

Revenge, Social Justice and the Highest Degree of Intelligence

Contextual wisdom, individual accountability and Iran's democratic future

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Understanding should illuminate responsibility, never erase it. Justice should recognise victims and protect the society that comes next.

NARRATIVE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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ABSTRACT AND SCOPE

Abstract

Background. Following state repression, survivors and bereaved families may ask whether revenge is a legitimate response and whether understanding perpetrators risks excusing complicity. Iran's experience makes this question urgent. A democratic transition must address past violence while establishing institutions capable of protecting every citizen.

Objective. To examine the relationship between revenge, social justice and the author's concept of the highest degree of intelligence, and to develop a framework that joins contextual understanding to individual accountability.

Approach. This targeted narrative review integrates experimental research on revenge, scholarship on wisdom and moral disengagement, primary legal instruments, human-rights documentation, and the author's earlier essays. It offers conceptual analysis and policy proposals; it reports no original participant data, systematic review, meta-analysis or validated prediction.

Argument. Feelings of revenge can express grief, violated dignity and a demand for recognition. They do not establish a right to inflict retaliatory harm. Contextual wisdom considers knowledge, agency, coercion, conduct and consequences without erasing responsibility. Criminal guilt requires evidence and an applicable legal basis; political affiliation and religious identity alone are insufficient. Accountability should combine fair trials and proportionate sanctions with truth, reparations, institutional reform and equal citizenship. Neither execution nor forgiveness can be assumed to produce psychological closure.

Conclusion. The strongest public response to atrocity is a justice system that recognises victims, judges conduct accurately and prevents recurrence. The highest degree of intelligence is used here as an ethical conception of contextual wisdom, not a psychometric rank. Iran's democratic future depends on choices and institutions; historical suffering does not guarantee a democratic outcome.

Keywords: Iran; revenge; social justice; contextual wisdom; moral responsibility; transitional justice; reconciliation; secular democracy.

Scope and method

Sources were selected for direct relevance to the question, with preference for original psychological studies, primary legal texts and organisations reporting their own investigations. Public-source checks were conducted on 11 October 2026. Some scholarly material was available at abstract level, limiting methodological appraisal. The supplied essays, *What Is the Highest Degree of Intelligence?* and *Politics of Crisis and Crisis in Politics*, and the current author profile provide continuity of argument, not independent proof of events. [1-3]

This is an independently published paper. It has not undergone journal peer review. It does not adjudicate any named person's guilt, establish a national opinion poll, or predict the timing or means of political change.

THE QUESTION AND ITS DISTINCTIONS

1. What does the desire for revenge ask for?

A question raised in private correspondence is the starting point: if people witnessed decades of oppression, had access to truthful accounts and still chose to support the Islamic Republic, when does ignorance become a choice, and that choice become responsibility? A second question follows: can national reconciliation accommodate understanding without making it an excuse for complicity? These questions deserve a direct answer.

A family whose child was killed may want the perpetrator to suffer, but may also want something more specific: acknowledgement of the child's life, disclosure of the truth, an end to intimidation, a credible verdict and assurance that another family will be protected. Public policy should distinguish these needs rather than presume that a death sentence satisfies them all. The moral legitimacy of anger and the legal legitimacy of an action are separate questions.

Table 1. Distinct aims within a response to atrocity

Concept	Principal question	Public meaning
Revenge	How can the offender be made to suffer for the harm?	A retaliatory motive; it does not supply evidence, jurisdiction or a lawful sentence.
Retributive justice	What proportionate sanction is deserved for proven wrongdoing?	Punishment constrained by law, individual guilt, impartial procedure and rights.
Restorative justice	What acknowledgement and repair are possible?	Voluntary, safe participation; it cannot be imposed on victims or replace necessary prosecution.
Social justice	How can equal rights, protection and opportunity be secured?	Fair institutions and resources, including meaningful support for those harmed.
Transitional justice	How should a society address a legacy of serious violations?	A combination of accountability, truth, repair and reform suited to the country's circumstances. [17]

These purposes can overlap. A lawful sentence may carry retributive meaning and also protect society. A survivor can support prosecution without wanting cruelty. Emotional satisfaction, however, cannot be the sole measure of justice: punishment must remain defensible even when the victim feels no relief or the accused is unpopular.

Thinking about revenge is understandable. Organising collective or extrajudicial retaliation is a different act. Public leadership should help transform a demand for recognition into reliable institutions, while allowing people to grieve, disagree and decline forgiveness.

EVIDENCE AND THE IRANIAN CONTEXT

2. Iran: documenting violence without generalising guilt

The Islamic Republic's history extends from 1979 to 2026, a period of approximately 47 years. Such a long history requires investigation of distinct episodes, institutions and actors. It cannot be reduced to a single undifferentiated accusation against everyone who lived, worked or worshipped within it.

Amnesty International's 26 January 2026 account describes massacres concentrated on 8 and 9 January, the firing of rifles and pellet-loaded shotguns at protesters, and the involvement of the IRGC, Basij, police and plain-clothes agents. Its account draws on verified videos and eyewitness evidence. Human Rights Watch's 16 January report independently describes coordinated mass killings after the protests escalated on 8 January, based on interviews and verified visual material. [4,5]

In September 2026, Amnesty reported further investigations into crimes against humanity during the 2022 Woman Life Freedom uprising and called for criminal investigation of implicated officials. The UN Fact-Finding Mission's 2024 reporting also identified human-rights violations amounting to crimes against humanity in the context of the protests that began in 2022. These are investigative findings; an individual's conviction remains a separate judicial determination. [6,7]

This paper does not calculate a final January death toll. Communication restrictions and differences in access affect documentation. The existence of a serious evidential basis for investigation does not depend on adopting the highest circulating estimate. The appropriate response is preservation, independent examination and transparent reporting.

Political religion and the organisation of coercion

The author's concern is the conversion of religious authority into state power: when clothing, belief, dissent or a demand for political change is treated as evidence of an enemy identity, the state can make ordinary citizenship conditional on ideological submission. The accusation that someone is an infidel or a traitor can become a means of denying that person's equal worth. This is an analysis of coercive political practice, not a claim that every Muslim, cleric or state employee holds the same beliefs.

Bandura's account of moral disengagement explains how harmful conduct can be recast as a worthy duty, responsibility displaced onto authorities, consequences minimised and victims dehumanised. It supplies a general psychological framework; it does not establish what any particular Iranian recruit believed or knew. [12] Identifying these mechanisms helps ask better questions about orders, training, incentives and conduct.

The use of public wealth in coercive institutions also warrants investigation. Claims about particular oil and gas revenues, patronage networks or illicit transfers require budgets, contracts and financial records. The proposal here is to make national resources accountable to public welfare and subject any recovery of unlawfully acquired assets to legal scrutiny. No financial estimate or universal allegation about clerical livelihoods is asserted.

WISDOM AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF REVENGE

3. The highest degree of intelligence as contextual wisdom

In my earlier essay, the highest degree of intelligence meant enlarging the frame of understanding until judgment becomes more precise. [1] The concept is most useful as a discipline of wisdom: identifying what is known, what remains uncertain, what shaped an action and what consequences a response will create. It is a proposed ethical orientation, not an established highest score on an intelligence scale.

Sternberg's balance theory links wisdom to the common good and to balancing personal, interpersonal and wider interests. Grossmann and colleagues found that reasoning about social conflicts could improve with age even while aspects of fluid intelligence declined. Their studies examined perspective-taking, uncertainty and other reasoning dimensions. They support distinguishing wise social judgment from processing speed; they do not show that one political position proves superior intelligence. [10,11]

The relevant practical questions are therefore cumulative. What did the person do? What did the person know? What alternatives existed? Who benefited? Who had power to intervene? What response protects those harmed? What would prevent the same machinery of abuse from reappearing? Understanding extends the investigation; it does not decide innocence in advance.

What experiments can and cannot tell us

Carlsmith, Wilson and Gilbert reported three studies in which people anticipated emotional benefits from punishment but, in the studied circumstances, experienced worse affect and more rumination than expected. These findings challenge the assumption that exacting revenge necessarily permits a person to move on. They do not establish that punishment always worsens wellbeing, and laboratory offences are not equivalent to bereavement after state killing. [8]

Gollwitzer and Denzler found that satisfaction in a laboratory revenge episode depended on the offender signalling understanding of why revenge had occurred. The study suggests that recognition can matter beyond seeing suffering. It does not demonstrate that apologies, execution or restorative meetings resolve atrocity-related trauma. [9] The inference proposed here is that public acknowledgement may be an important component of justice, while claims of guaranteed closure should be rejected.

A bereaved person's anger is not evidence of low intelligence. Nor can cruelty be diagnosed as an intelligence deficit: deliberate abuse can involve planning and technical competence. Cognitive ability, moral responsibility and wisdom are different questions. An analysis that calls perpetrators unintelligent risks overlooking calculated conduct; an analysis that calls victims primitive risks disrespecting their grief.

The test of contextual wisdom is whether it improves the accuracy of responsibility, the dignity of victims and the protection of future citizens.

IGNORANCE, CHOICE AND CULPABILITY

4. When does ignorance become responsibility?

There is no single date, educational qualification or number of news reports at which ignorance automatically becomes guilt. Responsibility depends on the person's position, access to information, freedom to act, obligations and actual contribution to harm. Context should be examined rigorously enough to reveal choice as well as constraint.

The first distinction is between inability to know and refusal to know. A frightened citizen cut off from information differs from an official who receives credible reports, can question them and deliberately avoids doing so to protect a career. Moral criticism becomes stronger when warning signs are clear, inquiry is feasible and continued support materially enables foreseeable harm. That ethical assessment still does not establish every element of a criminal offence.

The second distinction is between sympathy and contribution. Private belief, a past vote or family membership does not prove participation in killing. Supplying a detention list, arranging transport for a criminal operation, issuing unlawful orders or concealing victims' bodies raises different questions. Investigators must establish the relevant conduct and mental element rather than infer them from a label.

The third distinction is between vulnerability and authority. A recruit's exposure to indoctrination is relevant to a full account of conduct. A commander's access to reports and power over subordinates creates a different evidential inquiry. The Rome Statute addresses individual participation, command responsibility and mental elements; its standards for military commanders and other superiors are not identical. [13] The rank of the person matters to the inquiry, but rank alone is not a verdict.

An assessment that hears context without surrendering judgment

A careful investigation asks about credible information available at the time; evidence of intention or knowledge; the action or omission alleged; the person's legal duties; effective control over others; specific threats or coercion; feasible alternatives; and subsequent efforts to prevent, report or conceal abuse. These are questions for evidence and applicable law, not a numerical guilt score.

Under the Rome Statute, duress has defined conditions, and superior orders do not provide an unrestricted defence. Orders to commit genocide or crimes against humanity are expressly treated as manifestly unlawful. [13] These provisions offer useful reference points; they do not automatically confer ICC jurisdiction over Iranian events. A competent forum must establish its jurisdiction and the applicable law.

My answer to the friend is therefore yes: ignorance can become a culpable choice when a person knowingly shields himself from credible evidence, has a meaningful opportunity or duty to respond, and continues enabling harm. But the degree and legal form of responsibility must be established individually. Neither indoctrination nor understanding can be used as a blanket excuse, and neither affiliation nor public anger can substitute for proof.

The same discipline should protect against selective justice. Political allies, opponents, religious figures and secular activists should face the same standards when comparable evidence exists. A new national identity gains credibility when the law can examine its own supporters as carefully as its adversaries.

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PRACTICE

5. From collective accusation to accountable conduct

A justice programme should distinguish criminal proceedings, ethical responsibility and eligibility for sensitive public office. Each serves a different purpose and requires its own procedure. The following matrix is a policy aid, not a sentencing schedule or a finding about any real person.

Table 2. Proposed routes for individual assessment

Situation	Question requiring evidence	Appropriate proposed route
Belief, peaceful support or a past vote	Is there conduct beyond protected opinion?	Protect citizenship and expression; invite open civic debate.
Silence or conformity under fear	What threats and realistic alternatives existed?	Contextual assessment; no automatic criminalisation of survival.
Administrative or material assistance	Was assistance knowingly connected to defined wrongdoing?	Investigate conduct and knowledge; prosecute where legal elements are met.
Direct killing, torture or unlawful detention	What happened, who acted, and what defences apply?	Independent criminal investigation and fair trial.
Command or senior authority	What control, information, duties and omissions are established?	Investigate responsibility under the applicable legal standard. [13]
Incitement or deliberate concealment	Does the conduct satisfy a defined offence?	Evidence-led investigation; distinguish incitement from protected opinion.
Suitability for a sensitive office	Does substantiated conduct affect current suitability?	Individual vetting, notice, an opportunity to answer and independent appeal.

A low position in a hierarchy does not guarantee innocence. A senior position does not establish responsibility for every act of every subordinate. Equally, a person can bear serious moral or political responsibility without meeting the threshold for criminal conviction. Conflating these categories would make accountability arbitrary.

Reintegration should remain open to citizens who accept equal rights and lawful democratic participation. That route must not be offered as immunity for proven atrocity crimes. Conversely, a person acquitted of an accusation should not be treated as permanently guilty by public decree.

The object of judgment is a person's conduct, authority and responsibility. Religious identity, relatives, clothing and group labels must not become substitutes for evidence.

TRIALS, SANCTIONS AND THE DEATH PENALTY

6. What should lawful punishment achieve?

A fair trial can establish facts, attribute responsibility, publicly recognise wrongdoing and impose a lawful sanction. It cannot restore a lost life. A justice system should therefore avoid promising families that a conviction or execution will remove grief. It should offer a credible process and continuing support, rather than prescribe how a family ought to feel.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides a foundation for an independent and impartial hearing, a presumption of innocence and defence rights. [14] The proposed Iranian framework should make reasoned judgments accessible, protect witnesses, exclude coerced confessions, allow appeals and keep political leaders from deciding verdicts. Fair procedure is itself part of the public break with arbitrary rule.

Severe proven crimes can warrant substantial imprisonment. A life sentence, where lawful, would require an individual judgment and conditions consistent with human dignity. Community service or restorative participation may suit some lesser offences; these should not be treated as a sufficient universal response to murder, torture or mass persecution. No victim should be required to meet or forgive a perpetrator.

Democratic choice has human-rights limits

Iranians should debate and determine their future constitutional and penal arrangements through a free process. Yet a majority vote does not remove the requirements of human rights and lawful procedure. The right to life and protections against arbitrary punishment continue to matter when a defendant is hated.

Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 36 interprets the death penalty restrictions under the Covenant narrowly: in countries retaining it, the most serious crimes involve intentional killing; mandatory death sentences are arbitrary. It also directs states towards abolition. [15] The paper's policy preference is to pursue credible, proportionate, non-capital accountability that preserves the possibility of correcting error. This recommendation does not claim that the Iranian population has already agreed on abolition.

The argument is consistent with the author's wish to think beyond revenge. It asks whether punishment restores a lawful civic order and protects society, rather than whether it produces the greatest spectacle of suffering. Execution cannot be made a required proof that the revolution has honoured its dead.

A transitional authority should also resist exchanging prosecution of serious crimes for a convenient political settlement. Truth-telling, cooperation or remorse may have legally defined consequences, but must not erase accountability automatically. The practical challenge is to investigate responsibly, maintain public confidence and avoid making a promise of justice that existing capacity cannot deliver.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

7. What lies beyond a verdict?

The future of a society cannot be measured only by the number of defendants punished. A family may obtain a verdict while remaining without an income, medical support, the location of a missing relative or protection from harassment. Social justice asks what the state owes the living and how equal citizenship can become a practical condition rather than a promise.

The UN Basic Principles on Remedy and Reparation identify restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. [16] ICTJ likewise describes transitional justice as a range of responses centred on victims' dignity, including accountability, truth, reparations and reform. [17] These frameworks help identify needs that a criminal sentence alone cannot meet.

Five linked commitments for a future Iran

Truth. Families should have access to a safe process for establishing what happened and, where relevant, locating and identifying the missing. Public archives and testimony can preserve memory, while privacy and witness protection constrain what is released.

Accountability. Independent prosecutors and courts should examine the most serious conduct and the chains of authority that enabled it. Public communication should explain the progress and limits of cases without announcing guilt before trial.

Reparation. An accessible programme should address treatment, rehabilitation, disability, lost livelihoods, education and the needs of bereaved dependants. Assistance should be designed with victims and delivered through clear eligibility rules and appeals.

Institutional reform. Security bodies, detention systems, courts and public finances must be brought under transparent law and effective oversight. Substituting new officeholders while retaining arbitrary powers would leave the mechanism of abuse available.

Memory and equal citizenship. Memorials, education and protection of public mourning should recognise victims without creating inherited categories of guilt. Muslims, people of other faiths and non-believers must be able to share a state in which rights do not depend on a religious or political test.

These commitments are proposals for Iran, not a validated intervention package. Reconciliation should mean the possibility of living together under fair institutions. Emotional reconciliation remains personal. A victim may refuse forgiveness and still participate in a democratic society; a state may protect an accused person's rights and still prosecute that person firmly.

From the perspective of trauma surgery, restoring function requires attention to more than the most visible injury. This is an analogy, not clinical evidence about nations. A political transition similarly needs care for the people harmed and repair of the conditions that exposed them to harm. The aim is a country in which children can dissent without being placed at risk by their own state.

DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY AND HISTORICAL PROCESSES

8. History creates conditions; citizens must build institutions

Historical processes connect decisions, institutions, wars, economic pressures and social responses. A chain of events can bring a society to a turning point. It does not prove that an outcome is destined, that regime change is imminent or that a successor order will be democratic. The earlier crisis paper deliberately treated transition pathways as conditional scenarios rather than prophecy. [2]

The present argument retains the author's aspiration for fundamental political change while separating that aspiration from a forecast. Free expression and credible voting are needed to establish what Iranians want. Reported protest demands cannot by themselves measure the views of an entire population. The political task is to create conditions in which consent can be expressed safely.

War, negotiated change, civil resistance and revolutionary rupture can produce different opportunities and dangers. Violence can destroy lives, records, public services and trust. It should not be treated as an automatic stage in national progress. Whatever the pathway, the tests of a democratic transition remain practical: can citizens organise, speak, scrutinise authority and replace political leaders peacefully?

The ballot box within a constitutional order

Popular consent should authorise the constitutional framework, representative legislature and accountable executive. It does not follow that every judge, civil servant, doctor or military officer must be chosen by a direct vote. A functioning representative democracy also requires merit-based appointments, judicial independence, checks on power and rights that protect dissenters between elections. These are design principles proposed here, not a claim that there is one compulsory institutional model.

My own public position supports secular democracy, constitutional monarchy and Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi's role in a democratic transition. [3] That position must remain compatible with the people's freedom to choose their constitutional settlement and with equal rights for those who prefer a republic or another lawful democratic option. National consolidation cannot require agreement with one leader as a condition of citizenship.

The criticism of religion in power therefore concerns unaccountable coercive authority, not a right to suppress private faith. Describing an Iranian middle age may convey the author's sense of a historical struggle against clerical sovereignty, but it is a political metaphor, not a scientific classification of Muslims, religions or civilisations. Diverse religious people can support rights, and secular people can abuse power.

Maturity should be judged by institutional behaviour: officials accepting legal constraints, citizens tolerating lawful disagreement, trials examining evidence, and public resources supporting common needs. Suffering supplies a compelling reason to seek change. It does not do the work of constitution-making, independent justice and social reconstruction for us.

A PRACTICAL JUSTICE PROGRAMME

9. Turning contextual wisdom into public action

A future Iranian programme should be developed with domestic civil society, survivors, bereaved families, independent lawyers and relevant professional expertise. The stages below are proposed priorities, not a fixed timetable. Some tasks must begin together; basic safety and assistance should not wait for the completion of trials.

Table 3. Proposed priorities and observable progress

Priority	Action	Observable progress
Protect and preserve	Stop retaliatory violence; preserve records; protect witnesses and detainees.	Safety reporting, preserved archives and judicial review of detention.
Document	Create independent evidence and missing-person mechanisms; protect medical confidentiality.	Verified records, identified missing persons and auditable evidence custody.
Investigate	Select cases through published criteria for gravity, evidence and responsibility.	Case progress, reasoned decisions and access to counsel.
Provide repair	Deliver medical, disability, livelihood and bereavement support with appeals.	Coverage, access, delays and unmet needs reported transparently.
Reform power	Establish lawful civilian oversight, independent courts and reviewable individual vetting.	Published rules, functioning complaints and independent review.
Secure consent	Protect parties, media and peaceful assembly; establish a credible constitutional process.	Participation, free competition and the ability to replace political leaders.

For investigations of potentially unlawful deaths, the Minnesota Protocol provides an established forensic reference. [18] Medical records, images and testimony should be handled through qualified, independent processes. Neither a social-media accusation nor an unexamined injury image can by itself identify the perpetrator or prove a command relationship.

Progress should not be reduced to conviction totals. Information on acquittals, appeals, access to defence, victim participation and reparations matters too. Lawful asset recovery and transparent budgets can help fund repair, while protecting unrelated people from confiscation by association.

A reviewable justice programme may earn confidence over time. Its effects on safety, trust and recovery must be measured rather than assumed. The proposed framework has not been tested as a causal model and should be revised in light of victims' experience and independent evaluation.

DIRECT ANSWER AND CONCLUSION

10. A direct answer to my friend

Your concern is right: understanding must not become an excuse for chosen complicity. If someone knew about serious abuse, had meaningful agency and continued enabling it, that person's responsibility deserves scrutiny. Those suspected of killing, torture or other grave crimes should face independent investigation and fair trial. No one should receive immunity simply because ideology influenced them.

At the same time, we should distinguish the wish for revenge from the public purpose of justice. A bereaved parent is entitled to anger and does not owe anyone forgiveness. But a state cannot promise that killing the offender will heal the family, and it cannot make suffering the foundation of its legitimacy.

The highest degree of intelligence, as I use the phrase, is the ability to understand the circumstances thoroughly, assign responsibility precisely and consider the society that our response will create. We should bring perpetrators to lawful judgment, recognise victims, repair harm wherever possible and dismantle the institutions that enabled abuse. Understanding should illuminate responsibility, never erase it.

What lies beyond revenge is a country in which another child will not be killed for speaking, dressing differently or demanding political change. The future must offer equal citizenship, public accountability and a constitutional order freely authorised by the people. That is a purpose worthy of our grief and our intelligence.

Conclusion

Revenge, lawful punishment and social justice answer different questions. Revenge seeks repayment through suffering; lawful accountability establishes responsibility under defensible procedures; social justice addresses the conditions of dignity and security. Contextual wisdom connects these concerns by asking how an action was produced and what a public response will produce next.

Iran's future should preserve maximum seriousness about atrocities and maximum care in judging individuals. Political religion's coercive institutions require scrutiny, while private belief remains protected. Reconciliation should widen citizenship without imposing silence on victims. Historical change becomes democratic progress only when citizens and leaders build the institutions that make power accountable.

Author's position and declarations

Mr Peyman Bakhshayesh is a Consultant Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgeon and an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Leeds. He writes on Iran, national reconciliation and secular democracy. His support for constitutional monarchy and Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi is declared as a political standpoint, not an empirical conclusion or an institutional position. [3]

No new human-participant data were collected. The initiating correspondence is paraphrased without identifying the correspondent; the private screenshot is not reproduced. No causal effect sizes, clinical claims about bereaved families, national preference estimates or original forensic findings are reported. Interpretations and policy proposals belong to the author. Preparation of this manuscript included AI assistance in drafting and presentation.

RESEARCH, LAW AND AUTHORIAL CONTINUITY

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