

Iranian civilisation, and not the mullahs, won against America

Hindol Sengupta • June 19, 2026,

The Iranian ceasefire reminds us that a society's deepest strategic asset is often the one that appears on no balance sheet: the confidence of a people who know who they are and what they descend from



A woman waves an Iranian flag as she chants slogans against Iran and US talks at the Islamic Revolution square in Tehran, Iran. AP

In an earlier essay for *Firstpost*, ‘**The secret of Iran’s resilience**’, I in essence argued that a civilisation with deep roots behaves less like a building than like a river. A building can be shelled into rubble; a river only diverts, absorbs what falls into it, and resumes its course. Iran, I suggested, is such a river, fed by underground springs of Persian language, Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, Zoroastrian moral imagination, and a continuous memory of selfhood that has outlasted Alexander, the Caliphate, the Mongols, and the modern sanctions regime alike. The ceasefire framework agreed with the United States in mid-June 2026, after 107 days of brutal war, is the starkest confirmation of that thesis I could have asked for. And it carries a warning for every nation that has begun to forget, or to quarrel bitterly over, what it actually is.

Consider the raw arithmetic of the war. Iran lost its Supreme Leader and much of its senior command in the opening strikes of 28 February. Its military infrastructure was gutted, its economy strangled by a naval blockade, its skies dominated. By every metric in the modern ledger of power — precision munitions, satellite intelligence, market leverage, alliance networks — Tehran should have buckled. Washington’s

planners assumed exactly that. They read the protest movements of recent years as evidence of a brittle regime one shock away from collapse, and they prepared for an Iran that would fracture from within.

Instead, the opposite happened. War produced not fragmentation but cohesion. As analysts have since noted, American intelligence had mistaken a battle for national survival for a season of political protest — it had ignored the ‘civilisational question’. A people may loathe its rulers and still close ranks instinctively when the homeland itself is struck. That instinct does not come from policy. It comes from a story a society tells about itself across millennia, which is so deeply held that it operates below the level of argument. And so, the nation that was supposed to collapse instead held the Strait of Hormuz, roughly a fifth of the world’s oil, and walked into Switzerland to sign a memorandum its own negotiators called a victory: a phased reopening of the strait on Iran’s terms, the lifting of the blockade, immediate sanctions waivers, and a reconstruction commitment running into the hundreds of billions.

The point is simply this. Resilience, we are taught, is a function of hardware and balance sheets. The Iranian case suggests it is at least as much a function of self-knowledge — of how confidently a society can answer the oldest political question, *who are we?* Iran’s answer was not in doubt. It is recited from memory in thousands of couplets, carried in a language that survived its conquerors and re-emerged enriched rather than erased. Bernard Lewis observed long ago that Iran was unique among the lands the Arabs conquered: it became Muslim without ceasing to be Persian. Will Durant portrayed Persia as a wellspring whose ideas flowed outward in every direction, east and west. A society that secures in its own continuity does not need to be told why it should endure. It simply does.

When we now turn the lens around, the warning becomes clear. The most powerful state in history entered this conflict, and the wider contest of the age, increasingly unsure of its own founding story. America today is a nation arguing furiously with itself about what America is. Is its origin 1776 (Declaration of Independence) or 1619 (when the first slaves arrived)? Is it a creedal republic or a settler project, a melting pot or a federation of grievances? These are not trivial campus debates; they shape what citizens believe they owe one another and what, if anything, they would sacrifice for. A civilisation confident of its identity converts hardship into solidarity. A civilisation divided about its identity converts the same hardship into recrimination:

each faction blaming the others, each reading a national setback as vindication of its own side. The body that cannot agree on what it is will struggle to act as one body at all.

Let's be fair to the obvious objection and criticism to this argument, because it is a serious one. Iran's cohesion is not purely civilisational; it is also enforced, and dissent there carries a price that American dissent does not. And the American capacity to quarrel openly about its own meaning is, in one light, the glory of a free society rather than a symptom of decay, a nation secure enough to interrogate itself. Both points have some truth in them. But they do not dissolve the argument. Open contestation is a strength only while it rests on some shared floor that no faction will breach. When the contestation reaches the floor itself, when rival camps no longer agree on the basic story, the common heroes, the shared memory, disagreement stops being deliberation and becomes dissolution. Iran's strength was that its floor held under literal bombardment. The deeper anxiety about America is whether its floor still holds at all.

For India, watching from a civilisation older than either combatant, the lesson is neither triumphalism nor mimicry. It is recognition. Our own resilience, across invasions and colonisation and partition, has rested on a continuity of memory that no empire managed to sever: Sanskritic, devotional, plural, stubborn. This inheritance is not decoration, a mere matter for festivals and tourism brochures, while the real business of statecraft proceeds in the borrowed vocabulary of GDP and hard power. It is in fact the bedrock upon which everything else stands. The Iranian ceasefire reminds us that a society's deepest strategic asset is often the one that appears on no balance sheet: the confidence of a people who know, without having to debate it, who they are and what they descend from.

Weapons can, and do, degrade hardware, and flatten command posts and crater runways. But what they cannot reach is a verse recited from memory, a self-older than the state that defends it.

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