

Internationalism and Sympathy Politics

The Cuban Matter

If 2026 has been anything, it has at least been an interesting year for geopolitics. The United States started the year strong with the capture of Nicolas Maduro and his wife (which itself has resulted in no meaningful changes in Venezuela or the U.S., and everyone, even those of the “left”, have seemed to simply forget it even happened).¹ Followed by a coordinated Israeli-American strike on Iran and of course an ever hungry appetite for the small island of Cuba. Before we get to the main course of this article, the war with Iran, we’d like to devote a few words to the Cuban State and its future, or lack thereof.

Cuba has largely been forgotten and abandoned by the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Marxism-Leninism. In reality the only people that seem to even care about Cuba are Miami gusanos and American leftists, the latter of whom treat the island as a sort of Socialist Mecca. Cuba lies at the crossroads of the great contradiction in our current movement and its existence, and our “comrades” insistence to not move on from it, offers up many questions that begin to break down the psyche of many an American leftist. Yet since COVID-19, the Cuban economy has seen negative economic growth.² Nearly half of the Cuban population already believes that socialism (more aptly referred to as social democracy) should be abandoned as the national economic system.³ Economic growth, or decline, is of no concern to us in the abolition of capitalism, however many of our contemporaries place an undue

¹ Note: At time of editing, there have been some new deals with American oil companies in Venezuela, but their impact has yet to be seen.

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2024&locations=CU&start=2020>

³ <https://latinoamerica21.com/en/half-of-cubans-believe-the-socialist-model-should-be-abandoned/>

importance on these factors. If we pair this with the ongoing trade embargo imposed by the United States, the future for Cuba is certain: collapse.

Among the American left, Cuba operates as a sort of mythological homeland for revolutionary politics. However when we examine the reality of Cuba, most of the allure falls apart. Cuba's "Socialist" economy is really no more different than that of any of the Scandinavian countries with an involved government and the right to own private property enshrined in the Cuban Constitution.⁴ Cuban officials consistently act as "first among equals" when compared to the general populace and enjoy several privileges, such as the outright exemption from having to pay tariffs (if they request).⁵ Yet we must defend Cuba to our dying breath. Cuba is upheld as our North Star and its "struggle against U.S. Imperialism" is lauded, yet its economy is collapsing and it must rely on the goodwill of Western leftists to come as tourists and bring "aid". Without the backing of Venezuela and since the ousting of Maduro, Cuba cannot even power its electric grid. This humanitarian crisis has seen an outpouring of support from the international community and international communist movement to rally to the defense of the Cuban state, but this support is not internationalism. Far from it, these recent activities represent a strand of praxis we call "Sympathy Politics", residing in an alliance with the Cuban State, rather than a genuine call for internationalism which would no doubt include the turning of the State apparatus on its head.

Sympathy politics can broadly be defined as the tendency of Socialists, Communists, and those on the left to engage in the class struggle through the lens of support for states, use of geopolitical analyses, and the employment of humanitarianism. When we look to Cuba and the recent flotillas sent to alleviate the burden of the Cuban working class we see these efforts as

⁴ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Cuba_2019

⁵ https://cubaminrex.cu/en/privilegios-e-inmidades#:~:text=According%20to%20Law%201089%20of%201962%2C%20accredited,request%20concessions%20for:%20*%20Importation%20*%20Purchases

little more than sympathy politics. Of course when discussing the plight of the working people of Cuba, calls for “internationalism” are laundered through support for a nebulous “Cuban People” or direct support for the Cuban State (as seen with groups like PSL). This allows for faux-leftists, such as the millionaire Hasan Piker and nationalist band Kneecap, to flock to the island and “show their support” by staying in government run 5-star hotels, perform solidarity shows (for the Western leftists only), and interview the “noble Cuban worker” and highlight how their struggle and condition is actually honorable instead of demeaning and dehumanizing.

Cuba itself is a more defensible project to hold sympathy politics for however. Its economy, as previously said, is indeed in shambles. Its people are dying. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Cuban state there is sure to be the proliferation of widespread suffering. As much as we disagree with the praxis, there is a humanitarian crisis just 90 miles away from us. We cannot, however, extend our sympathies to Iran and the current inter-imperialist war escalating in the Middle East, nor can we turn a blind eye to those among us that engage in the pseudo-internationalism that is sympathy politics.

War in Iran or War with Iran, and the Changing Logic of Imperialism

First, we’d like to devote some time to discussing Iran’s role in the war and whether Iran is a country being aggressed against or if it’s an equal power in relation to the United States. To sum up, before we can discuss sympathy politics with Iran we need to answer the question: Is this a “War in Iran” or a “War with Iran”. We side with the latter interpretation that Iran and the U.S. are imperialist powers and that this conflict is fundamentally an inter-imperialist war, that as we believe the international proletariat has no benefit is picking a side.

It would be simple, yet monotonous, to list all of the qualities of Iran that prescribe it as an “Imperialist State”. We could bring up Iran’s recent admission into the international economic

alliance of BRICS⁶, or its military alliance with Russia (both in terms of providing aid to the on-going Russian-Ukrainian War ⁷ and Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War), or the regional military alliance, the "Axis of Resistance", of which is headed by Iran, or anyone of Iran's relationships with their neighbors (be it Syrian intervention in the Afghan refugee situation). Yet all of these are infinitely less interesting than examining the economics of the Iranian state.⁸ Imperialism, as we understand it, is not a simple action that a state takes, such as the assertion that Iran can be characterized as "Imperialist" because it sent in IRGC commanders to oversee the many massacres in Syria⁹, or because it has deported over one million Afghans since the beginning of 2025.¹⁰ A state is not "Imperialist" because it commits a certain amount of actions deemed morally reprehensible, but because of the economic trajectory associated with the existence of a national bourgeoisie and the prevalence of capitalistic social relations. To put it simply, it's not the action that defines Imperialism, but the relation behind it.

Claiming that a State is Capitalist is much like saying "chai tea", both technically mean the same thing. The State being the manifestation of the interests of the bourgeois class is enough to characterize it. Iran in this function is no different than the rest of the world's states, it is fundamentally a form of governance set up to provide economic and social benefits to the national bourgeoisie. Much has been said from our "comrades" about the social nature of the Iranian Revolution. Of how following the fall of the Shah many of the private holdings in land and business were swiftly nationalized. What is often left out is the multiple waves of neoliberal privatization reforms following the end of the Iran-Iraq War. In the aftermath of perhaps Iran's

⁶<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/8/24/saudi-arabia-iran-to-join-brics-as-grouping-admits-six-new-members>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-military-cooperation-d982dd3faf78fbb17dfc8b9c1cb9dae7>

⁸ Yet if one does want to read a synopsis of Iran's history and role in "Anti-Imperialism" we recommend Arya Zahedi's works "Class Struggle, Autonomy, and the State in Iran" and "The Anti-Imperialist Imperialism Club".

⁹ https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Daraya-Report_ENGLISH_Final.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgpl8epg11o>

most disastrous war to date, they sought further aid from the international business community for the redevelopment of their economy and integration into the wider global market (such is the only way for a state to “win” under current relations). Iran itself was happy to accept restructuring demands from the IMF, although the IMF and its associated firms never accompanied the restructuring with loans.¹¹ The State of Iran has been stuck for decades in economic limbo. Despite being overwhelmingly willing to adopt neoliberal reforms, the presence of American and Western sanctions as well as Iran’s geopolitical positions have largely kept them isolated from the markets they so desperately want to break into (rather *need* than want, as any current state simply cannot survive without access to the international system). When we examine the relationship of the Iranian state to the wider global community through this lens, rather than a crude geopolitical analysis, then we start to uncover the true rationale of the recent spat between the United States and Iran.

Everyone is sure to be aware of the so-called “Iranian War”. We have all felt the repercussions of this war. Gas is more expensive, as well as regular commodities (such as food and clothes, due to shipping from East Asia). As this war begins to constrict supply lines and bring tangible harm to the consumers in the United States, our leaders have been gracious enough to draft up a peace plan with the Iranian State. While this peace is precarious at best, the released 14 point “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) lets us really understand the Iranian vision for this war. Among the 14 Points only two are of any interest in relation to what we have previously been discussing. From the MOU:

¹¹ Kayhan Valadbaygi (2021) Hybrid Neoliberalism: Capitalist Development in Contemporary Iran, *New Political Economy*, 26:3, 313-327, DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2020.1729715

6. The United States of America undertakes with regional partners to develop a definitive, mutually agreed plan with at least USD 300 Billion for the reconstruction and economic development of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The mechanism for the implementation of this plan will be finalized as part of the final Deal within 60 days. All required licenses, waivers, and permissions needed for the relevant financial transactions will be granted by the United States of America.

7. The United States of America undertakes to terminate all types of sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the United Nations Security Council resolutions, i.e. IAEA Board of Governors resolutions, and all unilateral U.S. sanctions, primary and secondary, in an agreed upon schedule as part of the final Deal. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America acknowledge the critical importance of the sanctions termination issue above mentioned and express their intentions to immediately address these issues in the negotiations in order to achieve mutual agreement on them.¹²

While it's important to reiterate that this is not the definitive, official peace plan for the end of the war it does represent the interests of the Iranian and American states and was produced by both of them in mutual discussion. Among much of the online discussion is the 6th point, or what many are calling "war reparations". While it is not entirely incorrect to call this a form of reparation, it is not a blank check or debt like many are making it out to be. The most important distinction is not that the Iranian state wants \$300 Billion in cash from the United States, but that they're asking for America's help in procuring investment. This \$300 Billion in investments would come from American, European, and allied Gulf states. If we are to believe our "comrades", then we've been told that Iran is a stalwart defender of Palestine and the oppressed

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/14-point-draft-us-iran-deal-2026-06-17/>

(which coincidentally is not mentioned *once* in this MOU), as well as that Iran is staunchly opposed to any normalization with the “West”, especially its boogeyman Israel. Why then is the future headquarters of the Joint Dictatorship of the Proletariat of Oppressed Nations seeking one year’s worth of GDP in foreign investment from the Great Satan and its allies? Before we answer this let us return back to Cuba.

Cuba is at a crossroads and it seems to have made its pick. At the beginning of the summer, the Cuban state announced the beginning of sweeping economic reforms, all under the guise of obtaining western investment.¹³ This effectively marks the end of the Cuban experiment in socialism (and we are the better for it). Among the reforms are plans for the decentralization of the Cuban state, its involvement in overseeing economic affairs, allowing for foreign investment, and the semi-privatization of state operated enterprises.¹⁴ This path for the Cuban abandonment of its previously held social democratic values is not unique. Cuba is just the next domino to fall in a very predictable trajectory for anyone the United States deems an enemy. Overwhelm the State with sanctions, and in Cuba’s case an embargo, cut them off from the global market, and watch as they slowly suffocate and succumb to the final interests of international Capital (as opposed to the native Cuban bourgeoisie: the Communist Party). Following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the total hegemonic takeover of the United States we have seen this play out again and again. It would take serious effort on our part to list every state that fell to the orbit of international capital this way, but none of them would be unique. How does Iran fare regarding this formula?

¹³<https://apnews.com/article/cuba-economic-reforms-us-embargo-diaz-canel-trump-rubio-b6b8d4319d4291dde47084baa624c795>

¹⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/cuba-economic-reforms-diaz-canel-758f2199c867472e05e585ccc54a269f>

Through sanctions, blockades, and physical war, the United States has attempted to do to Iran what it has done to everyone before them. The only difference is that Iran resisted and turned the logic of Imperialism on its head. Before the release of the MOU and our current understanding, we would still classify the American-Iranian War a battle of mutual partners and to be labeled as such “inter-imperialist”. This would be because of all the qualities of the Iranian state that we listed earlier: their presence in multinational economic alliances, foreign military alliances, involvement in the affairs of surrounding countries, and of course the existence of capitalistic social relations. However, there is now a novel way of examining this conflict, that is that Iran is engaging in a sort of “Reverse Imperialism”. With the usage of the term “Reverse Imperialism” we are not positing or affirming Iran as an “Anti-Imperialist State” (we do not engage with such an idea), but rather we are saying that the current logic of Imperialism has been turned on its head. In traditional understandings there exists multiple strata, or levels, to a state’s “imperial qualities”. Often phrased in the Star Wars-esque terminology of “Core, Semi-Periphery, and Periphery”, the relationship is often one of unequal exchange amongst the different levels, such that the Core oppresses both the Semi-Periphery and Periphery States while the Semi-Periphery engages in some sort of unequal exchange with the haute Periphery.¹⁵ Iran has broken this cycle it seems through the act of war. Through the right of might Iran has shifted the protagonization of the Imperial relationship towards itself and has thrown itself into a global conflict for the express purpose of global economic integration. Economic stimulus in the form of a \$300 Billion investment from foreign MNC’s while allow for the financial, industrial, and service sector of the Iranian economy to be bolstered and brought up to international levels while the suspension of sanctions will finally allow for Iran to engage in the ever lucrative banking

¹⁵ Again, this is not a model we subscribe to (we deny the notion that there exists various levels of Imperial states, but affirm that all states are imperial), but only brought up to discuss the current changing of usual understandings.

systems of Western Europe and engage in global trade with its so-called mortal enemies. It seems even the Great Satan and His allies may have some use for Iranian oil after all, and Iran seems desperate to sell to Him. From this we can definitively say that this is a war *with* Iran, rather than a simple war of aggression against lesser peoples. We affirm our support strictly for the international proletariat and its members across the world. The Iranian State is no ally or defender of the Iranian proletariat, as shown by its willingness to sacrifice thousands, if not millions, of its citizens in barbaric bloodshed all for the sake of market integration. Our condolences lie with the schoolgirls who were murdered, so that Iranian oil can power French, German, and Belgian cars. The Ayatollah was lucky that his “martyrdom” came so prematurely that his citizens could not live long enough to tear him limb from limb for his avarice. It is a shame that Hell does not exist.

Who Gets To Have National Sovereignty?

If you follow the mainstream left and its publications you’ll have noticed a curious phrase employed in defense of the Iranian State, that being “national sovereignty”. PSL, DSA, FRSO, and CPUSA have all published articles and statements commenting on the matter.¹⁶ DSA even goes as far to claim that national sovereignty is “precondition” for working class liberation!¹⁷ Before our refutation, let's take a moment to examine national sovereignty and its history.

Like most things rotten with the International Communist Movement, the concept of “national sovereignty” finds its origins and height with the Second International and the illustrious V. I. Lenin. Central to the struggle against capital in the Russian Empire was the collaborative struggle against Russian Imperial policies, alongside the fight against domestic and

¹⁶ <https://liberationnews.org/47-years-of-hybrid-war-against-iran/>
<https://frso.org/statements/stop-the-u-s-israel-war-on-iran/>
<https://cpusa.org/article/tudeh-calls-for-immediate-action-to-save-iran/>

¹⁷ <https://www.dsasusa.org/statements/dsa-stands-against-imperialist-war-and-with-the-iranian-people/>

foreign Capital interests. Touted as the “prison-house of nations”, Lenin and the Bolsheviks took special care to analyze the conditions present in oppressed nationalities within the Russian borders, such that that Lenin wrote numerous works on the topic and employed Bolshevik writers to research further (Stalin). In his work *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Lenin defined self-determination as:

Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated. Therein is the economic foundation of national movements. Language is the most important means of human intercourse. Unity and unimpeded development of language are the most important conditions for genuinely free and extensive commerce on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism, for a free and broad grouping of the population in all its various classes and, lastly, for the establishment of a close connection between the market and each and every proprietor, big or little, and between seller and buyer.

Therefore, the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. The most profound economic factors drive

towards this goal, and, therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilised world, the national state is typical and normal for the capitalist period.

Consequently, if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations, not by juggling with legal definitions, or “inventing” abstract definitions, but by examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state.

While we are not here to debate the validity of Lenin’s historical position on the right of nations to self-determinate, we are here to debate its contemporary repercussions which in this case manifested in the question of national sovereignty. If we are to be charitable to Lenin, in reading his works it is widely said that self-determination, national sovereignty, and national liberation are tools by which Communist forces can progress history and give their country the specific tools needed for future Communist Revolution, i.e. the development of the productive forces. Lenin furthers this claim in the 1916 article *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*:

In this respect, countries must be divided into three main types:

First, the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and the United States of America. In these countries the bourgeois, progressive, national movements came to an end long ago. Every one of these “great”

nations oppresses other nations in the colonies and within its own country. The tasks of the proletariat of these ruling nations are the same as those of the proletariat in England in the nineteenth century in relation to Ireland.

Secondly, Eastern Europe: Austria, the Balkans and particularly Russia. Here it was the twentieth century that particularly developed the bourgeois-democratic national movements and intensified the national struggle. The tasks of the proletariat in these countries—in regard to the consummation of their bourgeois-democratic reformation, as well as in regard to assisting the socialist revolution in other countries—cannot be achieved unless it champions the right of nations to self-determination. In this connection the most difficult but most important task is to merge the class struggle of the workers in the oppressing nations with the class struggle of the workers in the oppressed nations.

Thirdly, the semi-colonial countries, like China, Persia, Turkey, and all the colonies, which have a combined population amounting to a billion. In these countries the bourgeois-democratic movements have either hardly begun, or are far from having been completed. Socialists must not only demand the unconditional and immediate liberation of the colonies without compensation—and this demand in its political expression signifies nothing more nor less than the recognition of the right to self-determination—but must render determined support to the more revolutionary elements in the bourgeois-democratic movements for

national liberation in these countries and assist their rebellion—and if need be, their revolutionary war—against the imperialist powers that oppress them.

If we are to build off the works of Lenin, as the groups listed above claim to be, then what meaning does “national sovereignty” really have? Has Iran not gone through its bourgeois democratic revolution? Does Iran not have present capitalist social relations? What about Iranian society is fundamentally different from America, besides some cultural quirks? National sovereignty in this manner is fundamentally a reactionary idea. Even if we are to assume that national sovereignty is valid as an idea, then who do extend it out to? If we extend this sovereignty to Iran, does it then apply to every Iranian? The answer would obviously be “no”, as there are numerous oppressed nations inside the borders of Iran! Let us look at the Kurds. Among the many nationalities present in Iran, the Kurds are disenfranchised and actively fighting for their own national autonomy and self determination from the Iranian state, which is widely ethnically Persian. Is the same courtesy extended to the Kurds? As we have seen, the answer again is no. So then national sovereignty is now not about self determination for an oppressed nation (or even Leninist stageist developmentalism), but is an allowance for the Iranian state to proceed as it pleases, even though it itself is a horribly oppressive state no less bourgeois than the United States or Israel.

Furthermore, if we are able to continue the logic of national sovereignty then how does it not apply to the enemies of Iran! Does Israel not have the right, under international law, to defend itself from its aggressive neighbors in Lebanon and Iran? Does the United States not have the right to determine for itself what its demographic makeup should be? Those who so fiercely

combat the American state and its immigration policies tacitly support the Iranian state deporting over 1 million Afghans! All for the sake of “counter-hegemony” which we will discuss later.

This is not to say that we are in support of the actions of the Israeli and American state, quite the contrary, but it is to say that questions of the moralization of what actions a state can or cannot do have no bearing on the Communist, for the aim of the state is not of our own!

Defencism, Defeatism, and the Myth of Counter Hegemony

While our contemporaries have been discussing the supremacy of national sovereignty, they have marked their praxis as the unwavering support of the Iranian state. Among our discussions of what American Communists, Ultras, and our associates are supposed to do during the war they have chosen defencism while we advocate for defeatism. Although usually used for defence of one's own state, the same principle still applies when defending a foreign state. Our issue with this “revolutionary”, anti-American defencism lies just as much in its practical application, not just our expressed ideological opposition. If we are to examine the previous language used by our counterparts it is all focused on supporting the Iranian state in its almost religious struggle against America and its allies. Phrases such as “No War on Iran”, “Support Iranian Sovereignty”, “Glory to Iran”, etc. all protagonize the Iranian state and its military as the active combatants in this global struggle, such that no feasible action from Americans can happen unless it is laundered through support of the Iranian state. In the same way, this mindset shirks off responsibility away from our domestic proletariat to engage in meaningful struggle against International Capital because Iran has it handled, or in many cases the American proletariat simply isn't worthy of engaging in a struggle. Obviously, there is much to be said about the current condition of the proletariat of our country, but our role as Communists in this movement is to galvanize and foment struggle in our communities against Empire.

Tactics and strategies employed by our “comrades” all rely on the assumption of the existence of “counter hegemony”, or that there will exist some non-proletarian movement that will come to struggle against Western Capital. The issue of course is that the ones challenging Western Capital will just simply be Eastern Capital. Whether our Capitalists live in Washington, Tehran, or Beijing is of no concern to us. Our primary concern is that they exist in the first place and the relations that they have impressed upon us reign supreme. Counter Hegemony itself is just an iteration of “Multipolarity” that we have discussed before and it begs the question of with whom do we trust this counter hegemonic action to? Do we allow the Chinese to reign supreme? At the very least they have the word “Communist” in their ruling party, which is sure to be attractive to many. If we are to support the Iranian state then why do many not lend the same support to Russia, itself being engaged in a prolonged conflict with Ukraine, a proxy for Western and NATO power? Of course many amongst us do in fact lend the same support to Russia as they do Iran, such as those in the PSL, but this multipolarity is not internationalism. At best it is crude geopolitics, at worst it is chauvinism.

If we are to engage in authentic and productive conflict with Capital we must not allow ourselves to become narrow minded, and must necessarily extend our hostility with Capital to the very concept of the State itself. For as long as either remains our battle is still ongoing.

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