

Moral Polarization in Exile: Necessary Evil and the Decoupling of Nation and State in Wartime

This paper examines how members of the Iranian diaspora in the United States interpreted the June 2025 military escalation between Iran and Israel and justified opposing positions toward war. Classic sociological accounts of wartime crisis often anticipate patriotic consolidation or “rally” effects that strengthen national unity in the face of external threat. Yet among diaspora actors positioned between homeland conflict and transnational distance, the escalation instead generated sharp moral polarization. While some actors defended military escalation as a tragic but necessary instrument for dismantling authoritarian rule, others rejected the legitimacy of war altogether. This paper asks whether opposing actors shared a common understanding of war as a “necessary evil,” differing primarily in strategic evaluation, or whether they fundamentally disagreed about the moral legitimacy of violence itself.

Moral dilemmas surrounding harm have long appeared across philosophical traditions. The question of whether killing someone as a means differs morally from causing death as a side effect emerged in Catholic moral theology through the doctrine of double effect. In *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect*, Foot (1978) revisits this doctrine through the example of a runaway tram, asking whether redirecting harm differs morally from directly causing it. Thomson later expanded this thought experiment into what became known as the “trolley problem,” shifting attention from the tram driver to bystanders and other agents who must decide whether to sacrifice one life to save several others (Foot 1967; Thomson 1985). Variants such as the transplant case demonstrate that moral judgments shift even when numerical outcomes remain identical.

Yet these dilemmas unfold in abstraction. No lever is pulled, no life is lost, and the individuals involved remain anonymous. The apparent clarity of such scenarios rests partly on their impersonality. When those implicated in harm are no longer abstract figures but socially meaningful others—with names, histories, and relationships—moral evaluation becomes inseparable from processes of boundary-making that define who belongs within one’s moral community and who remains outside it. Sociologists describe such distinctions as symbolic boundaries: conceptual lines actors draw to categorize people and practices, structure belonging, and organize moral evaluation (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Judgments about acceptable harm therefore depend not only on action structures or numerical outcomes but also on how actors delineate communities of responsibility and concern.

Sociology’s central contribution lies in examining moral phenomena “in the wild,” as they unfold through relationships, histories, and situated interactions rather than through hypothetical thought experiments (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). Moral reasoning emerges within moral orders—shared systems of meaning that structure judgments of right and wrong and bind together emotion, loyalty, and evaluation (Smith 2003). Even experimental research demonstrates that moral reasoning varies across cultural contexts (Awad et al. 2018). In real-world settings—particularly during conflict—moral dilemmas are embedded in relations of power, violence, and constraint, where individuals must

publicly justify harmful decisions under conditions of uncertainty and risk. Under such circumstances, the notion of “necessary evil” becomes especially salient, as actors defend morally injurious actions as unavoidable responses to conflict rather than freely chosen ethical preferences.

These dynamics intensify in wartime. As Philip Smith (2005) argues, dominant approaches in sociology and political science often interpret war through categories such as threat, power, and strategic gain, reducing it to efficient, goal-directed collective action. Yet war also unfolds as a cultural event in which actors actively produce meaning and contest interpretations of violence. On June 13, 2025, Israel launched strikes on Tehran, initiating a twelve-day escalation during which Iran carried out retaliatory attacks. As missiles moved through the air, debates over the war simultaneously unfolded across Iranian social media platforms.

Observation of these discussions reveals competing narrative formations. One prominent discourse, closely aligned with official Islamic Republic rhetoric, framed Israel as the primary enemy and promoted military retaliation as necessary national defense. This narrative mobilized patriotic sentiment while collapsing distinctions between state, nation, and people. In Gramscian terms, such discourse may be understood as articulated by traditional intellectuals who reproduce and legitimize the existing political order (Gramsci 1971). Yet this discourse did not dominate the broader field of debate. Instead, Iranian publics—both within Iran and in diaspora—engaged in intense disagreement over the meaning and legitimacy of the war.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted between September and December 2025, this paper examines how members of the Iranian diaspora justified their positions within this polarized moral landscape. Participants had immigrated from Iran within the past decade and maintained close family ties inside the country. This positioning—geographically distant yet socially and emotionally connected—created a distinctive vantage point from which individuals interpreted the conflict. While all interviewees expressed opposition to the Iranian regime, they diverged sharply in their evaluation of war. Some framed military escalation as a tragic but potentially redemptive “necessary evil” capable of dismantling authoritarian rule. Others rejected the legitimacy of war entirely, arguing that military intervention inevitably harms the very population it claims to liberate.

These positions reflected not simply pro- and anti-war attitudes but competing moral worlds structured by divergent understandings of harm, responsibility, and political belonging. A key mechanism shaping these differences was the decoupling of nation from state. Participants frequently distinguished between the Iranian regime and the Iranian people, sustaining emotional attachment to the latter while rejecting identification with the former. One entry point into these distinctions emerged through discussions of national symbols, particularly the debate between the pre-revolutionary lion-and-sun flag and the post-revolution Islamic Republic flag. Conversations about flags opened broader debates about belonging, representation, and collective identity, revealing how

participants negotiated whether the official state symbol represented them and how alternative symbols might express national identity without affirming state authority.

Through these symbolic negotiations, participants articulated forms of belonging that separated nation from state. This disidentification with the nation-state allowed some actors to support external pressure against the regime while maintaining solidarity with the Iranian population, whereas others rejected this distinction and viewed war as violence inflicted upon a shared moral community. Rather than functioning as a stable evaluative category, the idea of “necessary evil” shifted across these moral worlds, reflecting different definitions of who constitutes the relevant moral community.

By situating wartime moral reasoning within processes of symbolic boundary-making and disidentification with the nation-state, this paper contributes to sociological scholarship on morality by demonstrating how evaluations of harm are mediated by reconfigured relations of belonging. More broadly, the study contributes to research on nationalism, diaspora politics, and war by showing how actors interpret collective violence not only through strategic or ideological positions but through culturally grounded negotiations of attachment, distance, and responsibility.

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