21st century: under the illusion of global security and peacekeeping, Western militaries fight not to maintain the ideals that this nation were built upon, but rather to line the pockets of the cornucopia of defense contractors, energy companies, and tech corporations.

Conclusion

Was this conflict inevitable? Class system theory has a qualified answer to this question. It was not inevitable as described by Steve Forbes and Victoria Coates, who paint the conflict as an obligatory correction of various strategic mistakes or the needed takedown of a fanatical, immoral regime (Forbes, 2026; Coates, 2026). Neither was it an individual driven decision or an accident, even though Trump and Netanyahu quite clearly changed the timing of it (Baroud, 2026). Rather, this paper argues that this is all the overarching result of over seventy years of entrenched Western materialism: an alliance amongst oil companies forced upon Iran in 1953 and maintained by British and American intelligence agencies during the Shah era; an arms-profit relationship that thrived even during periods of significant hostility, as demonstrated by the Iran-Contra affair; a bipartisan American political elite who have moved the goalposts on what is considered acceptable political discourse, effectively changing the public's view on the matter; and, in 2026, a discordance whose primary financial stakeholders include foreign developmental funds, remote computing companies, and weaponry manufacturers documented by sources across the entire political spectrum (Shah et al., 2026; Smith, 2026).

The war's consequences on American hegemony, based on the evidence assessed in this paper, seem to be more abrasive than corrective. Realist savants at the Council of Foreign Relations assert that the conflict violates realism's standing principles of achievable steps and has already caused us losses exceeding tens of billions of dollars, while simultaneously removing

defensive missiles that could be needed for deterrence against Russia or China (Lissner & Rapp-Hooper, 2026). CSIS analysts independently note that Russia is a huge beneficiary in all this through higher oil prices, reduced sanction pressure, and just an overall increase in wartime revenue; this has also resulted in a slightly deeper alignment between Iran, China, and Russia, as well as straining American relations with Europe, since they were not consulted before the initial strikes (Bondar, in Shah et al., 2026). Mark Cancian's additions to the same report mentioned how Iran's five-week closure of the Strait of Hormuz actually revealed a weakness in the American navy that a purely numerical advantage couldn't solve, chipping away at the claims of a swift victory and the credibility of the White House (Shah et al., 2026). Ramzy Baroud and Vijay Prashad, talking with an anti-imperialist stance, elaborate on this, contending that the found weaknesses of the Israeli-U.S. alliance accelerated the discord between the two parties, also causing Gulf nations that previously encouraged American escalation to think twice before reaffirming their support for what is potentially a sinking ship (Baroud, 2026; Prashad, 2026).

If class system theory is indeed the defining coefficient in this war, that would mean the war was started to protect the priorities of a concentrated strata of elite rather than national interest, then the divergence from traditional American political blueprint that we would expect to see shouldn't come at a surprise to anyone. The class that rakes in all of these profits is a distinct spirit that should not be compared to the American public that sustains this effort through military service, treasury outlays, inflation, and a belittled global standing, nor to the broader state who compromised their long-term strategic position to secure their role in this war (Shah et al., 2026). This is exactly the interpretation that other theories like a purely state-centric account would not be able to explain, where a war is only beneficial for a limited elite rather than the more sizeable national concord, since the legislators responsible for declaring war respond more

to the former than the latter. Interpreted like this, the choice to go to war with Iran was neither rational nor unified, as much as it was as the newest expression of an age-old arrangement first installed in 1953, which has been safeguarded, endorsed, and revamped since.

As Max Elbaum argues, correcting this course will need more than just a unified opposition to any particular war; it will require an unorthodox initiative of American foreign policy that makes intentional choices to break down the military-industrial-complex to prevent this war in Iran and any future ones like it (Elbaum, 2026). Barring an unexpected shift in the way these countries interact, these underlying incentives will remain more powerful than any temporary ceasefire, continuing this cycle between the United States and Iran to spark the next time the international terrain changes.

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