

The fiction of humanitarian intervention

By **Siavash Saffari**

Published Feb 12, 2026 10:20 am KST Updated Feb 12, 2026 3:26 pm KST

Iranians are experiencing one of the darkest episodes in their country's modern history. Nationwide protests against a repressive and corrupt state were met in January with unprecedented brutality. In the span of a short few days, under the cover of a digital blackout, thousands were massacred; the exact death toll is still unknown. By the government's own account, 3,117 died— not that anybody actually believes the government's numbers. It seems as if everyone I talk to knows someone who was killed or injured.

As the clouds of shock and grief cast their shadow over the hearts of an entire nation, far afield the chariot wheels of a sinister geopolitical agenda grind ahead. The American ruling class, having for over a decade subjected the Iranian people to an inhumane collective punishment by way of crippling economic sanctions, now feigns sympathy and care. Wolves in sheep's clothing claim to want to rescue a traumatized nation from the clutches of its tyrannical leaders. U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a longtime advocate of war with Iran, has made the media rounds wearing a Make Iran Great Again hat. Only a few years ago, he joked how "terrible" it would be if a DNA test showed he had Iranian ancestry.

From the moment the protests began, Washington indicated it would intervene in support of the protesters. "We are locked and loaded and ready to go," President Donald Trump wrote on social media on Jan. 2. He later told reporters if Iran starts shooting at the protesters, "we'll start shooting too." Then came another post: "Iranian Patriots, KEEP PROTESTING - TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!!... HELP IS ON ITS WAY." That promise, in the end, turned out to be empty. But the rhetoric of supporting the Iranian people helped to legitimize the imposition of additional economic sanctions against Iran and the deployment of an "armada" to the Middle East.



Siavash Saffari

While Washington's gunboat diplomacy aims to pressure Iran into capitulating on its nuclear and missile programs, the charade of American politicians feigning humanitarian concern continues uninterrupted. Graham has urged Trump to show up for Iranians by launching "a massive wave of military, cyber and psychological attacks" against the Islamic Republic. Not to be outdone, Sen. Ted Cruz, a self-identified "non-interventionist hawk," has called for "arming the protesters in Iran."

In the U.S.-led global order, moral hypocrisy is as startling as a cold day in Antarctica. Imagine the outrage if the leaders of Venezuela or Cuba urged anti-ICE protesters in Minnesota to take over government institutions, pledging "help is on its way." Or, if during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, China declared it was "locked and loaded" and ready to intervene or the Soviets spoke of providing arms to the protesters. The absurdity of these hypothetical scenarios passes for normalcy when it comes to U.S. conduct.

But even in a world of absurd double standards, ambitions of domination must be wrapped in a cloak of good intentions. In colonial times, the pretense was spreading civilization and Christian salvation. Now, it is exporting democracy and humanitarian intervention. The intellectual class is always on board to sell these fictions to the populace. The leading philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment drew up sophisticated racial hierarchies depicting non-Europeans as savages who could be brought into the fold of civilization through Europe's colonial conquests. Today, this explicitly racial discourse has been dispensed with, but the old fiction of the Western savior continues to be recycled.

As news of the violent crackdown in Iran emerged, Western corporate media brought back the old script of a faraway people in need of a Western savior. A segment of Iranian diaspora that coalesces around Iran's ex-crown prince Reza Pahlavi, and which hopes to seize power on the coattails of the U.S. military, was brought aboard to amplify this message. Lost in this media cacophony were the voices of civil society organizations inside Iran that have long fought for democracy, human rights and workers' rights. Many of them have made it clear they don't need Uncle Sam to play savior to the Iranian people.

The history of so-called humanitarian interventions is wrought with violence, chaos and devastation. The 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia led to the intensification of an ethnic cleansing campaign against Kosovar Albanians at the hands of Serbian militias — an outcome which, according to Gen. Wesley K. Clark, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe at the time, was "entirely predictable." The 2011 NATO assault on Libya, which was carried out under the banner of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, was no less disastrous. Libya spiraled into a civil war that rages on today, and the country's ranking on the Human Development Index has dropped from 64 in 2011 to 115 in 2025.

In a rare moment of honesty, addressing the Davos Economic Forum in January, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney described the "rules-based international order" as a "pleasant fiction" that for decades veiled an asymmetrical U.S.-led global order of legal and political double standards. "Countries like Canada," he said, knew all along the game was rigged in favor of the powerful, but

they played ball simply because they “prospered.” Faced with Trump’s tariff wars and his threats to annex Greenland and Canada, the rest of the West can no longer keep up the charade.

Carney’s breaking of the fourth wall earned him a standing ovation at Davos. But in parts of the world where American hegemony has brought not prosperity but misery, Carney’s confession merely adds insult to injury. In Palestine, which has suffered occupation, ethnic cleansing, apartheid and genocide at the hands of America’s outpost in the Middle East, nobody was holding their breath for the West to acknowledge its moral hypocrisy. Nor was anybody in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or Somalia waiting for a Western politician to reveal the fictitiousness of the rhetoric of democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention.

In the eyes of much of the world, the emperor has always been naked.

Siavash Saffari is a professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations at Seoul National University. The views expressed in this column are his own.

